

A Game of Jacks: Review Essay of John D. Caputo's Recent Works

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journals.sagepub.com/home/psc**Richard Kearney** 

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Abstract

This is a review essay by Richard Kearney celebrating the recent work of John D Caputo and responding to the companion review essay by Caputo on Kearney's work in this issue of PSC. The author critically considers five volumes by Caputo and two recent volumes and a reader devoted to his philosophy. The essay covers most of the key issues in Caputo's later published work including 'weak theology', 'deconstruction', 'radical hermeneutics', 'hauntology' and 'the event of the impossible'.

Keywords

continental philosophy, hermeneutics, John D Caputo, Richard Kearney, theology

There is a striking image on the back cover of the new edition of Jack Caputo's book, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*. The photographer has caught the author in the act of raising his right hand to deconstruct Jacques Derrida who is listening with stoic intent as he realizes that his disciple has learned his teaching all too well! Little Jack deconstructing Big Jack. Or vice versa? Who is to know in this radical hermeneutic circle? Perhaps only a close reader of the image – and of the text it exemplifies (one of my favourite Caputo books) – might hazard a guess.

I will try, in what follows, to do just that, reading between the lines of some of Caputo's recent writings. Celebrating his 80th birthday in 2021, the archi-evangelist of American deconstruction is more prolific, provoking, inspiring and engaging than ever. And one has much to celebrate today reviewing the philosopher's extraordinary scholarly publications and achievements. These include his long and productive labours in the vineyards of continental philosophy, from his groundbreaking work on Heidegger

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and medieval thought (Aquinas and Eckhart) down to his pioneering work on deconstruction and religion, not forgetting his wise and influential stewardship as president of the American Catholic Philosophical Association and the executive co-director of the Society for Phenomenological and Existential Philosophy. A service which has informed a whole generation of young hermeneutic scholars teaching and writing today.

I will also endeavour to respond here to some of the challenges which Caputo offers in his own review of my recent work in this volume. A mutual friend who perused Caputo's review remarked that it was like witnessing a 'Boss tell someone how much he loves him before shooting him'. I wouldn't go quite that far and am glad to report I am still alive and well, but it is true to say that Caputo always puts me to the pin of my intellectual collar and I will do my best below to conduct our gladiatorial exchange as honestly and honourably as possible. An exchange which the Latins might call a *disputatio*, the Germans an *Auseinandersetzung*, the French *un combat amoureux*. I dedicate the following reflections to my friend of 40 years and favourite sparring partner, Jack Caputo.

I: Revisiting Caputo: To the texts themselves

Let me start with a brief survey of Caputo's most recent publications before offering some critical reflections. I rehearse them in the order of their apparition.

In *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (2018), Caputo provides an excellent and accessible account – courtesy of Pelican – of the genealogy of the hermeneutic movement with special attention to its crucial implications for today's world. He entertains such leading questions as: Is there anything outside of reading? Is there a reality beyond the text? Are there facts that are interpretation-free? And if the answer is no, how are we supposed to know what to think or do in our everyday lives? The author devotes detailed discussion to most 20th-century proponents of hermeneutics – Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida, Vattimo and Rorty (Ricoeur is a notable exception) – before engaging such topical postmodern themes as post-humanism and post-religious secularism. He doesn't raise the question of post-deconstructionism – what comes after deconstruction? – but I will return to that anon.

In the final sections of the book, Caputo poses the timely question of interpretation in our digital age – how can we tell the difference between real and virtual worlds? Caputo speaks here of the 'spectre of the post-human', noting that our imaginary is no longer primarily shaped by religion, art and philosophy but by the new cyber technologies. Far from engaging in Luddite nostalgia for by-gone pasturelands (as Heidegger did), Caputo takes his cue from Derrida arguing that our contemporary coded communication systems are simply the latest continuation of textuality, a process dating back to the first invention of 'writing' as a form of virtual reality (as Plato realized in his critique of the magic spells of Hermes/Thoth). Indeed, Caputo even engages Donna Haraway's thesis that our genetic code is already a form of language written into our animal-bodily life. No form of material life, he reminds us, is 'outside of the text'. What is going on in contemporary genetics and brain science is not opposed to the model of textuality but is based on it. *Differance* is everywhere, from the logos of Genesis to the genetic alphabets of our DNA and RNA. We are inscribed in both formal and animal systems and there is no way out of these World Wide Webs. But that does not mean we must give up on hermeneutics. Au

contraire, Caputo retorts, the challenge is to turn technical calculation into interpretative negotiation. Or in Gadamerian terms, to follow not only the way of ‘method’ but of ‘play’. (And we note that Caputo’s writing is, as always, full of playful daring and brio. You can agree or disagree but you are never bored).

In the conclusion to this lively book, Caputo decries the old antagonism between science and philosophy and calls for a new ‘hermeneutic teamwork’ between hermeneuts, physicists and neuro-scientists, celebrating the ‘plasticity’ of consciousness. The real concern of postmodern hermeneutics, he argues, is not to demonise technology but to realise its productive powers. The Other as Big Dada has mutated into Big Data – but that is not the end of the story. Instead of embracing an apocalyptic pessimism regarding our digital culture, Caputo suggests we turn the threat into a promise. And in a concluding inscription of both Derrida and Tillich, he holds out the possibility of a postmodern post-religion which champions the ‘unconditional’ as a ‘fragile, precious, priceless something I-know-not-what in life’. Not a new church of revelation but a new form of life dedicated to a messianic democracy-to-come. A final rallying cry for a new game of interpretation in our expanding age of information.

The Essential Caputo (2018) showcases a veritable treasure-trove of classic Caputo texts, admirably assembled and introduced by B. Keith Putt. The first part features very helpful and insightful conversations between the author and the likes of Derrida, Clayton Crockett, Mark Dooley and Putt himself. The second traces the development of Caputo’s trademark ‘radical hermeneutics’ through selections from his early writings on Aquinas, Meister Eckhart and Heidegger to his later engagements with Gadamer, Foucault, Vattimo and Derrida. The splendid volume culminates in a series of essays in which Caputo explores his keynote ideas of sacred anarchy, weak theology and the axiology of the impossible. All making for a formidable Reader of the ‘best of Caputo’. A veritable *summa theologica* of Saint Jacques de Villanova.

It is fitting that the publication of *The Essential Reader* was shortly followed by two other critical commentaries on Caputo’s compendious intellectual itinerary – Štefan Štofanič’s *Adventure of Weak Theology* (2018), which traces Caputo’s biography through the lens of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and Calvin Ullrich’s *Sovereignty and Event* (2021), which explores the political implications of Caputo’s radical theology. All three critical volumes offer powerful testimony to Caputo’s prophetic (he might prefer ‘quasi-prophetic’) deconstruction of the theological and metaphysical idols which have vitiated western thought for two millennia.

Cross and Cosmos (2019) features Caputo’s impassionate plea for a radical reinterpretation of the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*). It casts an equally critical eye on the theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*) which Caputo rechristens, with the help of Luther, ‘difficult glory’. Caputo makes a telling confession in this book: that theology was a word he resisted using for most of his career – from the time he left the De la Salle Brothers, where he spent years as a young novice, to the time he encountered Derrida’s later work in the 1980s–1990s. Ironically, it was Derrida the atheist who taught Caputo what a deconstructive thing theology could be and what a theological thing deconstruction could be. It was only after his major neo-Augustinian reading of the master deconstructor, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1977), that Caputo went on to publish his three landmark theological works, *The Weakness of God* (2006), *The Insistence of*

God (2013) and *The Folly of God* (2005). There were other minor theological works in between – *What would Jesus Deconstruct?* (2007) and *Hoping against Hope* (2015); but the big theological trilogy put Caputo on the map of theological deconstruction – with Derrida’s blessing – and he never looked back. *Cross and Cosmos* is, by the author’s own admission, the culmination of 40 years of audacious work rethinking what is meant by the ‘name of God’. The output is as dynamic as it is productive, reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s similarly God-crazed prolixity in the 1850s. And Kierkegaard remains throughout one of Caputo’s guiding stars – the solitary knight of faith taking on atheists and theists alike in his determination to unmask ecclesial hypocrisy (catholic or protestant) and to affirm the scandal of the Cross. In this 2019 work, Caputo takes his tune from Paul’s reading of kenosis (Phil 2: 6–7), to suggest that the God of sovereign might has emptied himself from almighty power into an ‘irreducible groundlessness’. The Crucifixion is not a means to some triumphal end, a mortal wound leading to some Immortal Body. The cross is the way itself, its own end, whose only solace is the difficult glory of mortal living and dying. The Luther of the *Heidelberg Disputation* is his chosen guide here, along with Paul and Kierkegaard. Caputo follows Luther ‘where he was not leading’ – a post-Catholic engaging with post-Protestantism in affirming the unsurpassable lesson of the crucified one against all forms of triumphalism.

In part 2 of the book, Caputo considers the implications of a radicalized *theologia crucis* for a new understanding of the cosmos – a sort of deconstructive cosmology inspired by Catherine Keller’s brilliant figure of ‘planetary entanglement’. For Caputo, God does not ‘exist’ but ‘insists’ as a call for cosmic reconciliation facing up to our mortal condition with justice and charity. His aim is not to provide easy answers or happy endings but to restore life to its ‘original difficulty’ – to seize the cosmic moment in its transient glory. To restore us to a basic condition of existential insomnia. *Sic transit gloria mundi*. But the niggling question remains, if the cosmos at large shares the same tragic fate as the crucified (non-risen) Jesus, what hope is there of better things to come? What promise of new cosmic life after the impending climate disaster? Will our world ever rise and shine again? Will Jeremiah rather than Isaiah have the last word?

The recent 2019 republication of *On Religion* is a second edition of the 2001 book Caputo wrote for Routledge’s Thinking in Action series. It has actually proven to be his best seller. This expanded version with a new preface includes a discussion of the ‘mystical element’ in human existence framed in terms of ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ Caputo explores in very accessible terms how there can be faith *both* within *and* without religion and also engages the vexed question of religious violence for our contemporary age. The book concludes with a discussion of science and religion, considering inventive physicists as the new mystics in a ‘post-human’ age of the AI simulation. Among other things, he revisits the question of how a religion of Incarnation might survive the ongoing and progressive digitalization of human life, up to and including the ‘uploading’ of consciousness and shedding of biological bodies (see Johnny Depp in the movie ‘Transcendence’).

Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida with a New Introduction (2021) is precisely what the title promises – a conversational commentary on the work of Caputo’s ultimate mentor and guide. Opening with a vintage round table with Derrida at Villanova University in 1994 – the first of many symposia held at the

university over the years – Caputo brings his Parisian Rabouni through his paces illuminating the central teachings of the deconstructive gospel. It is a pleasure to follow master and apostle as they navigate *l'autre cap* (*de bonne espérance*) and beyond. If, that is, one can talk of a 'beyond' of deconstruction? Of Ana-deconstruction? But whether or not one embraces Caputo's close reading of Derridean concepts like *khôra*, *écriture*, *différance*, hospitality, Gift, grammatology, messianicity and democracy-to-come, one cannot deny that this veritable tour de force of hermeneutic exposition is the best guide available to the highways of deconstruction. From Jacques to Jack and back again.

The final volume by Caputo under review, *In Search of Radical Theology* (2020), features 10 critical essays under the subtitle 'expositions, explorations, exhortations' – the greatest of these being 'exhortations'. In a characteristically bracing Introduction, Caputo rehearses key arguments of his earlier *Cross and Cosmos* (2019) and extends his basic thinking on the 'possibility of the impossible'. This is the ultimate account of his post-religious hermeneutics of 'hope without hope'. His argument, in a nutshell, goes something like this. Once deconstructed, theology becomes a form of life, *tout court*. From the point of view of classical theism, Caputo is an 'atheist' (in keeping with Derrida when he avows 'he rightly passes for an atheist'). His radicalized theology is about a God without God and a religion without religion. Like Tillich before him, his atheism is the beginning of a genuine radical theology, not the end; for he holds that the name of God is *not* the name of a scholastic *ens supremum* or *esse ipsum subsistens*, but a 'symbol' of the unconditional call – what he names an 'event'. God is the unconditional but the unconditional is not God. For Caputo, it could be a lot of things, maybe even the universe itself, but the idea that there is a personal, intelligent and loving being called God behind it all is, he believes, a demand of *piety*, not of phenomenology. After Caputo's deconstruction, God is decapitated, perhaps even caput. And speaking to God as a person is like speaking to the sea or a tree 'as if' they were persons. Brother sun, sister moon. Except that while Francis of Assisi speaks of God 'as' nature, Caputo speaks 'as if' (*comme si*) God were nature. The real 'meaning' of the New Testament is ultimately the *form of life* it 'calls forth'. And if we want to say it is true, it is only in the sense of making sense truly. Or in the way a novel is true while still being a work of fiction. But the so-called Revelation of Scripture is not, for Caputo, about representing matters of fact, as if God and angels and resurrected bodies were real entities, instead of characters in a story. It is less a *theology* than a *theopoetics*.

So far so clear. But how, I ask, might Caputo see this credo of incredulity in relation to anatheism? How does he contrast his faith of the faithless with my diacritical hermeneutics of God as *posse* – divine Maybe or Perhaps based on transformative moments of radical hospitality? Caputo seems to suspect that, behind it all, I still believe in a personal Supreme Being who has rigged the stakes from the start, before any wagers are laid, stacking the deck so that some *deus ex machina* can pop out with a final hand to trump all atheist opponents. In short, he seems to imagine anatheism as a theological card game where the dealer slips a joker from his sleeve at the last minute. A double dealing which wants it both ways – atheist and theist – but ultimately deems only those who bet on theism as winners.

Let us take a closer look at the arguments

II Crossing swords with Caputo – Between hermeneutics and deconstruction

In Caputo's review essay of my work, *Reading Richard Kearney* (published in this issue of *Philosophy and Social Criticism*), the author shows his hermeneutic colours in robust engagement with my work. Caputo is at his combative best when flushing out the ultimate difference between his radical hermeneutics and my diacritical hermeneutics, between his weak theology and my micro-eschatology, between his post-religious atheism and my post-religious anatheism, between his God of the Impossible and my God of the Possible. While the gallant Knight of Villanova begins with beguiling kerchiefs of praise, he soon removes the gauntlet. We square off. *Faites vos jeux!*

Drawing on the impressive arsenal of his recent writings – the octogenarian is a spring chicken when it comes to laying golden eggs – Caputo critiques anatheism as a threefold movement from theism through atheism to a new (ana) theism: a third position which overcomes the polar opposition in a final synthesis. Now even though he acknowledges I do not identify as Hegelian, this sounds very like Hegel to me. And, I confess, this is a common confusion which I have tried to clarify more than once since the publication of *Anatheism* in 2010. But if I am obliged to explain myself, maybe there is a problem. *Une anguille sous roche*, as the Gallic deconstructionists might say. So let me take the opportunity to rehearse my position more clearly. Here goes. God after God, the God who returns after the death of God, may well be the God of wisdom traditions – of Abraham or Lao Tsu or Patangali or Black Elk – or it may be a God who completely surprises us in its strangeness, or it may be no God at all. As I wrote in the conclusion to *Anathesim*: in the after-God moment of anatheism, 'we open ourselves to the gracious possibility of receiving our own God back again, but this time as a gift from the other as a God of life beyond death. In losing our faith we may get it back again: first faith ceding to second faith in the name of the stranger. That is the wager of anatheism. And the risk. For in surrendering our own God to a stranger God no God may come back again. Or the God who comes back may come back in ways that surprise us'.¹ In other words, the third step – if one must number them – may take the form of either an 'theist anatheism' or an 'atheist anatheism'. Or, as often as not, an on-going wagering between both. But whatever form it takes, anatheism is never a Hegelian *fait accompli* – never an ultimate solution governed by a secret 'ruse of Reason'. If there were a dialectical guarantee that we end up in a heavenly Absolute Spirit after all, there would be no risk, no wager, no act of faith, no hosting the incoming stranger – but only a sly theodicy with God up its sleeve. It would be what Caputo (and Derrida before him) describes as 'programmability': a predictable program of pre-established harmony waiting to 'come out' when the chips are down. But to borrow from Alfred J. Prufrock, 'that is not what I meant at all'.

So what *do* I mean? I mean that anatheism is a disposition rather than a position, a process rather than a program, an open questioning rather a final answer, a performance (orthopraxis) rather than a predication (orthodoxy), a guestbook for strangers rather than a Facebook for preselect 'friends'. Anatheism is not Hegelian dialectics but hermeneutic dialogue between multiple seekers of love, peace and justice without end. And I would certainly count Caputo among them. And if I may be permitted another personal credo – this time from *The God Who May Be* (2001) – I would say this: '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*.² So if in practice I am wont to identify, more often than not, as a *theist atheist*, I would consider some of my closest partners in the 'after-God' colloquy as *atheist anatheists*. For example in the dialogues of *Reimagining the Sacred* (2015), I would count Julia Kristeva, Gianni Vattimo, James Wood and Caputo in the latter category and Charles Taylor, David Tracey and Merold Westphal in the former. But if atheist anatheists 'rightly pass as atheists', to borrow Derrida's formula, they do so in a special way – more akin to Nietzsche's madman who announces the death of God while declaring that he 'seeks God'. Both groups are '*seeking after God*'. So is there really much of a difference between theist and atheist versions of the atheist questioning/quest for God? In the heel of the hunt, perhaps not. But, to be honest, a little *quand même*? So before declaring the *disputatio* over, let me deploy some 'diacritical hermeneutics' to discern what this 'little' gap (*écart*) separating Caputo and myself might entail.

As both of us hail from a Catholic-Christian formation (with no supercessionist presumptions), let us cut to the quick: the scene of the Annunciation identified by Caputo as central to my analysis. In *Anatheism* and elsewhere, I have invited a hermeneutic revisiting of the moment where Mary of Nazareth – the Nazarena – is confronted with a stranger who goes by the name of Gabriel. After a moment of hesitation, she makes an atheist wager and says yes. Amen.³

Caputo objects that my diacritical hermeneutics is lacking when it comes to the 'historical-critical method'. He notes that my approach involves close reading of literary texts and art works but that when it concerns Scriptural scenes like the Annunciation, this amounts to uncritical fantasy. 'The historical-critical questions about these scenes', he writes, 'are simply ignored. One is left with the impression that these readings belong to the innocence and naivété of an uncontested theism, immune to atheistic criticism'. Now, as I see it, nothing could be further from the truth. But since I know Caputo will not be happy until I give a better account, let me try.

All my diacritical readings of religious texts – Jewish, Christian or otherwise – presuppose the atheist suspension of dogmatic claims, be they theist or atheist. That's why anatheism occupies the liminal space of a wager – like the Nazarena's own 'pondering' (*dialogizomai*) described in Luke 1. A wagering where all is possible, and where what is no longer possible to mortals is 'possible to God'. I have compared this atheist wager to a phenomenological *epoché* (Edmund Husserl) and to the poetic act of faith which John Keats defines as 'negative capability' ('finding ourselves in the midst of mystery, uncertainty and doubt without the irritable reaching after fact and reason' – a special capacity of imagination entailing 'a willing suspension' of belief and disbelief). The atheist wager is therefore quintessentially critical – or as I say 'diacritical' – in calling for micro-logical close readings between the lines of texts and actions, scriptures and paintings, stories and histories, faces and icons. In the case of the Annunciation – to stay with that primal scene – diacritical readings cover a range of contemporary critiques, including (1) *feminism* (Mary is free to say yes or no – she is not ravished by some

saturation phallogocentric phenomenon; she does not yield to some invertebrate idol of Mariolatry), (2) *psychoanalysis* (she ‘trembles’ and ‘ponders’ at the traumatic arrival of the ‘uncanny stranger’ (*das Unheimliche*). ‘Every angel is terrible’), (3) *deconstruction* (in countless paintings of the scene, she reads a book trying to negotiate the difference between the possible and the impossible) and (4) *critical theory* (she embodies, in her social origins, the ‘power of the powerless’ putting questions to Power: even outdoing Job in her interrogation of the angel – who are you? How did you get here? What do you mean I am going to conceive?).

It is true that I make scant use of the ‘historical-critical’ method in my work to date. Granted. But this is because life is short, one can only handle so many critical methods, and that particular one, in my view, displays a marked lack of imagination, suffering at times from too much ‘irritable reaching after fact and reason’. Not that it is not valid or interesting – I too am curious to know if Mary had sisters or if she spiked the chalice of the Last Supper with psychedelics (as a recent scientific hypothesis using pharmacological testing suggests).⁴ My point is that the historical-critical method is not the most productive in the theo-poetic scheme of things. It is a forensic way of reading story as history, with much to teach us, but I personally prefer reading history as story when it comes to the putative ‘word of God’. Indeed, most historical ‘Jesus scholars’ readily admit we don’t actually *know* much about the original Yeshua, Mariam and Josephus. And Jesus himself didn’t help matters by not writing anything down. No diaries or archives, no first-hand confessions or medical records. Not even rocks turned to bread – however sorely tempted, as Dostoyevsky reminds us. We only have stories, second-hand testimonies, competing gospels (official and unofficial), good works in his name and legions of art works and theologies. And why, we might add, did Christ ask Mary Magdalene to let him go (*noli me tangere*) rather than carving everything in stone while still on earth? Had he done so, there would be no need for anatheism, no worries or doubts, no risky wagers or leaps of faith. The literal record of Jesus’s bio-historical existence would be there for all to see. As son of God he could surely have done it? But no, Jesus left it to later storytellers and scribes, to creative poets and painters to fill in the gaps, give us ‘faith’ rather than ‘knowledge’. And on this last point, I think the two Jacks – Caputo and Derrida – would agree that regarding ultimate religious mysteries, it is *croire* rather than *savoir* that ultimately matters.

Let me illustrate my thesis with some personal anecdotes.

When Jack Caputo invited me to join him at the historical Jesus seminar in Santa Rosa in 2015, I was almost pilloried. In fact, if it wasn’t for Caputo coming to my rescue, I might not have survived. How, the chair of our panel inquired, could I credibly speak of the Annunciation when there was no empirical evidence for its existence? And how could I construe Jesus’s anatheist wager on the Cross as a passage between atheism (‘my God why have you forsaken me’) and anatheism (‘unto thee I commend my spirit’) when the two sayings were from different Gospels written at different times by different people. Because, I replied, for anatheism, it doesn’t ultimately matter! What matters in theo-poetics – which is where hermeneutics of religion goes when it becomes anatheist – is how we imaginatively interpret the ‘word of God’. And as the wise Talmudists remind us, there are at least 10 meanings to every line of the Bible. Theo-poetics is about what phenomenology calls ‘free imaginative variation’, and that is why, in volumes like

Anatheism, Reimagining the Sacred and *Touch*, I have chosen to read ‘sacred scripture’ – which believers take ‘as’ true – alongside fictions of spiritual experience by the likes of Woolf, Joyce, Proust – which readers take ‘as if’ true. These two forms of atheist poetics – what I call *figuring-as* (religious faith) and *figuring-as-if* (literary or artistic fiction) – are mutually supplementary: the former keeping the latter serious, the latter keeping the former inventive.⁵ Both forms of figuration are, I believe, integral to anatheism.

Let me explain. *figuring as-if* (fiction) and *figuring-as* (faith) are two acts of imagination. In the case of theopoetics, this does not mean either act of figuration is ‘untrue’, for there is a truth proper to both (1) the truth of fiction understood as poetic configuration (what Aristotle calls *mythos-mimesis* which enables us to intuit the ‘essence’ (*eidos*) of events) and (2) the truth of faith understood as a properly religious experience of revelation or hierophany.⁶ In fiction, the question of belief or disbelief is suspended as readers freely imagine tropes of ‘transubstantiation’ or ‘epiphany’ as fictionally explored by Joyce or Proust, for example. That is also why it is a category mistake to dismiss these authors as heretics or to accuse writers like D.H. Lawrence or Salmon Rushie of blasphemy for imagining Jesus or Mohamed having sex. Why? Because in literary poetics no one is claiming such things to be literally true. But only *comme si*. And perhaps the poetic license of the ‘as if’ may even permit us to appreciate the full humanity of holy figures *more* than officially authorized doctrines might allow? (As Saint Paul reminds us, Christ was subject to every human temptation). Anatheism keeps theology tolerant by keeping it theopoetic. And, I think, in spite of our different approaches, Caputo would agree.

Which is not to say, I hasten to add, that atheist theopoetics is a hermeneutic free for all. There is a difference between a triumphalist reading of the Annunciation – found in reactionary evangelism and devotionism (what I call dogmatic theism) – and a critical emancipatory reading (e.g. anatheism or radical theology). Reading Caputo’s recent work, I think it safe to say that his ‘radical hermeneutics’ would happily join forces with my ‘diacritical hermeneutics’ in helping us tell the difference.

But joining forces does not mean all our troops march to the same drum. There still remains the key question of discernment. How *do* we tell the difference? I think our lovers quarrel reaches its crux here on the question of what Caputo calls ‘criteria’. How does one, *qua* host to the incoming other, seek to judge, discern or differentiate between different kinds of strangers that knock on the door? Caputo accuses me (with a swat of the chasuble rather than a belt of the crozier) of ‘criteriology’; his basic objection being that criteria are things that I (and Ricoeur) invoke and that he (and Derrida) do not. But if criteriology means using a manual of rules to decide beforehand the result of hermeneutic ‘negotiation’, then clearly there is no genuine wager, and hospitality is reduced to an ‘old pals act’ (where only those with proper IDs can play) or cheap grace (where God decides all in advance). This is the kind of authoritarian Alpha-God rightly knocked for six by smart atheists like Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, with some latter day help from Sartre and De Beauvoir (I think of Sartre’s critique of God as a paperknife maker in *Existentialism and Humanism*). To truly host the stranger, we cannot know ‘in advance’ who the stranger is – we ‘tremble and ponder’ in response to the call. In the end, it’s not a matter of knowledge or power, but of faith, hope and charity – and the greatest of these is

charity. The criterion of all criteria. Love and do as you will, as Augustine says. Do the truth – *facere veritatem* – and do it lovingly. Do we need another criterion than that? I think not, but we need at least that.

What we know is, in the end, of little consequence. What matters is what we do. Anatheism is a way of moving beyond the old religious wars of belief and disbelief, theism and atheism, so that we ‘do’ the good and love one another. Anatheism is just another name for grown-up spirituality.

Caputo seems to suggest, however, that *all* criteria are waived in the undecidability of deconstructionist decision. But is that really so? When he says that hospitality is absolute and unconditional in leaving the future open to ‘justice’ and ‘democracy to come’, is that not already identifying the future as a certain kind of hope – for justice rather than non-justice? For democracy rather than non-democracy? And when he declares that deconstructionist decision is not decisionism, how can this be if there is no hermeneutic guide of some kind available – however approximate and intimated, however minimal and aspirational? Not hard and fast laws, to be sure, but narratives, calls, images and solicitations – issuing from ‘texts’ or ‘faces’ saying: do not kill, give me bread, where are you? This is not indiscriminate decision but diacritical discernment. Not mad relativism but a carnal hermeneutics of sensitive situationism where we chose and wager, as best we can, between what is better or worse – where we delicately endeavour to differentiate between what is more or less hospitable, more or less ‘just’ and ‘democratic’ in each particular situation where a self meets a stranger and decides to open the door (or not). If we can agree on this, is there really such a gap between deconstructive ‘negotiation’ and diacritical ‘discernment’?

III Concluding questions – A story without end

I conclude with a sketch of four remaining questions – for more detailed development in future exchanges.

- (1) Caputo’s radical theology holds that ‘God’ is a name for a call that insists rather than exists. It is an event which at best translates into a human ‘form of life’ which performs as justly and democratically as possible as it awaits more ‘democracy to come’.⁷ I resonate with much of this but would add the following: the form of life which I would call faith is not limited to an immanentist anthropology but responds to a call from beyond, to someone or something out there – human, animal, natural, divine – which wants to become incarnate in my world, an eschatological possible (*posse*) waiting to be made actual (*esse*), a Word longing to dwell among us, a Kingdom yearning to become flesh, from the first moment of genesis, through Abraham’s and Mary’s hosting of strangers, to the last moment of recorded time: an eschatological moment when what we call God may come back again – and again (*ana*). As I have argued since my dissertation with Riceour and Levinas in 1980, the *May-be* forever *desires* to *be*.⁸ Which is why theo-poetics is theo-erotics. And why I talk of *onto*-eschatology. The eschaton is in love with being. It loves to be in being and of being. It loves creation (*amor mundi*). Hence, the paradox of transcendence-in-immanence. Logos-in-Sarx. Pantheism.⁹ We humans are not

all there is. There is more to *posse* than us. More in heaven and earth than mortal philosophers – including Caputo’s patrons, Nietzsche and Derrida – have imagined. For if there is a gift there is a giver, if there is a call there is a caller. I am not thinking, to be sure, of some Omni-Alpha-Supreme Being – which intelligent atheism has properly debunked. Nor of some Heideggerean conscience calling the self back to itself. No, the call is more like a ‘still small voice’ – an Other, always another, always a stranger, who whispers, personally, transpersonally, suprapersonally: where are you? Can I come now? Often a call of the earth – in-finitely sounding – not just to nomads in deserts (these too of course) but to multispecies dwellers of forests, rivers, mountains and seas. A call to which we are all free to respond with *amor mundi* – or not. That is why what I called onto-eschatology in *The God who May Be* I would now rechristen eco-onto-eschatology. Or even ethico-eco-onto-eschatology. For what anatheism calls ‘God’ is always good (aka love). And here I would like to put this question to Caputo: how can the event of God *not* be good, from beginning to end, if it dreams of democracy-to-come, of pure hospitality and undeconstructible justice? How can the messianic hope of Caputo’s weak theology consort with the dark apocalyptic vision of the final pages of *Cross and Cosmos*, which suggests that the ‘mortal’ *deus absconditus et crucifixus*¹⁰ has the last word? Why should the ‘autobiography of God in time . . . end in death?’¹¹ What of resurrection? Why is it ‘necessary to further weaken the logos of theology with the possibility of the death of both logos and theos?’¹² Or why does God have to ‘bear the cross’ of admitting that ‘the weakness of God means God is subject to the unrelenting weakening of the universe into something even less than a shadow of its old self?’¹³ To say, as I did in the opening line of *Poétique du Possible*, that ‘God is not but may be’ means that no matter how dark the non-being of death becomes, new life may always be, again and again. Anacarnation – as *Posse*’s call to be made flesh encore et encore – means wagering that divine love is inexhaustible and infinite. It means defying the Nothing (of ontology, anthropology, theology) with the perennial riposte: ‘Death where is they sting?’

- (2) Which brings me to the vexed question of ‘empathy’. Caputo invokes Heidegger’s famous critique of empathy in *Being and Time* and I take his point: If empathy is understood as an isolated self trying to hook up with another isolated self – which is what Descartes and Sartre thought but not the Husserl of *Ideas II* nor his disciple, Edith Stein, who defined *Einfühlung* as a ‘primordial experience of the non-primordial’, that is, of an alterity that transcends us – if taken narrowly as two solitary egos trying to connect, then of course Heidegger is right to object and remind us that we are fundamentally ‘being-with-others’ (*Miteinandersein*) from the word *go*. But Heidegger then goes on to describe how Dasein’s conscience calls *itself* back to *itself* from its thrown immersion in the inauthentic ‘They’ (*Das Man*). For Heidegger, my ownmost (*eigenst*) existence as being-towards-death is my most authentic (*eigentlich*) possibility. The impossibility of any other possibilities. The token of my ultimate ‘existential solipsism’.¹⁴ Dasein’s fundamental aim is the authentic existential self alone before its own death. Levinas, Caputo rightly notes, adds a different slant to the critique of ‘empathy’ construing it as a sort of *egoism-à-*

deux where two subjects sacrifice alterity to some mutual ontological sameness – at best a candlelit dinner for two; at worst totalitarianism.

But my understanding of empathy – in *Anatheism* and *Radical Hospitality* – is based on the hospitality model of host and guest: that is, of two persons who are both similar-and-different (*semblable*) but never the same (*même*). As early as *Poétique du possible*, I argued that every human being is a ‘*figurant*’ (French for actor) in a play of on-going narrative figuration (configuration, disfiguration, transfiguration). No self begins or ends with itself. We are all intertextually connected, intercardinally embodied, imaginatively enlaced. Tapestries woven from stories heard and told, as Proust put it. So where is the problem? Caputo objects that ‘narrative hospitality requires narrative imagination and narrative imagination is a function of empathic imagination . . . Empathy compromises genuine alterity . . . The other is not constituted by the ego as an alter-ego but the other constitutes the self’. Empathic hospitality, as I understand it, has nothing to do with a self reducing another to itself. The other is not another-self qua alter-ego. Au contraire, empathy is about sharing other’s stories (and sufferings) so as to open onto a new story, another possibility of being with the other that is not egological but mutually heterological. Or, to put it in Ricoeur’s terms, narrative hospitality is the discovery of ‘oneself as another’ – it cuts both ways – and has nothing to do with totalizing sameness. The other always remains a ‘stranger’ (unlike me) even as it becomes a ‘neighbour’ (somewhat like me). But no matter how like me (*comme moi*) the other appears, we never ultimately ‘know’ the other (Caputo and Derrida are right about this), neither *avant* nor *après coup*. From beginning to end, the other remains ultimately a stranger. The foreign traverses and transcends the familiar. Something is always lost in translation. This is what Benjamin calls ‘the untranslatable kernel’ in all translations, no matter how seemingly complete. There is no perfect translation, only multiple translations. *Traduttore, traditore*.

This was the central message of both the Introduction to *Phenomenologies of the Stranger* (2011) and part I of *Radical Hospitality* (2021). And it informs the ethical manifesto of the Guestbook project of ‘exchanging stories changing histories’.¹⁵ As the poet Fanny Howe writes: ‘sometimes the guest must leave the host in order to remain a guest’. Hospitality is as much about going (leaving, letting go, departure, severing, mourning, *Gelassenheit*) as it is about coming (*viens, oui, oui – l’avenir comme l’à-venir*). Or as the song ‘*Je t’aime moi non plus*’ says, ‘on vas et on vient’. That’s what every good host and guest says. And, I might add, this model of coming and going is equally present in Ricoeur’s hermeneutic model of (1) ‘narrative hospitality’ as a healing of political wounds by ‘exchanging memories’ and (2) ‘metaphoricity’ as an invention of new meaning from the tension (not fusion) between similar and dissimilar (semantic imperitence). If the tension, understood as a productive ‘conflict of meanings’, collapses into sameness or identity, the game is over: living metaphor (*la métaphore vive*) becomes dead metaphor (cliché and jargon).

Which brings us back to ‘ana’: repeating not backwards but forwards. Ana as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it: ‘back, up, again, *anew* in time and space’. Ana is not a return to the same, but the opposite: a hosting of strangeness, novelty, mystery, surprise. Nothing is ever the same after Ana. The *soi-après* narrative hospitality differs from the

moi-avant in discovering that it is always fundamentally ‘othered’ by its other (host or guest) – such that the ‘I-self’ (*moi-même comme ego*) is reconfigured as a ‘more than I-self’ (*soi-même-comme-un-autre*). And the *comme* here is not fusion or confusion. Far from it. The ‘as’ always safeguards a ‘gap’ of alterity – the *écart* as hallmark of diacritical perception (Merleau-Ponty). It marks an interval which respects the stranger’s strangeness, even when one imagines the other ‘as if’ he or she was ‘like’ myself. *Mon semblable mon frère!* Which means that radical hospitality is less a hermeneutic circle returning to itself (in an economy of sameness) than a hermeneutic spiral opening out onto new horizons of meaning and experience. Not Odysseus returning to himself in Ithaca. Nor Moses dropping dead at the sight of Mt Pisgah. But a hybrid mix of Greek and Jew whose conversation never ends. Jewgreek-*as*-Greekjew, to juggle with Joyce. The ‘as’ here, like every good metaphorical ‘as’, contains both an ‘is’ and an ‘is not’. The host both is and is not the guest. And vice versa. The guest neither is nor is not the host. The ambidexterity of hostility (*hostis* as alien) and hospitality (*hostis* as ally) says it all. An enigmatic fertile tension captured in the ingenious deconstructive coinage – *hostipitality*. I think Caputo and I can agree on that.

- (3) A third remaining question concerns *touch*. While Caputo construes our increasingly digitalized world as a postmodern confirmation of Derrida’s maxim that there is nothing outside of the text – everything is coded – I see things otherwise.¹⁶ I am somewhat more wary of the growing tendency towards ‘excarnation’, where the spectral replaces the carnal, text replaces touch and hauntology replaces haptology. Like Derrida’s critique of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the haptic in *Le Toucher*, Caputo fears that mutual tactility can collapse into ‘presence’. I take a different view. My most recent work, *Touch: Recovering our most Vital Sense* (2021), argues for the primacy of ‘double sensation’ as support for an ethical ‘reciprocity principle’ crucial for our divided and dangerous times—riven by the rise of top-down autocracy (from Trumpism to Putanism) and a global climate emergency. But time and again, Caputo (après Levinas and Derrida) seems to mistrust the principle of mutuality, reciprocity and dialogue in favour of irreducible alterity, incommensurable difference and hyperbolic rupture. And here, I think, he risks being over-deconstructive and under-hermeneutic (it is no accident that Derrida rarely spoke positively of hermeneutics and studiously eschewed the term for years). But why, I ask, does it have to be a choice between either touch or trace, voice or writing, empathy or alterity, reciprocity or asymmetry, dialogue or deconstruction? Why does it have to be *only* one or the other? Rather than a hermeneutic play between ostensible opposites? Why can’t it be both/and? Indeed, isn’t this where hermeneutics chimes with the deconstructive call to overcome binarism?
- (4) And a final word about ‘ana’: What comes ‘after’ deconstruction – if anything? When Caputo speaks of ‘ana-deconstruction’ is he asking, in part, what might come after an exchange like this one where he is deconstructed by me and I am deconstructed by him? Where we are both othered by each other never to be the same again? Where we might together ‘negotiate a double injunction, of demands coming from both directions – from the impossible *and* the possible?’¹⁷ I hope so. And

if so, is there really such a gap between his deconstructive ‘negotiation’ and my diacritical ‘discernment’?

Perhaps we might find an answer in the example of our mentors, Derrida and Ricoeur. Hermeneutic detours are often the quickest route to truth. By indirection finding direction out (*Hamlet*). Caputo is right to suspect that the main differences between us go back to our respective apprenticeships with our Paris mentors. If we both shared an initial Catholic schooling, we went on to enjoy a second schooling – an ana-pedagogy – at the feet of our respective masters. Speaking of the enigma of ‘pardon’, Ricoeur noted that the difference between him and Derrida was the difference between the words ‘difficult’ and ‘impossible’.¹⁸ Which for Caputo and me might be translated as the difference between ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’. We both talk of a God of Perhaps (understood as a messianic future, an eschatological promise, a call of hospitality). But where Caputo reads this as an *impossible* possibility, I read it as a *possible* impossibility. The devil is in the italics. Caputo’s radical theology speaks of an impossible God. Atheism speaks of a possible God. Perhaps the diacritical hyphen between possible and impossible can connect as well as separate? Let me end with this story of an encounter between our mentors in Le Jardin du Luxembourg in 1998.

After Derrida’s Dublin lecture ‘On the Lie’, he and I 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.’

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 *les 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 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 spiritual son 2 years later in 2004. In one of the last conversations I had with Ricoeur, he told me that when he and Derrida had read *The*

God Who May Be, Derrida thought it too hermeneutic while Ricoeur thought it too deconstructive! I smiled and shared a line from Seamus Heaney: ‘Two buckets are easier carried than one, I grew up in between’ (p. 19).¹⁹

I think it fair to say that Caputo and I both grew up between the buckets of hermeneutics and deconstruction. And though we have leaned in different directions over the years, I pray we will not wait as long as our teachers to meet up for a cup of ‘strong tea’ (euphemism for Irish whiskey) – over which libation we can, hopefully, turn impossible differences into possible negotiations.

Sláinte!

Books Under Review

- *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. with a new Introduction (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997, 2021)
- *In Search of Radical Theology: Expositions, Explorations, Exhortations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).
- *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019)
- *On Religion*, Second Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2019)
- *The Essential Caputo: Selected Writings*, ed. B. Keith Putt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018)
- *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (London: Penguin/Pelican, 2018)
- Štefan Štofanič, *The Adventure of Weak Theology: Reading the Work of John D. Caputo through Biographies and Events* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2018).
- Calvin D. Ullrich, *Sovereignty and Event: The Political in John D. Caputo’s Radical Theology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021)

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Notes

1. Kearney (2010), 181; see also my earlier exchange with Caputo in *Reimagining the Sacred: Debating God*, 2015.
2. Kearney (2001), 5–6, intro credo.
3. Kearney (2010), 23–24.
4. See Muraresku (2020).
5. On this question of figuration as/as if see my *Poétique du Possible*, 1984, and my recent critical exchange with Keith Putt “Debating the Art of an Atheist Wager: Recent Perspectives on Richard Kearney’s God after God” in *Research in Phenomenology* (2021).
6. See Ricoeur (1984), volume 1, chapter 2 and vol 3, chapters 5–8 (1988).
7. Caputo *In Search of Radical Theology* (2020) and also *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretations* (2018), chapters 10–11 and conclusion.
8. My doctoral dissertation, entitled *Poétique du Possible: Vers une phénoménologie herméneutique de la figuration* was researched, directed and defended with Ricoeur and Levinas in the University of Paris X in 1980 and published in 1984 with Editions de Beauchesne, Paris.

9. See Caputo's critique of pantheism in his concluding arguments to *Cross and Cosmos* (2019a) and in *Hermeneutics*, pp. 298–299.
10. Caputo (2019a), 219.
11. Caputo (2019a), 220.
12. Caputo (2019a), 221.
13. Caputo (2019a), 222.
14. See Heidegger on the uncanny call of conscience (*Gewissen*), *Being and Time* (1927), paragraphs 40, 57.
15. See our Introduction to *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality*, co-edited with Kascha Semonovitch, 2011. For a practical application of the hermeneutics of hospitality, see our *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action*, 2021, co-edited with Melissa Fitzpatrick, and our Guestbook project of narrative imagination and exchange, 'Exchanging stories changing history' (guestbookproject.org) and Richard Kearney, *Touch*, Columbia UP, 2021.
16. See Caputo's analysis of life in our digital age in *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information*, 2018, especially chapter 9, 245 forward.
17. See Caputo, 'A Conclusion without Conclusion' in *Hermeneutics* (2018).
18. See Ricoeur on Derrida and pardon in his 'Epilogue: Difficult Forgiveness', *Memory, History and Forgetting*, 2004.
19. See Kearney (2018), 44–45.

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