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Book Review

Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness, by Richard Kearney. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. x + 294 pp., 21 illustrations, index. ISBN 0-415-27258-0, paper, \$30.95.

As anyone working in the humanities and social sciences knows, the Other is a hot topic. But however timely the theme of oppressed, marginalized, and excluded “others” might be in academia, the issue is not restricted to the theoretical level. Given the role of difference—whether national, racial, sexual, religious, or political—in current world affairs, we can expect to see the exigencies of alterity manifesting themselves in very tangible ways. In his recent book *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, a work that deals with the hermeneutics of otherness, Richard Kearney places a distinct emphasis on the place of understanding in one’s relation to the other. Otherness, it seems, calls for understanding. Indeed. If this seems too obvious to state, it is because one rarely finds a contemporary philosophical treatise advocating the irrational exclusion of others. Much to the contrary. But while some of the discourse surrounding the issue amounts to little more than a facile relativism, Kearney’s book is set apart by its recognition of the vital role of critical, philosophical thought in understanding the other. This understanding of the other also proves essential to understanding oneself. As the third volume in a trilogy entitled “Philosophy at the Limit,” which began with *On Stories* and *The God Who May Be*, this volume attempts “to reinvestigate practices of defining ourselves in terms of otherness” (5)—an investigation that affirms the vital role of critical, philosophical thought in coming to understand the other. What results is a work that embodies many of the better aspects of Continental thought. Uniting depth with clarity, Kearney’s prose is very readable, even when handling the ideas of such notoriously difficult thinkers as Heidegger, Derrida, and Žižek. Contrary to certain stereotypes of Continental philosophy, he elucidates rather than obfuscates. This is important insofar as it allows Kearney to follow intellectual currents throughout various disciplines. Powerfully interdisciplinary in scope, the book synthesizes philosophy, religion, sociology, politics, art, and psychology within its central focus: interpreting otherness.

The title refers to the three main characters of the book: Strangers, gods, and monsters, which Kearney offers as “three colloquial names for the experience of alterity” corresponding to three ways we encounter otherness (13). “The figure of the ‘stranger’ ...frequently operates as a limit experience for humans trying to identify themselves over and against others” (3). From distant foreigners to next-door neighbours, others are strange to us. Monsters represent a similar limit experience, but with the monstrous we are reminded with greater force that the realm of the ego, the self, and sameness, is never quite safe, sovereign, or secure. Similarly, gods transcend the limits of human thought, reminding us of our contingency. “But where monsters arise from underworlds, and strangers intrude from hinterworlds, gods generally reside in otherworlds beyond us” (4). Kearney undertakes to respond to these varied forms of otherness in terms of philosophical

understanding, proposing that

if the enigma of the Other has been largely ignored by the mainstream metaphysical tradition – going back to Parmenides and Plato who defined the Other in relation to the Same – it resurfaces again and again throughout our western cultural history in the guise of strangers, gods and monsters who will not go away and continue to command our attention (7).

The proper response to these enigmatic types of otherness is not wholesale exclusion, evasion, or scapegoating, but philosophical understanding.

To this end, Kearney employs what he calls a “diacritical hermeneutics,” bringing together critique and dialogue to chart a middle path through hermeneutical extremes. This hermeneutics is critical insofar as it takes a critical approach to the relation between self and other, employing a critique of both parties. Against the narcissistic cultural and philosophical tendencies that seek the integrity of the same at the expense of excluding the other, a critical stance must seek to prevent the self from closing in on itself. Equally important, however, is a critical stance directed toward the other. This requires a double critique to prevent the other from become too transcendent or too immanent, since either would ruin any genuine understanding between the self and the other. Any understanding that would preserve this relation between self and other must not “let the foreign become too foreign or the familiar too familiar,” but instead “make the foreign more familiar and the familiar more foreign” (11). The self is not quite as self-contained as we might like to suppose, but neither is the other quite as alien as we might wish. Thus applied this diacritical hermeneutics hopes to achieve “a more discerning readiness to welcome strangers, respect gods, and acknowledge monsters” (11). The critical stance is crucial to this aim: the critique of the self exposes the egocentric desire for autonomy in hopes of engendering a readiness to welcome, respect, and acknowledge these others. The critique of the other reminds us of our need to be discerning in our response to the other; we need to discern whether we are dealing with a stranger, a god, or a monster.

This approach stands in distinction from both romantic and radical hermeneutics. In the first category Kearney includes Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Gadamer. The classification of Gadamer as an advocate of romantic hermeneutics is questionable, given his assault on the romantic hermeneutical ideal, i.e. the union of the original consciousness of an author with the consciousness of the reader. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer explicitly rejects the assumption that one can access the consciousness or original intent of an author, but Kearney sees Gadamer’s conception of hermeneutical understanding as a “fusion of horizons” as being a remnant of romantic hermeneutics (17). This allegation is open to dispute, but in any case this point does not undermine Kearney’s overall distinction, insofar as it clarifies the difference of his diacritical hermeneutics from the romantic tradition.

Kearney’s position also differs from the radical hermeneutics of John D. Caputo, which is to some extent synonymous with deconstruction, given the overwhelming influence of Derrida in Caputo’s project. Radical hermeneutics casts off the romantic hope of hermeneutical reconciliation, emphasizing irreducible alterity instead. This radical alterity cannot be overcome or mediated, so the traditional models of “understanding” are usually marked by an unethical violation of the other by the self. Standing somewhere between its romantic and radical relatives, diacritical hermeneutics obviates “both the congenial communion of fused horizons and the apocalyptic rupture of non-

communion,” opening a space for “intercommunion between distinct but not incomparable selves.” Beginning by welcoming difference, the diacritical approach

...champions the practice of dialogue between self and other, while refusing to submit to the reductionist dialectics of egology governed by the *logos* of the same. Between the *logos* of the One and the anti-*logos* of the Other, falls the dia-*logos* of oneself-as-another (18).

These convictions form the heart of this book, supporting Kearney’s approach in each chapter. He first discusses the all-too-common phenomenon of scapegoating, and draws on René Girard’s definitive work on the topic. The function of the scapegoat within a society is one of purification; by placing blame on a sacrificial victim and then driving him out or punishing him, a community establishes its own sense of innocence. The scapegoat assumes the guilt of whatever evil must be punished, and his suffering draws the line between the pure and the impure (27). “In sum, for saints to remain saintly, strangers had to be scapegoated” (33). The scapegoated victim need not have any connection with the evil for which he suffers—typically he does not. What is really at work is the impulse to absolve oneself of guilt by placing it on an Other. For Girard, this impulse is undermined by Jesus Christ, the truly innocent victim who exposes the scapegoat ritual as self-deception. Jesus thus demythologizes the scapegoat myth, overcoming its bloodletting to create peace (39).

Kearney agrees with Girard insofar as the scapegoat mechanism allows the self to create an illusion of innocence by blaming the Other. We see this worked out throughout the history of Western civilization in practices such as witch-hunts, inquisitions, racism and other forms of xenophobia that demonize the Other or depict him as a monster. The true insight is to recognize that the monster is not as distant as we might think. On this count Girard’s powerful hermeneutic of suspicion is in order; the scapegoat myth needs to be demythologized. As Oedipus demonstrates, the guilt in question might lie much closer to home. Kearney’s objection, however, concerns the totalization of Girard’s thesis: First, for Girard myth itself seems to be something monstrous, and he overlooks the important role that myth can play in negotiating the monstrous—an insight that is central to Kearney’s project. Second, Kearney objects to the privilege Girard gives to Judaeo-Christian monotheism as a way out of the cycle of scapegoating. In identifying non-Judaeo-Christian myths with scapegoating, Girard runs the risk of practicing the scapegoating function himself (41). Might it be that other traditions might offer a redemptive exit from scapegoating? Kearney suggests they can, though this is more a suggestion than a demonstration. He cites some examples, but such a comparative evaluation lies beyond the scope of his concerns here, which takes place on more of a meta-mythological level.

The second chapter does, however, present and examine two narratives that deal with the relation of sacrificial scapegoats to the enigma of monstrous alterity. Kearney takes these two narratives from our contemporary cultural consciousness, using two popular films. In the *Alien* series we see that the monstrous is not easily driven out. Instead:

Human space travelers actually find themselves playing ‘host’ to the hostile monster from outer space, thus discovering (to their horror) that the monster is no just ‘out there’ but ‘in here’... What really terrifies them is the alien within, already inscribed in the homely but such that it cannot be integrated or named (50).

The *Alien* movies show that the truly alien and monstrous, “the most alienating and alien-making forces of all are shown to reside not out there in intergalactic space but within the human species itself” (52).

We see a similar point in Kearney’s reading of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now Redux*. In this film Lieutenant Willard is sent on a mission to eliminate the renegade Colonel Kurtz, who has gone AWOL and now poses a threat for his American commanding officers. Willard is told that “Kurtz has crossed the line between ‘us’ and ‘them,’” but as Kurtz’s story unfolds, we can no longer be sure which side of that us/them line is right and which is wrong. Kurtz can testify to U.S. military brutality and injustice, and he assumes the role of scapegoat for his former superiors—“a scapegoat serving to preserve the illusion of a clean conscience” (59). Willard, however, eventually realizes that their stories, their guilt, and their confession are all interwoven (60). From this narrative, like the *Alien* narrative, Kearney concludes that our monsters are not as foreign as we might hope: “They are lurking within us here at home – often in the depths of our selves” (61). The appropriate response is not one of scapegoating, exclusion, or evasion, but one of learning “to live with them” (62). This does not mean, of course, that we should simply put up with them: “Some monsters need to be welcomed, others struggled with. The important thing...is to try to tell the difference” (62). That is the hermeneutical task.

This hermeneutical task of discerning between good and evil—“between benign and malign others” is not an easy one, and Kearney suggests that we must be sensitized to the fact by “the deconstructive resistance to black and white judgements of Us versus Them” (67). The appeal of the scapegoat function lies largely in its ability to render such ambiguities clear and distinct, particularly in situations in which discernment seems hopeless. We must not, however, be incapacitated by the difficulty of such discernment. Derrida’s account of hospitality is one position that risks erring in this regard. For Derrida, the phenomenon of hospitality is marred by the fact that the host remains the master of ceremonies, who reserves the right to reject his guests in such a way that hospitality is never pure hospitality. Such hospitality is always conditioned by certain expectations and limitations. The hospitality of deconstruction, by contrast, must be unconditionally open to the absolute Other, who can be neither anticipated nor understood. Pure hospitality is a risk, because we cannot determine who the guest will be, nor how s/he will act as a guest. Yet this hyperbolic form of hospitality conflicts with our ethical responsibility to discern between good and evil. In Kearney’s words:

The problem with this analysis of hospitality is, I fear, that it undervalues our need to differentiate not just legally but *ethically* between good and evil aliens. It downgrades – without denying – our legitimate duty to try to distinguish between benign and malign strangers, between saints and psychopaths (though admittedly most of us fall somewhere between the two) (70).

Addressing Derrida as well as Levinas, Kearney argues that this form of “deconstructive non-judgementalism” needs the resources of a hermeneutical practical wisdom to aid in discerning between justice and injustice. This is a crucial point, particularly in those circles where one finds the fallacious notion that there is no legitimate instance of exclusion. *Contra* the rhetoric that reigns in these circles, the Other is not good simply by virtue of being the Other. Such a notion recalls the sort of simplistic relativism which very few, if any, people consistently hold. Some practices and

traditions are unjust, and *should* be excluded. Derrida and Levinas would certainly agree with this point, but unfortunately their emphasis on radical alterity and undecidability tends to undermine it. Such decisions are not easy, and we need to hear the deconstructive critique. But that does not eliminate our very real need to make judgements and act on them.

If Kearney's diacritical hermeneutic tries to avoid the pitfalls of deconstruction on one hand, it tries to avoid those of psychoanalysis on the other. Whereas "deconstruction too rapidly subordinates the Same to the Other, psychoanalysis may too rapidly subordinate the Other to the Same" (77). Freud and Kristeva provide two examples of this position, in which the strangeness of the Other is due more to the self externalizing and projecting its internal strangeness onto the Other. In this view, "dreaded aliens are most dreaded not because they are other than us but because they are *more like us than our own selves*. There is nothing really alien about the alien" (75). The foreign is really not foreign at all. Diacritical hermeneutics, by contrast, contends that understanding between a Self and an Other is possible. The Other genuinely transcends us, and is not merely a projection of our own strangeness; but neither does the Other lie beyond our capacity for a modicum of understanding. The relation is characterized by neither absolute closure nor absolute rupture.

This insight is vital to our capacity to respond to evil, terror, grief, and melancholy. The middle portion of *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* is devoted to these phenomena, exploring those limit situations that seem to frustrate or forbid any attempt at understanding. In the fourth chapter Kearney employs his diacritical hermeneutics to explore the mystery of evil, in both its origins and the mythical, metaphysical, and religious explanations offered for it. Here Kearney examines the account of what he calls the postmodern sublime, which depicts evil as unspeakable, ineffable to the point that it seems to confound all understanding. One finds this suggestion in thinkers such as Kristeva, Lyotard, and Žižek, who emphasize the sublime ineffability of evil to the point that it leaves us unable to discern between evil and good. Along with certain aspects of Jungian, Gnostic, and New Age quasi-religions, this yields a confusion, even a conflation, of the sacred and the monstrous (99). Within the depths of divinity one is liable to encounter the demonic. Again, this leaves us with the inability to discern between good and evil, or to act ethically in response to it. What we need are the ethical-hermeneutical resources of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), to make judgements and act against evil. Here again the importance of narrative emerges. Narrative conveys practical wisdom insofar as it facilitates understanding, however incomplete or approximate, in those experiences that elude abstract principles. Narratives convey practical wisdom. It initiates and upholds the process of working-through (*catharsis-Durcharbeitung*) the experience of loss, suffering, and evil by making mourning possible. And finally, it opens a space in which we can glimpse the possibility of pardon or forgiveness.

The indispensability of narrative figures centrally in subsequent chapters: Kearney explores the limit experience of terror, particularly political terror in the wake of 9/11 (Ch. 5). He examines loss in his reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Ch. 6), and argues that narrative is necessary for the work of mourning. Narrative is essential to the capacity to mourn properly over loss, as his reading of *Hamlet* reveals (153). Melancholy similarly threatens to bring "us to the limits of reason" (165), frustrating any attempt at understanding. We see this with Kearney's look at Freud, Heidegger, and the myth of Saturn (Ch. 7). To this challenge of melancholy, Kristeva proposes three responses—religion, psychoanalysis, and art, to which Kearney adds a fourth: philosophy. More specifically, Kearney proposes the resources of hermeneutical, narrative understanding, which entail more

phronesis than *theoria* (176). While philosophy is limited in its resources, these resources are nevertheless vital tools for reckoning with those forms of otherness, whether within the self or from beyond, that bring us to the limits of understanding.

Each of these experiences threaten the self by binding it to its past, devoid of hope for a future. Narrative understanding pushes the limits of representation and understanding, breaking through the static actualities of the past toward new possibilities in the future (182-83). With this conviction Kearney criticizes what he calls the “postmodern cult of the immemorial,” which insists on the ineffability of such experiences as trauma, horror, terror, loss, etc. (185). The narration of such experiences might seem impossible—even inhumane—given the inadequacy of any representation. Against any naïve historical positivism or realism, Kearney acknowledges the alterity of the past, particularly in such limit experiences. But in refusing to tell these stories, just as in silencing the voices that cry out to have their stories heard, we eliminate the possibility for any genuine understanding, judgement, and healing to take place. And as Kearney reminds us, alongside Freud and Hamlet, this leaves open a pathological space for such horrors to happen again. So, taking once more the middle way, he points to his model of understanding that is at once critical and affirmative. The meaning of the past is neither purely present nor absolutely Other. Consequently, the hermeneutical task of narration is one of learning to tell stories well. Narrative is not good *per se*; we can tell stories poorly or we can tell them well. So it is crucial that we learn to tell them well.

All of this amounts to a very compelling argument in favour of narrative remembrance, but it leaves one wondering about the place of forgetting. Given the dominance of those pathological forms of forgetting that the work deals with, it is understandable that Kearney’s emphasis falls on the responsibility to remember. And it is, after all, our “moral obligation to bear witness to history” (190). But from this vantage point we may wonder if genuine healing might—*perhaps*—suggest the possibility of genuine forgetting. Such a question lies beyond the scope of this book; from here we can only catch a glimpse of the possibility. We might be premature in considering this possibility, but might we hope for a time when certain horrors, certain monsters, are forgotten? In this regard, it would be worth considering the recently published translation of Paul Ricoeur’s *Memory, History, and Forgetting* (Chicago University Press, 2004). Given Ricoeur’s influence on Kearney’s thought, which is evident throughout *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, the question of how forgetting figures into Kearney’s project is an intriguing one.

The final two chapters of the book deal with Kearney’s philosophy, or *hermeneutics*, of religion. If the middle portion of *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* overlaps more with the narrative theory of *On Stories*, these final chapters overlap more with his project in *The God Who May Be*. The ninth chapter poses the question: God or *Khora*? *Khora* is yet another limit concept that calls for the diacritical approach. The notion dates back to Plato’s *Timaeus*, where it is presented as the primordial origin of all things, as a deep impenetrable mystery, a “placeless place” that metaphor can scarcely broach (193). Psychoanalysis is inclined to locate *Khora* in the unconscious; Kristeva identifies it as a sort of “pre-verbal semiotic space” (196), while Žižek offers a more apocalyptic account relating it to Hegel’s “pre-ontological ‘night of the world’” (197). Deconstruction, and Caputo more than Derrida, relates *Khora* to the question of God. But *Khora* is not God. No, it is more akin to *differance*, insofar as neither *Khora* nor *differance* exist, are real, or come to presence. Like God, they are ineffable. But there is a difference. Kearney summarizes Caputo’s view as

follows:

If God is higher than being, *differance* is lower than it. If God, like Plato's agathon, has gone beyond us, *differance* is more like Plato's *khora* in that it hasn't yet reached us. It is beneath us, before us, behind us: anterior rather than ulterior (198).

In Caputo's account *khora* might seem to take on some manner of religious significance, were it not for the fact that it points to a religion without religion, and a significance without signification. Utterly alter, absolutely inscrutable, *khora* offers no consolations, no promises—in a word, nothing. Certainly not God. Yet Caputo suggests that at bottom a radical undecideability inheres in this question: God or *khora*? One does not know (201).

Here Kearney's diacritical hermeneutics offer a different approach. Comparing Derrida/Caputo's treatment of *khora* with the Levinasian *il y a*, the sheer indeterminate *there is (es gibt)* of being, Kearney acknowledges the reality of such experiences (204). But while we should not "flee the shadow at the heart of existence" (205), neither should we "celebrate (*khora*) as the best we can do" (204). If, as Heidegger famously observes, the god of the philosophers is not a god whom one can worship, neither is *khora* something that can redeem, inspire hope, give love, or motivate one to work for justice. So while *khora* proves a necessary remedy for the onto-theological insistence on sheer presence, *khora* and the god of onto-theology do not exhaust the possibilities, as Caputo might suggest (207). Much to the contrary, Kearney proposes another possibility: the God of the possible.

We get a glimpse of this possible God in the tenth chapter, in which Kearney contrasts it with Heidegger's "Last God." Although Heidegger offers an incisive critique of onto-theology, the vision of the divine that he offers in its stead is not exactly preferable. Heidegger's poetics of Being may avoid the flaws of onto-theology, but the new dispensation of Being and the Last God exhibit shortcomings similar to those of deconstruction's *khora*. In Kearney's view, Heidegger's Last God "certainly has little to do with the God who declares love and promises justice" (219), the God "before whom one can pray or praise," or who is "a transfiguring God who calls us to act in order to transfigure our world" (220). Heidegger's Last God is non-personal and non-ethical, and calls for nothing beyond our awaiting its advent, as "an event in Being" (225). By contrast, Kearney suggests an understanding of God that does not fall prey to the errors that Heidegger points out in onto-theology, in particular that of limiting being to presence and actuality. Heidegger's reversal of the priority of actuality over possibility opens up not only new possibilities of understanding ontology, but also new possibilities of understanding God. This means that those neglected and marginalized voices that suggest God is "one 'who may be' (Cusanus, Bruno, Boehme) or as one 'who is beyond being and non-being' (Dionysius, Eckhart, Tauler)" might deserve a second hearing (227). For Kearney this opens up new ways of understanding the divine, not merely as static act, but as *posse*, as eschatological possibility—"the impossible made possible." This eschaton requires that we not simply wait, as with Heidegger, but to act ethically in expectation of this coming Kingdom (228).

If this vision resembles theological speculation more than philosophical hermeneutics, it is important to understand that Kearney see this depiction as a poetics of possibilities rather than a dogmatics outlining theological assertions. Moreover, it is concerned with ethical responsibility, and the way such action arises in the varieties of religious experience and practice. Throughout the

work Kearney points to the resources of different religious traditions to negotiate the perplexities and exigencies of otherness. Such traditions, with their narratives and practices, play an important role in discerning between strangers, gods, and monsters. So while the religious plays a significant role in this book, a fuller development of Kearney's hermeneutics of religion and his notion of the "possible God" appears in *The God Who May Be*. That work has initiated a good deal of debate, which I will not rehearse here. I will, however, raise some questions regarding the present work—a work that I find largely compelling, but which nonetheless leaves me with some concerns.

The first question arises regarding Kearney's use of diacritical hermeneutics to interpret divine revelation. Revelation does, after all, call for interpretation, and Kearney tends to interpret it as initiating ethical actions of love, compassion, justice toward the other. In this regard revelation seems to square with our ethics. But what if, at some point in time, revelation does not? At the heart of this book is the recognition of our responsibility to discern between good and evil, gods and monsters. Or, as Kearney puts it in his introduction, taking "one of the most ancient examples of ethical discernment, how are we to differentiate between the voice that bade Abraham kill Isaac and the voice that forbade him to do so?" (10). The ambiguity (the undecideability, perhaps?) of this supposed revelation from God is deeply disturbing, as Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes de Silentio reminds us to great effect in *Fear and Trembling*. In drawing a distinction between the two voices, Kearney takes a position opposite de Silentio, presumably alongside those scholars who identify the first voice with the practices of Abraham's ancestral religion in Ur of the Chaldeans. Whether this is the case or not, neither the biblical account nor the Christian tradition make this clear distinction, so we are left with the troubling story of a revelation that admits of no understanding. Hence the silence of Johannes de Silentio's: Abraham cannot be understood, cannot be mediated. Yet on Kearney's account such a limit experience calls for a diacritical hermeneutics. We need to consider the ethical implications of the Abraham narrative, and mediate them philosophically, i.e., hermeneutically. We need to discern between good and evil, and it seems a good God would never make such a demand. On this count Kearney sides with Kant, who writes the following in his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*:

Among miracles, the demonic are the most completely irreconcilable with the use of our reason. For as regards theistic miracles, reason would at least have a negative criterion for its use, namely that even though something is represented as commanded by God, though a direct manifestation of Him, yet, if it flatly contradicts morality, it cannot, despite all appearances, be of God (for example, were a father ordered to kill his son who is, so far as he knows, perfectly innocent) (Harper & Row, 1960, 81-82).

Kearney may differ from Kant in other respects, but he agrees that the demonic or monstrous counts as a negative criterion for discerning the good and/or the voice of God. And a command like that of the Abraham narrative would be one such instance.

Does this mean that, in Kierkegaardian terms, the ethical trumps the religious? It is likely that neither Kant nor Kearney would prefer to construe the problem that way, but what is at stake in de Silentio's discussion is which has ultimate authority: the universal as maintained by the ethical, or the scandalous particularity of the religious, which is scandalously particular insofar as it cannot be mediated. So while Kearney's ethical concerns are devoted to particular people, cultures, and situations rather than Kantian universals, his project seeks to preserve philosophy's prerogative to mediate and judge such situations. Philosophically and ethically, that might be right. But the

question nevertheless remains: Does this demand that revelation must be cut to the measure of our understanding of the good? Surely the Abraham narrative is an extreme case, but it brings the question directly to the fore: Does our conception of the ethical sit in judgement on revelation? Philosophically, that might be right again; Abraham does, after all, relinquish the possibility of being understood, and we do not want to trivialize this. Consider the way we view the messianic claims of someone like Charles Manson, for instance. But if philosophy allows for the possibility of revelation—as a possibility rather than as a fact, this possibility entails that revelation might rupture the categories of our understanding, whether philosophical, hermeneutical, or ethical. Revelation might not leave us with the prerogative to sit in judgement on it.

Does this run counter to Kearney's project of making "the foreign more familiar" through diacritical hermeneutics? This is an important point. If revelation occurs, we must seek some understanding of it. But the critique of the other, in this case revelation, is only one side of this coin. The flip side is to make "the familiar more foreign" through the critique of the self (11). In that case one's own ethical understanding is open to being called into question by the other, showing that the self is already penetrated by otherness. Might it be that revelation can call the self into question, as well? This would not be an otherness already immanent within the self, in which case the self would need to acknowledge it. Rather, this would be a wholly otherness that reveals that the self is not as autonomous as it might suppose—that the self lacks the capacity to receive or judge the revelation. The foreign would thus make itself familiar on its own terms. Or as the Kierkegaardian pseudonym Johannes Climacus suggests, the divine Other would give the condition for receiving the revelation and becoming a follower. It is not a condition already immanent within the self.

Perhaps it is unfair to fault Kearney's book for not solving this problem philosophically, but it is precisely such limit experiences that he seeks to mediate diacritically. And to its credit, the book as a whole gives us a sense of how he deals with such apparent undecideables. In his discussion of Heidegger's *Last God*, Kearney asks a provocative question: "What if the truth were monstrous?" (220). The book provides a compelling critique of those positions that suggest just that by confusing or conflating good with evil, whether in the postmodern sublime with thinkers like Lyotard and Žižek, in New Age religion, or in Heidegger's *Last God*. The problem with these accounts, in Kearney's view, is "to establish how the transgressive experience of the sublime in terms of terror and abasement could be reconciled with any kind of discerning judgement (especially at an ethical or political level)" (222). Kearney supplements this already strong point by appealing throughout to various narratives and religious traditions that suggest the goodness of the divine, and provide resources for ethical discernment.

Kearney's work in this area is admirable, insofar as he acknowledges the sense of terror involved in our experience of the sublime and the divine, but rejects the inference that the divine contains the demonic, that the good contains evil. Kearney rightly observes, citing Joseph O'Leary, that biblical texts refer to "awesome cosmic theophanies that inspire fear and trembling," as in the final chapters of *Job*, but the primordial basis of these is typically inflected "in an ethical and eschatological sense." The fear of the Lord also tends to appear alongside an emphasis on divine majesty in scenes of judgement. One finds this in Isaiah 2:10: "Enter the rock and hide in the dust, from the terror of the Lord and from the splendor of His majesty." Moreover, scripture locates these awesome visions of God alongside ethical, covenantal promise (261). The primal fear of the numinous is thus tempered by the goodness of God's character. But what is missing from Kearney's discussion is the

insight that such fear also arises out of an overwhelming sense of unworthiness. The dread need not arise from evil in God, but from the evil in ourselves. For that reason, it is not a projection of our own strangeness or darkness onto the divine Other, as in the psychoanalytic account. Rather, it is a recognition of one's own guilt and sin against the Holy. Consider the next verse from the Isaiah text: "The proud look of man will be abased, and the loftiness of man will be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day" (v.11). This experience of divinity exposes the pretense of humanity. Consider as well Isaiah's later description of his vision: "'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts'" (Isaiah 6:5). This prophecy comes in a time when Israel is guilty of great idolatry and injustice, and it not only calls Isaiah and his people into question—it reveals the evil of their practices. God is not a monster, but He is holy. Kearney recognizes that the self must be subject to critique, but the sin-dimension is absent from his treatment of this biblical text, in which sin figures centrally.

Kearney's project is not one of theology nor a pure phenomenology, but a hermeneutics that seeks to understand experience through narratives, symbols, and metaphors such as these. He does not make explicit claims regarding the ultimate truth of these hermeneutical resources. That said, as a student of Ricoeur he also recognizes that these are not devoid of referentiality. Semantic innovations like these help us to understand our being in the world, and enable us to imagine other possible ways of being in the world. Kearney draws on the wisdom of different narrative and religious traditions because they offer varied resources of this kind. This is also why he believes his diacritical hermeneutics can navigate a middle path between the "twin temptations of judgementalism and (its opposite) relativism" (232). Between and beyond these alternatives Kearney proposes a "third way" of religious pluralism, which acknowledges that "the divine Other may take the form of different others." But is religious pluralism the only way between? To speak pluralistically, perhaps there are other ways in between—a fourth, a fifth way?

In order to answer this question, we need to know what this proposed religious pluralism entails and what is at stake. More precisely, where does this diacritical hermeneutics end and theology begin? What sort of referentiality and judgements are we discussing? We must recognize that different narratives and religious traditions provide rich resources for ethical understanding, and for creating possible ways of being in the world. But judgments of this sort are different from theological judgements regarding their reference to the nature of a divine Other. Kearney sets this forth as a hermeneutical, not a theological project, and as such I believe it should preserve one's prerogative to recognize the ethical resources of a given narrative or tradition, yet disagree with its theological claims because of a personal commitment to the claims of another tradition.

But then again, this does not imply that the two are so easily separated. One's theological judgements are liable to come all the way down into one's evaluation of these ethical resources. For example, the theological conviction that truth is not ultimately monstrous, and God is not a demon, will tend to influence the way one evaluates these resources. Further, Kearney gives no indication that these resources are merely ethically useful, *à la* Richard Rorty, and it is the conviction that they express divine reality in some fashion that will not allow us to close the door on theology completely. So if these religious resources are more than a matter of pragmatics, we are forced to deal with claims about the nature of the divine, its manner of revelation, etc. The claim that the divine reveals itself in different "others" therefore becomes a question of theological commitments.

Again, this is why we need to be clear at what level these judgements are taking place. Hermeneutically, theological presuppositions like these matter, and we cannot completely bracket them to embrace a neutral, pure pluralism any more than we can employ a pure phenomenology.

This admission need not smuggle judgementalism in the back door, just as pluralism need not smuggle relativism in the same door. Instead, it acknowledges the reality of the conflict of interpretations, which is a virtually inherent feature of hermeneutics. The fact of disagreement need not equal disrespect, nor rule out dialogue. Rather, I would suggest that an honest recognition of disagreement is the possibility of genuine understanding. From this perspective, one can acknowledge the resources that different religious traditions offer toward an understanding of the world, while maintaining the claims and convictions of one's own.

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