



*Imagination Now: A Richard Kearney Reader*,  
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It was Alfred North Whitehead who boldly claimed that the entirety of the western intellectual tradition was essentially “a series of footnotes to Plato.” While the claim may be overstated, and lacks unanimous agreement, the spirit of this famous declaration does indeed hold true, in as far as those operating within the philosophical discipline pride themselves on furthering the ideas and conversations established by the great thinkers who have come before us. In a few rare instances, however, there are those of us that are able to transcend these normal practices and operations, and ultimately step forward with a new question, idea, or conversation altogether. In the course of his lengthy career, Richard Kearney has definitely been successful in producing the type of academic work that satisfies both of these categories. What’s even more impressive though, is the fact that Kearney has labored to produce a philosophy that not only tantalizes in an academic setting, but genuinely strives to take root and flourish in the world. Perhaps it is safe to say, that at this stage in his scholarly career, Kearney’s labors have not been in vain.

Turning to one of Kearney’s earliest texts, in which he carefully interviews Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Emmanuel Lévinas, Paul Ricœur, and Jacques Derrida, makes it abundantly clear that Kearney was uniquely qualified to engage with some of the greatest thinkers and ideas of the Twentieth Century. *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (1984) is only one of many examples demonstrating Kearney’s perspicacious mind adeptly engaging with the essential ideas of Contemporary Continental thought. Simply revisiting this text and its incisive treatment of various thinkers is all one needs to do in order to witness the truly impressive way Kearney is able to converse with the likes of Derrida and Ricœur, assiduously navigating his way through the philosophies that shaped him as a young scholar.

The mastery with which Kearney is able to both question and contribute to the ideas of his interlocutors, clearly represented a sign of things to come, as it was this strong philosophical foundation that ultimately allowed him to step forward with his own unique contributions to the discipline.

After the completion of rigorous programs at McGill University and l'Université de Paris X-Nanterre, where Kearney cut his philosophical teeth under the tutelage of Charles Taylor and Paul Ricœur respectively, Kearney set out to leave his own mark on the philosophical world. Although, at the time, I'm not sure even he could have anticipated just how large of an impact he would ultimately make. Nevertheless, the result has been nothing short of four decades of prolific publication and the continued development of a rich and variegated body of work. Kearney has made numerous contributions to furthering the discourses of phenomenology and hermeneutics, and he has also made significant contributions to the philosophy of religion. Additionally, outside of academia, Kearney has been just as productive, authoring works of fiction and poetry, not to mention his efforts negotiating peace in Ireland. If this discussion is starting to become reminiscent of some sort of retrospective of a waning or concluded career, let me be clear: Richard Kearney and his work are both as vibrant and vivacious as ever. Rather, my goal was to offer a very brief introduction to a thinker whose work is being celebrated in a new volume from Rowman and Littlefield.

The volume, *Imagination Now: A Richard Kearney Reader*, edited by M.E. Littlejohn, serves as the perfect introduction (or for the already initiated, the perfect *re*-introduction) to Kearney's corpus. This philosophical *amuse-bouche* offers a series of excerpts from Kearney's various texts, beautifully edited together, representing his essential ideas. The first section establishes Kearney's poetics, effectively illustrating the core of his philosophy of the imagination. The second primarily deals with Kearney's attempt at recovering the significance of the flesh in the form of a "carnal" hermeneutics. The third section explores Kearney's philosophy of religion: atheism, or returning to God after the death of God. The fourth section provides a way of thinking about Kearney's philosophy in application. The sense of cohesion holding the volume together, and the thread that can be traced from start to finish, is imagination itself. Kearney's project then, and Littlejohn's carefully edited volume makes this abundantly clear, is one that asserts that our creative capacity (in the form of imagination) has the potential to overcome the back-breaking malaise of the modern paradigm. As Nietzsche said of the imagination, "[it] alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live." (BT, §7) It is in this respect that Kearney's project achieves a scope and mission on par with Friedrich Nietzsche himself; what Nietzsche

attempted to do in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kearney attempts in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, albeit with a level of clarity and conscientiousness that no one in their right mind would ever attribute to Herr Nietzsche. Yet, the comparison is an apt one. Kearney's reliance on poetics establishes a framework for an ethically-oriented existential aestheticism. It is a philosophy of making and doing. It asks us to give more of ourselves, and to accept more of others. In essence, it makes the impossible possible. Kearney makes it clear then, that imagination presents itself as a *pharmakon*, or as Kearney himself puts it, "the hair of the dog" (pg. 316). It may have been our unrestrained collective imaginations that brought about an age of nihilism and inauthenticity, but it is also a healthy dose of imagination, as Kearney prescribes it, that can also provide a way forward.

After the many carefully curated selections from Kearney's corpus, the final, and I would argue most enjoyable, section consists of a conversation with Kearney, simply titled "Richard Kearney Now." It is in this section that the reader can see all of Littlejohn's work truly come to fruition. The questions posed are insightful, and Kearney's answers are as erudite and illuminating as one would expect. It is also somewhat humorous to see a full role reversal from Kearney's position in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (1984). The focus is now on him. It is his work that moves the conversation, and it is in this conversation with Kearney that we can clearly see a mind at work, a thinker, who has already given so much, looking towards the horizon with an idea of more to give.

I am well aware of the fact that many have not yet read Kearney's *opera omnia*, particularly given its voluminous nature, but I would argue there is no time like the present to start, to take up and read. *Tolle lege*. To that effect, M.E. Littlejohn's volume makes it all the more manageable to find a starting point, a wonderful place to begin the conversation, and an appropriate time-frame for doing so: now.

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