

IMAGINATION'S TRUTHS: AN INTERVIEW

WITH RICHARD KEARNEY

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*This is a transcript of an interview conducted by Rebekah Smick, Associate Professor of Philosophy of Arts & Culture at the Institute for Christian Studies, with Richard Kearney on October 13, 2012 in conjunction with the event titled "Imagination's Truths: Re-envisioning Imagination in Philosophy, Religion & the Arts" held in Toronto, on October 13, 2012. This was a collaborative event co-sponsored by the Toronto School of Theology, the Institute for Christian Studies' Centre for Philosophy, Religion, and Social Ethics (CPRSE), and Emmanuel College.*

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**Rebekah Smick:** Referencing the title of our talk today, “Imagination’s Truths: Re-envisioning Imagination in Philosophy, Religion, and the Arts,” what does it mean to you to speak in terms of imagination’s truths?

**Richard Kearney:** Well on the face of it, it would seem that imagination is about unreality, therefore, if you define truth as reality imagination is but an untruth. But there are certain truths proper to fiction, and certain truths that one can only access as complete through fiction. Aristotle in the *Poetics*, which is probably our first philosophical account of the relationship of truth and fiction, makes the point that it’s not a story that recounts the facts and gives you a chronicle of events that gets to the truth of what happens. It’s the poets who prescind from the facts but aim at an essence, what he calls an “essence of events.” And they do this through a

process of *mimesis*, creative imitation or representation, and *mythos*, that's our word "myth," but in the Greek it's "plot." So there's a restructuring and a reconfiguring of the facts such that we are able to see what is universal in human actions and human sufferings, and that for Aristotle is something that is only accessible through art.

Other philosophers have said interesting things on foot of that. To leap into the modern era, David Hume maintained that all men are liars and poets are liars by profession, so that poets actually take the ways in which we use imagination in our lives to construct meanings and then bring them to a higher level so that we become aware that we're actually constructing meanings. Nietzsche goes for this too, when he says there are no facts; there are only interpretations of facts; and interpretations of facts involve imagination, the constructive, productive, constitutive role of imagination. And he ultimately concludes that there are two kinds of liars, there are those who tell lies and don't know they're telling lies—because our imaginations are always at work even when we're dreaming and perceiving and eating, imagination is always at work symbolizing and giving meaning to things. So the distinction he makes is between the liars who don't know they're telling lies and authentic liars who know that they're lying—and they're the poets, or those who avail themselves of the poets and the artist's work and so realize how the lie is performed. So there are the liars who deny they're lying, and they're the inauthentic ones, and the liars who acknowledge that they're lying, and they're the authentic ones. And of course in the latter sense, the lie is, as Samuel Beckett says "lyingly exposed," and when it's exposed and performed, then we have a freedom around it and it's easy to be a lie; it actually becomes a truth. So I would claim there is a truth proper to fiction in this way.

If I might just give an example, a practical example: a number of years ago I was giving a talk in Montreal on different cinematic portrayals of the Holocaust, so I was talking about *Schindler's List* and *Life is Beautiful* and *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann. And going through the various pros and cons, you know, of doing a fictional dramatic recount of the event, *Schindler's List*, versus *Shoah*, which is two-camera, face to face, testimonials of survivors, first generation survivors. And after it, this little woman came up to me after question and answer, and she said, "You know, I was one of the survivors. I was on Schindler's List." And she said, "I was never able to return to the experience, never able to revisit it, never able to talk about it, never able to think about it, remember it, until I saw the film. And when I saw the fictional account played by fictional characters, I was then and only then able to identify with myself as a real victim." But it

was only by going through it in imagination, by the detour of fiction, by a certain vicarious journey that she was able to come back to what was in effect an inexperienced experience. So it took fiction for her to be able to experience it for the first time. And that to me is a case in which fiction can actually serve to bring out a truth that otherwise remains concealed. Why? It's because it's just unbearable.

So fiction can say it in another way and make the unbearable bearable, which is one of the main points Aristotle makes in the *Poetics*. He says that when we go to the theatre, and we see tragedies, we witness events—Agamemnon slitting the throat of poor Iphigenia, Oedipus committing murder and incest, the most hideous things. And these are things we could never contemplate, or never accept or tolerate or experience or regard in real life; but through the detour of fiction, we can look at the most hideous things, the most difficult things, the most painful things, the most tragic things, and see them in a new way. So for Aristotle that was a very liberating thing because two of the most powerful and very often unacknowledged (we might say today unconscious) emotions in Greek society, in all societies, were pity and fear, which were *pathomata*, they were passions. And too much fear, too much pity could destroy a society. Over-identification with people, too much *pathos*, too much *eleos* or pity, or too much fear could lead to violence or distance or cruelty. So what you needed was an imaginary synthesis of these two emotions so as to de-pathologize them, civilize them, and then the citizens, who would go and have their unconscious passions purged and distilled and refined and refigured, would then go back into society more human and humanized citizens.

**RS:** What about Adorno's thought about the barbarity of poetry after the Holocaust—how does that fit in?

**RK:** Well I think Adorno was making a dramatic rhetorical point. I think it's just untrue, thankfully. There have been great poets after the holocaust. And I'm not talking about poets who ignore the holocaust, I'm mostly talking very importantly about those who acknowledge the holocaust. Paul Celan would be a perfect example. I mean if you don't have Paul Celan's poetry there is no literary, genuinely literary, witness in poetry to the event. And without such witness, then I guess as well the holocaust could be forgotten; and if it's not remembered, and remembered in a way that can be commonly and humanly shared through literature, then the

Nazis have won, because the Nazis didn't want anyone to remember it. They wanted it to pass over, for everybody to pass over it in silence. They refused to preserve any records and so on. So in that sense ironically, if one were to obey Adorno's call, we would be doing the bidding of the Nazis, which is exactly the opposite of what he wanted. I think probably what he should have said is: after Auschwitz, who can write "beautiful poetry," in the sense of poetry or literature that doesn't acknowledge the horror that has traversed history?

**RS:** Can you say more about why the concept of imagination might need to be seen in new ways?

**RK:** I think the challenge for contemporary understandings and discussions of imagination is to avoid two traditional pitfalls. On the one hand, the notion that the image is the purely passive receptor, an impression or an imprint left after our empirical experience through the senses. And this would be a view you would find in scholastic philosophies and then very much in Hume and Locke and "empiricism," where basically our ideas are faded images, which themselves are faded impressions. So everything dates back to the senses but in sort of a reductive, quasi-materialist sense. So that's image as "imitation" in a passive, purely representational sense. And that understanding doesn't get, really, what imagination is. And if it does, then Plato was right in the *Republic* to say that images are simply poor parents of poor children because they are merely copies of reality which itself for Plato is but a copy—empirical, natural reality—of a transcendental truth. So images are at *two* removes from truth. So if you take that idea of the image as a copy, then clearly one is going to denigrate imagination; and in Western philosophy imagination was very often and for the most part a suspect entity.

The other extreme to be avoided would be a sort of "constructivist," if I can use a horrible word, approach to the image which says that there's nothing meaningful in reality at all, so any meaning we have is given by the image. So in that sense, you almost enter into a kind of "fictionalism" or "constructivism" where—and Nietzsche at his most extreme would be an example of this—we just make up meanings as we go along. So in that sense the image becomes imperial, an *imperius*, in its ability to create the world by fiat and has no fidelity or loyalty or answerability to reality at all. So I think, you know, the image as imitation of the image—pure

imitation of the image as pure artifice—are both extremes that misrepresent the real power of imagination, which is both to receive and to recreate.

And I think the hermeneutic definition of Paul Ricoeur is very useful, where he says imagination is “invention.” And he takes the origin of the word “invention” from the Latin *invenio* to be at once an invention—we invent, we create, we produce—but we do not create out of nothing; we create from what we have already discovered in reality. And that’s *invenio* in the second sense of to do an invention, to actually make a list, to observe what’s there. And I think that is the sense, the bifocal, the Janus face of imagination as open and attentive, what Eliot calls the “auditory imagination,” that is, listening to what’s happening out there in other people, in things. Attention is the only prayer. And then on the other hand, a creativity, a leap into the new. And one needs both, it seems to me.

**RS:** Can works of the poetic imagination cause change?

**RK:** Well, I think they can but not directly. Seamus Heaney makes the point that no poem ever stopped an attack. And I think that’s right. But at the same time, we know that works of art have indirectly and culturally prepared a space and a place and a time for change. In Ireland, for example, there were many poets—Patrick Pearse and Yeats and so on—who prepared people, arguably, for change. Yeats even made this statement after the 1916 uprising against the British: “Did that play of mine send out certain men the English shot?” This play was *Countess Cathleen* (*Cathleen ni Houlihan*), and Mother Ireland comes back and calls her sons to sacrifice themselves for the free nation. Now, that was Yeats being a bit presumptuous; I think about 10 people saw the play, and none of them who were there got shot; but at the same time, the consciousness of 1916 and the way it radically changed people’s opinion about independence was in many respects a part of a cultural revolution, which preceded a political revolution—I wouldn’t say caused it, but it meant that people interpreted the events in a different way. They saw the rebels as martyrs in a symbolism and a mythology of martyrdom that was part of a certain poetics, a national poetics.

And I would say that in Northern Ireland (I’m talking about Ireland because I’m Irish) the Good Friday peace agreement of 1998 was, in my mind, also facilitated by the fact that so many Irish writers, poets, novelists, and dramatists were writing about their adversary. So you had

Catholic writers writing from the point of view of Protestants, and Protestant writers writing from the point of view of Catholics—you know nationalists, unionists (I'm using "Protestant" and "Catholic" as stand-ins for the two communities). And I think that this exchange of narratives, of narrative imaginations, also had a big impact in allowing people eventually to say, as it was written in the Good Friday agreement, you can be British or Irish or both. You could be both! I mean you don't have to kill each other for a United Ireland or a United Kingdom, which are constitutionally incompatible because sovereignty is one and indivisible. So: United Ireland or United Kingdom, but you can't have both. Well, in imagination you can. Constitutionally you can't, but in imagination you can. So I think that this symbolic excess, over factual incompatibility, had something to do with the Good Friday peace agreement's affirmation that you can be British or Irish or both.

And then you can look at works like Picasso's *Guernica*, or Sartre's political plays, or the roles of poets like Sorescu and Donescu in the rising Romania, Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia, I mean countless examples where distant writers have created a space of contestation, but also of utopia, of thinking otherwise, which is all poets and artists can do. They can try to fill this space in, and when they do it's usually a disaster. To quote Seamus Heaney again it's a question of "opening up a landing site" for things to come; it's creating "landing sites" and then helping people to observe what is coming and interpreting what is coming. But art works in the realm of symbolism, not in the realm of ideology, and when the two conflate or become too confused or fused, I think that's dangerous.

**RS:** I agree. It would take a certain refining of one's ontology of art, for example, to make sure that your poetry doesn't become propaganda.

**RK:** Yes, and it can be a very thin line.