This book explores boundaries and the unknown, where reason and fantasy flow, a place where we are insecure and face challenges and where we can encounter our monsters. This place is the place of fracture within the human psyche.

We mostly try to evade the otherness of these boundary places often projecting our fear onto others in the act of scapegoating and blaming them.

There are ways of exploring this borderland through art, religion, psychoanalysis and philosophy, be it practical wisdom, reflective judgement or interpretive models. But we find the strangers, monsters and gods resurfacing through cultures in ways that command our attention. Kearney believes that the project of the Enlightenment will remain unenlightened until it comes to terms with strangers, gods and monsters. We need new interpretive models of understanding melancholy – our angst must be faced.

Many are attracted to films that propagate the death instinct through depicting violence. Nationalism and fundamentalism can screen this violence. We like to see the baddies get their ‘come-uppance’. We think we are protecting ourselves by seeing violence in the other, whereas we need to build a bridge between our own better self and that which is other and dark within ourselves as well as the strange other in the world. It is necessary to trace interconnections between the poles of sameness and strangeness – to discover relationship through bridge building, whilst respecting border limits that defer final answers. This is not a narrative of totality or closure and calls for judgement.

The same approach can be taken for both our inner and outer exploration. A valid sense of self-hood and strangeness can co-exist that respects gods and acknowledges monsters. Symbolic imagination is necessary in order to acknowledge ourselves as oneself-as-another. Kearney uses a method which he calls ‘diacritical hermeneutics). In his writing he uses the word hermeneutics often meaning an interpretation of what he discovers. But he also uses the words discernment and judgement often too and this gives a grounded wholeness to his writing. He balances his thoughts and those of others with the openness that his method allows.

He feels that this third book of the trilogy is exploring the role of ‘philosophy at the limit’ and I think this is spot on. It addresses the diverse experiences of human estrangement by hermeneutic retrieval of selfhood through an ‘Odyssey of otherness’ and it does offer a lifelong journeying of discovery through encounter and relationship.

Kearney believes that human groups have blamed others for their ills throughout history. There seems to be need to cast out what is unholy and monstrous, removing traces of evil. Strangers have to be scapegoated in order to define a group’s identity. We have created a world of dualities: sacred and profane, order and chaos etc. But
still the monster (strangers) keep coming back so the social purgation and persecution go on. A genuinely peaceful community would be one without need for scapegoating. Demonising monsters or strangers keeps God on our side and this seems part of the Judaic/Christian/Islamic traditions. We are the ones who perpetuate the idea of the other stranger being monstrous through film and television.

To put an end to scapegoating we could begin by understanding our own monsters better and learn to live with them. We need a middle way.

Openness to the Other is called justice and absolute hospitality. However, we always need to exercise discernment between malign and benign other, without which it is nigh impossible to take considered ethical action. We also need to recognise the difference between enabling and disabling forms of alterity.

The genealogy of evil is addressed. There are four categories at work: mythology, scriptural, metaphysical and anthropology. Then we need to take a threefold approach: Practical understanding: working through: pardon. Forgiveness gives a future to the past.

He addresses terror through interpreting the horrors of 9/11 and Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

The former was named, by both sides, a religious war/Jihad. For President Bush and many Americans Bin Laden was the outcast. To Bin Laden the Twin Towers were a symbol of evil, a capitalist monster. For Bush, Bind Laden was seen as evil and monstrous in himself and in his actions. Many on both sides used the term crusade. The TV’s response was obsessional with many repetitions of the disaster being relayed over and over again. Rather than the approach, which Kearney feels is needed, that of: practical understanding: working through: and pardon: war resulted and in hindsight most people question whether war has made the world a safer and better place or only increased the likelihood of further violence.

Shakespeare wrote ‘Hamlet’ some time after losing his son. In the play we see Hamlet’s suppressed memories return. The play is about a secret that Hamlet is trying to uncover. It demonstrates how mourning has been sublimated in literature. Melancholy brings Hamlet and us to the limits of reason as the extremes of mania and despair are struggled with. We either succumb to inner dark or turn it into song as Shakespeare does. Life stories are held together by our historical imagination. It is ethically and poetically right to remember and we must bear witness to history. We must not flee the shadow at the heart of existence but must face up to the terrors of the world and put an end to our fear. ‘Perfect love casts out fear’.

In his Conclusion, Kearney writes, that we try to recover the ‘yes of joy in the sorrow of the finite’. We know our own story will end. Religious pluralism can be embraced. Discernment is essential in our conversation with the Other, but it is very important
to avoid judgementalism and its opposite relativism in our dialogue but with a diacritical hermeneutic we can do more justice to the Other.

(I have continued to use Kearney’s term ‘diacritical hermeneutic’ as it fits so much better his method of approach than anything I might replace it with)