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Debating the Art of an Anatheistic Wager: Recent Perspectives on Richard Kearney’s “God After God”

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D’où parlez-vous? In the preface to his book *Anatheism*, Richard Kearney identifies this question as the first inquiry that Paul Ricoeur made of his seminar students.¹ He wanted to know at the outset from where each one spoke, something of their own individual presuppositions and of their own cultural horizons of expectations. Kearney actually considers this Ricoeurian question to be “the standard hermeneutical question” and admits that his answer to it has persistently included a “theological” component, primarily because the desire of God has haunted him throughout his life.² Indeed, he confesses that the “God” question became even more compulsory precisely because he focused his studies in contemporary French philosophy, specifically with thinkers such as Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Stanislas Breton, and Jacques Derrida. These thinkers grounded him so deeply in certain perspectives relative to traditional phenomenology and hermeneutics, perspectives alloyed with an intense attraction to imagination and story, that he remembers delightfully “sailing through multiple theories of narrative in phenomenology and the philosophy of history and religion.”³ Consequently, his intellectual life has consistently been cross-contaminated with various interpretations of philosophy and theology, of a certain “secular” appreciation of embodiment and a recognition of the sacred – as evidenced in works such as *Carnal Hermeneutics* and

1 Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), xi.

2 Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001), 5. Book hereafter cited as *GWMB*.

3 Richard Kearney, “Where I Speak From: A Short Intellectual Autobiography,” in *Debating Otherness with Richard Kearney: Perspectives from South Africa*, eds. Daniël P. Veldsman and Yolande Steenkamp (Cape Town, SA: Aosis, 2018), 36. Book hereafter cited as *DO*.

Touch – and of an attraction to phenomenology and a commitment to the tenacity of the religious.⁴

1 The Second Naiveté of a Fourth Reduction

Kearney has been consistently insistent on never inoculating his thought against the side effects of the phenomenological method or of seeking a cure for his relapse into philosophical theology. He remains faithful to the broader implications of the phenomenological method, because, although embracing “various critiques and surpassings of Husserl’s initial formulation of the project,” it never strays too far from “inviting us to think again, to go back to beginnings, to question anew. This has the methodological advantage of enabling us to ask what things *mean* – as if we were asking for the first time.” Such questioning back of meaning relates as much to theology as it does to metaphysics or science. As a result, Kearney reenacts something of a phenomenological reduction with reference to theology by prescribing a “return” to God, an investigation into the meaning of God “after” God, in order to inculcate a critical dynamic to any expression of “faith.” For him, such an application of a phenomenological reduction actually establishes what he calls an “anatheism,” an imaginative, poetic, and hermeneutical repetition of the meaning of “God,” a position that he believes effectively restates Ricoeur’s concept of a “second naiveté.”⁵

Of course, Kearney does not restrict his reliance on Ricoeur to the notion of a second naiveté or to a post-critical faith. He also accedes to Ricoeur’s idea of an “eschatology of the sacred” as distinct from both an archaeology of religion, as per a Freudian reading, and a teleology of religion, in conformity to Hegel.⁶ The eschatology of the sacred seeks neither an originary ground nor a dialectical totalization; instead, it looks for sacredness in the “epiphanies of the everyday,” a certain “holiness of happenstance” (*AG*, 4). One returns to God after God by attending to what Duns Scotus calls “*haecceitas*,” the “thisness,” or particularity, of embodied ephemeral experience. Of course, given this

4 See Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) and Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

5 Richard Kearney, “Poetics of Imagining,” in *Imagination Now: A Richard Kearney Reader*, ed. M.E. Littlejohn (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 25. Book hereafter cited as *IN*.

6 Richard Kearney, “Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology,” in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Panteleimon Manoussakis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 11–12. Book hereafter cited as *AG*.

ephemeral experience, one must understand eschatology not as some absolute completion of time and history effected by a sovereign and omnipotent deity but as the “presence” of the divine in the mundane micro moments of lived experience (*DO*, 40). For Kearney, the phenomenological character of this notion of the eschatological depends on comprehending a form of “reduction” other than the orthodox version of Husserl’s transcendental movement to bracket the natural attitude. Indeed, he proposes a “fourth reduction,” an eschatological or micro-eschatological reduction, that leads “back (*re-ducere*) to the *eschaton* curled at the heart of quotidian existence” (*AG*, 5). He identifies this eschatological reduction of anatheism as a *fourth* reduction, because he plays off of Jean-Luc Marion’s identification of three previous reductions: Husserl’s eidetic reduction to essences, Heidegger’s ontological reduction to being, and Marion’s own donological reduction to givenness. Kearney’s fourth reduction admits the other three but demands another “return,” another questioning back, or *anamnesis*, in order to recover the enfleshed encounters that occur “face-to-face,” what the Greeks call “*prosopon*” (*AG*, 6; *GWMB*, 18–19). In other words, he affirms that the fourth reduction brings us right back to the beginning – again (*ana*).

Betraying something of a Levinasian influence, Kearney believes that in the prosopic moments of the fourth reduction, one may also encounter a hospitality toward the other, the stranger, and the different, a hospitality that functions as a potential “revelation” of God. In the fourth reduction, a variant of religion and theology may actually present itself, although he suggests that one must consider the religious character of the reduction to be about a “religion *beyond* religion, *before* religion, and *after* religion,” with the three prepositions leaving open the tension between theism and atheism in order to interpret God anatheistically (*AG*, 8). Kearney further confesses that in this fourth reduction to the micro-eschatology of embodied experience, phenomenological hermeneutics comes the closest to theology, actually “opens up the possibility of new theological interpretations.” But in no way should this proximity be erroneously diminished to a homogeneity. A phenomenological philosophy of religion must invariably maintain a methodological distance between itself and theology, since the latter always signals an access to revelation that the former can never claim (*AG*, 14).

Naturally, Kearney knows that his association of anatheism with a fourth reduction places him squarely in the sights of Dominique Janicaud’s provocative polemic against the “theological turn” in French phenomenology. Not surprisingly, Janicaud himself addresses the methodological implications of the original three reductions identified by Marion and argues against grafting them into a genuine “orthodox” understanding of Husserl’s *epoché*. The legislating

issue for him derives specifically from the idea of Revelation (with a capital R), an idea that he claims imports back into the discussion a transcendence that actually results in “fixing” the game against a genuine notion of bracketing the natural attitude.⁷ He denies giving any place to the “theological swerve” that obliterates the methodological neutrality established by the phenomenological reduction to eidetic intentionality (*PTT*, 28). Yet, he also underscores the parameters of his polemics with reference to a possible relationship between phenomenology and theology, cautioning that his thesis not be extended past the narrow confines of his argument. His critique fixates specifically on the issue of methodology, not on the broader concerns of particular disciplinary ideologies.

Janicaud clearly affirms that he is not interpreting the relationship between the two disciplines of phenomenology and theology as necessarily requiring a Sartrean atheistic phenomenology. Indeed, he overtly asserts that he intentionally brackets out “the legitimacy of the theological domain, its concepts, and its ‘contents’” (*PTT*, pp. 99–100). In a later work on the same theme, he goes so far as to admit that he should have placed the term “theological” in parentheses, since he never intended to be misunderstood as categorizing certain thinkers as theologians nor as contesting “the justification for a phenomenology of religion, of religious phenomena, or even of para-religious phenomena ...”⁸ Certainly one must conserve the neutrality of the phenomenological method by removing the methodological deficiencies of the natural attitude and the “naively doxical”; however, that, again, does not necessitate the acceptance of “a radical atheism from the point of view of ‘first philosophy.’” On the contrary, he intends quite narrowly to remove “the stumbling block of [both] theism and atheism” (*PWO*, 15, 18). Furthermore, in an interesting exception to his criticism, he actually excludes Ricoeur’s position on a linguistic phenomenology of religion and does so clearly because he thinks that Ricoeur maintains the type of methodological rigor that he finds lacking in Levinas, Marion, or Michel Henry (*PWO*, 5–6). Janicaud does think that a correlation between phenomenology and hermeneutics remains “more disjointed than jointed”; nevertheless, Ricoeur’s grafting of hermeneutics onto phenomenology offers

7 Dominique Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” in Dominique Janicaud, Jean-François Courtine, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, and Paul Ricoeur, *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate*, trans. Bernard G. Prusak (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 42. Book hereafter cited as *PTT*.

8 Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology “Wide Open”: After the French Debate*, trans. Charles N. Cabral (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 2, 8. Book hereafter cited as *PWO*.

a valid approach to developing a phenomenology of religious discourse (*PWO*, 48, 52).

Now, Janicaud's affirmation of Ricoeur's phenomenology of religion extends also to Kearney, who intentionally follows the Ricoeurian hermeneutical approach of examining religion through the detour of signs and texts, even texts that name "God." In an essay dedicated to Kearney's phenomenology of the sacred, Janicaud reiterates that his critique of the theological turn, that is, the methodological "misuse" of the eidetic reduction, does not disenfranchise, either intellectually or existentially, the potentiality of addressing the possibility of God. He states that "it would be preposterous to negate the possibility of religious faith. It would be even more dangerous and illegitimate to claim God is an absolute impossibility."⁹ Janicaud argues that Kearney's atheistic technique of engaging those possibilities works phenomenologically precisely because he maintains a creative tension between phenomenology and hermeneutics. Within that tension, the shared intentional object "is revealed, or inscribed within our experience, through texts, traces, words, poems, and so on," all of which demand interpretation (*AG*, 107). He does believe, however, that Kearney cannot maintain his atheism without simultaneously prescribing what he calls a "hermeneutical metaphysics" in distinction to a "standard metaphysics," which means, of course, that atheism cannot genuinely be characterized as a post-metaphysical philosophy of religion. Nonetheless, because Janicaud does consider hermeneutical metaphysics to be superior to standard metaphysics, he does not hesitate "to profess [his] empathy toward Kearney's attempt" (*AG*, 109–10).

2 A Wager about Wagering

Kearney's "hermeneutical metaphysics," with its atheistic hermeneutic – and hermeneutical atheism – has matured into one of the most influential and provocative perspectives on the idea of the sacred, of the possibility of God, and of the moral implications of hospitality. In doing so, it has become a creative re-expression of the Kingdom of God motif as it relates to a post-secular and post-theistic era. That development finds explicit warrant in the extensive primary and secondary bibliography that has accrued around his works over the decades. Indeed, most recently, that bibliography has increased with the publication of four new texts in just the past three years.

⁹ Dominique Janicaud, "Is the Possible Doing Justice to God?" in *AG*, 104–105.

The Art of Anatheism (2018), co-edited by Kearney and Matthew Clemente, collects essays from various artists who offer diverse expressions of a theological poetics, expanding the ideas of “making God” and “God making” across multiple media of creative expression. *Richard Kearney’s Anatheistic Wager: Philosophy, Theology, Poetics* (2018), also co-edited by Matthew Clemente, this time with Chris Doude van Troostwijk, assembles contrasting but complementary essays that explore the various risks and ambiguities inherent in Kearney’s notion of wager. They do so from the paradoxical perspective that the wager of anatheism demands a constant re-evaluation of the concept of wager itself. *Debating Otherness with Richard Kearney: Perspectives from South Africa* (2018), edited by Daniël P. Veldsman and Yolande Steenkamp, presents a series of articles by South African scholars who engage Kearney’s theories on a theology of “God after God,” on the risk of faith, and on hospitality toward the stranger. The contributors explore these anatheistic themes as they relate uniquely to reconciliation and to the South African theological, political, and social experience. Finally, in *Imagination Now: A Richard Kearney Reader* (2020), the editor, M. E. Littlejohn, has done an excellent job of collecting a score of salient primary Kearney texts from across his corpus, along with a few new essays written specifically for the *Kearney Reader*. These collected essays cover the primary themes that have guided Kearney’s work over the past 30 years, themes such as imagination, hermeneutics, carnality, God, and the ethics of hospitality, and, in doing so, give an enlightening topography of Kearney’s broader arguments. They sketch out a route that moves through art and video,¹⁰ through 12-step programs and trauma therapies,¹¹ through liturgy and passion dramas,¹² and through Homer and Hip-Hop.¹³ Using these obviously diverse texts as intellectual GPS units, one may journey in the various directions they suggest as

10 Cf. Mark Patrick Hederman, “Anatheism and Judeo-Christian Art,” in *The Art of Anatheism*, eds. Richard Kearney and Matthew Clemente (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 67–83; Chris Doude van Troostwijk, “The Still Born God, Again: Overcoming the Aporia of Anatheopoetics,” in *The Art of Anatheism*, 251–62. Book hereafter cited as *AA*.

11 Cf. Maxwell Parsons Pingeon, “American Anatheism: The Art of Narrative Healing,” in *AA*, pp. 197–209; Pieter Duvenage, “Phenomenology in South Africa: An Indirect Encounter with Richard Kearney,” in *DO*, 63–85.

12 Cf. Christina M. Gschwandtner, “Performing Anatheism: Dialogic Hospitality in Syriac Liturgical Poetry,” in *AA*, 175–95; Mirella Klomp and Danie Veldsman, “After God: Screening *The Passion* as Ana-Liturgy,” in *AA*, 237–49.

13 Cf. Pierre Drouot, “Recognition and Hospitality: Coming Back to Odysseus’s Coming Home,” trans. Sarah Horton, in *Richard Kearney’s Anatheistic Wager: Philosophy, Theology, Poetics*, eds. Chris Doude van Troostwijk and Matthew Clemente (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 189–200. Book hereafter cited as *AW*; Callid Keefe-Perry, “More Fully to the Risk: Hip-Hop as Anatheistic Resistance,” in *AA*, 163–73.

proper avenues for arriving at a more precise and perspicuous appreciation of the most recent developments in Kearney's theology of the God after God.

One might actually begin navigating Kearney's thought with the anthology entitled *Richard Kearney's Anatheistic Wager*, since it most assuredly distinguishes a topic that may well function as the legislating idea in his anatheism – the idea of “wager.” Indeed, Kearney himself states quite succinctly that “anatheism is not just a theory but a wager.”¹⁴ Wager, therefore, functions ontologically and definitionally; it captures the “essence” of what anatheism is in its genuine being and, thereby, denotes the basic definition that distinguishes and differentiates Kearney's thought from other approaches to the question of God. Of course, the centrality of the wager for anatheism emanates from the broader hermeneutical character of Kearney's philosophy. He confesses that at no point can human beings escape the influence of hermeneutics, which, in turn, signifies that human beings cannot escape the systemic uncertainty and risk associated with thrownness and the accompanying protocols of interpretation. Or, as he, himself, articulates it: “In the beginning is hermeneutics. We all have our presuppositions and wagers.”¹⁵ Yet, wager not only broaches the issue of hermeneutical risk but also includes the topic of faith, since wagering always traffics in belief more than in knowledge. After claiming that anatheism is not merely a theory but also a wager, Kearney adds in apposition: “Or a faith before faith” (*AW*, 40). For him, however, one cannot address the subject of faith without surveying the importance of the imagination, or the potency of poetic discourse, or the ethical implications of hospitality and the stranger, or the potential role of fiction in sacred narratives, or the various meanings that can be attached to the name “God,” or whether those meanings may be synonymously open to a divine polynymity (*AW*, 64). In other words, the anatheistic wager of/on faith includes poetical, ethical, and theological risks, all of which permeate the broader implications of an anatheistic phenomenology of the sacred.

One should certainly never attenuate the magnitude of Kearney's idea of the riskiness of faith for the anatheistic wager. He attests that anatheism should not be interpreted as some “wishy-washy indifferentism”; on the contrary, it is “about making bold and committed wagers while always remaining open and attentive and refusing the tyranny of certainty – the lure of absolutism” (*AW*, 62). This could be considered his paraphrase of “walking by faith and not by sight,” that is, maintaining a metaxological position between the arrogance of absolutism and the credulity of careless conviction. As Anné Verhoef expresses

14 Richard Kearney, “A Conversation After God,” in *AW*, 40.

15 Richard Kearney, “Theism, Atheism, Anatheism,” in *AW*, 15.

it in his article, "Transcendence and Anatheism" in *Debating Otherness*, Kearney consistently advocates a position between the deficiency of an "empty secularism" and the excess of any "absolute talk about the absolute."¹⁶ Furthermore, Joseph O'Leary warns against reducing the Kearneyian Wager to the rather anemic level of the Pascalian Wager, a wager that he contends functions as a "grim moral blackmail," something of a *sacrificium intellectus*. Whereas Pascal appears to establish his wager on the imperative "*abêtissez-vous,*" make yourself dumber and believe, O'Leary affirms that Kearney's wager always requires an open and critical mind.¹⁷ In other words, Kearney consistently relates faith to humility without allowing it to deteriorate into a naïve credulity.

By scrutinizing how faith and humility determine the substance of Kearney's anatheistic risk, Brian Treanor, in his *Anatheistic Wager* article, does a masterly job of extending O'Leary's contention that Kearney's wager of faith never deteriorates to the level of innocuous belief. Treanor concedes that in one of his earlier essays, he had adopted an adverse perspective on the idea of wager, considering it to be a trivial expression of belief that fails to appreciate the serious existential commitment required by genuine faith. As such, he insisted that the wager of belief smacks of fideism and deteriorates into the stereotypical definition of faith as a blind leap. He contends, however, that Kearney has avoided this derogatory cheapening of wager by insisting that the wager be made "with humility in the context of careful discernment," thereby ensuring that it is "characterized by fidelity rather than fideism."¹⁸ One might say, therefore, that Treanor interprets Kearney as distinguishing *croynance* from *foi*, emphasizing the latter to be an authentic understanding of faith as something other than, even if often inclusive of, simple belief, that is, of faith as *fiducia* and not merely as *assensus*. Indeed, Kearney quite conspicuously asserts that "faith is trusting. *Fidens* as *confidens*," a statement best translated as "believing in" instead of "believing that" (*AW*, 30–31, 35–36). Furthermore, Treanor goes on to consider this understanding of faith as correlating well with Ricoeur's notion of a "second naiveté," a return to faith after the discipline of critical discernment has been practiced and the adverse effects of the speculative and literal nature of belief have been exorcized (*AW*, 120). Richard Colledge, in an ensuing article, agrees with Treanor's assessment, contending also that Kearney's wager of faith "goes out on a limb" and makes a confident commitment without any "demonstrative certainty."¹⁹

16 Anné H. Verhoef, "Transcendence and Anatheism," in *DO*, 108.

17 Joseph S. O'Leary, "Buddhist Anatheism," in *AW*, 168–69.

18 Brian Treanor, "The Anatheistic Wager: Faith After Faith," in *AW*, 114.

19 Richard J. Colledge, "Kin and Stranger: Kearney and Desmond on God," in *AW*, 130–31.

Treanor concludes from Kearney's reinterpretation of wager that atheism should not be narrowly limited to the "theological" alone, that is, to a way of deliberating about God after the death of God, but should also be recognized as pisticological, that is, as a way of prescribing how "to have faith after the death of Faith." Yet, he quickly concedes that one should not erroneously reduce atheism to the description of a particular faith but, instead, should expand it to a methodological prescription for "a way to *have* faith." Ironically, then, Kearney's wager actually confronts the proper manner in which one should wager, what Treanor calls "a wager about wagering." Clearly, one does wager on God and on how to address the idea of God in a post-theistic age; however, in doing so, one concurrently wagers on how one should wager on God (AW, 115). Treanor delineates this "meta-Wager" of atheism as "open rather than closed, humble rather than triumphal, imaginative rather than literal, engaged rather than passive, and exploratory rather than parochial." By its very nature, consequently, atheism as wager instills the hope that one can properly return to a "deep ground" wherein one can "recover faith" (AW, 123). To be sure, Kearney would most unquestionably concur with Treanor's conclusion regarding the issue of meta-wagering. For him, atheism demands that one must play the game of multiple prepositions, since "ana" references both the "before" and the "after." As a result, atheistic pisticology constantly negotiates between a faith before faith and a faith after faith (AW, 45). Both function as "objects" of the wager. This shuttling between the two temporalities of faith leads Helgard Pretorius to label Kearney's atheistic wager "an open-ended hermeneutic questing and questioning after what we are doing when we speak and act in the name of God." For Pretorius, such a hermeneutic replaces any abstraction from the various particularities of diverse faith confessions with a more circumscribed focus on protracted progressive reevaluations within "actual faith traditions, inviting proponents of those traditions to repeat the 'primordial wager' *forward*."²⁰

Of course, not every respondent to Kearney's atheistic wager maintains a consistently supportive acceptance of his argument. For example, L. Callid Keefe-Perry, in his article "The Wager that Wasn't," disputes whether the atheistic wager actually functions as a genuine wager at all. He questions whether the wager truly instantiates an authentic openness to either theism or atheism, or, on the contrary, surreptitiously casts loaded dice. In other words, he rejects what he believes to be Kearney's good-faith broad-mindedness that genuinely refuses to privilege one bet over another with reference to gambling on a particular interpretation of God. He asserts that since Kearney compels a

20 Helgard Pretorius, "Is it Possible to Be a Reformed Atheist?" in AW, 145.

wager “beyond reproach,” one that persists as “pristine,”²¹ his wager must lack any horizons of expectations. Its outcome must be “definitively unknown,” and its motivating directionality must not be slanted in any way either toward or against a specific theological hermeneutic. Additionally, he insists that Kearney desires to avoid reducing atheism to merely another example of faith conjoined with an appropriate admixture of doubt in order to guarantee humility. The wager must be rooted in freedom as its *fundamentum inconcussum* without any trace of a “pro-imaginative determinism in which that poetic act of imagining [e.g. the referentiality of the cipher “God”] necessarily yields faith.” On the contrary, however, he reads Kearney as adversely privileging theism over atheism and, as a result, accuses him of engaging in a form of premeditated evangelism, as preaching *sub rosa*, or perhaps not so *sub rosa*, a particular theological gospel. As he puts it, Kearney wants us to place our bets while he, himself, holds “a pair of aces up his sleeve” (*AW*, 179).

Additionally, Keefe-Perry not only accuses Kearney of secreting a pair of aces up his sleeve but also of playing with a marked deck from which he deals off the bottom. Centering his criticism on Kearney’s conspicuous association of faith with imagination, with poetic narrative, and with the ontological variations provoked by fiction, he argues that since there exist far “more stories of theism than atheism,” a literary asymmetry that Kearney certainly knows, “the odds cannot possibly be even” with reference to whether atheism decrees a specific expression of faith or not (*AW*, 181). Consequently, he determines that Kearney has two possible responses to this tensive dilemma. First, he may consider any theism that disentangles itself from a strong onto-theological approach as not technically theism but atheism. Second, he may simply capitulate to the reality of the situation and affirm that atheism does not allow the tension between atheism and theism to be fairly balanced but is “in fact a rigged game in favor of God.” Strictly speaking, therefore, atheism is *not* a wager at all. Yet, ironically, Keefe-Perry embraces the second position as the preferred perspective to take, which indicates that Kearney’s inconsistent treatment of the wager offers something of a *felix sine culpa*, a decidedly salvific “logical” lapse. He states categorically that Kearney’s atheism is “an education,” not a wager, at least not an objective wager, one more akin to Kierkegaard’s passionately inward subjectivity (*AW*, 184). In truth, he does concede, based on the third chapter of *Anatheism* in which Kearney argues for developing a “genuine faith,” that Kearney most likely recognizes this “criticism” and would not disapprove of it. All of this leads Keefe-Perry to conclude,

21 L. Callid Keefe-Perry, “The Wager That Wasn’t: An Education in Shady Chances,” in *AW*, 178–79.

therefore, that anatheism is not to be comprehended so much as a wager or risk of faith but as “an education in theological imagination,” an imagining of God that coheres rather closely with John Caputo’s preference for a “God” that does not speculatively exist but rather poetically insists (AW, 185).

3 Undecidability and Carnal Hospitality

I deem Keefe-Perry’s brief allusion to Caputo’s distinction between divine existence and divine insistence to be quite fortuitous in the context of Kearney’s alleged “non-wager” wager. Whereas he suspects that Kearney has a couple of aces up his sleeve in order to attenuate the uncertainty of the anatheistic gamble, I prefer to think that Kearney actually has a couple of “Jacks,” as in Jacques Derrida and Jack Caputo. Specifically, I think that Kearney’s wager remains valid as another manifestation of what Derrida and Caputo would call “undecidability.”²² Now, I accept the argument that Kearney has, at times, misunderstood what these two Jacks mean by undecidability, opting to connect the term synonymously with “indecisive.”²³ It most assuredly does not mean that, and I think that Kearney has now recognized its true implications. In reality, the two “Jacks” state that, antithetically and ironically, undecidability necessitates decisiveness, actually indicates that one cannot avoid making a decision, thereby disabling the paradox of Buridan’s Ass. In point of fact, undecidability directly preempts the possibility of calculation and programmability, always reminding us that our decisions do not precipitate out of closed systems of thought energized by absolute certainty. Strictly speaking, it reminds us that genuine decisions cannot be made by computer programs or determined solely by algorithms. In such feedback procedures, one does not need to deliberate but merely to endorse. In lieu of such programmability, undecidability constantly reveals that we must deliberate and then dare to decide, that is, make a choice. We must choose precisely because we do not have the luxury of the “no-brainer” with reference to every decision, for example, decisions

22 Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul De Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 137; John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 198–99. Patrick Burke makes a similar argument with reference to undecidability in an article dedicated to revealing the close proximity between Kearney and Derrida, what he terms “a nuptial nexus with deconstruction.” See “Kearney’s Wager,” in *AG*, 94–103.

23 Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 201. Book hereafter cited as *SGM*.

regarding theological issues. Undecidability, therefore, maintains the epistemological humility implicit in the wager of faith – we choose and then hope.

I believe that the proper understanding of undecidability captures the uncertainty inherent in Kearney's wager and, *pace* Keefe-Perry (a rather minor "*pace*" to be sure!), demands gambling, without cheating, on how to express anatheism – theistically or atheistically. If something is undecidable, one must make a decision. Correspondingly, could one not also contend, especially regarding anatheism, that if God is unimaginable, one cannot *not* try to imagine God, at least as unimaginable; that if God is uninterpretable, one cannot circumvent hermeneutics, since one has interpreted God as uninterpretable; or that if God is ineffable, one cannot avoid communicating that specific ineffability? Do these performative contradictions not give evidence that one can admit both the idea of a genuine wager of faith (or non-faith) and the potentiality of believing in some content to that faith (or non-faith), all with authentic fear and trembling? Kearney would most certainly answer, "Yes," given that he believes that the narrative imagination inherent within the various repetitions of anatheism allows one to "say something about the unsayable, to imagine images of the unimaginable, [and] to tell tales of the untellable" (*SGM*, 10).

Of course, I concede that a variant of Keefe-Perry's "critique" may still obtain here, expressly in regards to whether the necessity of wagering adversely affects the genuine nature of faith. In *Debating Otherness*, Johann-Albrecht Meylahn offers such an objection when he contends in his essay that a decision "can only be made in absolute non-knowledge, that is in death." In other words, when one discerns and then decides, one has reverted to knowledge or logic and, in doing so, has abrogated the genuine wager.²⁴ Meylahn's argument here finds support in Derrida's critique of Kearney's insistence that theological conviction maintain some sense of content. In response to Kearney's prioritization of discernment as resulting in a functional decision regarding God, Derrida defends the position that once one has accepted a set of criteria by which to discriminate between "an authentic God [and] a false God" – a discrimination that Derrida conclusively professes to be unavoidable – one has necessarily suppressed faith and put God to flight.²⁵ I believe, however, that in taking this position, Derrida, too, has failed to appreciate the theological implications of his own concept of undecidability. Since the concept cannot mean indecision but must involve the risk of taking a leap and choosing, when one

24 Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, "Response to Richard Kearney's Anatheism: Anatheism and Holy Folly," in *DO*, 121.

25 Richard Kearney, "Desire of God," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 133.

makes a personal theological choice, that choice does not compel an abrogation of faith. One does not inexorably destroy uncertainty when one chooses rightly to pass as either a theist or an atheist. One may certainly take Derrida's "I do not know, I must believe" and augment it with a bit of scripture, "I believe, but help my unbelief."²⁶ In other words, as Kearney rightly acknowledges, one's faith decision, when it is genuine faith, never abolishes the risk, which means, correspondingly, that atheism may be, in Keefe-Perry's nomenclature, both an education *and* a wager.

Still, Keefe-Perry has good grounds for celebrating what he takes to be Kearney's dealing from a stacked deck, since Kearney does not attempt to hide his own personal existential decision to privilege a particular atheistic theism. He testifies to believing that there is a presence, transcendent in some sense, "out there ... beyond imaginary projections and linguistic tropes." He confesses that he prays to this presence, to this "someone sacred," what he terms "God" (*AW*, 24). He finds it spiritually enervating to pretend to pray without an indirect object, without addressing his prayers *to* someone or something; consequently, he refuses to commune with "some empty abstraction," preferring to allow the name of God to cross over into particular forms of incarnation – as in praying "to Jesus, to Mary, [or] to St. Francis." For this reason, although he does believe in a God that lies beyond the imaginary and the reductively semantic, he concedes that God quite often becomes "enfleshed" in "images, narratives, liturgies, actions, and embodiments."²⁷ Furthermore, he modestly affirms that he is no theologian and that, subsequently, he practices a "methodological agnosticism" in his phenomenology of the sacred, one quite similar to what Janicaud prescribes. In that practice, however, he does not cease "to be a Christian or a believer," that is, does not cease to make existential wagers by entering the conflict of interpretations, taking sides, and accepting certain narratives and images that connote "God."²⁸ As a result, he unapologetically confesses to believing in an identifiable deity when he affirms that "the God of love and justice is the only God I'm interested in."²⁹

26 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1, 129; Mark 9:24.

27 Kearney, "A Conversation After God," in *AW*, 46–47.

28 Richard Kearney, "Across Oceans: A Conversation on Otherness, Hospitality and Welcoming a Strange God" in *DO*, p. 311; Kearney, *GWMB*, 48.

29 Richard Kearney, "Boston Colloquy: Theorizing the Gift," in *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 300. Book hereafter cited as *DCP*.

When Kearney testifies to “the God of love and justice” as the only acceptable anatheistic deity for him personally, he signals an inescapable corollary to his wager of faith. Not only does anatheism demand a theological wager, but it also demands an ethical wager, with both wagers gesturing toward the potentiality of hospitality directed at the Sacred Stranger as both divine and human. In other words, anatheism distills down to the basic attitude one takes with reference to welcoming the other, even to the point that Kearney contends that an ethical vulnerability to the “widows and orphans,” to “the least of these,” to the one in need, or, more generically, to the “different,” transcends the conflict between theism and atheism. For the anatheist, a genuine faith in the ethics of hospitality expresses, in another idiom, a genuine faith in “God.” Such a faith would be the “*exclusion of exclusion*,” the rejection of any idolatrous worship of homogeneity. One must be willing to welcome the stranger or the foreigner and not alienate or shun anyone, since the stranger might well be a functional incarnation of the divine, a way that God “becomes flesh.” Indeed, Kearney states that in serving strangers, “orthopraxis trumps orthodoxy” (*AW*, p. 12). One could say that this orthopraxis is a way of “doing God,” of re-imagining God as a transformative, messianic power in reality, a power that incites an ethic of hospitality.³⁰

Of course, the ethical wager that hospitality instantiates includes another meaningful wager in Kearney’s anatheism – the “carnal” wager, a wager also known as the “poetics of sacred carnality” (*AW*, 25). This wager precedes the epistemological concern with knowledge and depends upon the precognitive engagement with the world that one finds in the infant, who responds initially to touch and taste. As the word “infant” indicates, there is something prior to the ability to speak, and, for Kearney, that prelinguistic intentionality comes from the non-linguistic ability to experience reality through the medium of the flesh, that is, through touch. As Kearney expresses it, prior to words, “we are flesh, flesh becoming words for the rest of our lives.”³¹ Hermeneutics, therefore, cannot be constricted to discourse but must also include the process of embodied interpretation, since we comprehend reality both linguistically and non-linguistically. In other words, we understand experience as “a form of tact within contact, of savvy as *savoir* in the original sense of tasting and testing” (*DO*, 58).

30 Kearney, “In Conversation with Richard Kearney,” in *IN*, 322. See also the section on “Confessional Hospitality” in Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 43–48.

31 Kearney, *AW*, 51; Richard Kearney, “Carnal Hermeneutics,” in *IN*, 95.

For Justin Sands, the nonlinguistic hermeneutic of caressing the world offers another fascinating example of Kearney's phenomenological method. In his contribution to *Debating Otherness*, he claims that Kearney's emphasis on carnality clarifies how we expose ourselves to the world via the polarity of distance and proximity.³² Sands correctly focuses on how Kearney extends the polarity of carnal hermeneutics to include a reciprocity among the self, the world, and the other, an extension that finds significant treatment in Kearney's most recent work where he insists that just as we touch the world as a way of knowing it, so, too, does the world touch us. For example, in his essay "Double Hospitality: Between Word and Touch," an original contribution to *Imagination Now*, he acknowledges that this "double sensation" of touch comes directly from Husserl's idea of "a phenomenon of reversibility where touching is also a being touched."³³ Kearney actually fleshes out this Husserlian phenomenology of tactility in his most recent book, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*, in which he contends that Husserl considers touch to be "the most primordial relationship" between the individual and reality. Through touch "as the indispensable agency of intercorporality – and, by moral extension, empathy" – one simply cannot reduce the perception of oneself to "some disembodied consciousness experiencing a mere thing amidst things, but as flesh experiencing flesh in a fundamentally reciprocal way."³⁴ Nevertheless, Kearney also prescribes a vigilance with reference to the reciprocity of touching, enjoining a hermeneutic of suspicion in order to ensure that one discerns the proper way of touching and not touching. He warns that tactility requires a sensitivity to the "tactful," in other words, one should never forget that there are appropriate and inappropriate ways of touching. One should never allow touch to become abusive or disrespectful by violating "the otherness of the other" (*Touch*, 10–13). One needs to know "how to be far and near, absent and present, foreign and familiar at once ... which is why carnal hospitality is always a task, never a fait accompli" (*IN*, 306). Under these critical conditions, therefore, Kearney acknowledges the incarnation of human being and how the other distinguishes itself from me with reference to flesh and how I must relate to the other *as* flesh (*IN*, 109–110; 113–17). No matter how foreign to me the other may be, there remains a genuine connection at the level of shared flesh, at the level of a "thisness" and a unique particularity signaled by the body of the other

32 Justin Sands, "Introduction to Richard Kearney's Intellectual Autobiography: Where Do You Come From, Richard Kearney?" in *DO*, 27.

33 Richard Kearney, "Double Hospitality: Between Word and Touch," in *IN*, 301.

34 Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 46–47.

(*IN*, 117; *DO*, 40, 328). Still, as Pretorius suggests, the risk of the carnal wager endures, because “at the threshold between self and other, an untranslatable kernel always remains, making any pedagogical wager, like translation, a trial and a drama, a fragile task always to be taken up anew.”³⁵

4 Re-Thinking an Apophatic Reduction of Theopoetics

In extending carnal hermeneutics to an ethics of hospitality, one also extends it to the dynamics of theopoetics, since the “theopoetic imagination gives flesh to word and word to flesh.”³⁶ In other words, the creative reciprocity between the sensual and the semantic applies also to an anatheistic interpretation of God. God must be enfleshed in reality, must be “made” (*poiesis*) to appear in the phenomena of experience. That “appearance” occurs as human beings respond to the call of hospitality and through acts of grace, mercy, and compassion directed toward the Other actually create God in that moment, that is, serve a Christ-like function of incarnating the love of God within the moral structures of ethical obligations. Our “yes” to the summons of the other, which is our “yes” to the possibility of hospitality, transforms God into flesh, into an experienceable existence.³⁷ In doing so, we allow God to intervene in history, to establish something of the Kingdom of God in what, as noted above, Kearney calls a “micro-eschatological” revelation. He uses the kingdom language of the biblical narratives to designate the “already, but not yet” eschatological nature of divine rule. The kingdom is not some future end to history, some dialectical synthesis whereby the Absolute Spirit reigns. Instead, the kingdom comes in little moments and appeals to the “least of these” that Jesus references, “the widow, the orphan, the stranger” (*IN*, 321). Yet, that means that the kingdom must be a kingdom of flesh, of a poetical ethics that remains sensitive to the potentiality of hospitality, in other words, of touch and taste.

For Kearney, the savory nature of hospitality finds unique imaginative expression in the Abrahamic narrative of the commensal encounter with God at Mamre. When Abraham and Sarah show everyday hospitality to the three divine strangers and invite them to dine, they participate in God’s revelation (*IN*, 101). For Kearney, the imaginatively poetic efficacy of this narrative may be

35 Helgard Pretorius, “Approaching the Threshold: Hospitality as a Pedagogical Wager in the Work of Richard Kearney,” in *DO*, 195.

36 Richard Kearney, “God Making: Theopoetics and Anatheism,” in *AA*, 4.

37 Richard Kearney, “Hermeneutics of the Possible God” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 60 (2004), 944.

found pictorially in Andrei Rublev's famous icon, *The Trinity*, also known as *The Hospitality of Abraham*, in which Rublev leaves an open space at the table facing toward the viewer in which one sees a chalice. The symbolism here appears to be an invitation for humans to join the Trinity, which would be, in turn, for humans to instantiate the Trinity through acts of hospitality (AA, 11–14). In "Making God," another original essay written specifically for *Imagination Now*, Kearney refers to this iconic invitation to join the Trinity as a "desire for a fourth." It reveals God as essentially relational and not as self-sufficient, as welcoming human beings as the "fourth" to participate in divine creation by translating theopoetics into literal acts of justice and compassion.³⁸ As a result, Rublev's icon inventively communicates what Mirella Kemp and Danie Veldsman call a "sacramental imagination," a powerful imaginative expression of an atheistic theopoetics of the flesh.³⁹

Indeed, atheistic hospitality depends on the poetic power of imagination, given that through the imagination one can transcend one's own narrow perspective and envision how the other might encounter reality. This transcendence figures into the poetics of hospitality at a number of different points. For example, Verhoef associates Kearney with Derrida and Levinas in that all three depend on "the alterity of inverted intentionality." By that he means that all three transpose the inception of ethics from the deliberations of the moral self to the invocations of the beckoning other. This other remains transcendent precisely because its genuine alterity cannot be forced into the claustrophobic confines of an ethically responsible person's conceptual network (DO, 104). Likewise, Theo Hetteema, in his *Anatheistic Wager* essay, subscribes to this same notion of ethical transcendence, adding to it the accompanying necessity for arbitrating between whether the stranger is a monster or a messiah. He announces that "the other arises in front of me, unexpected [and] uncontrollable." In doing so, the other presents itself "with a twofold face, at once terrifying and friendly." Furthermore, he acknowledges that this dichotomy obtains not only in the case of the ethical other but even more so with reference to the divine other.⁴⁰ In a similar way, Troostwijk and Clemente pick up on this theological idea and endorse the significance of imagination and poetics for interacting with the atheistic dynamic of hospitality. They assert that if we expose ourselves to the other, the different, and the stranger, then, perhaps,

38 Richard Kearney, "Making God: A Theopoetic Task," in *IN*, 207.

39 Klomp and Veldsman, *AA*, 243. A slightly edited version of this essay may be found in *DO* under the title "After God but Behind the Cross: The Procession as a Way to Re-encounter God in a Culture Beyond Classical Liturgy," 253–71.

40 Theo L. Hetteema, "The Apparent God: Biblical Poetics and the End of Time," in *AW*, 217.

“the impossible will happen,” that is, the divine might “return to us in new and unexpected ways.”⁴¹

All of the above correctly advances the extent of Kearney’s anatheistic wager. He definitively dictates that imagining the other “is to imagine *differently* ... [which] is, in itself, an ethical gesture of welcoming what is different.”⁴² Obviously, however, as mentioned above, one cannot preempt the centrality of hospitality from the necessity for discernment. Just as Kearney insists that one must decide about one’s perspective on theism or atheism, one must also decide about which “others” one willingly welcomes as host. Likewise, whenever undecidability leads one to make a decision about the reality of theological claims, one must be sensitive to which God one accepts or rejects. As the title of his 2003 book indicates, one must be wary as to whether one welcomes strangers, Gods, or monsters. Although the decision of hospitality remains a wager, it should not be an imprudent one.

Of course, Kearney’s discerning theological realism does not interpret God as a phenomenological given or object. He made that clear almost forty years ago in his early work, *Poétique du Possible*.⁴³ Interestingly enough, the complete title of that book, *Poétique du Possible: Phénoménologie Herméneutique de la Figuration*, presciently amplifies what eventually become prominent parameters of his future anatheistic theism. Anatheism is, indeed, a poetics of the possible, of futurity and the messianic, of what may be or may come. As such, it rejects a speculative, metaphysical, scientific, and/or literal investigation into God, and, instead, concentrates on a weak theology of a vulnerable God open to inter-personal transformation. The poetics of the possible transmutes into a poetics of God, or a theo-poetics, that is, into certain theories of how God may be figured and re-figured, symbolized and re-symbolized, narrated and re-narrated. Yet, in his initial theo-poetical inquiry into the “God Who May Be,” Kearney explicitly refers to his work in theological poetics as a phenomenology of the sacred. Likewise, his more recent anatheism also remains a phenomenological hermeneutics of the sacred. Such a phenomenology, of necessity, accentuates the imagination as a form of intentionality and, furthermore, punctuates the apophatic implications of the phenomenological reduction for a more critical appreciation of his anatheistic wager.

Kearney actually returns to Husserl’s phenomenological reduction and insists that this methodical bracketing has always emphasized the “ana,” the

41 Chris Doude van Troostwijk and Matthew Clemente, “Epilogue,” in *AW*, 253.

42 Richard Kearney, “Hermeneutics of Imagination,” in *IN*, 42.

43 Richard Kearney, *Poétique du Possible: Phénoménologie Herméneutique de la Figuration* (Paris: Beuchesne, 1984), 231–32.

“letting go of something ... in order to open yourself to the possibility of something novel and strange.”⁴⁴ Attempting to disengage the natural attitude of personal presuppositions, which, of course, hermeneutical theory insists can never be genuinely achieved, permits one to think anew, to question back and empower the possibility of re-thinking accepted interpretations. Kearney associates this methodological epoché with Socratic ignorance, Humean skepticism, and Kantian critique as manifestations of uncertainty, as reminders of the necessity for humility, and as formal indicators of the therapeutic dynamics inherent in any ascesis of the negative, especially regarding faith. Indeed, as noted above, he construes this application of the epoché as another example of Ricoeur’s notion of the second naïveté, the return to faith after the detour of critical analysis. The phenomenological epoché, therefore, becomes a central motif in atheism precisely because it empowers the “purgative emancipation and transformation of tradition” (*DO*, 315). It functions iconoclastically and kenotically to clear out an imaginative space within which to contemplate new opinions about God, about ethics, and about meaning.

The iconoclasm of the epoché reveals the efficacy of atheism and a certain radical theology of the death of God for a deeper appreciation of the anatheistic wager (*DO*, 315–16). This “negative capability” of the epoché, however, can certainly induce moments of “anxiety and crisis,” leaving one “in a state of ‘mystery, uncertainty, and doubt, without the irritable reaching after fact and reason’” (*AW*, 91; *DO*, 324–25). Yet, this emptying, or “letting-go,” evidenced in “the ‘dark night of the soul’ depicted in the mystical poetry of John of the Cross or Gerard Manley Hopkins,” avoids reducing faith to “cheap grace” or to “the lure of fundamentalist idolatries” (*AA*, 10; *AW*, 66). Despite the salvific implications of this “letting go,” Kearney refuses to take the negative capability of silence as the “last word.” Although he acknowledges that apophatic silence does remind us of our limits and of the alterity of God, he, nonetheless, compels a return to discourse, “to myths and metaphors and symbols and stories,” which he takes to be, in essence, a return to the imagination (*IN*, 3). For Yolande Steenkamp, this explains how Kearney establishes a “middle way through the apophatic and cataphatic approaches” by using the “metaphorising role of hermeneutic mediation” in order to traverse the “frontier zone where the human imagination uses stories, parables and images to think the unthinkable and to say something about the unsayable.”⁴⁵ In like manner, John Manoussakis postulates that atheism establishes a certain “rhythm,” or cadence, between two

44 Richard Kearney, “An Anatheistic Exchange: Returning to the Body After the Flesh,” in *AA*, 91.

45 Yolande Steenkamp, “Kearney Between Poles: Is Too Much Lost in the Middle?” *DO*, 129.

possibilities, first, “the *possibility* of returning to God, [and second,] enabled, paradoxically, by the very critique that allowed philosophy to move beyond God in the first place.”⁴⁶ As a result, the tempo of Kearney’s anatheistic iconoclasm of the epoché follows the triple beat of “re-imagining *after* imagining and de-imagining God” (*IN*, 323; *SGM*, 10).

All of the above brings us finally to the imaginative parameter of figuration for the concept of theopoetics. Kearney defines theopoetics as the manner in which “the divine (*theos*) manifests itself as making (*poiesis*)” (*AA*, 3). But he claims that the making is Janus-faced in that there is a reciprocity between God making us and our making God (*IN*, 214). God expects us to participate in the process of creation, whereby not only is reality affected by our actions, but so, too, are we, and so, too, is God. At one level, that means that we constantly figure and refigure God imaginatively through creative acts of poetry, narrative, art, music, and film. These creative expressions allow us to give flesh to God, to offer potential *Vorstellungen* by which we can comprehend and communicate our theological interpretations. The various figurations of God promote a diversity and an alterity in how we attempt to “do God,” thereby establishing a pluralism that Kearney finds anatheistically productive. He announces that “if divinity is unknowable, humanity must imagine it in many ways. The absolute requires pluralism to avoid absolutism” (*Anatheism*, xiv).

Admittedly, Kearney’s theopoetics conforms quite closely to Caputo’s theopoetics, with its emphases on the substitutability of the name of God and the potentiality for multiple creative “incarnations” of God in language, the arts, and in ethics. In his article in *The Art of Anatheism*, Caputo deciphers poetics as more than “verse and poetry in the narrower sense.” He relates it to a more “primal *poiesis*,” which evokes “a constellation of nondiscursive, metaphoric, and metonymic resources ... allowing the call that is taking place *in* the name of God to come to words.” As a result, he considers the poetic to be “the very birth of God.”⁴⁷ Theopoetics, therefore, mediates “something other – *tout autre* – something startling [that] breaks in upon the business as usual of the world and calls upon theology to recall its ancient task of imagining the world otherwise” (*AA*, 48). In her essay that appears just prior to Caputo’s, Catherine Keller unquestionably agrees with Caputo at this point, at least with reference to the ambiguity of theopoetics, for she broaches the probing question: “Is God making or getting made?”⁴⁸ What is more, she repeats the “carnality” of theopoetics that Kearney and Caputo both exhibit when she informs

46 John Panteleimon Manoussakis, “Cracked: The Black Theology of Anatheism,” in *AA*, 49.

47 John D. Caputo, “Theology, Poetry, and Theopoetics,” in *AA*, 46–47.

48 Catherine Keller, “Theopoetics: A Becoming History,” in *AA*, 29.

us that “God-making” intimates both “a conceptual construction and an effect on that cosmic life we are calling God” (AA, 39). Consequently, Kearney, Caputo, and Keller recognize theo-poetics as a genuine reciprocity between refigurations of God and refigurations of the human, or as Kearney would term it, as the negotiation between anthropoetics and theo-poetics (DO, 321).

4.1 *Fictional Refiguration and Creedal Transfiguration*

Kearney candidly confesses that atheism as a poetics should not be confused with atheism as a fiction, nor, likewise, should faith. In doing so, he differentiates between what he calls the “fictive *as if*” and the “atheist *as*” (*Anatheism*, 15). Nevertheless, by virtue of making this distinction between the *as if* and the *as*, has Kearney not become vulnerable, yet again, to having ostensibly devalued the reality of the wager and, thereby, depreciating the risk of genuine faith? As noted in the “wager” section above, Johann-Albrecht Meylahn joins L. Callid Keefe-Perry in accusing Kearney of contradicting his commitment to a genuine wager, but he does so specifically by addressing the distinction between the *as if* and the *as*, the fictive and the non-fictive. He wonders why Kearney would confirm that “religions are imaginary works” and would accept that the very imaginative character of religious discourse protects God from being reduced to the level of the literal, only to turn around and argue against the fictive nature of that protection, thereby returning to a form of “literal” theological realism. Meylahn prescribes that for Kearney to remain consistent in his pistology, he should “embrace the fictive *as if* wholeheartedly” (DO, 115–16). Moreover, he believes that only by embracing the fictive can Kearney remain consistent with his identification of atheism as hospitality toward the stranger. He argues that if the book *Anatheism* is not a fiction, then what is it? It is not a novel or an anthology of poems. It must, therefore, be a creedal book or a theological-philosophical book. But if it is that, then he insists that its content already prefigures who or what the stranger may be. Such a text serves as the pretext for a prejudiced perspective on those who are “in” and those who are “out.” Such a book, therefore, conspires with other elements within a particular community to preempt the alterity of the other by conceptualizing that alterity within its own ideological network (DO, 117). The book, among other things, decides who the “committed” are, signifies those who have taken the leap in the right direction and, by that, has wiped out the wager (DO, 118–20). In contradistinction to such a “contradictory” reading, Meylahn prefers to remain a fool or a joker, one who “has been conned, by none other than my own imagination: my response to an imagined call.” In other words, he “wagers” on accepting “God *as* fiction (literature) ... or rather God *as if* fiction” (DO, 122).

Not surprisingly, Meylahn's critique does not convince Kearney that he must acquiesce to a wager *sans choix*, which, ironically, would be no wager at all, since to wager literally means to make a choice, to place a bet. He asserts that one does not have to be impaled on the horns of a false dilemma here between fiction and nonfiction, or between truth as correspondence (*adequatio*) and poetics as emotive. On the contrary, truth as revelation (*aletheia*) allows for imaginative expressions that, although dependent on non-literal language or aesthetic media, may still reference a reality of some sort that lies beyond poetic semiotics. He admits that religious faith does, undoubtedly, depend on fictional and non-literal discourse, since "one cannot bypass narrative and metaphor on the way to the sacred." Yet, the sacred cannot be reduced to this symbolic discourse. He confesses that, for him, "sacred narratives – the scriptures, the lives of saints, the testimonies of holy people ... refer us to something other than ourselves, bigger than ourselves, more loving than ourselves" (*AW*, 32–33). Precisely at this point, Kearney's Ricoeurian influences manifest themselves again, since he relies directly on the idea of testimony and the threefold mimesis of narrative literature, two perspectives that significantly inform Ricoeur's philosophy of religious discourse. Using Ricoeurian language, one could claim that a hermeneutics of testimony can shield you from the dilemma of fact or fiction with reference to the uncertainty implicit in faith. Kearney agrees with Ricoeur that the act of testifying seeks "to join an *experience* of the absolute to the *idea* of the absolute ..." Ricoeur does admit to the possibility of an existential encounter with the Absolute, that is, an encounter within the immanence of experience and history of that which transcends experience and history. He concedes, however, that the testimony of such an experience remains caught within a logic of probability; it is always a hermeneutic and never an absolute claim to absolute knowledge.⁴⁹ Ricoeur declares that, as a result of this epistemological reduction to probability, testimony carries a juridical component; it is always on trial, open for cross-examination, and potentially defensible (*EBI*, 128). Yet, for Kearney, that "juridical" component is precisely what makes faith a wager on something irreducible to the figurative semantics of the sacred.

Additionally, Kearney depends on Ricoeur's trinity of mimetic figuration in order to account for the complementarity between the fictional *as if* and the imaginative *as* in relation to the referentiality of religious, or sacred, discourse.⁵⁰ Prefigured sacred actions produce the configuration of narrative

49 Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 119. Book hereafter cited as *EBI*.

50 Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52–71.

testimonies that then empower the refiguration of faith in those who believe those stories (AW, 13). Through the narrative imagination, one may engage theopoetic language in order to reflect on imaginative variations on God, that is, to listen to contrasting and competing stories of the sacred in order to re-evaluate the possible worlds that the vocation of hospitality summons, and to recover the humility that should obstinately accompany the hermeneutical modesty of mystery. Kearney directs the Ricoeurian trilogy of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration into “two modes of figuration – creedal transfiguration and fictional configuration” (DO, 322). The transfiguration of faith emerges from the configuration of fiction as another species of the second naiveté in that the fictional *as if* “opens an imaginary space ... for new possibilities of epiphany and annunciation, of hospitality and caritas.” That space may certainly lead one to remain in the fictive reality of the imaginary, merely enjoying the aesthetic pleasure of the literary “world” projected by the text. On the other hand, it may also incite an atheistic wager on the possibility of a non-fictional, transformative reality of the sacred that cannot be confined to or comprehended by any transparent language or absolute experience (DO, 324).

Still, one must never forget that the movement from fictional configuration to creedal transformation, from considering God *as if* God were a character in the story, a literary or semantic cipher, to committing to God *as* a presence or call within the structures of experience, always occurs within the restrictions of the hermeneutical circle, which remains both carnal and poetic. In other words, there is no escaping figuration. It remains literary and not literal; it demands more imagination than speculation; and it compels the perpetuation of both the *as if* and the *as*. Consequently, one lives repeatedly in the risk and uncertainty of faith, in the atheistic wager, and in the negative capability that constantly cautions us never to forget that “[t]here is no absolute way to the Absolute” (DO, 325–26). Kearney does not hedge his bets or load his dice or stack his cards when he testifies to a faith in the God who may be, in the loving possible that arouses a desire for hospitality. No, he plays an honest theological and poetic game, one in which the players “can never be sure whether the figure is a figuration of something beyond us or a mere figment of our imagination, a pure supreme fiction projected by our minds” (DO, 321).

4.2 *A Concluding Poetic “Perhaps”*

In the above quote, Kearney uses one of Wallace Stevens’ primary poetic phrases, “supreme fiction,” and not just for the first time. In another text from fifteen years ago, he defends wagering on the narrative of a God of possibility

as “Good News that goes beyond even our most ingenious supreme fictions.”⁵¹ Yet, these two examples of Stevens’ vocabulary do not exhaust the influence that that American poet has had on Kearney. Indeed, on three occasions in his bibliography, Kearney epigraphically quotes Stevens: twice in *The Wake of Imagination* and once in *Anatheism*.⁵² Moreover, he also references Stevens on five other textual occasions: once in *The Wake of Imagination*, once in the essay “Enabling God,” twice in *Reimagining the Sacred*, and once in *Anatheism*.⁵³ One may certainly infer from these few, but important, citations that Kearney himself recognizes something congruous between his philosophy of imagination and phenomenology of religious experience and the persistent themes of fiction, faith, imagination, and God scattered throughout Stevens’ poetry.

Like Kearney, Stevens also struggles with the loss of faith and how one might respond to believing after one can no longer believe. Does the absence of faith necessarily imply a negative perspective on life? Does it abrogate any existential meaningfulness? Stevens responds to these two questions with a definitive “No.” He finds in the imagination and in poetry what he calls “The joy of meaning in design/Wrenched out of chaos.”⁵⁴ This joy produces affirmation, and affirmation affirms again, and again, and again, in spite of any repetitive negations. After the “no” comes the “yes”; there is always something “after.” Stevens calls this “aftering,” this redundancy, “the romance of the precise,” which he designates as the “ever-never-changing same,/An appearance of Again, the diva-dame.”⁵⁵ But what is that poetic expression if not another translation of “*ana*,” Kearney’s ubiquitous central preposition that he translates as “after,” “again,” or as “retrieving, revisiting, reiterating, repeating?”⁵⁶ The “theological” contiguity between Stevens and Kearney interfaces in this one small but potent word, “again.” Kearney’s “*ana*” is Stevens’ “diva-dame,” the

51 Richard Kearney, “Against Omnipotence: God Beyond Power,” in *DGP*, 239.

52 Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), unpaginated epigraph page before Dedication, 359. Hereafter cited as *WI*; Kearney, *Anatheism*, 3.

53 Kearney, *WI*, 186; Richard Kearney, “Enabling God,” in *AG*, 47–48; Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmerman, eds, *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 18, 203. Book hereafter cited as *RS*; and Kearney, *Anatheism*, 13.

54 Wallace Stevens, “The Sail of Ulysses,” in *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 127.

55 Wallace Stevens, “Adult Epigram,” in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, Corrected Edition, eds. John N. Serio and Chris Byers (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 371. Hereafter cited as *CP*.

56 Richard Kearney, “God After God: An Anatheist Attempt to Reimagine God,” in *RS*, 7.

constant mercurial repetition forward of what has been, of what recurs always as reconstructed and revitalized.

Yet, in Stevens' symbolic vocabulary, the therapeutic dimension of "again," the unrelenting unfolding of the "imagination's new beginning" that invariably sustains the continuity of "aftering," conceals a theological dimension in the very etymology of "diva-dame."⁵⁷ "Diva" derives from the Latin "*divus*," which gives rise to "*divinus*," the "divine." The PIE root "*dei*," produces "*Zeus*," "*Deus*," and "*Dieu*," in other words, words for "God."⁵⁸ If "again" is a "diva," then for Stevens, it is something divine, something sacred, something that transcends every attempt to articulate it. But that, also, is precisely Kearney's perspective on the idea. "God" names the process of "again," *anatheism*, of that which comes "after," after God, after faith, the "aftering" of the messianic, and the "againing" of the process of transformation and hospitality. For both thinkers, however, that process remains an imaginative one; consequently, Stevens' mysticism of the imagination and Kearney's atheistic imagination may well be considered two complementary translations of Ricoeur's idea of a "grace of the imagination."⁵⁹ Perhaps, however, just perhaps, both thinkers wager on the possibility that the grace of imagination is not purely imaginary – again, just perhaps.

57 Wallace Stevens, "Esthétique du Mal," in *CP*, 336–37.

58 Joseph T. Shipley, *The Origins of English Words: A Discursive Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (Baltimore: The Johns-Hopkins University Press, 1984), 54–55.

59 Paul Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 237; Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 60–61.