

Where I speak from: A short intellectual autobiography

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I am grateful to have the opportunity to respond here to the question posed by my hosts during a recent visit to South Africa: How did I come to the philosophy of the Stranger? Or more precisely, what is the relationship between a hermeneutics of hospitality and my own intellectual itinerary?

In what follows, I will attempt a brief response by tracing the genealogy of my thoughts on God and religion – a key theme of ‘anatheism’ as a hosting of the Other – from my early education in Ireland through some critical junctures in my professional life as a philosopher abroad. In so doing, I will retain something of the ‘personal’ and ‘anecdotal’ tone of the presentations I gave

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at the Universities of Pretoria and Johannesburg and Stellenbosch in May 2017. I am very grateful to Professors Daniël P. Veldsman, Robert Vosloo and Dr Yolande Steenkamp for so generously welcoming me and arranging some of the memorable exchanges featured in this volume.

■ Family upbringing and early schooling

To begin: I grew up in the city of Cork, in Southern Ireland, in a Catholic family with devout loving parents, Kevin and Ann Kearney.

My father was a good man who suffered from severe war trauma²³ and had a streak of survivor guilt mixed with old-fashioned Irish Jansenism. This made for a melancholic version of Christianity, but he was never judgemental and when, for example, my unmarried elder sister became pregnant at the age of 20, losing her job as a teacher ‘for fear of scandal’, he was the first to stand by her. My father had a horror of what he called ‘holy Joes’ (who put rules before compassion); and he was always humble before his God: he would kneel and say the night rosary with our family during the Easter Season and was always discreet in the public practice of his faith. But he never missed Sunday Mass and went on a (‘dry’) pilgrimage to Lough Derg’s healing waters in Northern Ireland every spring – which managed somehow to salve his hurting soul for a while.

As for my mother, Ann, she was also a devout Christian, combining a deep love of the Catholic sacraments with a sense of compassionate liberty in the face of punitive church orthodoxies regarding ‘sex and morals’ – a dissident liberalism perhaps inherited from her father’s Protestant background. Some of my earliest memories were of us both preparing beautiful May

23. He had served as a naval doctor in the Red Cross during the First World War.

altars to Mary on the window sills of our house, brimming with vases of lily of the valley and bluebells. We would sing hymns – ‘O Mary we crown thee with blossoms today, Queen of the Angels and Queen of the May’ – and smell the spring flowers and laugh together. I also still recall how she would wake me from my sleep in the early morning when I was seven years old and walk me through freezing winter streets to a convent on Montenotte Hill where I served as an altar boy at 06:00 Mass for the nuns. I loved my mother and Mary with equal fervour (with Mary a close second, to be honest) and could never believe, for the rest of my life, that the God they loved could be anything but a God of love. The Eucharist always remained for me a host of the mother as much as of the father of God; and to this day, bread and wine are my favourite food.

My five brothers and one sister were uniquely spiritual people and very close siblings. Four of them worked as healers of the sick, dying or disabled (two with Jean Vanier’s L’Arche communities in Europe and Africa). They are all more spiritually evolved than me and I continue to learn from them, especially during annual walks on the Camino de Compostela and on the windy hills of Myross, West Cork, where all the family congregates every summer – a wild, sacred sanctuary throughout our lives. And a powerful reminder that God lives in and through nature, as Ireland’s first pantheist philosopher, John Scotus Eriugena, already taught in the 9th century: *Deus currens*: a divine current runs through all things.

Then there was school. My education began with the Christian Brothers in Cork where I first learnt that the church could also have a violent streak. I regularly witnessed cruel beatings delivered to unfortunate fellow pupils for not knowing the right Catechism answers or not wearing clean white shirts for Communion. And that was not the only wrong (as recent national tribunals on child abuse revealed). The ‘first naiveté’ of faith was

over and I never forgot the lesson that Christianity can be the best and worst of religions. *Corruptio optimi pessima* [The corruption of the best is the worst].

At the age of 13, my parents sent me to Glenstal Abbey, a boarding school in County Limerick, run by very enlightened Benedictine monks. There I learnt the beauty of Gregorian chant, elegant liturgy and theological excitement. I was introduced to philosophies of religion – both atheist (Sartre, Nietzsche, Camus) and theist (Marcel, Buber, Simone Weil) – and learnt the invaluable lesson that one most genuinely embraces faith when one has read the strongest arguments *against* it. In class, we read the arguments of non-believers before those of believers – observing Dostoyevsky’s adage that ‘true faith comes forth from the crucible of doubt’. My first teacher of religion at Glenstal was Father Andrew Nugent, who looked like a dried prune with foggy glasses and dandruff but constantly glowed with great ideas! Another of my influential mentors there, Brother Patrick Hederman, remains one of my closest intellectual friends to this day. I return to Glenstal Abbey regularly with a wonderful group of artists – among them Fanny Howe, Sheila Gallagher and Nóirín ní Ríain – and have had the great privilege of working with them on a recent volume entitled *The Art of Atheism* (2018). A regular meeting point of our Glenstal group has been a special underground chapel housing ancient Russian icons, one of which, *Christ the Healer*, remains an abiding focus for my daily meditation.

I might also mention that Glenstal was famous for hosting an annual ecumenical meeting for all the Christian denominations of war-torn Ireland in the sixties and seventies – Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic – and serves to this day as a place of daring dialogue with the Orthodox Church and non-Christian religions of the East.

At 17, I received a scholarship to study literature and philosophy at University College Dublin (UCD). This was in the mid-seventies

when a 30-year war between Catholic nationalists and Protestant loyalists raged in Belfast and Derry north of the ‘border’ (Belfast was only 160 miles from Dublin). The philosophy department at the time was largely run by Catholic clergy – including a future Cardinal of Ireland, Desmond Connell. But this clerical hegemony did not prevent the mandatory dose of metaphysical ‘Realism’ (another word for scholastic Thomism) being accompanied by new thinking coming in from Continental Europe, and especially post-sixties Paris: existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, structuralism, humanist Marxism and critical theory. This opening was further aided by the ‘Loneragan movement’ of Vatican II renewal, which argued for dialogue with innovative forms of secular and scientific thought. Of particular influence on my thinking as an undergraduate in UCD was Patrick Masterson, author of *Atheism and Alienation* (1971), who introduced me to the intellectual splendours of Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Ricoeur. And I was also deeply moved by the brilliant lectures of Denys Turner, who taught me the power of humanist-Sartrean Marxism, and of Dennis Donoghue, who introduced me to the dazzling enigmas of Derridean deconstruction. It was Masterson, a close friend to this day, who encouraged me to apply for a scholarship to do graduate work with Charles Taylor – author of *A Secular Age* (2007) and *Sources of the Self* (1989) – at McGill University in Canada. Taylor was a kind and compelling teacher, drawing generously from both Continental (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) and analytic (Austin, Wittgenstein) traditions. His lectures on the philosophy of language in the Fall semester of 1976 were spell-binding. During my time in Montreal, I was also deeply impressed by his role as a public intellectual in Canadian politics²⁴ – a role that has remained a model of ‘applied philosophy’ for me ever since. Taylor showed how one could be a practising Catholic and a politically engaged thinker, making a mark in the public media in important popular debates. Once I completed

24. He was a founder member of the National Democratic Party and ran against Trudeau for the premiership.

my master's with Taylor in 1977, he recommended that I pursue my doctoral studies in the phenomenology of imagination with his friend Paul Ricoeur in the University of Paris.

■ Paris apprenticeship

I arrived in Paris in September 1977. I will never forget my first encounter with Ricoeur. I walked into a packed seminar room at the Centre Herméneutique et Phénoménologique at Avenue Parmentier where a number of Ricoeur's close colleagues sat around a table – including Emmanuel Levinas, Stanislas Breton, Jean Greisch and Françoise Dastur. In a second outer circle sat a dozen or so doctoral students. I joined them and waited for Ricoeur to arrive. When he did he was wearing a bright multicoloured jacket that he had just bought in Chicago, where he was teaching for a semester each year. I was expecting a sober Protestant intellectual dressed in black. Ricoeur warmly welcomed everyone and proceeded to ask each student his initial hermeneutic question: *D'où parlez-vous?* [Where do you speak from?] When it came to me, I explained that I came from Southern Ireland and had been educated in philosophy at UCD – at which Ricoeur happily observed, 'that is excellent, I will call on you whenever we need commentaries on Aquinas!' Little did Ricoeur know I was a rebellious refugee from orthodox scholasticism.²⁵

From then on it was plain delightful sailing through multiple theories of narrative in phenomenology and the philosophy of history and religion. Each Wednesday seminar was a treat and Ricoeur always proved his commitment to 'intellectual hospitality' by inviting visiting scholars and friends to give presentations. The title of one of his volumes, *Le conflit des interprétations*, took on real meaning as different voices chimed and clashed in what Ricoeur liked to call *un combat amoureux* (a phrase he

25. Although as Joyce wrote of Stephen Dedalus – he had 'the cursed Jesuit strain in (him), only injected the wrong way'. Metaphysics was in the blood whether I liked it or not.

learnt from Jaspers). When it came to religious questions, Ricoeur was invariably open to ‘interconfessional translation’ between Christian, Jewish and Muslim perspectives.²⁶ The model of traversing multiple ‘hermeneutic detours’, where one exposed oneself to a ‘polysemantics’ of diverse readings, was central to Ricoeur’s method of teaching and writing. As he liked to say, ‘the shortest route from self to self is through the other’. Looking back, I can now see the seeds of my interest in the Guestbook project, with its central themes of ‘hosting the Stranger’ and ‘exchanging narratives’²⁷ – themes that, as a public intellectual in Ireland, I tried to translate into a number of philosophical proposals for a peace agreement in Northern Ireland in the nineties.

I became a good friend of Ricoeur over the years, hosting him twice on visits to Ireland once I returned to UCD in the early eighties to take up my first job as a professor of Philosophy. I completed my doctoral studies under his direction – with Levinas and Breton as examiners – at the University of Paris in 1980 and went on to publish several books on his work and organise international conferences on his thought (including co-directing the Cérisy Colloque on Ricoeur in 1987). Without a doubt, Ricoeur has been the most formative influence on my thinking about narrative imagination, hospitality and religion. Indeed, I think it is true to say that without Ricoeur there would have been no *God Who May Be* (2001), *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003) or *Anatheism* (2011).

But there were other figures in my philosophical apprenticeship in Paris. Breton, Levinas and Derrida were also critical interlocutors on the ‘God question’ during that time and since. So let me say a brief word about each.

26. In the seventies in Paris, the turn towards Eastern religions had not yet made a big mark – though Mircea Eliade was a close friend of Ricoeur’s at Chicago.

27. Refer to Chapter 15 in this book.

Levinas invited me to attend his last lectures at the Sorbonne in 1979 on 'Kant and Ethics' (co-taught with his ex-Dominican friend, Jacques Colette). Levinas spoke in stuttered whispers that Colette translated for the class – about ten of us – in a cold, bare room with no handle on the door. This was just before Levinas's fame spread widely in the eighties when the French embargo on philosophy conversing with theology was finally lifted. Levinas challenged Heidegger's absolute separation of phenomenology and religion (outlined in his 'Phenomenology and Theology' lecture of 1927 [1998]) and dared invoke the word 'God' in his first classic work, *Totality and Infinity*, published in French in 1961. But Levinas, like his Sorbonne colleague Ricoeur, was still sensitive to the *séparation universitaire* between philosophy and theology: the latter was not permitted in any public academies of the French Republic but only in denominational establishments like the Instituts Catholiques or Facultés Protestantes. Levinas published his more phenomenological work as philosophy and his more religious work as Talmudic lectures (although the border was sometime porous). I think it was in some sense thanks to his Judaism – which demanded tolerance in post-Holocaust Europe – that Levinas was allowed more latitude than other religious thinkers in France (e.g. the Protestant Ricoeur, the Catholic Breton or Marion) in blending secular and religious thinking. And one cannot underestimate the importance of Levinas's disciple, Derrida, in making the God question respectable again in public discourse in France, with the publication of his ground-breaking essay on Levinas ('Metaphysics and Violence' in *Writing and Difference* [1978 {1967}]). The fact that Derrida was both Jewish and the master of fashionable deconstruction was not irrelevant. The God who was cautiously re-entering French intellectual discourse during my time in Paris was in many respects a deconstructed messianic God, a factor that surely informed my own thinking about God – up to a point – in *La Poétique du Possible* (1984b) and *The God Who May Be* (2001).

But before leaving Levinas, let me say a word about a very special meeting I had with him in his home on Rue Michel-Ange in 1980. He invited me for tea shortly before my doctoral defence – of which he was a jury member along with Ricoeur and Breton – and kindly gave me the questions he would ask me the next day. As we talked, his son, Michaël, a concert pianist, rehearsed his scales in the background to the evident delight of his father. The main topic of our conversation – and of my dissertation – was the relationship between a poetics of the possible and an ethics of justice. When I confessed to Levinas that I found his ethics of asymmetrical responsibility to the other – I am always more responsible for the other than the other is for me – impossible to actually *live*, he gave me two simple examples of such a hyperbolic ethical demand working in everyday practice. Firstly, he spoke of how one says *après toi* when going through a doorway with someone. That is ethics: standing back to let the other go first (without the other being expected to do likewise). And secondly, he cited his recent experience of a group of young scholars who travelled all the way from Latin America to ask him how his ethics was practicable – to which he replied, ‘your travelling thousands of miles to ask me the question is itself ethics’. The concern to do justice is the first act of doing it. Several weeks after my defence, Levinas made another gesture of generosity in agreeing to participate in a colloquium I was organising with my compatriot, Joseph O’Leary, in the Collège des Irlandais in Paris. It was the first time Levinas had agreed to meet with France’s leading Heideggerians (Beaufret, Fédier, Vézin) since he had lost relatives in the Holocaust. Ricoeur and Marion also agreed to join the conference, which was published a year later as *Heidegger et la Question de Dieu* (1980). I never forgot Levinas’s act of intellectual trust and forgiveness. Ethics in action.

And then there was Stanislas Breton, the third member of my doctoral dissertation (June 1980). A professor at the Ecole normale supérieure and a priest of the Passionist Order

(who presided over my marriage in Normandy), Breton had a unique ability to combine mysticism, Marxism and metaphysics. He remained a lifelong friend and confidant and was what I would call a 'holy' man. He loved to play with children (including our daughters Simone and Sarah), getting down on all fours and becoming a child himself as he did so. He gave credence to the idea that children are first in the Kingdom; and like other genuinely holy people I have encountered in my life – Jean Vanier, Chokyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama, my mother – he knew how to laugh from the core of his being as the best response to the contradictions and complexities of existence. It was Breton who introduced me to the illuminating trope of *perichoresis* – the Greek orthodox figure of three divine persons moving in a circle – by drawing a picture on a white table napkin in my Paris apartment the night before my dissertation defence. The image still returns again and again in both my academic and spiritual life. He was also the person who helped me find the title for my first single-author book, *Poétique du Possible* (1984b), and who introduced me to Duns Scotus' notion of *haecceitas* (thisness) as the particularity of each person created by God. I always think of Breton when I read these lines by Gerard Manley Hopkins (Hopkins 1996):

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.
[...] for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces
(‘When Kingfishes Catch Fire’).

It is an image that has remained central to my thinking on hospitality ever since – namely, the call to host the quintessential inimitable strangeness of each human person. Responding to the other's singular 'thisness' co-responding to one's own. So that each one is saying, in their bodies and souls, 'Behold (*ecce!*) this (*haec!*)!' The Latin term, spelled variously *haecceitas* or *ecceitas*, plays on this double sense of annunciatory wonder and singular address. Or as Joyce puts it in *Finnegans Wake*, 'here comes

everybody' (HCE - *Haec-Ecce*). Each person, Breton taught me, is everyone. The particular is the universal. The concrete is the cosmic. The infinitesimal the infinite. Epiphanies are ordinary, everyday things. God is a god of little things - the last and the least (*elachistos*). The strangeness of every stranger (Mt 25). It is a lesson I never forgot.

There is one other mentor and friend I came to know during my Paris days whom I would like to honour here: Jacques Derrida. My first encounter with Derrida was in 1980 when I invited him to participate in my forthcoming book, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (1984a)²⁸. To my great relief, he said yes - largely because I was introduced by his mentor Ricoeur - and proceeded to share his intellectual confidences and convictions (later published in our exchange, 'Deconstruction and the Other', 1984). This somewhat surprised me as Derrida had taken vehement critical exception, around that time, to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of dialogue, reciprocity and metaphor. But it became quickly clear to me that Derrida had a profound generosity that went beyond philosophical differences to welcome a fellow student of his former master.²⁹ My 1980 exchange with Derrida was to be the first of several published conversations between us over the years, the last two appearing as 'Desire of God: an exchange'³⁰ and 'Terror, Religion and the New Politics'³¹.

In each of our exchanges over two decades, Derrida was always charming, modest and humane - belying the common caricature of him as a cranky, egotistical intellectual rock star. For many who did not read Derrida closely, deconstruction spelled nihilism

28. Which also featured conversations with Levinas, Ricoeur, Marcuse and Breton.

29. Derrida had been a *maître assistant* for Ricoeur - presenting the material for his first breakthrough book *Introduction to the Origin of Geometry* (1987) in one of Ricoeur's doctoral seminars.

30. Villanova dialogue (1997), published as Derrida, Caputo and Kearney 2006:301-308.

31. Conducted in New York City in the shadow of the fallen Twin Towers in October 2001, published as Kearney and Derrida (2004:3-14).

and relativism. Indeed, I recall when I invited him to give a talk in Dublin in 1998, his notoriety preceded him in the form of a British media campaign berating Cambridge University's decision to award him an honorary doctorate. Thousands turned up to hear him in Dublin. He arrived at UCD with a massive wad of pages that he had every intention of delivering. But as we walked down the aisle of the amphitheatre, I swept it from his arms and said – 'You are not reading *that!*' He clung to it like a mother to a baby the social services are taking into custody; but he soon let go and faced the public, paperless and disarmed. He spoke from the heart about the 'lie' (the topic of his talk) for a brisk 50 min rather than the 3 hours his paper would have taken to deliver (a month previously he had spoken for 6 hours at the Freud Museum in London). The audience, both academic and popular, were utterly entranced. Derrida could charm birds off trees when he was not hiding behind a 200-page paper. And he did just that. The question-answer session afterwards was a lesson in good listening and responding. No question, no matter how naïve (e.g. 'Mr Derrida, what does it mean to be human?'), was considered unworthy of response. Indeed, the final questioner of the evening added this remark, delivered in a broad Dublin accent:

Monsieur Derrida, I am delighted you came all the way from Paris to talk to us today. Reading the British gutter press this week I was expecting to see a vampire here today. But you are a grand good man. I always believed the Marquis de Sade to be the most maligned man in philosophy, but now I realise it is Jacques Derrida! If I was the Lord Mayor of Dublin I would offer you keys to the city. (n.p.)

The audience broke into applause and Derrida was deeply moved, bowing deep, his two hands clasped in thanks.

Another incident I would like to share concerns a conference we both participated in at Philadelphia in the nineties. It was the second Villanova University meeting on postmodernism and religion and at one point my good friend, John Caputo, objected to my challenging Derrida with the question:

[H]ow can deconstruction's maxim that 'every other is every other' (*tout autre est tout autre*) be reconciled with a hermeneutics of

discernment: namely the need to differentiate between different kinds of others – e.g. a madman or a messiah? (n.p.)

But Derrida took my question on the chin and graciously responded: ‘Richard’s problems with my thought are my own problems with my thought’. I was saved a lynching and all three of us went on to discuss the issue in perfectly cordial fashion.

One last story I am moved to mention here, but which, for reasons of discretion, I have not done before, concerns Derrida’s final reconciliation with Ricoeur. After Derrida’s Dublin lecture on the lie we retired to my house for dinner. During the course of the conversation, the question of Derrida’s depression came up – we had both experienced ‘dark nights’ in our lives – and he happened to mention how one of his worst bouts followed his doctoral defence when Ricoeur (his director) never showed up for the post-dissertation toast. Derrida confided that this withholding of the ceremonial blessing (as he read it) had devastated him, because Ricoeur had been an intellectual father for him since leaving his own family in Algeria to come to Paris as an émigré student. When I informed him that Ricoeur had not come to my doctoral toast either, Derrida was speechless. You too? He exclaimed. ‘Were you not shocked?’ I said not at all. I had simply picked up the phone and asked Ricoeur why he had not shown up – and had received this frank and moving response:

I am sorry Richard, but I never attend any of my student’s dissertation toasts. I have so many and must also look after my own family. I am a bad father to both my intellectual and actual children. I never give either enough time. Such is my life. I do two jobs badly, but it is all I can do. (n.p.)

Derrida was deeply affected and as soon as he returned to Paris the next day phoned Ricoeur. They agreed to meet that same afternoon in the Jardin du Luxembourg (it was early May) and stayed talking non-stop until the *gardiens* sent them home when the gates closed at 21:00. What they realised during their exchange was that for 30 years their respective philosophical positions (deconstructive and hermeneutic) had been speaking

past each other – mishearing, misreading, miswriting – in part because of a *dialogue manqué* at a pivotal moment in their lives: Derrida looking for a surrogate father, Ricoeur unable to respond to a surrogate son.

Ricoeur confessed to me subsequently that after this reunion, they continued to talk on a weekly basis right up to Derrida's untimely death from pancreatic cancer in 2002. Ricoeur wept at Derrida's passing, confiding to me: 'It was not fair. He should not have died before me'. Ricoeur joined his adopted spiritual son two years later in 2004. In one of the last conversations I had with Ricoeur, he told me that when he and Derrida had read my book, *The God Who May Be*, Derrida thought it too hermeneutic while Ricoeur thought it too deconstructionist! I shared with him a line from Seamus Heaney: 'Two buckets are easier carried than one, I grew up in between'. He smiled.

In addition to these philosophical friendships during my Parisian sojourns, I also had the good fortune to enjoy the intellectual acquaintance of other good colleagues like Jean-Luc Marion, René Girard and later Julia Kristeva, with whom my French wife, Anne, and I spent many memorable evenings discussing God, Being and the Unconscious with much good cheer. And I should also mention that my Paris apprenticeship included learning from several other inspirational thinkers 'at a distance', from Sartre and De Beauvoir (whose funerals I attended) to such teachers as Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, Lacan, Eliade and Lévi-Strauss, whose Paris lectures I was fortunate to attend in the late seventies. It was indeed a golden age.

And a final debt: It was also during my Paris years that I developed a creative and lasting relationship with my compatriot, Joseph O'Leary, who was studying theology at the time and went on to become a collaborator on many intellectual projects, beginning with our co-chairing the *Heidegger et Dieu* conference at the Collège des Irlandais in Paris in June 1979 (published as *Heidegger et la Question de Dieu* in 1980 and republished as a *Livre de Poche* in 2009). Joe went on to teach for three decades at

Sophia University, Tokyo, where I had the pleasure of visiting the Buddhist temples of Yanaka and Kamakura in his company. He has become a leading international scholar of East–West philosophical relations (especially Christian–Buddhist) and remains one of my closest intellectual colleagues on questions of interreligious dialogue. We were both born in the same city of Cork, Ireland, in the 1950s and will probably die there too, in good time, God willing.

■ Between Dublin and Boston

After my doctoral studies at the University of Paris, I married my French partner, Anne Bernard, and returned to a post in the department of metaphysics at UCD. Here I taught from 1981 to 1999, when I moved to take up a Chair of Philosophy at Boston College. During my two decades in Dublin, I had the joy of introducing undergraduate and graduate students to the radical questions of existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics and post-structuralism. I also edited a journal, *The Crane Bag*, with my Benedictine friend, Mark Patrick Hederman, which brought together writers, artists, educators, politicians and journalists in a common questioning of Ireland’s present and future cultural condition. We were denounced in the British House of Commons for being ‘too nationalist’ and by ministers of the Irish government (at the Forum for a New Ireland at Dublin Castle in 1984) for being ‘not nationalist enough’. To boot, senior members of the Irish Church condemned us for impiety and iconoclasm, while the media often dismissed us as too utopian and elitist. Because so many disliked what we were doing, I suppose we were doing something right. The driving principle of our journal was to open Ireland to ‘other’ modes of thinking, beyond the narrow tribal nationalisms fuelling much of the violence in the North. We followed James Joyce’s vow ‘to Europeanise Ireland and Hibernicise Europe’.

During the eighties and nineties, I worked with academic colleagues north and south of the Irish border on a number of

proposals for peace in Northern Ireland, including ‘Towards Joint Sovereignty’, ‘Towards a Council of the Isles’ and ‘Towards a Post-Nationalist Archipelago’. These and other essays on political and cultural reconciliation on our island were later published under the title *Postnationalist Ireland* (1997a). The main idea running through these projects for a shared governance of Ireland was a pooling of hitherto exclusivist sovereignty claims – to ‘one and indivisible nation states’ – in the name of greater regional or transnational power sharing. It was, throughout the Ulster Troubles, an attempt to shake hands with one’s traditional adversary and exchange narratives.³²

During my time back in Ireland, I also served as a so-called public intellectual on a number of semi-state bodies like the Irish Arts Council, the Irish Higher Education Authority and the Irish Film Center Board. This service brought me into contact with public life and politics in a way that was exciting and enlightening but also acted as a reminder, after a number of bruising polemical encounters, that politics was not for me. I also enjoyed a number of years combining my academic life with an extra-curricular career as public broadcaster on Irish and European media (RTE, BBC, ITV, France Culture). I presented several programmes on literature, philosophy and culture, which included exchanges with philosophers like Marcuse, Gadamer, Lyotard, Umberto Eco and Martha Nussbaum, as well as more political figures like Vaclav Havel, Mary Robinson and Noam Chomsky.³³ In the mid-nineties, I ventured into fiction and published two philosophical novels, *Sam’s Fall* (1995b) and *Walking at Sea Level* (1997b), which were translated into several languages³⁴. There followed a modest volume of poetry, *Angel of Patrick’s Hill* (1991). They were heady days – endeavouring to conflate the struggling

32. I will return to this later.

33. The dialogues were later published in the collections *States of Mind* (1995c) and *Debates in Continental Philosophy* (2004).

34. The French and German translations drew more readers than the English.

efforts of a public intellectual with the responsibilities of a regular academic life involving teaching at UCD and annual visiting semesters in the USA (Boston) and France (Paris in 1992 and Nice in 1994). But it could not last. The double fidelity to academic and public life proved too much and I suffered a series of burnouts and black nights leading to my decision in 1999 to pack my bags and migrate with my wife and daughters to Boston, where I have been living and teaching since.

The move to Boston was in many ways ‘a retreat’. Retreat in the dual sense of a withdrawal from an over-committed life in Ireland and a philosophical stepping-back in order to take stock. Or as Heidegger put it: *ein Schritt zurück* in order to engage in ‘another thinking of beginning’ [*Andenken als ein anderes Denken und ein anderer Anfang*]. This also involved, truth to tell, a certain ‘come down’. Right after the move to Boston College, I began to experience what my old McGill friend, John McNamara, called the ‘silence of the phones’. No one ringing to ask for a media interview or book review in the *The Times Literary Supplement* or *Irish Times*. No one calling in with agendas for the next crisis meeting of some semi-state cultural venture or organisation. No one announcing that the cameras were rolling in 15 min. But with this eclipse from public life, I found time to reflect more on the direction of my own intellectual and spiritual life and to spend more time with my family. Boston College offered a much lighter teaching load than UCD and a half sabbatical every 3 years for research and writing. It afforded me the opportunity to teach advanced doctoral seminars with leading thinkers in my field of contemporary European philosophy. I succeeded Hans-Georg Gadamer as professor of hermeneutics at Boston College and worked closely with Continental thinkers like Bill Richardson (expert on Heidegger and Lacan) and Jacques Taminiaux (expert on Arendt and phenomenology), while also conversing with non-Continental thinkers in the Boston area like Noam Chomsky (MIT) and Hilary Putnam (Harvard). The former became a family friend while the latter exchanged ideas and writings on Levinas, as he began to mix analytic with Continental

thinking in his last years. And then there was the extraordinary Boston Consortium, which permitted gifted graduate students from different Boston universities to cross-register courses – meaning that my seminar rooms had students from Boston College sitting beside counterparts from Boston University, MIT, Harvard, Brandeis and further afield. It is, to my knowledge, a system of pooled intervarsity collaboration almost unique in the great university cities of the world, and one of the highlights of my teaching at Boston College to this day.

The move to Boston also afforded me the chance, as mentioned, to re-evaluate my path in philosophy. It was during my initial years at Boston College that I began to concentrate explicitly on a hermeneutic phenomenology of the Stranger. This work on a ‘narrative imagination of otherness’ resulted in a sequence of seminars, leading to the publication of my trilogy, *Philosophy at the Limits*, in 2001–2003, namely, *Strangers Gods and Monsters* (2003), *On Stories* (2002) and *The God Who May Be* (2001). Whereas most of my books in the 1980s and 1990s had focused on imagination – from *The Wake of Imagination* (1998b) and *Poetics of Imagining* (1998a) to *Poetics of Modernity* (1995a) and *Transitions* (1985) – at the beginning of the new millennium I decided to revisit the hermeneutics of religion first adumbrated in *Poétique du Possible* (1984b). The publication of the trilogy was followed by a series of books on interreligious hermeneutics, including *Traversing the Heart* (2010), *Hosting the Stranger* (2011) and finally *Anatheism* (2011). As I look back now, I realise that these writings on religion were deeply informed by a series of research trips I made abroad where I engaged in dialogue with thinkers of other religious traditions. These intellectual odysseys included meetings with Sufi masters in Egypt, with Hebrew and Talmudic scholars in Jerusalem, with wise lamas in Nepal (most memorably Chokyi Nyima in the White Monastery of Kathmandu) and finally with Hindu gurus and sadhus in India. Two extensive research journeys to India involved stays in the Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh, the Fireflies Intercultural Centre in Bangalore, the interreligious monastery of Kurisumala (Kerala) and, perhaps

most movingly, the Ramana Maharshi Ashram in Arunachala, where the Benedictine pioneer of Christian-Hindu dialogue, Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux OSB), spent many formative years in the 1950s. My reflections on these Indian itineraries were published in *Traversing the Heart: Journeys in Interreligious Imagination* (co-edited with Eileen Rizo-Patron), so I will not repeat them here. Suffice it to say that these encounters with great teachers from other wisdom traditions had a lasting impact on my philosophy of religion – almost exclusively Christian up to then – and confirmed Ricoeur’s maxim that ‘the shortest route from self to self is through the other’. The impact was, I readily avow, as much spiritual as intellectual, a transformation of heart as much as mind. Returning from these foreign trips, I brought home practices of yoga and meditation that I continue to this day. Though I am always still a beginner.

But my testimony of debt to ‘other lands’ would not be complete without mention of one last journey. In 2015, I visited a series of Buddhist temples in Japan and China (Taipei and Shanghai), where I was profoundly moved by the sacred figure of Guan Yin. Guan Yin means ‘one who hears the cries of the world’ and was originally known as Avalokiteshvara – an East Asian bodhisattva associated with compassion and venerated by Mahayana Buddhists and followers of Chinese folk religions. She was invoked as a female Buddha or ‘Goddess of Mercy’ and was known by Christian missionaries as the ‘White Mary’. This sacred woman of heart-wisdom and compassion recalled for me my childhood in Cork making shrines to a White Mary of May with my mother and raised again the vexed question of why Mary was never celebrated as a fully-fledged female divinity in the Christian tradition? For all the talk of immaculate conceptions and heavenly assumptions, Mary remained the ‘handmaid of the Lord’ – a gender subservience evident throughout the long history of misogynist patriarchy in Western Christendom³⁵.

35. With the exception of the Celtic devotion to Brigid as both saint and goddess – known as ‘Mary of the Gaels’.

Not that Orthodox Judaism or Islam fared much better. Men ruled there, too. But perhaps in the growing encounter with non-Abrahamic spiritualities of the East, patriarchal monotheism can learn from ‘strangers’ to let women back into divinity. We might then recall that the female ‘Sophia’ who plays with the Lord in Proverbs 8 was there from the beginning and calls to be reintegrated into the biblical tradition. Sophia speaks in many tongues and shows herself in multiple ways – from Genesis and the books of Wisdom to Hosea and the Song of Songs. If Heidegger was struck, on reading Brentano, by the ‘manifold meanings of Being’, I confess to being struck, on my short journeys to the East, by the ‘manifold meanings of God’. This persuasion has made me a committed follower of the interreligious Centering Prayer and Contemplation movements pioneered by people like Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, Richard Rohr and Cynthia Bourgeault. A commitment that chimes with the ecumenical spirit of Benedictine monasticism, which nourished my early education in Glenstal. The key maxim of St Benedict’s Rule still rings in my ears: ‘*Ausculata!* Listen! [...] Treat every stranger who knocks as Christ’.

■ The Guestbook Project: From Boston to South Africa

As a last chapter of my odyssey through otherness, I would like to mention the work of Guestbook – a project that ultimately brought me to South Africa in the spring of 2017 and enabled me to participate in a series of animated philosophical exchanges that gave rise to the present volume. This concluding section takes a somewhat more formal tone, while remaining largely a matter of narrative testimony.

I founded Guestbook in 2008 as a largely scholarly venture. It began as an interdisciplinary seminar at Boston College on the theme of ‘Hosting the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality’. The idea was based on the fact that, in most

Indo-European languages, the word for ‘guest’ and ‘enemy’ is the same – for example, *hostis* in Latin is the common root of both ‘hostility’ and ‘hospitality’. Our aim was to explore how enmity could be transformed into empathy, how cycles of violence could be overcome in imaginative moments of welcoming the stranger. The first year of the project (2008–2009) consisted of 13 seminar presentations, two international conferences (philosophical and theological), an internationally streamed poetry festival (Poetries of the Stranger), a music concert (Songs of Sacred Strangeness) and a number of visiting lectures by artists like Dorothy Cross and Ann Carson. The activities were archived on guestbookproject.org and resulted in the publication of two special journal issues (*New Arcadia* [2009], *Religion and the Arts* [2010a, 2010b]) and two academic books (*Hosting the Stranger* [2011], *Phenomenologies of the Stranger* [2011]).

In the second year, I was joined by my Boston College colleague and professional artist, Sheila Gallagher, as co-director and we jointly embarked on a decade-long project of expanding Guestbook beyond a university programme to embrace an international outreach of partnerships in five continents under the umbrella title ‘Exchanging Stories Changing Histories’. This was to become our signature tune, comprising a Peace Story project where two young people shared their respective narratives across a divide and co-created a new third narrative. These were recorded as short videos and posted on our Guestbook website, serving as a ‘classroom without walls’ freely accessible to peace leaders, teachers and community activists in diverse educational contexts throughout the world.

When I was asked once what motivated me to set up Guestbook, I gave a number of philosophical reasons – invoking the hermeneutics of hospitality learnt from Ricoeur, Levinas and Derrida – and then avowed the more biographical reason of growing up in Ireland in the 1960s–1990s during a 30-year war of sectarian strife, culminating in the Good Friday Peace Agreement

of April 1998. The following is a personal testimony from the time:³⁶

In the 1980s, at the height of ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland, I was invited as a young professor of philosophy to come to Derry, a city divided by war, to moderate a workshop between republican and loyalist prisoners. During the workshop, one of the IRA [*Irish Republican Army*] prisoners told of how one night he was asleep in his bed when a loyalist gang broke into the house, bound, gagged and blindfolded him, threw him into the boot of a car, and drove him to a barn outside Derry. Strapped to a chair and about to be shot, he asked if he could smoke a last cigarette. His captor consented and offered him one. And as he smoked the cigarette – very slowly – he told the story of how he had become involved in republican violence: how his grandfather had been brutally murdered by the British armed forces, how his father had been incarcerated and tortured, how his mother had become an alcoholic and suffered a nervous breakdown, how his brother had been knee-capped and maimed for the rest of his life [...]. And he went on until he finished his cigarette. Then waited for the gun to go off. But it didn’t. There was no sound. No movement. He waited for five minutes, ten minutes, 15 minutes, 20 minutes – Nothing. Eventually, he managed to free himself and looked around. There was nobody there; the barn was empty. He walked home. When the IRA prisoner finished sharing this in the workshop I was chairing, another man, a loyalist paramilitary prisoner, stood up at the back of the hall and said, ‘I was the assassin who gave you that cigarette. And I *would* have shot you. But I couldn’t shoot you because, when I heard your story, I realised it was *my* story’. (n.p.)

I was very struck by how this basic act of narrative imagination could trigger a transfer of empathy between these two sworn enemies, leading eventually to reconciliation.

A second story that inspired Guestbook was that of ‘chancing your arm’. This goes back to 1492 when a terrible civil war was raging in Ireland and the Earl of Kildare, Gearóid Mór FitzGerald, hunted and eventually besieged James Butler, Earl of Ormond, in St Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin. At one-point FitzGerald realised,

36. What follows is a rewritten version of the testimony from an opening promotional video on www.guestbookproject.org (under the ‘Who we are’ section). For a transcription of this video, see Kearney (2015).

'It can't go on, this vicious cycle of blood-letting must end'. He asked his adversary, Butler, to open a hole in the door and announced:

I'm going to remove my armour and stretch my arm through the gap – you can cut it off or shake my hand. If you cut it off war continues, if you shake my hand, war ends. (n.p.)

Fitzgerald 'chanced his arm', as the saying went. Butler shook his hand and peace happened.

These two stories, from the history of my native war-torn Ireland, told of transformative acts of enemies becoming friends, of strangers becoming guests.

Guestbook now operates as an international non-profit, devoted to the fostering of peace stories through the work of empathic imagination, straddling divides of religion, class and culture in places as far afield as Asia, Africa, the USA and the Middle East. Examples to date include young Turks and Armenians sharing forbidden histories, Israeli and Palestinian students exchanging symbols (hijab and Star of David), Ulster Protestant and Catholic school girls switching school uniforms, Congolese and Rwandan refugees confiding traumas, Bangalore Muslims and Hindus performing rituals, Korean and Japanese youths trading memories and dreams. Each of these exchanges involves crossing borders of heart and mind where young people in divided communities dare *remake* history by imagining otherwise. They give a future to the past by transforming deep legacies of transgenerational hurt into narrative forms of healing. The aim of Guestbook is to empower young people to 'chance their arms' – to make bold leaps of imagination towards impossible possibilities of peace.

My philosophical work with the Guestbook project finally brought me to South Africa. In May 2017, I flew to Johannesburg at the invitation of Professors Willie Van der Merwe and Daniël P. Veldsman, and was privileged to engage in conversations with philosophers and theologians at the University of Pretoria, University of South Africa and Oos Gemeente (Ooskerk).

The visit also included the negotiation of an international partnership between Guestbook and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town and featured what for me was an unforgettable exchange with South African peace activists and scholars Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and Wilhelm Verwoerd at Stellenbosch University. I was deeply moved by these visionary people – Wilhelm, a former academic before becoming director of the Irish Peace Center in Glenree, County Wicklow (bringing together former belligerents from Ulster and South Africa), and Pumla, a brilliant scholar who served on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in the 1990s and since. One story related by Pumla – and recorded in her book *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid* – reminded me of the Irish legend of ‘chancing your arm’, although this time it was a case of ‘chancing your hand’. It is an episode that recalls the handshake as the first gesture of civilisation, epitomised in great peace breakthroughs in history, taken by people bold enough to dare the impossible and shake the hand of their sworn enemy. Think of Mandela and De Klerk, Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley, Begin and Sadat, and Gandhi and Mountbatten. Pumla’s story also exemplified for me the basic wager of my *Carnal Hermeneutics* (2015), that the most humane of the senses is ‘touch’, for it alone involves a ‘double sensation’ of touching and being touched, as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty both showed in their phenomenologies of sensation.

Here is the story: Pumla resolved, during a sensitive moment in the reconciliation process, to meet Eugene de Kock, a brutal apartheid executioner known popularly as ‘Prime Evil’, then imprisoned. She bore no illusions (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003:6): ‘De Kock had not just given apartheid’s murderous evil a name. He had *become* that evil’.³⁷ Pumla was prompted to meet with this

37. I am indebted to Robert Vosloo’s illuminating essay (2016), ‘Touch Gives Rise to Thought: Paul Ricoeur and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela on Dealing with the Past, Mutual Recognition and Embodied Performativity’ (published in this volume), for most of the following information and citations.

notorious assassin after she heard a widow of one of his victims express a willingness to forgive him after witnessing his testimony to the TRC in September 1997. 'I would like to hold him by the hand', the widow had said, 'and show him that there is a future, and that he can still change' (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003:14-15). Pumla interpreted the widow's readiness to reach out to her husband's murderer as an astonishing, almost impossible, act of empathy, for the widow was not only shedding tears for the loss of her own executed spouse but for the loss of De Kock's moral humanity. For Pumla (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003:15) this raised the crucial question: 'Was De Kock deserving of the forgiveness shown to him [...] Was evil intrinsic to De Kock, and forgiveness wasted on him?' Or as Augustine would have it: Was it possible to unbind the agent from the act? (Ricoeur 2009:489-493).

Robert Vosloo, who convened the colloquy between myself, Wilhelm and Pumla at Stellenbosch University, offers this lucid analysis of the moral dilemma involved in Pumla's meeting with De Kock (Gobodo-Madikizela 2002):

What Pumla drew from this enigmatic gesture of pardon between the widow and De Kock was that a remorseful apology can contribute to the vocabulary of forgiveness in the context of evil. She is aware of the asymmetrical relationship between the admission of guilt and the word of forgiveness, and that the request for forgiveness can have an empty ring to it, adding insult to injury. (p. 13)

However, the power and significance of an apology lies in its ability 'to *perform* and to transcend the apologetic words' (Gobodo-Madikizela 2002:13).³⁸ The emphasis on embodied 'performance' is key here. Why? Because, as Pumla insists (Gobodo-Madikizela 2002):

[E]mpathy is what enables us to recognise another's pain, even in the midst of tragedy, because pain cannot be evil. Empathy deepens our humanity [...]. When perpetrators apologise and experience the pain of remorse, showing contrition, they are *acting as human beings*. (p. 20)

38. The larger citation is from Vosloo's chapter included in this volume.

During her encounter with De Kock in prison, Pumla (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003) was at one point moved by his tears as he confessed not only his regret at murdering the widow's husband but his desire to undo the wrong:

I wish there was a way of bringing the (body) back alive. I wish I could say, 'Here (is) your husband,' he confided, stretching out his arms as if bearing an invisible body, his hands trembling, his mouth quivering, 'but unfortunately [...] I have to live with it'. (p. 32)

And then the impossible happened – an unthinkable act of embodied empathy was enacted in a moment of carnal transference. Almost unbeknownst to herself, Pumla found herself reaching out her hand towards his, only to find it was 'clenched, cold and rigid'. Reflecting back on this gesture afterwards, she (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003) observed:

This made me recoil for a moment and to recast my act of reaching out as something incompatible with the circumstances of an encounter with a person who not too long ago used these same hands, this same voice, to authorise and initiate unspeakable acts of malice against people very much like myself. (p. 32)

Clearly this was no matter of cheap grace, no act of facile sentiment. If anything this strange unpredictable moment signalled what Jacques Derrida terms an act of 'impossible hospitality'. Summing up the encounter, Vosloo (2002) astutely notes:

This unsettling encounter with De Kock left Gobodo-Madikizela with a sense of feeling guilty for having expressed some empathy, and this made her wonder if she had not 'crossed the moral line from compassion, which allows some measure of distance, to actually identifying with De Kock'. (p. 33)

The encounter also had an impact on De Kock himself, who confessed during one of their later meetings: 'You know, Pumla, that was my trigger hand you touched' (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003:39). This chillingly candid admission left Gobodo-Madikizela with a mixture of feelings. On the one hand, she felt vulnerable, angry and invaded, and on the other hand she

realised that De Kock's statement might also carry another underlying subtext (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003):

My action may well have been the first time a black person touched him out of compassion. He had previously met black people only as enemies, across the barrel of a gun or, for those who were on his side of the firing line, as comrades in murder. Perhaps de Kock *recognised my touch as a kind of threshold crossing*, a new experience for him. (p. 42)

As is plain, such liminal crossing was far from self-evident. Pumla was painfully aware of the complex contradictions involved in touching the 'trigger hand', but in that moment of carnal exchange she did not withdraw her hand. She made a wager in the impossible possibility of a shared humanity. 'His world was a cold world', she (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003) realised:

[W]here eyes of death stared accusingly at him, a world littered with corpses and graves [...] But for all the horrific singularity of his acts, de Kock was a desperate soul seeking to affirm to himself that he was still part of the human universe. (p. 39)

What is so revealing about this 'trigger hand' episode is, I submit, that it was Pumla's carnal experience of De Kock's remorse that reciprocally triggered her ability to acknowledge his humanity (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003:67-68).³⁹ That momentary gesture worked, it seems, because both De Kock's remorse and Pumla's empathy were *carnally performed* rather than *conceptually calculated*. It was less about cognition than recognition, less about sense than sensibility. 'A genuine apology', as Pumla subsequently observed (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003):

[F]ocuses on the feelings of the other rather than on how the one who is apologising is going to benefit in the end. It seeks to acknowledge full responsibility for the act, and does not use self-serving language to justify the behaviour of the person asking forgiveness. It must communicate, convey, and *perform* as a 'speech act' that expresses

39. Cf. our analysis of such critical carnal encounters with the stranger/other/enemy in Kearney (2003); Kearney and Treanor (2015), Kearney and Semonovitch (2011).

a desire to right the relationship damaged through the action of the apologist. (pp. 98–99)

In short, the act of double performativity embodied a dual recognition of common humanity between self and stranger, forgiver and criminal, peacemaker and perpetrator. Or as Pumla (Gobodo-Madikizela 2008) herself put it:

When remorse is triggered in the moment of witnessing [...] the perpetrator recognises the other as a fellow human being. At the same time, the victim, too, recognises the face of the perpetrator not as that of a ‘monster’ who committed terrible deeds, but as the face with enough humanity to feel remorse. (pp. 176–177)

Such moments of forgiveness – to the extent that they are humanly possible (which is perhaps why Ricoeur calls them ‘miraculous’) – lie in the search ‘not for the things that separate us but for something common among us fellow human beings, the compassion and empathy that bind our human identity’ (Gobodo-Madikizela 2014:1, 35).⁴⁰

So why, we might ask again, the importance of hands? Triggering or counter-triggering, acting or suffering, fallible or forgiving? I think what most struck me about Pumla’s account was the witness to a kind of practical wisdom that operates at the level of the body, a discerning sensibility that functions at the level of skin and flesh, nerve endings and sinews, complexion and touch. This is a carnal knowing prior to reflective knowing, a form of tact within contact, of savvy as *savoir* in the original sense of tasting and testing (from *savourer-sapere-sapientia*). This embodied wisdom operates in the three senses of *sens* – sensation, orientation and meaning – and it is at this level that the primal scenes of openness to the Other are recorded in the great wisdom traditions. One recalls Abraham and Sarah turning

40. One might ask here why a similar miracle of pardon and healing, of remorse and empathy, did not occur between SS officer Adolph Eichmann and his benign jailor (Captain Less) in the famous Holocaust trial in Jerusalem, as scrupulously documented by Hannah Arendt (1963)?

hostility into hospitality by extending empathy to the three strangers at Mamre, offering them food rather than the sword. Or the scene in Homer where the nurse Euryclea welcomes Odysseus, the disguised beggar, home to Ithaca by touching the childhood scar (*trauma*) on his thigh. Or the scene in Ovid where Baucus and Philemon host Hermes the masked stranger in their home and give him all the food they have. Or Jesus feeding his disciples at the last supper or on the shores of Galilee or at the Inn at Emmaus. These classical and biblical scenes of radical hospitality feature hands offering nourishment or healing (almost all Jesus's cures, for example, work through touch). And one finds similar instances of healing and hosting throughout the history of art and literature (right down to the table scenes between Jean Valjean and Monseigneur Myriel in *Les Misérables* and between Babette and her townsfolk in *Babette's Feast*). All these scriptural-literary scenes – and we already cited a number of iconic political handshakes – testify to a carnal power of savvy and tact, of flair and taste, pre-existing our conceptual consciousness: an embodied navigation between enemy and friend, hostage and host, often miraculously turning the former into the latter.

Commenting on one of Pumla's exchanges during the TRC, Archbishop Tutu remarked: 'We should all be deeply humbled by what we've heard [...]. Now we've got to turn our backs on this awful past and say: life is for living' (cf. Krog 1998:30). 'After such knowledge what forgiveness?' asks T.S. Eliot. And we might add, in the spirit of Tutu and Pumla: 'After such forgiveness what knowledge?' For if there *is* knowledge, what do we do with it? Do we go on remembering, working through wounds, setting the record straight? Or do we decide to forgive and forget? This is a key problem not only for the TRC in South Africa but for other truth tribunals and memorials in post-traumatic communities throughout the world. It has been a real question, on a smaller scale, for my own performative therapy work with Sheila Gallagher, both in Guestbook's *Exchanging Stories* in Northern Ireland and in our recent multimedia performance,

Twinsome Minds.⁴¹ Complex and challenging questions of memory and forgetting confronted us here. For story often comes up against history and has to rub it against the grain if one is to revisit hidden sufferings. Genuine remembrance goes beneath the Grand Narratives of Official History to identify hidden or neglected 'micro-narratives' – stories that turn 'backward memory' (addicted to repetition compulsion) into 'forward memory' (alert to unfulfilled possibilities of the past). Or to use Freud's term: we need a working-through of pain (*Durcharbeitung*) that can turn 'melancholy into mourning'. Such work involves a difficult process of therapeutic anamnesis – while always mindful that 'amnesty is never amnesia' (Ricoeur). We must remember rightly before we can rightly forget. We must pay our 'debt to the dead' before we can live again. Reliving through cathartic imagination.

I think it is no accident that one of the most powerful testimonies to the traumas of apartheid – *Country of My Skull* – was written by a South African poet, Antjie Krog. And I am also reminded here of Atom Egoyan's extraordinary testament to the Armenian genocide in his film *Ararat* as well as countless writers, artists and film-makers who have kept the memory of the Holocaust alive – Amos Oz, Paul Celan, Claude Lanzmann, Stephen Spielberg and Art Spiegelman – all observing Primo Levi's plea to 'keep retelling the story of Auschwitz so that it can never happen again'. But we must also honour Adorno's question – 'after Auschwitz who can write poetry?' – acknowledging the limits of narrative imagination. (Is not silence sometimes the most appropriate response to horror?) And yet one cannot deny the indefatigable call of healing. It does not go away. History needs story to bring the past to life again, so that we can 'feel what wretches feel', empathise with the pain of the

41. The latter comprised an act of 'double remembrance' regarding the historical traumas of 1916: those sacrificed in the Dublin Easter Rising and on the battlefields of Flanders and France during the First World War – often Irishmen from the same parish or family wearing the different uniforms of opposing armies.

persecuted and be 'struck' by the terror of it all. Or to repeat the lesson of Aristotle's *Poetics*: we often need a narrative plot to reconfigure past sufferings into a meaningful act of *katharsis*. Otherwise there would be no purgation, no reckoning, no release – just a bare chronicle of facts: irresistible fatality. Story and history need each other for unspeakable wounds to become visible scars. For archive to become art. In sum, a poetics of imagining is necessary for inexperienced experience to be *re-experienced* – again and again.

■ Last words

In conclusion, I would like to record with gratitude several other special moments during my visit to South Africa: In Stellenbosch, the challenging and illuminating conversations with Professor Louise du Toit at her graduate philosophy seminar on carnal hermeneutics and with Prof. Bernard Lategan at the Institute for Advanced Studies on intercultural hospitality; the very fruitful encounter with peace activists Ayehsa Fakie and Sindi Nosindiso and their team at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town – a meeting that resulted in the signing of a partnership with the Guestbook Project for Exchanging Stories (already underway). In Pretoria, the exchanges with Professor Christo Lombard and his students at the University of South Africa and with his 'atheist' colleagues afterwards *chez lui* where we explored together possibilities of a new 'acoustic space' for the call of the Stranger; the meetings with Professor Anné Verhoef and his passionately committed students from Potchefstroom on the hermeneutics of religion at our seminar at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria; and finally the deeply enlightening and engaging dialogues with Yolande Steenkamp and members of the Dutch Reformed Church on the subject of theopoetics in Ooskerk, Pretoria.⁴²

42. I am also very grateful to a number of people not mentioned in my text who kindly hosted me and my wife Anne during our visit to South Africa. These include Bernard, Esther and

I returned from my trip to South Africa to begin work on another project of narrative reconciliation, 'Stories at the Borders' – an event at Boston College in 2018 marking the 10th anniversary of the founding of Guestbook and the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Peace Agreement in Northern Ireland. All I can say after my encounters with such remarkable South African thinkers and peacemakers is that I feel newly emboldened to re-engage the daunting task of changing pain into peace through storytelling. A double work of heart and hand: striving to give a future to the past through narratives of healing and gestures of touch. The shortest route from self to self is indeed through the other. There are many others and there is much to be done.

(footnote 42 continues...)

Nerina Lategan, and their families, who welcomed us to their homes and to the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies, of which Bernard is director; Reza Hosseini of the University of Stellenbosch, who escorted us on a beautiful journey to the Cape of Good Hope with Professor Chielozone Eze; Keran Elah, Bernice Serfontein, Marinus Schoeman and Philomene Rust, who introduced us to the culture and nature of Pretoria and its environs with so much expertise, grace and generosity.