Review Essay

THE HOPE OF IMAGINATION:
RICHARD KEARNEY’S CONVERSATIONAL JOURNEYS

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Aeschylus, in the first part of The Oresteia, tells us that we mortals are “led by Zeus to wisdom” but that this “learning is earned, by Zeus’ lordly command, through suffering” (τὸν φρονεῖν βροτοὺς ἕδοσαντα, τὸν παθεῖν mathos thenta kuriōs echein); or in the marvelous translation of Robert Fagles, “we must suffer, suffer into truth” (Aeschylus 18). Though these words are uttered by the chorus in the context of the painful history of the House of Atreus, against the backdrop of the horrors of the Trojan War, one can hear an appeal to the broader sense of the conditioned or finite nature of human existence. We encounter or discover truth through the myriad experiences that befall us, which we undergo. We do not create truth nor do we contemplate it purely and unceasingly. In the end, however, this passivity of the human condition was not an impediment for Aeschylus, who celebrates the poetic taming of the Furies by the wisdom of Athene. In fact, the possibility of the successful appropriation of truth is the thread that winds its way through much of Western philosophy and theology (for example, in Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Hegel).

In the face of the tragedies that have marked the past few centuries and that seemed to have multiplied rather than diminished the horror
and suffering of the human condition, the faith of Western philosophy and theology seems to many to be an illusion too great for even Nietzsche’s Zarathustra to swallow (Nietzsche 244). It seems impossible to believe the great stories or theories that recount the transfiguration of our suffering into any form of truth, whether they be in the classical form of Aeschylus or the existentialist struggle of Sartre. We seem to be left in the end, like Joyce’s Daedalus, with only our human, all too human, tools: “silence, exile, and cunning” (Joyce 247). This “postmodern condition” seems to exclude the hope voiced by Aeschylus. In the late seventies at the Husserl Institute in Paris a number of prominent “postmodern” thinkers participated in a seminar led by Paul Ricoeur defending the power and possibility of narrative in the face of postmodern doubts. One of the strongest and most hopeful voices that came out of those lively discussions (which included such figures as Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Lévinas) belongs to Richard Kearney. Over the past twenty-five years he has been a consistent voice for an eschatological hope that faces the limitations of our human condition while championing the power of our imagination to transcend, in small yet substantial ways, these limitations. Recently, Kearney has returned to two major sources of his work, Paul Ricoeur and the richness of dialogue. In On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva, he provides a wonderful introduction to one of the most prolific thinkers of our times, a scholar who sadly passed away in the spring of 2005. His other volume reviewed here, Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers, includes conversations spanning the past two decades between Kearney and major figures in philosophy, religion, literature, and psychoanalysis. Though it may seem that these two works turn the focus from Kearney’s own project to the work and words of others, this is far from the case. In fact, Kearney’s engagement of these figures, especially Ricoeur, represents the work of the imagination he champions. Before turning to these two new texts, therefore, we shall examine major tenets of Kearney’s own work.

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The power of the work of art (poiesis) to create a unity out of the divergent passions of human existence by story-telling, painting, singing, sculpting, etc. has been viewed with deep ambivalence by much of Western philosophy and theology. This ambivalence arises from the fact that as a depiction or likeness, the image remains other and less than what it depicts (the real), and it is the “real” that theology and philosophy claims as its own. For most philosophers (and many theologians) poiesis must become a noesis. Our desire must be to move from “seeing