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RICHARD KEARNEY AND JEFFREY BERNSTEIN INTERVIEW

Books discussed: *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2021, 216 pages, ISBN 9780231199537, $19.95 and *Salvage*, Massachusetts: Arrowsmith Press, 2023, 296 pages, ISBN-13 979-8986340173, $19.00.

J

Thank you for agreeing to this interview, Richard. I think it would be helpful to the readers of the journal, if you first said a bit about how you would characterize the trajectory of your thought as a whole concerning your recent book *Touch* (2021), your titular essay in *Anacarnation* (2022), and then your novel *Salvage* (2023).

R

Let me start with my intellectual-philosophical itinerary, describing how I came to these questions, because there is a lot of overlap between the three recent works.

I started my philosophical journey with studies of imagination, working as a graduate student with Charles Taylor in Montreal and then with Paul Ricoeur in Paris, under whose supervision I completed my doctoral dissertation, *Poétique du Possible*, in 1980. That became my first published book and was focused primarily on the hermeneutics of symbols, images, metaphors, myths, and narratives. As such, one might say that from earliest writings I was studying the linguistic imagination. The hermeneutics of symbols is part of the linguistic turn in continental philosophy – a turn from a phenomenology of perception to a hermeneutic phenomenology of signs. In Ricoeur's case, the hermeneutic turn coincided with his publication of *The Symbolism of Evil* in 1960 – his basic premise being that meanings do not come to us directly, but indirectly through signs and images. I was taken by that and dedicated thirty or so years of my life, research, and teachings to the hermeneutic imagination.

About ten years ago, I became interested in grafting linguistic hermeneutics back on to the phenomenology of the body. Without giving up on the hermeneutics of imagination, I began to ask how it reconnected with a hermeneutics of the body?

Ricoeur once joked about himself as an "*obsédé textuel*," a "textual obsessive," as opposed to a "sexual obsessive." The question then arises for hermeneutics, "What about the sexed body, the gendered body, the lived body?" These questions led initially to a co-edited work with Brian Trainor, called *Carnal Hermeneutics*, published in 2015, which was saying that our carnal life, our incarnate existence, is already meaningful. We don't have to wait for verbal signs, we've already got a hermeneutic process going on in the very way we sense the world – and primarily in the way we touch the world. Hermeneutics goes all the way down.

So how did *Touch* evolve from *Carnal Hermeneutics*, with its claim that tactility is our most vital mode of experience? All the senses, I argue, are synaesthesic, they all overlap as phenomenology shows us, and Merleau-Ponty in particular. Both he and Husserl highlight the hand touching the hand, the reciprocity and reversibility of sensation.

I came to the hermeneutics of touch, first, through a rereading of Aristotle's treatment of tactility in the *De Anima*, and second, through the phenomenology of Husserl (*Ideas 2*) and Merleau-Ponty (*The Phenomenology of Perception)*. Aristotle's key insight

was that "touch knows differences" (*De An*. II.11). Touch is not, as for Plato or even the materialists held, an immediate fusion with the material world but a *mediated relation*. From the word go, touch can discriminate (*krinein)*. This is critical. Which is why Aristotle claims that "flesh is a medium" (*metaxu)*, (*De An*. 426b15) not an organ. He means that there is a critical relationship going on between us and the world from the moment we are born – qua tactile tangible beings – right up to the moment we die. In short, carnal hermeneutics is already operating as diacritical. Sensing is always and already a form of sensing "as."

J

You mention a connection between phenomenology and ancient philosophy, specifically Aristotle and Plato. I know part of the project of *Carnal Hermeneutics* is to understand the history of the body and of the senses. Could you say a bit more about how you read the ancients?

R

Aristotle in the *De Anima* holds that touch is the most universal sense, the primary sense, and the most philosophical sense. That struck me as pretty extraordinary. In Plato and Platonism, if you use the standard version, touch is actually the lowest sense, and sight is the highest. As he says in the *Cratylus*, [the word] *anthropos* comes from "the one who looks up" (399c). I think as we all know Plato may differ from Platonism – Plato is complex. But Platonism privileges the world of the ideas. In that tradition, the eye provides the dominant sense, because it gives you a survey of existence from a distance. You can see things in terms of ideas, rather than being immersed in the material contingencies of life. You can see without being seen but you cannot touch without being tangible. The former can be one-way but the latter is always two-way, reciprocal, recursive, interdependent, inter-corporeal. So, the *anthropos* becomes optocentric, and this unilateralist bias reaches its culmination in Descartes's *cogito* as the "master and possessor of nature" (*Discourse on Method*).

Aristotle, curiously, although he didn't win the intellectual-philosophical war, makes the extraordinary claim that it's not sight, but touch that is the most philosophical basis of all of our worldly experience. One of the reasons is because, in touch, as I mentioned, you are in contact with what you are touching. In touch, you have a mutual relation; when you're in touch you are always tactile. I repeat: You can see without being seen, you can hear without being heard, you can taste without being tasted, but you can't touch without being touchable. That, for Aristotle, is what makes us vulnerable and open to the new, the strange, and the different. Touch gets us out of ourselves. The oyster, Aristotle said, was the least philosophical of all creatures, because it is encrusted and closed up in itself – intangible so to speak. It doesn't have that reversible relationship with its environment. By contrast, we humans are almost all exposed skin, our largest wrap-around organ, with its vulnerability, its exposure to otherness – this is what makes us philosophize. This makes us ask the question: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" You wouldn't ask that question if you weren't encountering something novel, challenging, difficult. The one who is in touch with the world is thus vulnerable but also, Aristotle adds, adventurous – the one who dares to go out of oneself and enter into a co-dependent relationship with otherness in the real, material world out there, and most especially, with other people.

J

Before we leave the topic of your intellectual itinerary, I know you also work on philosophy of hospitality. How does hospitality fit into your other projects?

R

In my work in *Guestbook*, it became obvious to me that if there's to be hospitality, there has to be both a sharing of food (carnal hospitality) and a sharing of stories (narrative hospitality). Civilization begins with the handshake. We've now entered a world where we, as incarnate beings, have become "ex-carnate." In my recent book *Touch* I am making a plea that we become "ana-carnate" again. We need to return to the body, not by denying the digital world, but as I say in the last section of the book, by combining the advances of digital technology where we live by proxy, with a continuation and enhancement of our embodied existence. I am not advocating a Luddite return to some primitive way of being. However, a recognition of our basic need to touch, even in a digital culture – our "touch hunger" will never go away. Nor should it. We discovered this during the Covid pandemic when people were reaching out to be touched on their deathbeds because, deprived of touch by the rules of social distancing, they realized that, however wonderful it is to communicate through computers, people dying need to be in touch with other people. This struck me as *un cri du cœur* ("cry from the heart"). It struck me that we mustn't lose touch with touch, while advancing in every other possible way with our digital technologies. My most recent argument on the subject, *Anacarnation*, makes a plea for a return to the lived body in our new digital civilization of codes and algorithms. The term digital is tellingly ambidexterous – carnal and virtual at once. We need both "digital" fingerprints and "digital" codes.

J

I know that you said in *Anatheism* that your influences run more along the lines of Merleau-Ponty than Heidegger. But in your book *Touch*, I wonder whether tact is a kind of medium that can be thought along the lines of Heidegger's ontic/ontological distinction. Then tact would be something like Being, while the senses in general would be something like ontic beings.

R

Okay! How technical should I get here? It's a good question. Let's bring touch to Heidegger. There's not a huge amount of analysis of Heidegger in *Touch* or *Carnal Hermeneutics*, except that in a way we're all post-Heideggerian Heideggerians today dealing with phenomenology and hermeneutics. In *Touch*, I make a distinction between tact and contact. Contact is the objective body. It's a way of relating to people and things as instruments or objects – *zuhanden* or *vorhanden*. In that sense, contact is ontic. On the other hand, tact is the experience of the lived body, *Leib*. Tact reinterprets contact in a way that brings it to the level of an authentic existential understanding – to an ontological *verstehen*. Heidegger, who doesn't go into the body very much alas in *Being and Time*, teaches us nonetheless that our everyday engagement with the world is already a *Vorverständnis*, a pre-understanding through our moods of being. In that sense, hermeneutics goes all the way down. There is no phenomenon that we experience that isn't hermeneutic all the way down (from beings to Being). Here, I am not talking about the purely rational consciousness of a *cogito*

a transcendental ego, or a reflective objectifying consciousness. Tact first operates ontologically as a pre-reflective lived experience – as authentic *Dasein*.

The great insight of Heidegger was that everyday understanding is already an existential pre-understanding of the being of people and things. We only appreciate the being of the hammer, for example, when it breaks, just as we only understand the being of a human life when it breaks down (in anxiety and care). Everything we encounter in the work is interpreted diacritically as this or that meaning for my existential project as a being-in-the-world. If one is climbing a hill and sees a rock, to take the classic phenomenological example, one's hermeneutic understanding will see it "as" this or that thing, in terms of my overall existential project. If you're a mountain climber, the rock is an obstacle. If you're a mason, it's a stone for building a wall. If you're Michelangelo, it has the potentiality to be a sculpting block. If you're fleeing from an enemy, it can be a weapon of defense. What the rock is what the rock means to you; it depends on your existential situation. And so, coming into contact with a rock always involves an implicit hermeneutic of tact. If you separate the rock from the ontological context of *Dasein's* everyday hermeneutic, you reduce it to some kind of objective "contact" – seeing it as a mere thing amidst things, a mere object of empirical or chemical measurements, as if you brought it into a laboratory and abstracted it from its lifeworld (*Lebenswelt)*. Heidegger recognized that we encounter the world primordially with our own situated pre-understanding. But I regret Heidegger didn't go more into the senses. He realized that *Befindlichkeit* and *Verfallen* mean we are fallen into the world, that we are living our facticity as finite spatio-temporal beings. But to some extent, Heidegger's insistence on temporality meant that he sold short spatiality in *Being and Time*, and therefore he sold short embodiment and carnality.

Carnal Hermeneutics and *Touch* were attempts to supplement and complement Heidegger's notion of pre-understanding by bringing it into the thickness of corporeal, carnal existence. And here we drew on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty to show that human existence reaches down to a pre-understanding that is spatial as well as temporal, embodied as well as attuned. It is not a matter of negating *Being and Time*, but showing that the move from the ontic to the ontological operates in terms of being in the flesh as well as being in time. When it comes to carnal hermeneutics as such, Merleau-Ponty goes further and deeper than Heidegger in my view.

J

You mention that olfactory sensation played a great role in colonial ideologies. Is this ultimately a problem for tact, or one from which only tact can save us? What would it mean to decolonize tact?

R

I think we need to decolonize all of our senses. If the senses are hermeneutic, we're always evaluating. We might ask, "What is a good color?" If you're a colonial arriving in the "New World," the color to be celebrated is white. Christ is considered white, angels are in white, and colonial rulers are white. The devil is black, and the colonized people are black. I'm speaking, then, in black and white terms. There's a hermeneutic valuation of the way we see in terms of colors. That evaluation operates also in terms of what's touchable and what's untouchable, what's edible and inedible, what is deemed a good or foul odor. Take for instance in the case of India where you have the "untouchables." The Dalits. The lowest castes. You don't touch them. Going back to colonization, there's also in each case a religion brought by the

colonizers. Their God, their highest good, is also untouchable. You know, you don't touch the Eucharist or the sacred statues. You don't touch or see or have a carnal experience as such of God the Father or of Yahweh. These are the intangibles. The colonizer lays out what you can touch and what you cannot touch. From top to bottom. There is a colonial hierarchy of tangibility, involving issues of power and privilege. True tact would try to decolonize and deconstruct such discriminatory binaries.

In *Touch* I don't go into smell or the olfactory sense much, but I was taken by an article of a colleague of mine at Boston College, Joseph Nugent. He looked at the way smell was related to a colonial hermeneutics concerning what was considered malodorous and fragrant. In his brilliant essay, called "Snout," Nugent cites how, at a certain point in the 18th-19th-Century, as Ireland was moving from a Gaelic culture to an Anglophone culture, passing through devastating famine and emigration, there was a seminary called Maynooth. It was established for the education of priests. The new priests, then, were being instructed by an Anglicized Victorian culture which involved a certain moral puritanism, whereas Celtic culture had been more natural concerning questions of the body. In a traditional Irish parlor, there would have been animals. Animals weren't taboo. You could have them coming in and out of the house. It was deemed a grand thing to have a "pig in the parlor." It meant you were generous and wealthy, and you would share your food with people. But in terms of the colonial olfactory hermeneutic, the pig in the parlor suddenly became a sign of abject backwardness, poverty, and social illegitimacy. Animal odors were banished from the house and the peasants were purified, sanitized, that is – civilized. The natives were cultivated, saved from the smells of nature.

J

You had mentioned before that Platonism puts great emphasis on the sense of sight. But when did the Western philosophical tradition become overdetermined by that? When did the tradition become occulocentric?

R

Well, in *Touch*, I put it (too simply) down to Plato. In the *Cratylus*, he defines man, *anthropos*, as the one who looks up; the one who removes his/her gaze from nature. And this optocentricism, this privileging of sight over all the other senses, especially over touch, becomes a key motif in mainstream Platonic metaphysics. A prejudice in favor of the visual and the visible, which in turn becomes a central prejudice of official western Christianity – following Nietzsche's quip that "Christianity is Platonism for the people" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface). Perhaps it's a bit schematic, like Heidegger's notion of logocentrism or Derrida's notion of phonocentrism. But it follows the basic story of western metaphysics as something that begins through Plato and continues down to twentieth century optocentrism. There are always exceptions to his broad narrative, as I acknowledge in *Touch* when I cite examples of thinkers from medieval pantheists and Renaissance humanists, to certain modern empiricists, romantics, and vitalists, who recognize a key role of the more carnal, tactile, pre-visual senses.

I have another thought about the colonial question of how we hermeneutically, pre-reflectively, carnally discriminate between what is eligible and what is ineligible, desirable and undesirable. As an Irishman, I was always struck by how the English accent represented propriety, privilege, and power. We call it the "Queen's English" in Ireland and other colonized countries in the British Empire. Ireland was part of the

Empire until the 1916 Rising and subsequent War of Independence. Native accents, and especially those approximating to the indigenous Gaelic language itself, were looked down upon. This was an exercise of an auditory carnal bias where the linguistic pronunciation and intonation would define someone as "cultured" or not. In so-called "posh schools" in colonized countries, whether it was India or Ireland or wherever, pupils would be taught to speak the "Queen's English" and if they didn't they paid the price. It's interesting that this is something, again, that's not written in a manual, but belongs to a sort of unspoken prejudice (what Gadamer calls hermeneutic "prejudgment"). It doesn't sound right, it doesn't smell right, it doesn't feel right – that's how carnal hermeneutics works in a discriminatory way. There are all kinds of implicit evaluations and orientations at work in our embodied relations to others, for good or ill. The positive and negative are operative in the way we perceive the world – the way we carnally and tactfully interpret our being with others.

J

It seems that, regarding touch, authentic Christianity never really becomes occulocentric, at least concerning things like the resurrection of the flesh. It seems to me that it was the Gnostic interpretation of Christianity that brought that about. Would that be fair to say?

R

It would be fair to say that Gnosticism brings about the dissociation of spirit from body. The gnostic teaching of Docetism, for example, basically denies the carnality of Christ and the sacredness of tactile experience. It claims that Christ himself was a spirit who was only using the body. Incarnation as world made flesh was basically just an illusion, a disguise. Gnosticism holds that Christ was only embodied by proxy and that on the cross he never really suffered, because as pure divine spirit he could not suffer. Only the human body suffers; the divine as such is not subject to suffering. This Platonic-Orphic-Gnostic strain in Christianity never really went away. Irenaeus tried to rectify it and remind people that the Word was made flesh, and that Christ healed by touching, and that the body is resurrected; not just in the spirit – but in body. I offer a reading of the radical carnality of Christ in *Touch* that, I think, goes against the grain of much official doctrinaire Christianity: a dualist doctrine which pits the soul against the body, punishing the flesh as a carrier of evil inclinations.

Certainly, in the Catholic culture where I grew up, almost all the sins were sins of the flesh. Such sins were obsessively penalized and often associated with women. Contraception was a sin, masturbation was a sin, sex outside of marriage was a sin, single motherhood was a sin, abortion was a sin. This punishment of the body, seeing the flesh as something negative and fallen, was part of a popular Jansenism in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Such an anti-carnal puritanism was prevalent in a lot of Church teaching – Catholic and Protestant. And in this manner, ironically, the Christian religion of in-carnation became one of ex-carnation. So, I thought it was time to challenge this prejudice and revisit the original carnality and tactility of Christ in *Touch*. I'm not saying the sacredness of the flesh was completely forgotten for 2000 years – e.g. it was kept alive in the practice of the eucharist and corporal mercy – but it was certainly marginalized and neglected. Which is why a certain theological hermeneutic re-reading of the flesh is called for.

J

I'm going to condense two questions for the purpose of time, so we can talk about *Salvage*. You write in *Touch* as if the phenomenon of touch is originally benevolent or helpful. Something like abusive touch would be a perversion of this. But what is it that leads you to the idea that touch, in its original instantiation, is good as opposed to neutral? Is it that the original beneficence has to do with the ana- structure? Can we think about it in terms of ana-carnation? Is it because our senses always have to return to carnality, which is already presupposed in everything we already sensibly and intelligibly do? Or is there another reason you say that touch is good as opposed to neutral, or not good?

R

My wager, and it's a hermeneutic wager, about touch being benign and healing; about touch being on the side of health and happiness, is actually pretty Aristotelian. Aristotle was a good phenomenologist in recognizing the primacy of touch. If flesh is a medium, it goes both ways. It's subjective and objective, bilateral, reversible, recursive, it's ana- in all those senses. It's ana-carnation. That's just the way it is, unlike with the other senses which can be unilateral to the extent that they remove themselves from touch. But such removal is secondary and derivative. We begin with synesthesia. From the beginning touch is working through all the other senses. "I touch you with my gaze/I see you with my skin," as the poet says. It is only subsequently that some of the senses are separated out and become unilateral and imposing. But that goes against our fundamental sensibility, our primary way of being in the world. Tact is simply coming back into our natural condition as beings who touch and are touched at the same time.

Let me try to spell this out a bit more. To the extent that we abstract or isolate any of our senses from touch – denying our tactile reversibility vis-à-vis nature – we think we have control over nature. This practice is typical of the anthropocentrism; of the Anthropocene. In my recent works like *Touch* and *Anacarnation* and *Hosting Earth*, I am calling for a new Symbioscene. Based on our primary symbiotic relations with others and with nature. What happens with abusive touch, which is rampant all over the place, is that touch loses touch with touch, in the sense of reversibility and mutuality. In abuse, you become unilateral in imposing your tactile power over another. You ignore the other. Touch is no longer active/passive. It loses its sense of receptivity to the other (the receptivity that keeps us vulnerable, attentive, attuned) and becomes purely active. That is why anthropocentrism so often expresses itself as voluntaristic power going in one direction. It is pure will to power which has become insensitive to the needs, desires, sufferings and realities of the other person (human or non-human). As Aristotle says, touch makes us intelligent because it makes us sensible – namely, sensitive to whom or what is different from us, open to the feelings of others, hospitable to strangers, empathetic. That's what is absent in unilateral touch – harassment, violence, torture, rape. They are all tactile acts, but they are abuses of touch that have betrayed its basic function as mutuality, reversibility, reciprocity. As a medium, touch is always between the inside and the outside; the self and the other. To break that mediation of mutuality means to lose touch with the world.

J

I have a few questions on your novel, *Salvage*. In the book, there's one scene where Maeve expresses the idea of holiness in everything. And Seamus quizzically responds, "God in a dog?

That's a bit much" (161). To which Maeve says, "It's not really about knowing anything. It's about touching something, feeling something, you just sense it" (161). Am I wrong in thinking that the main character in your novel is touch or tact?

R

I think you are perhaps right, though I didn't ever think of it like that. Then again, when I wrote *Salvage*, I didn't really think about anything. I suppose I was in touch with my feelings, my intuition, my sensibility, which means the landscape and seascape around me. The people around me in West Cork, Ireland were speaking through me. I was eavesdropping, channeling, at best. That meant being in touch with that place: the *genius loci* of that place, which I hope I've captured in some way.

It's not explicitly a philosophical novel. But since it's come out, there've been quite a few reviews that have tried to link it to my philosophy. It's funny how the *Harvard Review, The Japan Mission Journal, The Journal of Irish Studies* and others have given philosophical and theological readings to it. They've seen how carnal hermeneutics and ana-carnation are echoed in the novel. You've suggested that the sense is central to the novel, and I think you're right. But I wasn't aware of that. I wasn't even aware of what the title meant until I was asked in a radio interview, "Why did you choose the title?" And I said, "Because these are fishermen who live off of the salvage on this Island, and it's set in the second World War, when Allied ships are being sunk by German submarines, and the local islanders are living off the salvage." That's one of the opening scenes of the book – the father getting the Harris Tweed coat off a shipwreck. But then I realized it's actually much more than the literal sense of living off salvage at sea, but the other sense were subconscious. It also means salvaging the community, which is under threat, being faced with the imminent loss of the language, the native healing and wisdom, the local names and namesakes. All that lore and layered transgenerational memory and tradition that is about to be lost – is it to be salvaged? A whole way of living in the world that is tactile and tangible – the vivid experience of the sacredness of nature – is about to be lost. Or to use the technical philosophical term, pantheism: divinity running though all living things. This is the *deus currens* of the Celtic philosophers like Erigena and Pelagius and even Duns Scotus with his notion of *haecceitas*. All these thinkers had a sense of God in all things, the univocity of being. But that is now on the verge of being lost. Maeve embodies it in her healing ways, in her native tact and savvy and flair. But can it survive? Can she survive?

Salvage cleaves to an endangered Gaelic culture that cries out to be salvaged. The names, the stories, the sufferings, the unfulfilled and betrayed desires. Retrieving ancestral wisdom for the present. It's not going back. There is no going back. It's a way of rereading the past for the future. And the salvaging of touch is central to that.

J

Maeve says to Seamus at one point, "Aren't bodies minds too" (184)? I'm presuming that it wouldn't have worked as well if she had said, "Aren't minds bodies too?" But why not? Is there an intention to that word order? I guess given what you've just said, these questions are philosophically grafted onto the novel. So, I apologize if I'm overdoing it.

R

There wasn't any intention behind the word order as far as I am aware. Like the first question, "It's news to me!" But on the other hand, yes – it rings true. The hermeneutics of touch talks about the primordiality of the tactile. Our intelligence comes from our sensibility. I'm against dualism, as all phenomenology is, because the phenomenon precedes the subject-object distinction and the inner-outer distinction and, therefore, the body-mind distinction. But insofar as we are in a post-Cartesian world, we live with dualism and binary opposites. So, if Maeve is going to make a plea for the unity of body and mind, it makes sense for her to start with the body and work up, rather than start with the mind and work down. What Western philosophy has done with the mind-body problem is to begin with the mind and then ask how it connects with the body. That's doing it the wrong way around. Of course, you can come at it that way. Husserl, like Descartes and Kant before him, starts with the conscious mind, and then moves towards the body – only to discover that it was there all the time! But once he rediscovers the body, he sees that touch is primary at all levels of our sensible experience and acknowledges that there would be no empathy or inter-subjectivity without it. In short, Husserl starts from a Cartesian-Kantian standpoint – in the *Cartesian Meditations* for example – and then has the problem of how to get from transcendental idealism back to contact and tactful relations with others; what in his later work he calls the life-world (*Lebenswelt)*. But phenomenology does find its way back. He's coming from mind to body, while Maeve is going from body to mind.

J

Maeve is preserving the knowledge and practices of Brigid, the saint of midwifery. It all comes down to touch for her. Is touch what is mostly salvaged in your book?

R

Yes. I do think that touch is salvaged. But along with touch, there is a contemporaneous and simultaneous salvaging of nature, and of the divine in nature (pantheism, although the word is never used in the book). There is a moment when Seamus, a young medical student and Maeve's lover, asks: "Have you ever heard of the Peking Man and the discovery of his skull in China?" (160) And he mentions Pierre de Chardin, the French anthropologist and a Jesuit, who wrote a famous piece called, "Mass of the Earth" after celebrating the Eucharist with atheist scientists in China. He claimed that everyone can be a concelebrant of the sacred ceremony of the earth. The Earth *is* the Eucharist, and that's Maeve's view. She hasn't read De Chardin, she doesn't know theology or philosophy. She's a sixteen-year-old, Irish speaking, schoolgirl in the 1950s. She thinks and feels from the ground up. And in retrieving touch, Maeve is also making a personal carnal plea for everything that goes with tactile experience – her relationship with nature, her body, sexuality, and, of course, the healing powers of medicine.

Maeve's relationship with Seamus involves their practicing the two different forms of healing. There's the folk vernacular medicine of plants and nature, which Maeve uses without ever using the word. This might be linked with the ancient Greek healing of Asclepius who, like Maeve, worked in a cave using special plants and music and animal dreams. Maeve uses psychoactive mushrooms known in Gaelic as *pucaí* against the sadness. The word *púca* (pookah in English) always means a shape shifter. It's something that changes your mind and your body. But such ancient Celtic healing practices were considered too "pagan" by the Anglican and Catholic

churches, and with the loss of the old Celtic Christianity – namely the rule of Columba for six hundred years – and later of the Gaelic language itself after the Great Famine of the 1840s, the practice of natural healing through water and herbs was threatened. The word *Gael*, as in Gaelic, originally comes from *goidheil*, meaning "forest dweller." The Irish were forest dwellers before the English came and cut down the woods to build their navy under Henry VIII. And forests were full of psychoactive mushrooms. That's all part of Maeve's medical inheritance from her father and forefathers. When she encounters Seamus she encounters modern medicine. Hence the dramatic tension between her natural indigenous folk healing – under the auspices of Brigid and Asklepius – and Seamus' Hippocratic science of healing. But I won't give the end away.

J

This connects well with my final question. Do you think it's possible to find a way to combine Brigid and Hippocrates, as Maeve at one point says she wants to do?

R

I think Maeve is saying we have to try. We need both kinds of healing if we are to save not just our suffering human bodies but nature itself. We have to be "edge-walkers," like Maeve, walking between tradition and modernity. And this is where *Salvage* chimes with the concluding appeal of *Touch* for an ambidextrous, symbiotic approach to the double sense of the digital (as carnality and code, as flesh and word). We are not going to solve the crises of contemporary pandemics without the help of medical technology and pharmacology. We require laboratory engineered vaccinations as well as natural healing. We need all that Hippocrates can offer us, which is management of pain and the scientific skills to intervene surgically. But we must not, for all that, lose touch with the Asklepian methods of healing through empathic tact and interpersonal contact.

Two of my brothers are doctors who have tried to combine both approaches. My brother Michael is a palliative care doctor who uses the Asklepian "bedside manner" – being present to the patient's pain and emotions – as well as the Hippocratic practice of pain control through pharmaceutical intervention. My other brother, Peter, is a cardiologist who deploys digital imaging technology and laser surgery while also insisting that personal, carnal contact with each individual patient significantly accelerates and improves the healing process. The Celtic Brigid and the Greek Asklepius share the same ancient truth – you heal people by touching them. Maeve lives out that wisdom.

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Notes on contributors

Richard Kearney is the Charles B. Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles and of over 24 books on European philosophy and literature. In addition, he has edited or co-edited 21 volumes. He was formerly a member of the Arts Council of Ireland, the Higher Education Authority of Ireland and chairman of the Irish School of Film at University College Dublin. His books include: *The Wake of Imagination* (1988), *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2002), and *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (2004).

Jeffrey A. Bernstein is a Professor of Philosophy at the College of the Holy Cross. His publications include *Leo Strauss on the Borders of Judaism, Philosophy, and History* (2015) and the co-edited volume *Leo Strauss and Contemporary Thought: Reading Strauss Outside the Lines* (2021) both published by SUNY Press.

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Richard Kearney
Department of Philosophy, Boston College, Boston, Massachusetts, USA
kearneyr@bc.edu

Jeffrey Bernstein
Department of Philosophy, the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA
jbernste@holycross.edu

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