



Protestant Theological University

Richard Kearney's sacramental play between immanence and transcendence

Damen, E.F.

Published in:

Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion

Published: 01/03/2023

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Damen, E. F. (2023). Richard Kearney's sacramental play between immanence and transcendence. *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion*, 5(1), 62-71.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons). You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

This publication might have been made available through the PThU Research Portal under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the PThU website: <https://www.pthu.nl/over-ptthu/bibliotheek-ptthu/diensten/article-25fa-taverne-amendement-end-user-agreement.pdf>

Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact us providing details, and we will investigate your claim and remove access to the work if necessary: bibliotheek@pthu.nl.

Downloaded from the PThU Research Portal (Pure): <https://pure.pthu.nl>.



BRILL

JOURNAL FOR CONTINENTAL
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION 5 (2023) 62–71

JCPR
brill.com/jcpr

Richard Kearney's Sacramental Play between Immanence and Transcendence

Enrieke Damen | ORCID: 0000-0003-4997-4159

Protestant Theological University, Groningen, The Netherlands

e.f.damen@phtu.nl

Abstract

This article will discuss anatheist imagination in Kearney's work. With the help of a poem by Sharon Olds, it will make a case for the sacramental – or anatheist – play between immanence and transcendence as a crucial motif to interpreting Kearney's philosophy. Firstly, illustrating that the sacramental opens the door to a more embodied and carnal understanding of Kearney's hermeneutics. Secondly, drawing on insights from my research, I'll argue in a short history of anatheist imagination that there's a continuity between the sacramental and Kearney's early work on the hermeneutics of the possible. Finally, the article concludes with some considerations on the philosophical and/or theological character of Kearney's emphasis on the sacramental imagination as a hermeneutic stance.

Keywords

Richard Kearney – hermeneutics – atheism – sacramental imagination – immanence – transcendence

• • •

Go out upon the earth, go to and fro, and up and down, I know you
will come back.¹

• •
•

1 Ode to Thought

I can almost see you, in the air – like a species
in your own right. I'd thought you were something
I made, when I was in my room,
alone with my scissors, Scotch tape, and paper –
and you were there, doing god-knows-what
while I cut, moving my jawbones in tune
with the blades. Were you using your words, or playing with your alpha-
bets, or less fettered than that, just
scooting your protons and neutrons and electrons
around. I know – you were something between
an electric current and a wave, in grey
and white brain-flesh. O thought, you were
inside me, but it didn't seem so,
I thought of you in a skirt of dazzle,
flying. You darling, you're beyond comprehension,
you travel in and out of our heads
at your own whim, and we are innocent
of all you say – and there's no blood on your hands,
dear thought, though I've killed so many of your kind there's been
a lot of your blood on mine – no more, go
roam, fill the room, go out
upon the earth, go to and fro,

1 Sharon Olds, *Odes* (London: Cape Poetry, 2016), p. 34. An earlier version of this article was presented as a public lecture during a conference with Richard Kearney, called "Re-imagining the Human", 8 June 2022, University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, The Netherlands. The author thanks Prof. Dr Petruschka Schaafsma and Dr Rob Compaijen for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

and up and down, in it, I know you will
 come back: see how my eyes get wet when I say it, I am sane.²

In this dazzling poem *Ode to Thought*, Sharon Olds traces the tangibly incarnate and yet unreachable character of thought. She describes how thought is so ordinary that it appears to her as a craft project: *something / I made, (...) / alone with my scissors, Scotch tape, and paper – / and you were there*. This physical closeness to thought is captured in her usage of the second person – *you darling* – and the anatomic depiction of thought – *you were something between / an electric current and a wave, in grey / and white brain-flesh*. Yet, Olds recognizes in her poetic ambivalence that thought remains at a distance, intangibly far away – *you're beyond comprehension, / you travel in and out of our heads / at your own whim*. This conjoining of the tension between phenomenological experience and what goes 'beyond' resonates with what the philosopher Richard Kearney (1954) describes as *sacramental* or *anatheist imagination*. For Kearney the term *sacramental* points to the "hosting of the transcendence in the immanence of the present," and thus, to a more general understanding of sacramental "than that of the ritual 'sacraments' (though it may include these)."³ It is an attentiveness to, or "a retrieval of," the extraordinary in the ordinary as can be observed in Olds' *Ode to Thought*.

Kearney, however, takes the attention for the extraordinary in the ordinary in the *sacramental* imagination one step further as to him it is more than a literary or poetic trope but what he calls "the anatheist paradigm."⁴ He observes:

There is a notion among modern intellectuals that matters of existential profundity and ultimacy, are now in Western culture, at least, being transferred to the sanctuaries of art. Although there is some truth in this view, it often misses the degree to which many authors remained deeply committed to a sacramental imagination that defies the either/or division between theism and atheism.⁵

This medial position between theism and atheism is often interpreted as *agnosticism*, but according to Kearney such interpretations do not "capture the

2 Sharon Olds, *Odes* (London: Cape Poetry, 2016), p. 34.

3 Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*, *Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 85–86.

4 Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. 101.

5 Kearney, *Anatheism*, pp. 101–102.

radical mystical character of much modern literature.”⁶ He perceives this attentiveness to the sacramental in literature and art whenever “mystery is preserved, even celebrated, not as ecclesiastical dogma but as a mystical affirmation of incarnate existence: Word made Flesh in the ordinary universe.”⁷ It is this return to “the sacred after the disappearance of God” – that Kearney will call *ana-theos*, God after God. The basic philosophical premise of Kearney’s atheist wager is that “only if one concedes that one knows virtually nothing about God can one begin to recover the presence of holiness in the flesh of ordinary existence.”^{8,9} Crucial in atheism is “the moment of not-knowing that initiates the atheist turn” – a moment that is not just epistemological but more fundamentally “a matter of existential profundity.” As such, atheistic moments are “available to anyone who experiences instants of deep disorientation, doubt, or dread, when no longer sure exactly who we are or where we are going.”¹⁰

In this contribution, drawing on insights from my research, I will argue in two parts that the sacramental is the common thread in Kearney’s philosophical work. First, I will discuss how the sacramental Kearney opens the door for a more carnal understanding of hermeneutics – i.e., in Kearney’s most recent book *Touch*. Second, I will offer a short history of atheist imagination to suggest that the sacramental has, from the beginning, been a *leitmotiv* in Kearney’s hermeneutics of the possible.

2 The Touch of Atheist Imagination

The emphasis on the sacramental extends in Kearney’s work to the crucial position of the body in the process of interpretation. In *Anatheism* (2011) Kearney writes that atheist moments are not “the preserve of hypercognitive cogitos,” instead they are “experienced in our bones – moods, affects, senses, emotions – before they are theoretically interrogated by our minds.”¹¹ But it is not until the edited volume on *Carnal Hermeneutics* (2015), which epitomized in the recent publication of the essay *Touch* (2021), that Kearney focuses explicitly on the field of ‘interpretation’ that unfolds from the body. While usually

6 Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. 102.

7 Kearney, *Anatheism*, pp. 101–102.

8 Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. 5.

9 Kearney, *Anatheism*, pp. 3–5.

10 Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. 5.

11 Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. 5.

in philosophy attention is given to the sense of sight, as the gateway for the engagement and interpretation of self and the world, Kearney puts – in line with the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition – the tactile sensation of *Touch* centre stage. He understands touch as “the existence of a special intelligence of the body – a tactile sensibility that informs our relations with others prior to abstract cognition.”¹² Accordingly touch, or what he will call “tact,” is not limited to this sense alone, it reveals itself and operates throughout the other senses as “the carnal wisdom of tactility.”¹³ Kearney, therefore, challenges us to reclaim touch in this post-pandemic world, as our encompassing sense, to interpret *fully* the meaning of life and the world.

For Kearney, the COVID outbreak gave extra urgency to (re)address touch as the world went online and social distancing became the norm.¹⁴ On this point the topic affects me personally, as at the onset of the pandemic COVID-19 touched me more than I had accounted for as a healthy young thirty-something:

For months on end, I find myself suspended, like fog, in a cloud of exhaustion and pain. My perspective, my life, is stripped down to the bare bones of my body. I'm powerless as COVID-19 takes over. As my body dictates. As my body transcends 'me.'

Why speak about this personal and rather particular experience of my body ‘being taken over’ amidst the experience of becoming ill? Well, to discuss and question whether Kearney’s argument for touch as the encompassing tactile sensibility – the intelligence of the body – is perhaps too optimistic about its

12 Kearney is aware that his distinctive interpretation stands separate from three other meanings of the sense of touch – respectively “as sensation (our five senses), as meaning (in what sense do you mean that?), and as orientation (as in sense of direction in Romance languages).” See Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), p. 9.

13 Kearney, *Touch*, p. 9.

14 The urgency for the plea lies in Kearney’s observation that we are entering “a crisis of touch in our time – an age of simulation informed by digital technology and an expanding culture of virtual experience.” This perspective received extra significance in light of the recent COVID crisis during which – as he reminds us – measures such as quarantine made it tangible just how indispensable the tactile sensation is. A plea which is structured as neither a nostalgic return to the old times of physical proximity and touch nor a eulogy on the benefits of digital technology. In Kearney’s prolific hermeneutic stance, he chooses the middle way, meaning that to live fully in this post-pandemic world is ultimately to him “a matter of both/and ... *both* virtual imagination *and* incarnate action.” See Kearney, *Touch*, pp. 9, 132.

potential? Does touch always open a field of interpretation from the body or can it also diminish and close off our understanding?

A longstanding feminist tradition of poets, philosophers, and theologians – in which I want to place my own experience – has reflected upon the bodily experience of illness and recovery – for example, Susan Sontag, Shelly Rambo, Elisabeth Eybers, Sharon Olds, Alice Walker, Susan Brison, and Melanie May. They discuss the often traumatic experience of being touched, of being powerless to the other as it takes over their body. I, therefore, want to raise the question: What if being receptive to touch has traumatic consequences? What if there is no time for discernment between a touch being welcome or not? What if the double sensation of touch – to touch the other implies simultaneously that you're touched – is not just a healing touch but a traumatic transgression of boundaries? Can the vulnerability that comes with the double sensation of touch then also move the other way around: besides making one receptive to the reality that transcends the self – i.e., of the other – can it also close or damage the reality of the I?

Which leads to a second, related but more fundamental point, namely: How to conceptualize in thought to bodily understanding as intended by Kearney's carnal hermeneutics? I am inspired here by a recent article by the Dutch feminist theologian Mariecke van den Berg, which observes that more and more researchers have re-elevated materiality and the body into the scope of their research intending to create "a productive tension" between conceptual belief and the material conditions in order to challenge the body-mind dualism with a fuller, more material understanding. It is problematic, she argues, that "the promise of embodiment is, in fact, a way of announcing that the research in question is about practice rather than thought or beliefs, and it consequently turns out to not address bodies, or to do so only in passing."¹⁵ This emphasis on a fuller more material understanding within the discourse makes that "research on the body is often in fact research on how the body functions in discourse, not on the reality of limbs, sinews, muscles, organs, sweat, blood, saliva and so."¹⁶ The announcement of a research focus on the body and embodiment is usually regarded as enough, even when it means that a researcher remains rather vague about methodology and often does not inscribe the researcher's own body in the process. Van den Berg's observations carefully highlight that there's a difference between the conceptual frameworks that guide (theoretical) research to

15 Mariecke van den Berg, 'Bodies and Embodiment. The Somatic Turn in the Study of Religion and Gender', in *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Gender and Society*, E. Tomalin and C. Starkey, eds., (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), p. 157.

16 Van den Berg, 'Bodies and Embodiment', pp. 157–158.

a more material or bodily perspective and starting with concrete experiences of the body in research – including that of the researcher.

If we take these considerations back to Kearney's emphasis on touch and carnal hermeneutics, it leaves me with two questions: Is it not necessary that the body of the researcher, in this case of Kearney, and their bodily experience is more visibly inscribed into the hermeneutics that *Touch* offers?; furthermore because Kearney discusses extensively the impact of trauma on the body in the fourth chapter of *Touch* – among other things the impossibility of speech and the collapse of representation in the case of traumatic bodily experiences – it leaves me wondering how can one find language in the anatheist imagination to express bodily experiences in the awareness that these carnal experiences are often beyond words, that we're literally incapable of expressing them?

3 A Short History of Anatheist Imagination

In the second part of this contribution, I'll argue that Kearney's anatheist emphasis on the role of the sacramental in the dynamic between immanence and transcendence was already present in his early philosophical work. To do so we first return to Kearney's understanding of hermeneutics.

Meaning is to Kearney – much like his doctoral advisor the philosopher Paul Ricoeur – “to arrive in the middle of an exchange which has already begun and in which we seek to orient ourselves in order to make some new sense of it.”¹⁷ In his academic work but also in concrete projects such as the Guestbook Project, Kearney constantly seeks dialogue, to encounter “the Other, the Stranger, the Guest – encounters that in turn call for ever-recurring wagers and responses.”¹⁸ These hermeneutic wagers, instigated by the face of the other, “differ from Pascalian wagers in that they are more about imagination and hospitality than calculation and blind leaps.”¹⁹ Kearney thus understands hermeneutics as a movement back and forth, opening oneself in dialogue to new possible worlds, to transcendent horizons of uncertainty and wonder. This emphasis on the horizon of the possible is why Kearney speaks of hermeneutics as *between*, always arriving in the middle between call and response, displaying a dual fidelity to both text and action, self and other, body and mind, poetics and ethics, imagination and language, phenomenology and hermeneutics – and when it

17 Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 5.

18 Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. xvii.

19 Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. xvii.

comes to matters of religion, a double commitment to both the secular and the sacred, immanence and transcendence. It is this middle way, “a road less travelled philosophically,” that characterizes Kearney’s hermeneutics and to which he returns in *Anatheism*.²⁰ In the latter, the prefix *ana* suggests a similar *between* – “up in space or time; back again, anew” – which can be best explained as a Kierkegaardian repetition forward: “a critical hermeneutic retrieval of sacred things that have passed but still bear a radical remainder, an unrealized potentiality or promise to be more fully realized in the future.”²¹

Murray Littlejohn has argued that the development of anatheism presents a shift in Kearney’s hermeneutics towards the question of God, with works like *The God Who May Be* (2001), *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (2010) and *Re-imagining the Sacred* (2015). I would argue, however, recalling Kearney’s early publications, that the question of God is not as new as Littlejohn suggests. Full-blown theological language and the sacramental *leitmotif* were already present in his first writings. To further outline this hypothesis, I briefly present Kearney’s early hermeneutic work on the hermeneutics of the possible.

In his dissertation *Poétique du possible* (1984), Kearney writes about the creative hermeneutic structure of imagination which to him is more fundamental than the mimetic domain often associated with the imagination. To conceptualize this alternative perspective on the imagination, Kearney introduces a new term, *figuration*, to highlight the fundamental capacity of meaning to shape and form our world. Figuration reveals “the *ecstatic horizon of possibility* (or more precisely the possibilizing horizon) which lies below or beyond any metaphysical opposition between being and non-being.”²² In this emphasis on the horizon of the possible, meaning functions as a *figuratio-as* or *as-if*, “a temporalising pre-figuration of its possible meanings.”²³ The hermeneutic structure of figuration makes it a creative process, because fundamental meaning is only “given paradoxically as the experience of an absence *as if* it were presence.”²⁴ In other words, fundamental meaning is not a complete actuality (*esse*) but a call of possibility (*posse*). The implication is that hermeneutics is never a finished

20 Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, eds., *Carnal Hermeneutics*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 19.

21 Richard Kearney, ‘God making: An Essay in Theopoetic Imagination’, in *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, eds. Timothy Burns et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 150.

22 Richard Kearney, *Poétique du possible: Phénoménologie herméneutique de la figuration*, Bibliothèque des archives de philosophie; nouvelle série 44 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984), p. 47 (own translation).

23 Kearney, *Poétique du possible*, p. 33 (own translation).

24 Kearney, *Poétique du possible*, pp. 93–94 (own translation).

job, directly accessible as a matter of given knowledge, and thus requires a process of (re-)creation, again and again, constantly anew, always “a hermeneutic wager” [*un pari*].²⁵ In this manner, Kearney’s hermeneutics of *posse* revisits the “the approach of Kierkegaard and Kant for whom the hermeneutical paradox requires that we abandon any mistaken notion of absolute knowledge of God or of Being, in order to engage in an act of belief – philosophical or religious.”²⁶

Kearney’s privileging of the horizon of the possible leads, in line with Ricoeur, to his conclusion that fundamental meaning can be interpreted in two ways – and this is where the earlier discussed dynamic between immanence and transcendence comes in – namely, 1) “as an ontological meaning where the essence is interpreted from the question of being,” and 2) “as an eschatological meaning (ethical-religious) where the essence is interpreted from the question of Good or God.”²⁷ The reason for this distinction between eschatology and ontology and the pairing of ethics and eschatology has thus far puzzled me. In the Christian tradition, the notion of eschatology has strong theological overtones, but because Kearney’s philosophical hermeneutics leaves it undefined, I wonder how he determines this category of ethical-eschatological meaning? Could it be that here the philosopher enters, what I would call, theological territory unannounced? This question becomes even more poignant when he further unfolds ethical-eschatological meaning and connects it to the Christian tradition of the coming “Kingdom” – although the suffix of ‘of God’ is lacking. He states:

Each act of figuration is an ethical choice between a *transfiguration* and a *disfiguration* of meaning. More precisely: transfiguring the world means opening it to the possibility of the coming Kingdom [*Royaume* with a capital R], recognizing that ‘the fundamental meaning’ of the world is the eschatological *posse* that makes our human activity of transfiguration possible without renouncing its otherness qua *posse*²⁸

In these words, I recognize the dynamic between transcendence and immanence which he calls *sacramental* in his later atheist writings on the hermeneutics of religion – a dynamic which resonates with the Ricoeurian dialectic between poetics and ethics. Yet, the status of the term ethical-escha-

25 Kearney, *Poétique du possible*, p. 38 (own translation).

26 Kearney, *Poétique du possible*, p. 94 (own translation).

27 This is an explicit positioning against the comprehensive ontology of Martin Heidegger. See Kearney, *Poétique du possible*, pp. 91–92 (own translation).

28 Kearney, *Poétique du possible*, p. 37 (own translation).

tological leaves me questioning: How does Kearney perceive the relationship between philosophy and theology in his work?

In the introduction of *Anatheism*, Kearney clearly states that the “hermeneutic stance in this work is philosophical rather than theological.”²⁹ But I cannot help but wonder if the role played by a sacramental imagination running from his early to later work does not express a fundamental paradoxical commitment to both our tangible phenomenological experience and the intangible imperative of the beyond, of divine transcendence – albeit in immanence? Dare I suggest, the reflections of a theologian incognito? I’m aware that in Paris of the 70s and 80s, influenced by the highly secular context of France, it was not uncommon for continental philosophers to engage with the other/Other, transcendence and the messianic without ever labelling it explicitly as theological; I think of philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur, who have influenced Kearney’s work. But the times are changing, and therefore I wonder why Kearney in his commitment to sacramental or atheist imagination continues to make the choice to position himself as a philosopher. Or might he consider, as John D. Caputo has done, coming out of the closet as a theologian?

Bibliography

- Kearney, R. *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*. Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics and Culture. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
- Kearney, R. “God making: An Essay in Theopoetic Imagination.” In *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, eds. T. Burns et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 145–160.
- Kearney, R. *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*. Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).
- Kearney, R. *Poétique du possible: Phénoménologie herméneutique de la figuration*. Bibliothèque des archives de philosophie; nouvelle série 44. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984).
- Kearney, R. *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).
- Kearney, R. and Treanor, eds. *Carnal Hermeneutics*. Perspectives in Continental Philosophy. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
- Olds, Sharon. *Odes*. (London: Cape Poetry, 2016).
- Van den Berg, M. “Bodies and Embodiment. The Somatic Turn in the Study of Religion and Gender.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Gender and Society*, ed. E. Tomalin and C. Starkey (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), 157.

29 Kearney, *Anatheism*, p. xv.