

Chapter 2

Richard Kearney

A. Introduction

After the disenchantment of critique, loss, and tragedy, it can become possible to imagine again, to believe again, to again encounter the divine call towards an open future. This renewed encounter can be qualitatively different: After the Death of God as a divine Sovereign, we may encounter God as a stranger, who needs our help as much as we need theirs. This seems to be the retrieval around which Kearney tells his story on religion: Instead of certainty of beliefs in an omnipotent Master-God, faith can become new again as a tenuous and fragile “maybe.” As much guided by readings of philosophy, arts, and literature as by the rich theological tradition of his own Irish Catholicism, Kearney brings his skill as a philosopher to a project with a clear theological interest, a project he has come to term “anatheism”: *ana-theos*, God, again. Discerning God at work outside the Christian tradition is crucial for this work of retrieval.

Kearney can be described as a hermeneutic philosopher. The “hermeneutic” part of this means Kearney’s work both expresses and embodies a belief in the worth of conversation. He rarely addresses an issue directly and systematically, instead embedding his own scholarly voice in readings of other authors, including John Caputo and Catherine Keller,¹ as well as many others. In many cases, this means he travels with them a portion of the way, before taking his leave and going in a different direction.

Kearney’s method of accompaniment often means he navigates two extremes before choosing a more mediated third option. In Kearney’s own words, this third option “is not just a synthesis of opposites ... the middle actually opens out onto

¹ For Kearney’s conversations with Caputo, see e.g. Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 136; John D. Caputo and Richard Kearney, “Anatheism and Radical Hermeneutics,” in: *Reimagining the Sacred*, ed. by Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmermann, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, pp. 193–218; Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 197–211; Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001, pp. 72–79. For a conversation with Keller, see Richard Kearney and Catherine Keller, “Beyond the Impossible,” in: *Reimagining the Sacred*, ed. by Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmermann, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, pp. 46–75. I have decided against including a detailed analysis of these interchanges, as it would take away from the focus of this study.

a new path.”² As this new path is frequently again an accompaniment of further thinkers, it is often difficult to pinpoint precisely where Kearney stands himself. This will become particularly clear below, as Kearney attempts to navigate his loyalty to both Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur.³ While I will indicate the authors and works he draws on where appropriate, discernment of the precise relation of Kearney’s interpretation to the author he is conversing with is not the goal of this work. I will thus attempt to present Kearney’s own voice as clearly as possible throughout this chapter, accepting that this inevitably does some violence to his hermeneutic style.

Of the many authors Kearney converses with throughout his texts, Paul Ricoeur stands out both as a significant conversation partner and a crucial influence. Kearney describes himself as “closer to Ricoeur than to any other philosopher,” though insists he is not a “disciple” of Ricoeur’s, if mostly because hermeneutic philosophy means there cannot be a Ricoeurian “school.”⁴ Particularly important in light of Kearney’s later thoughts on religion, it appears to me, is Ricoeur’s idea of “the world of the text.”⁵ The world of a text is not merely the historical context or psychological life of its author, but the “sort of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text.”⁶ The text proposes a *possible* world: “Fiction and poetry intend being, but not through the modality of givenness, but rather through the modality of possibility.”⁷ A fictional narrative, or indeed a religious one, can be “true” if it refers as a whole to a possible world that is revelatory about the world we live in. The issue or truth of the text is thus “the proposition of a world that in the biblical language is called a new world, a new covenant, the kingdom of God, a new birth.”⁸

As a philosopher, Kearney employs readings of classical theological dogmata or biblical texts less as stand-alone analyses than as illustrations of his philosophical arguments. I will attempt to reflect this by foregrounding his philosophical discussions and presenting the more theological elements towards the end of a section, when the philosophical stakes have been established, as “figurations.”

Kearney’s work on religion can primarily be found in his more recent works, such as *The God Who May Be* and *Anatheism*. Their evocative style and more associative argumentation appear to set them apart somewhat from his earlier work, leading Kevin Hart to describe *The God Who May Be*, for example, as a “series

² Richard Kearney, *Navigations: Collected Irish Essays 1976–2006*, Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2006, p. 380.

³ See pp. 84–92.

⁴ Kearney, *Navigations*, p. 378.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. by Mark I. Wallace, trans. by David Pellauer, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, p. 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

of suggestive papers” rather than a rigorous argument.⁹ However, many of the central themes in Kearney’s work on religion are already apparent in his earlier, more generally philosophical or literary works, such as *Poétique du Possible*, *The Wake of Imagination*, *Poetics of Modernity*, or *Postnationalist Ireland*. They thus continue to form the background and philosophical backbone of his more recent studies. This is reflected in the organization of this chapter.

In the next section of this chapter, I will thus explain three aspects of Kearney’s work that may prove fruitful for meeting what I have called the “anarchy” of religious difference. First, I will discuss Kearney’s take on narrative imagination and narrative identity. While his most elaborate discussions of these themes are not primarily interested in religion, they influence his understanding of religion in his more recent work significantly, and offer us profound readings of imagination and the formation of collective identity in their own right. Then, I will discuss Kearney’s recent case for a kind of Christianity he calls “anatheist,” in which the affirmation of faith is deeply conditioned by the negation of loss and critique. Third, I will discuss Kearney’s discussions of hospitality and the encounter with the stranger as a quintessential moment of Christianity. In section C, I will survey what Kearney has himself written about religious diversity and interreligious encounter, again in three steps: first, Kearney’s specific comments on an experience of interreligious dialogue and on Islam; second, his characterization of the interreligious as a kind of hospitality; and third, his affirmation, in his own vocabulary, of a theology of religious pluralism.

B. Resources

I. Narrative Imagination

I will start this investigation by discussing Kearney’s understanding of narrative, imagination, tradition, and identity. Although, as I noted above, religion does not feature prominently in these analyses, Kearney’s understanding of narrative collective imagination and tradition not only underlies and informs his work on religion, but also offers significant resources for the main concerns of this study.¹⁰

⁹ Kevin Hart, “Mystic Maybes,” in: *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. by John Panteleimon Manoussakis, New York: Fordham University Press, 2006, pp. 208–221, p. 211.

¹⁰ I hesitate to identify Kearney’s approach as a “narrative theology.” According to Ronald Michener, narrative theology, also known as postliberal theology, is associated with theologians Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, but is also a broader “loose connection of narrative theological interests” concerned with “the renewal of Christian confession over theological methodology.” It “reject[s] efforts to modernize Christian doctrines to make them palatable to contemporary scientific or rational mindsets” and “stresses the narrative of scripture along with the community of the church and its practices.” Other authors include William Placher and Stanley Hauerwas. Ronald T. Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 3, 4.

After establishing Kearney's interpretation of narrative imagination as a mediation of past, present, and future, always guided by ethical concerns, I will look at how this becomes deepened in his work on Ireland, zooming in on questions of national belonging and the role of otherness in the narrative construction of identity.

1. *A Wake for Imagination?*

In his 1988 *The Wake of Imagination*, Kearney traces various iterations of concepts of imagination in Western culture. He does so in a journey from antiquity through postmodernity, guided by the search for a retrieval of imagination after "the postmodern deconstruction of the humanist subject and its pretensions to mastery."¹¹ The title is a play on words: On the one hand, Kearney wonders if the omnipresence of prefabricated images in postmodernity has caused the death of imagination, occasioning a "wake" or vigil to mourn its passing. On the other hand, however, postmodernity's loss of inherited certainties may set imagination loose in a renewed manner, making possible "an *other* kind of *poiesis* – alternative modes of inventing alternative modes of existence."¹² In this sense, Kearney suggests we follow in the "wake" or turbulent trail behind it, perhaps even its awakening.

Kearney finds three fundamental paradigms of the imagination in Western intellectual history. Each has its limitations, but also offers something we can learn. Premodern imagination, Kearney explains, was predominantly *theocentric*, with the author primarily functioning as an anonymous craftsman. From this, we may learn that "imagination is always a response to the demands of an other existing beyond the self."¹³ Modern imagination, in contrast, was largely *anthropocentric*, viewing imagination as the autonomous expression of the artist. From this, Kearney draws a warning not to "abdicate a personal responsibility for invention, decision and action."¹⁴ Postmodern imagination, finally, is *ex-centric*, with the artist as a "*bricoleur*: someone who plays around with fragments of meaning which he himself has not created."¹⁵ From this we can learn that "we are living in a common Civilization of Images – a civilization which can bring each one of us into contact with each other even as it can threaten to obliterate the very 'realities' its images ostensibly 'depict.'"¹⁶

A precise discussion of Kearney's potential relation, challenge, and contribution to postliberal theology is beyond the scope of this work. See also note 92 on p. 127. See also Ricoeur's discussion of narrative theology in Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, pp. 236–248.

¹¹ Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, London and New York: Routledge, 1988, p. 387.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

We can already see here a prefiguration of the structure of his later anatheism project, which I will discuss below: Kearney hopes that a “postmodern imagination,” though it appears a contradiction in terms, may retrieve an imagination not held hostage to either divine or human mastery. Postmodernity as “the end of modernity” may hold “a possibility of rebeginning,”¹⁷ a hope for “preserving, through reinterpretation, the functions of narrative identity and creativity.”¹⁸

At stake in this retrieval of imagination is thus, in addition to an attention to *otherness* inspired by the premodern paradigm, also a retrieval of the human and the subject prominent in the modern paradigm. While the postmodern “decentering” of the anthropocentric “productive” imagination of modernity may have quite salutary effects if it breaks egological mastery, Kearney continues to insist on the possibility of “a properly *human* imagination.”¹⁹ The subject must be retained, in some way, Kearney argues, because of ethical concerns: Only a self can make an ethical stand and respond to the call of the other.

The intertwining of a human imagination, which retains an intentional subjectivity, with an attentiveness for the call of the other, which reaches us from beyond that intentional horizon, remains an important theme in Kearney’s work. I will discuss this dynamic in greater detail below.²⁰ For now, I just want to stress that Kearney sees in the moral call from the other, from the *face* of the other, the potential for a break in the postmodern culture of images. It delimits the “postmodern logic of interminable deferment and regress, of floating signifiers and vanishing signifieds.”²¹ Instead of dulling our imagination, the call of the other reaches through the image on the screen, reinserting a sense of relationship between self and other. “Even in those televisual images which transmit events from the furthest corners of our globe, we are being addressed, potentially at least, by living others.”²²

So the retrieval of imagination Kearney is looking for would serve to counteract the postmodern potential for nihilism on at least two counts: It reinstates a sense of self, and it reinstates an attentiveness to the reality of suffering of the other. Neither washes out the other. Further, imagination serves to “*imagine* that the world as it is could be *otherwise*,” to dream of a future that is not yet but is possible: It is a “poetics of the possible.”²³ A postmodern imagination would, on the one hand, function as a force for empathy with the concrete other, while on the other hand imagining “the transformation of our social existence.”²⁴ It is

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 360–361.

²⁰ See pp. 84–92.

²¹ Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, p. 361.

²² Ibid., p. 388.

²³ Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, p. 371; cf. Richard Kearney, *Poétique du Possible: Phénoménologie Herméneutique de la Figuration*, Paris: Beauchesne, 1984.

²⁴ Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, p. 387.

thus both guided by the *reality* of human suffering and the *possibility* of a wholly different future.

This work of a postmodern imagination has important political implications, Kearney remarks in a longer endnote. Drawing on Michel Foucault, François Lyotard, and Julia Kristeva, Kearney contends his retrieved postmodern imagination “marks a radical challenge to the conventional models of political power as ‘sovereignty’ – i.e. centralized nation-states and geo-political blocks.”²⁵ A politics based on Kearney’s postmodern imagination would involve “radical decentralization,” and foster “difference, plurality and otherness.” It would dismantle the center-periphery dichotomy and go beyond the nation-state. It would start with “particular commitments to ‘local struggles,’” and renounce the “temptation to propagate a New Universal Theory,” instead pluralizing and differentiating the activity of resistance.²⁶

2. *On Narrative*

For such a retrieval of imagination, Kearney finds *narrative* particularly apt. For an explication of this, Kearney draws strongly on Ricoeur’s 1984–1988 *Time and Narrative* series and his 1990 *Oneself as Another*. In the former, Ricoeur had suggested that narrative offers a “refiguration of temporal experience,”²⁷ resulting in an “imperfect mediation between the three dimensions of expectation, tradition, and the force of the present.” For Ricoeur, it is thus ultimately not philosophy but narrative and poetics that allow humanity to understand itself and the world it lives in. In Kearney’s words, narrativity is “the universal desire to make sense of history by retelling the story of ourselves,”²⁸ forming the site “where the text of imagination interweaves with the context of history.”²⁹

This is not only a matter of the individual: Collective narratives and collective imagination shape, interpret, and make possible the way a society understands itself, others, and its history. Central to the narrating of history is the effort to give a place to the responsibility toward those who came before us, particularly those who have suffered and died. Neither the past, nor the future, in which this responsibility must find a place, is simply available: They must be imagined. Narrative imagination therefore functions to make present what is absent, standing for the past, through retrieval and testimony, or for the future, through emancipatory projection.³⁰

²⁵ Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, 457n55f.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 458n55.

²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 3.

²⁸ Kearney, *Navigations*, p. 392.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

³⁰ Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity: Toward a Hermeneutic Imagination*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1995, p. 95.

This process of historical standing-for is marked by an ambiguity: While it must imagine the past to recall our debt, it has a “dual fidelity,” both to the otherness of the past and to its relatability to a contemporary mindset.³¹ Historical imagination attempts to make the past relatable “as” it really was, but this “as” stretches across both the correlation with the present, necessary for its relatability, and the respect for otherness required by the gravity and verity of historical events. This “as” is thus “a two-way trope of absence/presence.”³² The past is on the one hand narrated and reconstructed, enabling us “to see and hear things long since gone,” but on the other hand, it has a “right” to “incite and rectify our narrative retellings of history.”³³ On either side of this exists a danger: either to view the past merely as a playing field for contemporary imagination, or to “collapse into a literal belief,” obviating the seeing-as into a mere seeing.³⁴

A related tension appears in the function of “individuation”: the duty to remember “the uniquely unique character” of specific historical events *while* threading them into collective storytelling. Terrifying massacres “cannot be explained away as cogs in some dialectical wheel.”³⁵ On the other hand, a too radical version of this would allow the events to slip away entirely, becoming entirely unavailable to contemporary understanding: “[E]xplanation without imagination is ultimately inhuman, just as imagination without hope of explanation runs the risk of blind irrationalism.”³⁶

3. Narrative Identity

A further task of narrative imagination is its role in the narrative construction of identity. In his earlier works, Kearney primarily addresses this in the context of national, especially Irish, identity, but his discussions illuminate a more general hermeneutic structure that may be profoundly meaningful for questions of religious tradition or community as well and indeed substantially inform his later discussions of religious tradition.

In narrative identity, Kearney finds an understanding of identity that is more sensitive to “fundamental processes of socialization” than substantialist modernist notions of the subject or ego, without quite yielding to a dissolution of the self, which would threaten the self’s ethical answerability as we saw above.³⁷ Ricoeur had noted that a notion of the self as the subject of a story “implies no

³¹ Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 95; cf. Richard Kearney, “Narrative Imagination: Between Ethics and Poetics,” in: *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 21.5/6 (1995), pp. 173–190, p. 177.

³² Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 96.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality.”³⁸ Continuity is achieved by the story that ties a life or a community together. In this process of narrating, it is imagination that fills the role of synthesizing “the different horizons of past, present, and future.”³⁹

The narrative tradition we grow up in forms our starting point, individually as well as collectively; it forms our (pre)understanding of ourselves and the world.⁴⁰ However, Kearney stresses that narrative imagination is always also a dynamic process: Narratives not only interpret, but also reinterpret the past, releasing concealed possibilities, and can subject it to critical scrutiny in order to “wrest tradition away from the conformism that is always threatening to overpower it.”⁴¹ The formation and reformation of collective imagination is thus an unceasing process:

Every cultural narrative – be it a poem, play, painting, film, novel or political discourse – is in some sense a reinterpretation of its own history; an attempt to retell the story of the past as it relates to the present; an act of understanding otherwise the subworld of symbols that informs our consciousness of society.⁴²

In addition to its nature as an ongoing process of telling and retelling, Kearney stresses that the mediation of past, present, and future in collective narratives is always already plural. Tradition is always already multiple:

As soon as we acknowledge that tradition is not some monolith of homogeneous dogma but an ongoing dialectic made up of different rival traditions, internal crises, interruptions, revisions, and schisms; as soon as we acknowledge this, we discover that there exists an essential dimension of distance at the very heart of tradition which actually invites critical interpretation.⁴³

Such critical interpretation is necessary because collective narratives are ambiguous. When they become ideological, they can come to cement an unjust social order and serve a sense of superiority over, and exclusion of, others. In making this argument, Kearney also draws on Edward Said, who, in Kearney’s words, observes “how narratives frequently operate as representations of power: representations that must be challenged by ‘counter-narratives’ in order that their abusive tendencies be exposed and ideally, reversed.” This is done primarily by other, alternative stories: counter-narratives “of marginal and truncated histories, indirect stories of irony and subversion,” that “put the dominant power in question.”⁴⁴ Narrative imagination as the formation of identity, on the one hand, and the imaginative subversion of identity, on the other hand, thus belong together.

³⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 2; cf. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*, pp. 246ff.

³⁹ Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 99.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴¹ Kearney, *Navigations*, p. 392.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. xii.

⁴³ Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 84.

⁴⁴ Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 100; See also Edward W. Said, “Permission to Narrate,” in: *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13.3 (1984), pp. 27–48; Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

A critical fluidity and openness pertains to narrative identity as long as we recognize that it is always something made and remade. ... At its best, narrative imagination remains open to the possibility of its own self-deconstruction.⁴⁵

Or, as he puts it elsewhere, imagination “has to remain *critical*, lest it congeal into a new ideology subordinating the catalysing power of dream to the literal demands of propaganda.”⁴⁶ In order to give a place to both a hermeneutic of suspicion, which would critique or deconstruct these ideological aspects, and a hermeneutic of affirmation, which would retrieve what remains emancipatory and life-giving, Kearney proposes a “hermeneutic imagination capable of critical discrimination” between “falsifying and emancipating modes of symbolization.”⁴⁷ A hermeneutics of affirmation focuses “not on the origin (*arche*) behind myths but on the end (*eschaton*) opened up in front of them,”⁴⁸ “the horizon of aspiration opened up by symbols.”⁴⁹

Instead of a “monolithic doctrine to which the citizens of the nation submissively conform,” Kearney thus envisions national myths as symbols “bearing a plurality of meanings.”⁵⁰ The universality of myth is a capacity to “migrate beyond national boundaries and translate into other cultures.” Its universal value thus depends on its multiplicity, not on a universal univocity.⁵¹ Instead of believing in myths as “ideological creeds,” it becomes possible to “freely *reinvent* them as utopian metaphors.”⁵²

In sum, “[t]he idea that there exists some immutable ‘essence’ of national identity ... is nonsense.”⁵³ Kearney therefore proposes a “poetical fidelity” to the myths of tradition, that retains a “questioning attitude,”⁵⁴ particularly questioning where narrative eclipses and oppresses the narratives of others. Such a hermeneutically informed narrative imagination would read and interpret the stories of the past not for the sake of the past or its restoration,⁵⁵ but for the sake of the creative

⁴⁵ Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 100.

⁴⁶ Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 99.

⁴⁷ Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 74.

⁴⁸ Kearney, *Navigations*, p. 394.

⁴⁹ Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 74. What Kearney calls “archeological hermeneutics” seeks a “causal reference to some predetermining reality hidden behind the symbol.” Utopian interpretation, in contrast, “discerns in symbols a reference that is not exhaustively determined by anterior causes. This utopian reference is a ‘second order’ signification, wherein a symbol can refer ... [to] some ‘surplus’ meaning that transcends the the limits of ideology. Here value is in front of the symbol, not behind it; it is disclosed as a posterior horizon of possibilities.” *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵⁰ Kearney, *Navigations*, p. 397.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 399.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

⁵⁴ Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 91.

⁵⁵ Cf. Kearney, *Navigations*, pp. xii, 397.

transformation of the future, seeking to restore the “genuinely utopian projects of liberty” of the social imaginary.⁵⁶

4. Ireland: Retelling Nation

The collective dimension of narrative imagination is deepened additionally when Kearney discusses the political imaginary of his native Ireland. In his 1997 *Post-nationalist Ireland*, written and published during the Northern Ireland Peace Process which culminated in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Kearney sets out to investigate issues of nation, sovereignty, and political imagination as they pertain to the Irish situation.

Irish culture, Kearney argues, does not constitute a single entity, but must be understood as “a manifold of narratives that resist the uniformity of a closed system.”⁵⁷ This diversity is not to be repressed but celebrated, for it yields a “*surplus* of cultural meaning” that allows contemporary Irish thought to resist “both the tyranny of a unitary identity and the sectarianism of embattled tribes.”⁵⁸ Though Irish nationalism has been “extremely variegated” historically,⁵⁹ it has generally responded to this manifold by “*unifying* a variety of elements ... into a certain *identity*, thereby imparting to them a special function of inclusion and exclusion.”⁶⁰ Nationalism thus has a profoundly interpretative function as a “hermeneutic construct”: “[N]ational identity cannot be predicated on any ‘objective’ characteristics (however intimately associated) but only on the view which the members of the ‘nation’ in question have of themselves.”⁶¹

The Irish population was always already ethnically mixed, so ethno-cultural purism is “in fact a betrayal of the full complexity of Irish culture.”⁶² Both Ireland and Britain are “imagined communities,” without recourse to a perennial essence, and therefore also capable of reimagining themselves.⁶³ Kearney calls for a “transition from traditional nationalism to a post-nationalism,” which would preserve the emancipatory potential of Irish nationalism while reinterpreting it.⁶⁴

Politically, this postnational model would be marked by interdependence: Instead of the two dominant options for Northern Ireland, remaining in the UK or joining the Republic of Ireland, a postnationalist Ireland would see a “confederation of councils,” a “renunciation of sovereignty in favour [sic] of federated

⁵⁶ Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity*, p. 76.

⁵⁷ Kearney, *Navigations*, p. xviii.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, p. 8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9 For his understanding of nationalism, Kearney relies on Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 198n20.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 11. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso, 1983.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

political communities.”⁶⁵ Kearney thus envisions a more distributed system of governance with both a stronger local belonging and a stronger European context. Kearney lays this out in greater detail than I will reproduce here, but it involves the possibility for citizens of Northern Ireland to “owe differing degrees of allegiance to an expanding range of identifications: from regional townland, parish or province to national constitution (‘British or Irish or both’) and, larger still, to the transnational union of Europe.”⁶⁶ Nation and identity need to be separated from state and sovereignty, allowing for “more pluralist forms of association.”⁶⁷

Of particular interest for this study is Kearney’s attention to the role *difference* plays in the construction of both Irish and British nationhood. He begins by noting the peculiarity that in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict, only *Irish* nationalism is referred to as *nationalism*. For it is *British* nationalism that has historically been the primary nationalist force in the British Isles, and far beyond, with a relatively clear and unambiguous relation of people to territory, sovereignty, and Church. However, in an unequal power balance, dominant nationalism becomes occluded: “By thus externalizing the crisis of national legitimation onto its neighbours or adversaries, British-English nationalism conveniently forgot that it was in fact the first of its kind in the world.”⁶⁸

This English nationalism itself has its roots on the Irish island. For the English, particularly English settlers in Ireland from the fourteenth century onward, it was especially important to distinguish themselves from the Irish population because their difference was not self-evident.⁶⁹ The statutes of Kilkenny of 1366 thus “instigated segregation between colonizer and colonized, fomenting political divisions between two supposedly incompatible ‘peoples.’”⁷⁰ This border was carefully policed: marrying or commingling across the border was “‘degeneracy’ – that is, the falling outside the ... *gens*.”⁷¹ Kearney sees here a first occurrence of the forging of an English, proto-British nation.⁷² *Segregation* thus makes the nation: Dissociation is always already caught up with the associative movement of togetherness. “[W]hile it was Alfred’s expansion of Wessex (871–99) that opened

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 68. For this idea, Kearney draws on Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*. London: Penguin, 1990.

⁶⁶ Kearney, *Navigations*, p. 6. “British or Irish or both” is a phrase from the Good Friday Agreement, which recognizes “the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose.” The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, 2.1.vi.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶⁸ Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, p. 9, relying for the primacy of English nationalism on Greenfeld, *Nationalism*.

⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 201n23.

⁷⁰ Kearney, *Navigations*, p. 6.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Cf. Robert Rees Davies, *Domination and Conquest: The Experience of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, 1100–1300*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

the way, it was actually in the laboratory of Ireland that the English nation first saw itself in the glass and believed its image.”⁷³

In response, the Irish, too, came to define themselves as a *nacio*, as apparent in King Donald O’Neill’s letter to the Pope in 1317, “affirming an unbroken historical continuity of the Irish people (*gens*) through their laws, speech and long memory of tribulations suffered at the hands of the colonial invaders.”⁷⁴ This in spite of the fact, Kearney adds, that the Irish, too, were “a mongrelized ethnic mix of successive migrations.”⁷⁵

In the work of historian Linda Colley, Kearney finds further development of this idea of the doubling of Irish and British nationhood. Colley in turn draws on Edward Said. In his famous study *Orientalism*, Said had argued that it was particularly the objectification and domination of the Orient that allowed the European Occident to constitute and shape itself.⁷⁶ Similarly, Colley argues that the British nation constituted itself in and through the confrontation with, and subjugation of, the Other.⁷⁷ In addition to Ireland, Britain’s eminent Others also included continental Europe, especially France, as well as the societies Britain came to dominate as a colonial ruler. However, Ireland played a special role amongst these as *both* a Catholic nation *and* a colonial subject, serving significantly as a place for the Protestant British empire to experiment with colonial rule before applying this knowledge in India and elsewhere.

The two national identities, British and Irish, are thus intimately caught up with one another, Kearney argues, describing them as Siamese twins, “joined at the hip of Ulster.”⁷⁸

Britain has always been obsessed by Ireland, and oblivious of it, at one and the same time. Ireland, and in particular Irish nationalism, is its alter ego, its ally and enemy, familiar and foreign. The other which defines, and undermines, its very identity. The double which haunts and fascinates.⁷⁹

In Ireland, England is confronted with its own non-self-sufficiency: Its identity does not arise transparently from essence but is dependent on multiple negotiations, differentiations, and relational references. This confrontation with this ambiguity of national difference is what makes Ireland the “deconstructive seed at the heart of the British body politic.”⁸⁰

⁷³ Kearney, *Navigations*, p. 6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁶ Cf. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

⁷⁷ Kearney, *Navigations*, p. 9; cf. Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, 198n21. See also Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1797–1837*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

⁷⁸ Kearney, *Navigations*, p. 7.

⁷⁹ Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, pp. 9–10.

⁸⁰ Kearney, *Navigations*, p. 12. It appears that this particular dynamic, the narrative construction of a collective imaginary in reference to another concrete collective, does not appear again when Kearney is not explicitly discussing Ireland. This despite the focus of Kearney’s 2005

5. Conclusion

So we have seen that Kearney looks to retrieve imagination in postmodernity, in a way defined by neither autonomy nor heteronomy, yet answerable both *as a self to an other*. In narrative identity formation, imagination stands for both what is past and what may become real. Narrative identity, individual or collective, is not given but constantly made and remade, and always already plural. In his work on Ireland, further, it becomes clear how national identities are predicated on both an associative movement of gathering various strands together and a dissociative moment of segregation from an other.

Kearney's approach to narrative is of interest for the purposes of this study, as it gives a central place to the stories that form our world-view, while also remaining open to the way difference and alterity always already invade identity, and how the gathering of an identity is profoundly caught up with questions of imagining not yet realized possibilities. Though we are formed by the context in which we are born, the formative narrative world is not a single clearly bounded whole but always already marked by multiple transitions and translations. Kearney understands narrative imagination as a mechanism that not only interprets the world through a hermeneutic lens, but also opens up the stories of tradition themselves to reinterpretation, to the other, and to a future yet unseen.

Each of these elements can be part of a response to the "anarchy" of difference. Narrative identity, especially on Kearney's pluralist and processual take, can respond to the groundlessness of religion with an understanding of tradition not built on a given and fixed ground but instead on an interminable process of critique and re-telling. The constitutive role of difference in the narrative construction of identity, further, may go some way in understanding the unruliness of religious difference. If religious difference could be said to reveal the extent to which our identity does not emanate transparently from essence, but is always already dependent on transitions, demarcations, and negotiations, it would thus define, and undermine, our very identity – a "deconstructive seed" at the heart of our religious fields.

Strangers, Gods, and Monsters, which explicitly sets out to investigate "practices of defining ourselves in terms of otherness." However, here Kearney appears primarily interested in otherness in its anonymous and indeterminate forms, spending time discussing the Immemorial, the Sublime, Terror, and the Divine, enlisting art, religion, and psychoanalysis alongside hermeneutics to mediate or narrate our broken relationship to those alterities. Concrete otherness reminiscent of his above discussions, where the English are far from strange, divine, or monstrous to the Irish, yet still serve as their quintessential Other, does not appear in the book. Indeed in the opening pages Kearney affirms he is here mostly interested in Others as "tokens of fracture within the human psyche," and alterity as something "deep down," thus suggesting otherness is a consequence of issues within the Self. Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, pp. 4, 5. I will discuss several elements from the book below (see pp. 84–92). See also my critique of understanding the interreligious as the encounter with "strangers" on pp. 99f.