The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology

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CHAPTER 21

Transfiguring God

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Richard Kearney is at home on both sides of the Atlantic, as Professor of Philosophy at University College, Dublin, and Visiting European Professor at Boston College. He is at home also with several academic disciplines and a number of foreign languages. Putting to one side his ventures into novel writing and a number of volumes on Irish history (social and literary), his work engages in cross-faculty dialogues between continental philosophy, literary theory, theology, and cultural studies. Many were introduced both to him and to the influential work coming out of post-World War II France through his important book *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester, 1984). There, in discussion with Kearney, were five French philosophers working with a phenomenological heritage from Husserl and Heidegger. This heritage has, since Schleiermacher, always retained a close relationship to hermeneutics, and hermeneutical issues surface throughout. The dialogue as a form offers itself as a reflection upon the relationship between phenomenology and hermeneutics, raising questions concerning the spoken and the written, the writer and the reader. The last chapter of *Dialogues* begins an investigation into the philosophy of dialogue which has since preoccupied Kearney. Dialogue, dialectic, and hermeneutical reappropriation have been among his dominant philosophical, ethical, and theological concerns. They opened a space for thinking through the processes of the imagination and the relationship between ethics and poetics. In books composed between 1988 and 1995 Kearney provided us with genealogical, philosophical, aesthetic, and ethical accounts of the modern and postmodern imagination. But his task was not simply descriptive. In *The Wake of the Imagination* (London, 1988), *Poetics of Imagining* (London, 1991), and *The Poetics of Modernity: Towards a Hermeneutic Imagination* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1995), Kearney has made manifest a certain bankruptcy of postmodern construal of the imagination, while emphasizing the creative potential of imagining.
other possible worlds. The possibility of reconciling ethics and poetics lies within the faculty of the imagination, and it is at this point that theological investigations begin.

Certain figures remain central to his thinking, among them Heidegger, Ricoeur, Levinas, and Derrida. Each, in their own way, wrestle with theological questions. Kearney (himself a practicing Catholic) has been sensitive to these theological struggles, as shown in Dialogues by some of the questions put to continental thinkers like Levinas and Derrida. The theological imagination is itself explored in the first part of The Wake of the Imagination, and in developing his account of hermeneutic imagination (and Heidegger’s construal of poietical dwelling) Kearney speaks directly of the theological reconciliation between ethics and poetics: “Surely an eschatology of divine justice (if it exists) demands that ethics and poetics be reconciled? Such a demand is the proper task of hermeneutic imagination” (ibid, p. 64). The parenthetical “if” is coy, for his project has involved excavating the utopian potential of the imagination, its transcendental possibilities, its capacity to invent other worlds, even eschatological kingdoms. He has wanted to bear testimony, through his readings, to the transcendent. Imaginative testimonial can transform – transform by transfiguring.

The association of eschatology with transfigurative possibility lies at the heart of the more explicitly theological reflections in the essay contributed to this volume, As Kearney points out, the essay develops thoughts that lay in his French book Poétique du possible (Paris, 1984). It brings together and exemplifies Kearney’s phenomenological approach, concern with ethics, interpretive engagement (with a biblical text), and theological enquiry. Countermanding the simulations and simulacra of postmodernity, what is offered (attentive to several poststructuralist voices) is an imaginative possibility, “a personalism of the icon against the cultism of the idol.” This brings him closer to the work of Maritn than probably anyone else represented in this volume.

For William J. Richardson

I say more: the just man justices;
keeps grace: that keeps all his going graces:
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is –
Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”

I propose to explore here the theme of transfiguration, first in terms of a phenomenology of the persona, and then with more specific reference to the transfiguration of Christ on Mt. Tabor (Mark 9, Matthew 17, Luke 9, John 12). Finally, I will look at some contemporary debates on the transfigured God before offering my own reflections on this enigma during a recent Pascal visit to Israel.
Figure of the Other: Persona

Each person has a persona. Persona is that eschatological aura of "possibility" which outstrips but informs a person's actual presence here and now. It is another word for the otherness of the other. At a purely phenomenological level, persona is all that in the other which exceeds my searching gaze, safeguarding their inimitable and unique singularity. It is what escapes me towards a past that I cannot recover and a future I cannot predict. It resides, if it resides anywhere, beyond the intentional horizons of retention and protention. Beyond, therefore, both the presenting consciousness of perception here and now and the presentifying consciousness of imagination (with its attempts to reassimilate and foresee what resists intuition, albeit in the fictional mode of as-if). The persona of the other even defies the names and categories of signifying consciousness. It is beyond consciousness tout court.

This is what Levinas names la trace d'autrui; what Derrida calls the spectral enigma of "alterity"; what in most religions goes, quite simply but often quite misleadingly, by the term "spirit" (pneuma/animal/âme/Geist). I will endeavor to develop the notion of persona here in terms of a radical eschatology of transfiguration, first sketched out in chapter 8 of my Poétique du possible (1984).¹

We never encounter another without at the same time configuring them in some manner. To configure the other as a persona is to grasp him/her as present in absence, as both incarnate in flesh and transcendent in time. To accept this paradox is to transfigure the other, allowing this other to appear as his/her unique persona. To refuse this paradox, opting instead to regard someone as pure presence (thing) or pure absence (nothing), is to defigure the other.

To be sure, this is not an easy matter. The other always appears to us "as if" it was actually present. And it is all too tempting to ignore the "as if" proviso and presume to have the other literally before us, to appropriate them to our scheme of things, reading them off against our familiar models of understanding and identification. (Especially since the otherness of the other is not located some where else, e.g., in some Platonic heaven of pure forms.) Accepting the other as a "stranger" in our midst here and now is an uncanny and often threatening experience, as Kristeva reminds us.² Far easier to take the other as given, to take him/her for granted, as no more than what we can grasp - following the logic: what you see is what you get. For if it is true to say that we do somehow "see" the persona in the face of the person, we never get it. It always exceeds the limits of our capturing gaze. It transcends us.

Or, going to the other extreme, it is easier too to mistake the other's persona for an idol than accept it as an icon of transcendence.³ In this case, the "as if" presence of the persona is suspended in the interests of deification or apotheosis: a phenomenon not confined to religious idolatry (where an ordinary human person is revered as a divinity) but also evidenced daily in the cult of stardom (where Madonna replaces the Madonna...). Just think of Andy Warhol's
multi-series of famous faces. We defigure others not just by ignoring their transcendence but equally by ignoring their flesh-and-blood thereness. There is a thin line, of course, between seeking to capture the other as divine (qua idol) and receiving the divine through the other (qua icon). But thin lines are no excuse for confusion or fusion. They call rather for acute hermeneutic vigilance. Because the persona is at once so near and so far, we easily fall for the lure of possession.

The enigma of the persona as presence–absence is usually betrayed in the name of some fictitious totality. Such betrayal derives from the fact that the fictitious character of this “totality” is unacknowledged. We simply forget the as-if strategy that effects the illusion of full presence. We succumb to literalism (masking the figural in the literal). Or what amounts to the same thing, curiously, in this instance: fetishism. For both literalism and fetishism conflate the orders of the possible and the actual, the fictional and the empirical. A strange convergence this, witnessed in the surprising collusion in our time between the ostensibly opposite movements of positivism and postmodernism. Or in the religious world, between fundamentalism and New Ageism. But more on this below.

We live more and more under the eclipse of the “as if.” Which doesn’t mean the “as if” no longer functions. It might even be argued that it functions more effectively today than ever to the extent that it operates behind our backs, unknownst to us: a process of concealment actually abetted by our postmodern culture of simulation. Indeed, as critics of ideology from Marx to Ricoeur have observed: ideology is a “false consciousness” which, like the camera obscura, works by inversion, in the dark, to give us what seems like a perfectly believable illusion.

Ideological lies hide themselves and gain power from this stealth. One doesn’t have to look far for examples of this. One finds it recurring, on the scale of persons, in the wild obsessions of fans and fanatics, ranging from stalker- and voyeur-fantasies to the mass-media apotheosis of certain figures of power, fame, and charisma (a postmodern version of the Personality Cult). But it doesn’t have to be a human person. Nations, states, and empires have also been subject to idolatrous personifications (e.g., the sacralizing cults of national security, sovereignty, and territory). Here too we find defiguering practices.

**Persona as Eschaton**

What characterizes the eschatological notion of persona, by contrast, is that it vouchsafes the irreducible finality of the other as eschaton. I stress, as eschaton not as telos. And I understand eschaton here precisely in the sense of an end without end – an end that escapes and surprises us, like a thief in the night – rather than as the closing completion of some immanent teleological striving. Eschatologically considered, the persona of the person brings home to us that we have no power over her/him. Or as Levinas puts it, “nous ne pouvons plus pouvoir.” The eschaton, as persona, is precisely the other’s future possibles which
are impossible for me (to realize, possess, grasp). The vertical "may-be" of the other is irreducible to my set of possibilities or powers. That is why "the future is that which is not grasped . . . the relation with the future is the relation with the other." In other words, if we could figure out – in the sense of knowing and appropriating – the other's persona, it would no longer be other. We would have denied the other's temporality, futurity, alterity. We would literally have them. But the otherness of the other is precisely that which cannot be had, however much we fool ourselves into thinking it can. Just when it seems we hold it in our hands, it invariably absents and absolves itself, resisting the lure of totalized presence. "The relation with the other is the absence of the other; not absence pure and simple, not absence as pure nothing [néant], but absence in a futural horizon, an absence which is time." It is in this temporal sense that we might say that the persona is both younger and older than its person, preexisting and postponing the seizure of presence (qua sum of identifiable and totalizable properties).

The persona is there where there is no one ("il y a une persona là où il n'y a personne"). It is the no-place that a person takes the place of, but it does not itself take place. Yet it does give place to the person and without it the person could not take its place. It is the non-presence that allows presence to happen in the here and now as a human person appearing to me in flesh and blood. It is the quasi-condition of the other remaining other to me even as he/she stands before me in this moment. "Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men's faces."

But the persona is also there to remind us – spectrally, anachronically, messianically – that there is always something more to flesh and blood than flesh and blood. Hence the inevitable frustration of the torturer, so acutely observed by Sartre, when he discovers that the tortured is dead but unvanquished: the torturer now has a corpse (Korper) in his hands but he has lost precisely that which he was seeking to subject – the free transcendence incarnate in that person's living body (Leib). The tortured persona escapes the torturer.

The persona also escapes, in a more banal sense, my everyday attempts – often quite benevolent – to turn it into an alter-ego. Hence the futility of Husserl's attempts in the fifth of his Cartesian Meditations to ground intersubjective relations in an imaginative projection of one ego onto another. What he describes in his efforts to eschew the solipsism of the transcendental I is a reciprocating process of apperception, appropriation, pairing, and empathy (Aneignung/Paarung/Einfühlung). And we thus realize that it is not only I–It relations of crude coercion that compromise the irreducible alterity of the other's persona. Such compromise can take the form of symmetrical I–Thou relations as well. Especially where the Thou plays the role of another I: my mirror-image, my own ego in drag. The other as myself by proxy.

Time and again we seek to appropriate the other's persona as if it could be magically conjured in its present-at-hand thereeness (Vorhandensein). We even lose ourselves in jouissance in the hope that ecstasy can make us one with the other. But it cannot. The other will never be me, or even like me. Whence the
shock, for example, of a spouse reading his partner’s private diary and discovering he never really knew the person (that is, persona) he lived with for so many years. Whence also the post-coital tristesse that derives from the awareness that no amount of intimacy can ever give us the other. It does give us something of course — the other person, in all their delightful givenness, but not the other’s persona.

And so, in a curious reversal of tradition, we note here that it is the transcendent persona who marks the uniquely differentiating character of the finite person rather than the contrary. For us, while the “person” is a token of sameness (idem) — all that is statistically, logically, metrically, anatomically computable and therefore comparable in the order of like-with-like — it is the persona who is guarantor of alterity. The persona tells us more about the person than can be captured on an ID card or identikit.

You can fake a person’s ID but never their persona. Despite the most ingenious efforts, you can never quite take on another’s persona. Anymore than you can imitate their fingerprint. The body, lest we forget Merleau-Ponty’s and Marcel’s reminders, is the primary locus of incarnate persona. It inscribes a singular style and manner of existing that is unique to each person. Whence Merleau-Ponty’s quip about the transcending-transfiguring nature of the body-subject: “perception already stylizes.” Even our most involuntary alimentary and libidinal functions — ingestion, excretion, copulation — have their symbolic charge, as psychoanalysis reminds us; and as religious apologetics sometimes forgets. Contrary to spiritualist illusions, the persona is not some disembodied soul. It gives itself in and through the incarnate body. Just as it absolves or withholds itself. There and not there (but never somewhere else). Lovely in limbs and eyes. Through the features of faces.

Beyond Fusion

But the self-defeating endeavor to fuse with the other is not always carnal, or even personal. The unconscious has countless ruses up its sleeve to transfer libidinal drives onto sublimated, impersonal Figures. The Eternal Feminine, the Sovereign-as-Fetiche, the Phallic Sujet-supposé-savoir, the Replacement Lost Object (petit-a), and so on. All examples of refusing singular individuated others in the name of some totalizing One: the Same-One who is, at bottom, no more than the sum of our ideal ego-fantasies. The transcendent persona is thereby reduced to the Person-as-Phallus. And there is no more eligible candidate, one might add, in that the persona, like the elusive Phallus, is never present as full presence, is never all there so to speak. The big difference is, however, that the persona gives, calls, loves, solicits — and, as Levinas reminds us, forbids murder. The Phallus does not. Indeed the Phallus does nothing at all, for the Phallus does not care. Unlike the persona, the Phallus does not exist. That is the difference between Lacan and Levinas. So near and yet so far.
A more benign, but no less compromising, version of the idealized-fetishized persona is to be found in Plato’s theory of eros where the object desired is, at best, no more than an exemplification of an idea. In the Symposium Plato invokes the idea of Beauty which is always one and the same (like the permanent Oneness of divine agathon which it reflects). The so-called Platonic love which reveres a woman as exemplary instance of the Eternal Feminine is not a love of the other’s unique singularity (persona) but love of the Self-Same-One. We thus participate in the Self-Loving-Love of the eternal telos, approximating to the divine condition of Aristotle’s Self-Thinking-Thought or scholastic Self-Causing-Cause (ens causae sui); but we lose the alterity of the other person in the process. What we gain on ideal roundabouts we lose on the real swings.

The stakes are high. For what we are contrasting here is the eschatological relation of one-for-the-other with the onto-theological relation of one-for-one, or if you prefer, of the one-for-itself-in-itself. The latter comprises a long logos-centric tradition running from certain aspects of Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Heidegger. And the political implications of this legacy are not always propitious. As Levinas points out: “Plato constructed a Republic which must imitate the world of Ideas... and on this basis the ideal of the social will be sought in an ideal of fusion. One will assume that the subject relates to the other by identifying with him, collapsing into a collective representation, into a common ideality.”

Against this fusionary universalism of the Same-One, we might oppose the eschatological universality of the Different-Other. This second universality is ethical to the extent that it is conceived in terms of a possible coexistence of unique personas, whose singular transcendence is in each case vouchsafed. That such a universality remains a “possibility” still to be attained—still heralding from an infinitely open future—resists the temptation of the Same-One already present: a recipe for acquiescence in the security of the accomplished. The fact that universal justice and love is an eschatological possible still-to-come creates a sense of urgency and exigency, inviting each person to strive for its instantiation, however partial and particular, in any given situation.

To put this in theological language, we might say that the eschatological universal holds out the promise of a perichoretic interplay of infinitely differing personas, meeting without fusing, communing without totalizing, discoursing without dissolving. A sort of divine circum(c/s)essio of the trinitarian kingdom: a no-place which may one day be and where each persona cedes its place to its other (cedere) even as they sit down together (sedere). The Latins knew what they were about when they played on the semantic ambidexterity of the c/s as alternative spellings of the phonetically identical root term cessio/sessio. They knew about the bi-valent promise of persona as both there and not there, absence—presence, transcendence—inmanence, visible—invisible. But the eschaton is just that: a promise not a fait accompli. A possibility of the future to come, impossible in the present where the allure of total presence risks reigning supreme. As such, the eschatological persona defies my power—even if I have all the weapons in the world and it has none. The persona transfigures me before I configure it.
And to the extent that I avow and accord this assymetrical priority to the other, I am transfigured by that particular persona and empowered to transfigure in turn – that is, to figure the other in their otherness.

The assymetrical priority of the other’s persona over my person (qua ego-cogito-cogitans) finds expression in the fact that the other comes to me not as some figure-intuition – a presenting-presentifying fullness responding to my intentional consciousness – but as a figure-face (figure-visage) which shatters my intentional horizons. The face of the persona disfigures me before I countenance it. Which is another way of saying that the persona never actually appears in so far as it has already come (and gone, leaving only its trace) or is still to come, preceding and exceeding every figuration on my part. It hails and haunts me before I even begin to represent it as if it were present before me.15

These idioms of “already,” “prior,” “before,” “after,” and “still to come” signal a new kind of temporality – a specifically ethical time. This ethical relation expresses itself in the temporal extasis of the ego towards the other who surpasses it, responding to the call of the persona issued from a time which antecedes my beginning and exceeds my end. That is why the persona assumes the form of an achronic figure-visage that disrupts and obsesses me before and after every as-if synchronism I impose upon it. In the very proximity of the other person – which itself attests to the distance of the persona vis-à-vis the present person – an ethical summons is heralded and heard – a call coming to me from some immemorial past. And it is this aspect of the proximate neighbor as transcendence that Levinas terms “visage.”16

Persona as Chiasm

Strictly speaking then we might say that the phenomenon of the persona surpasses phenomenology altogether. At least phenomenology understood in the Husserlian sense of an eidetics of intentional consciousness (striving towards a rigorous science of transcendental immanence). It calls for a new or quasi-phenomenology, mobilized by ethics rather than eidetics. The enigma of the persona supersedes every presentation or re-presentation which seeks to apprehend it as intuitive adequation. It flouts the adequadio intellectus ad rem. Which is another way of saying that the figure-face is, at bottom, not literally a figure at all, but only figuratively so – that is, a quasi-figure which appears as if it was an appearance, as a prefiguration or refiguration of that which effaces itself as it faces us. So doing, and always avowing its own as-if conditionality, the persona of the other announces a difference which differentiates itself indefinitely, ad infinitum. Persona as infinitely premature and invariably overdue, always missed and already deferred. Persona as chiasm or cross-over with person.17 Which is why we cannot think of the time of the persona except as an immemorial beginning (before the beginning) and an unimaginable end (after the end). That is pre-
cisely its eschatological stature — the messianic achronicity which breaks up and breaks open the continuous moment-by-moment time of everyday chronology or clock-time.

The time of the eschaton is anti-clockwise. Or if one prefers, post-clockwise. It cannot be accounted for in terms of prediction or prevision. The inexhaustible alterity of the persona remains forever anterior to its manifestation and baffles every cognitive interpretation I project onto it. That is why it “deranges” me.¹⁸ (We shall return to this enigma in our discussion of “messianic time,” below.)

In sum, the persona is never “adequately” there. Which is why persona is literally personne. It is no one, if someone means a person who is phenomenally equal to me; but it is this one and no one but this one, if my neighbor appears to me eschatologically defying the as-if figurations by means of which I tell but part of its story. For the persona is always other than the other-for-me here and now. It is the figure which transfigures by absorbing itself from the very presence of its being-there, absenting itself as personne in the very moment that it hails and holds me. Like Celan’s Niemands Rose.

In this sense we might best describe ourselves as actors (figurants) in a play authored by personne (the French carries the dual sense of “person” and “no one”). To interpret a role is, therefore, to respond to the script of the persona who speaks through (per-soma) the other, to figure and play out this role as a one-for-the-other, as a one through (trans) the other. It is to behold the other as an icon for the passage of the infinite — while refusing to construe the infinite as some other being hiding behind the other. This is not Platonism. Nor Kantianism. Persona is neither Idea nor Noumenon. Neither pure form nor Ding-an-sich. Nor any other kind of transcendental signified for that matter. No. It is the infinite other in the infinite other person before me. In and through that person. And because there is no other to this infinite other, bound to but irreducible to the empirical person, we refer to this persona as the sign of God. Not the other person as divine, mind you — that would be idolatry — but the divine in and through that person. The divine as trace, as icon, as visage, passage, voice — the otherness of the other in and through that flesh-and-blood person over there. Trans-cendence in and through, but not reducible to, immanence.

We call it trans-figuration. Something we allow the persona to do to us. Something we suffer to be done unto us. Like the will of God. Or the eyes of the icon that look through us from beyond us. Or the thin small voice of Elijah’s cave. Or the cry in the wilderness. A far cry from the Sartrian world where hell is other people. The only hell in this scenario is that of self condemned to self. The empty choosing will. The idolatry of each-for-itself.

What we are proposing, therefore, is a personalism of the icon against the cultism of the idol.¹⁹ If the tradition of onto-theology granted priority to being over the good, this counter-tradition of eschatology reverses that priority. Here with the good of the persona has priority over the being of the person and holds it to account. And, where possible, cares for it. Against Heidegger we say: it is not our being that cares for itself, as being-towards-death, but the good that cares for being, as promise of endless rebirth.
Messianic Transfiguration

The act of transfiguration finds canonical expression in the Christian testimony of Mt. Tabor. Here the person of Jesus is metamorphosed before the eyes of his disciples into the persona of Christ. The alteration – from one to the other – is Christ’s coming into his own, fully assuming his messianic calling announced by the prophetic tradition from Moses to Elijah. It is marked not by Jesus abandoning his original person to become someone else, but by a change of “figure” which allows his divine persona to shine forth – in exemplary fashion – through his flesh-and-blood embodiedness. Jesus comes into his own by being “othered” as Christ. His person transforms into the persona latent in his self, the very divine otherness of his finite being, his in-finity.

It is no accident that the episode occurs just eight days after Jesus announced the first prophecy of the Passion and the coming of the kingdom: the double-act of death and promised resurrection which sets the condition of following Christ: “anyone who loses his life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9.22–8). Nor is it adventurous that prior to this announcement, Jesus had challenged Peter with the question of his identity – “who do you say that I am?” – receiving as response: “The Christ of God” (Luke 9.21). What occurs shortly afterwards on Mt. Tabor, in the presence of Peter and two other apostles, is Jesus’s own way of confirming this mystery of messianic incarnation: the word made flesh, the Christ made man in and through Jesus. To the father through his face.

The Dictionary of the Bible writes: “The transfiguration of Our Lord which ancient tradition locates on Mount Tabor, is indicated by the verb metemorphothe, transfiguratus est, which supposes a change, not in the person itself, but in the figure in which it normally appears.” St Luke’s Gospel tells us that as Jesus was praying, “the aspect of his face was changed and his clothing became sparkling white” (Luke 9.29–30). We note that it is the face that registers the transfiguring event, marking an ethical openness to transcendence which refuses idolatriy. A distancing precaution is also evidenced in the mention of “whiteness,” a common metaphor for the infinite and ineffable character of divinity (see also Matthew 17.2). Indeed the fact that Jesus carefully prepares his three disciples, James, John, and Peter, leading them to a sequestered high mountain to pray, and covering himself in a cloud, are further measures of protection against idolatrous appropriation. And it is in this same spirit that Christ insists, after the event, that the disciples build no monuments and keep their counsel, i.e., for fear of making him into an idol. As we are told, “the disciples kept silence and, at that time, told no one what they had seen” (Luke 9.36). (An echo of Christ’s admonition after Peter’s profession of faith in the “Christ of God” – “he charged them not to say this to anyone”: Luke 9.21).

It may be instructive to recall here the famous Homily on the Transfiguration by St John Damascene. Here we read: “The holy body finds itself circumscribed because, at the very moment it stands on Mt. Tabor, it does not surpass the physi-
cal limits of the mountain; but the divinity [of Christ] is infinite; it is . . . beyond all." Damascene goes on to make this connection between Christ's infinity and the whiteness of his transfigured aspect: "Just as the sun's light is other, so the visage of Christ shines forth like the sun and his garments white as light; they glisten with the splendour of the divine light." But the author is adamant that the transfigured character of Christ does not mean his divinity is reducible to this appearance — it "receives glory," he tells us, "by investment not by fusion." In this sense we might say that the transfiguration signals a surplus or incom-mensurability between persona and person even as it inscribes the one in and through the other.

Thus the Chalcedonian formula of two-in-one. A curious chiasm of infinity in the finite. Almost monstrous in its initial monstration. Certainly too much for his disciples, who are so baffled and bedazzled by Christ's whiteness that they immediately recoil in fear and must be reassured by the voice of the Father speaking from the cloud — "This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him" (Luke 9.36). An echo of Moses' initial fright before the blinding brightness of the burning bush, removing his sandals in fear before he is summoned to his mission by the voice of God.

We might even recall here what Melville has to say about the strange and estranging quality of whiteness in Moby Dick:

But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness, and learned why it appeals with such power to the soul: and more strange and far more portentous — why . . . it is at once the most meaningful symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian's Deity; and yet should be as it is, the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind. . . . Is it, that in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors: is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows — a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?

The thin white line between atheism and theism marks the seemingly undecidable frontier of faith. God-man as double-bind. The Christic criss-cross of persona and person. A holy braille to be deciphered in blinding light. Which is why the transfiguring God calls at all times for hermeneutic vigilance and discernment, setting us at a critical distance — yet never so distant as to forfeit grace. Far in its very nearness, but not so far as not to be at all. It bids us cast a cold eye but not the eye of death.

It is surely telling then that while the disciples who witness the transfigured Christ are filled with fright (Luke 9.34), his two Jewish forebears — the first and last prophets, Moses and Elijah — appear not in fear but "in glory" (Luke 9.31). The calm wisdom of the prophets as they converse with Christ stems doubtless from the fact that they have already encountered the infinite — and lived. Moses in Ex. 3.14 and Elijah in Kings 19. And again in contrast with Peter, James, and John, the two prophets do not propose setting up tents of cultic adoration there on the mountain but choose to speak to the transfigured Christ.
about his coming mission — "his passing which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem" (Luke 9.31).

The disciples' efforts to fix Christ as a fetish of presence, imposing their own designs on him, makes it necessary for God to intercede from the cloud and bid them attend to Christ's otherness: "Listen to him!" In this manner, the voice of transcendence speaks through Christ as divine persona, thereby arresting the idolatrous impulse of Peter, James, and John to fuse with his person or possess him as a cult object. The next line is especially telling, "After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone" (Luke 9.36). In other words, Christ is set apart from his followers by the divine voice-over (persona). And it is this very solitude of Christ, together with the consequent silence of the disciples as they follow him down the mountain, that marks this incident off as an epiphany of radical alterity. Mt. Tabor unfolds accordingly as a gospel replay of Mt. Sinai, with the transfigured Christ both re-figuring the Burning Bush (Ex. 3.14) and pre-figuring the coming of the messianic kingdom (when the resurrected Christ and the last prophet Elijah will return). Christ as figure between Moses and Elijah.

To rephrase this in the phenomenological idioms of our opening analysis, we might say that the Transfigured Christ breaches the limits of intentional consciousness. The very otherness and uniqueness of his persona exceeds the horizontal reach of our three main modalities of noetic intentionality: it goes beyond perception (the dazzling whiteness and the cloud, recalling the veil protecting the holy of holies), beyond imagination (the refusal of Peter's cultic imaginings), and beyond signification (the observing of silence). This excess of transcendent persona over immanent person is what prompts John Damascene to portray Jesus thus cautioning Peter against the precipitous desire to have what cannot be had: "If Adam had not sought delification, before the time, he would have achieved what he desired. Do not seek goods before their time, O Peter!" Moreover, the fact that the day after their descent from Mt. Tabor Christ makes his second prophecy of the Passion to come — announcing that he will be "delivered into the power of men" (Luke 9.44) — and then proceeds to declare that a helpless child on the street is greater than all the ambitious disciples, is a further indication of how the Transfiguration is framed with scenes which resist attempts to apotheosize Christ as some magical power or possession. The Transfiguration reminds us that when it comes to the persona of God — marking the unique thisness (haecitas) of each person — it is a question of the old enigma: now you have him now you don't. One moment there, one moment gone.

From which it follows that the cult of the historical Jesus is a form of idolatry just as compromising of Christ's persona as his reduction to some impersonal fetish (gnostic or ecclesiastic). The infinite persona of Christ is not exhausted in the finite figure of Jesus the historical person. The Messiah is distinct, if not separable, from the Nazarene. For as John Damascene once again reminds us, God only becomes man "in an indivisible difference, in a union without confusion." A point reinforced by St John the favorite apostle when he identifies the transfiguring spirit of Christ with the eschatological Paraclete of the kingdom. Jesus the historical person must depart from this finite world so that the persona of the
infinite Christ may return as the Paraclete who recollects all in a new heaven and a new earth (John 14.26). This is what the Homily of St Anastasius refers to as the “marvellous theophany on Mt. Tabor in the guise of an image prefiguring the Kingdom.”

For, according to this eschatologico-messianic reading, what we witness on Mt. Tabor is nothing less than a pre-view of the “new creation,” a call to “draw a recreated creation towards God.”

This audacious view is confirmed by many another post-gospel commentary. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, for example, claims that to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect means that the “Lord will appear to his perfect servants (in the kingdom) in the same guise as he was seen by the apostles on Mt. Tabor.”

And several other theologians find support for this eschatological perspective in St Mark’s account of God reminding the three apostles that the transfigured Christ is his “beloved son, who is neither slave nor angel nor ancient” (Mark 9.7). So doing, God confounds the apostles’ “natural” expectations and announces Christ as the possibility of all humans becoming “sons of God,” i.e., by being transfigured into their own unique personas. Accordingly, Christ is held out to us as a promise inscribed in the great prophetic path leading towards the coming kingdom, and already signposted by Moses and Elijah (the iconoclastic and messianic prophets respectively). Indeed it is no accident that both these predecessors are harbingers of exodus (ex-hodos, the way towards) rather than of closure. Their accompaniment of Jesus in his moment of metamorphosis on the mountain serves as reminder that the transfigured Christ is a way not a terminus, a figure of the end but not the end itself. A fact powerfully brought home to us by Christ’s pre- and post-transfiguration enunciation of his own exodic “passing” in the days to come. God as passage then, not presence. As way, truth, and light – but never as fait accompli.

The Pauline Legacy

It is no doubt St Paul, however, who is most responsible for the eschatological reading of the Transfiguration. In 2 Corinthians 3.18 he invokes this perspective of the kingdom when he suggests that the scene on Mt. Tabor is a call to each one of us to become transfigured in the light of Christ. Such transfiguring is of course something done unto us by the grace-giving persona of Christ; but it is also something we can do to others in turn, indeed in return. (Anything you do for the least of my brothers and sisters you do for me”; Matthew 25.) That is why we have an ethical choice to transfigure our world according to the Christic figure of love and justice as icon of the end-to-come, or to fix him as an idol of presence – whose only end is in itself. The choice is between Christ as transformation or as fixation.

For Paul, therefore, Mt. Tabor is to be reread within the broader biblical history as both a re-fuguration of Jewish messianic prophecy (e.g., the Psalms and prophets who already foretold the holiness of Mt. Tabor) and a
prefiguration of the kingdom — when each human person will be transfigured in Christ’s image (eikon). As Paul says, when the kingdom of ultimate transfiguration comes the clouds and veils that protect God will be lifted so that we may see face to face: “And all of us, with our unveiled faces like mirrors reflecting the glory of the Lord, are transfigured into the figure that we reflect in brighter and brighter glory; this is the working of the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3.18). What Paul calls Spirit here, we call persona.

Elsewhere – 1 Cor. 15 and Col. 3.10 – Paul elaborates on these key metaphors of figuring, imagining, and reflecting. Referring to Christ as the final Adam (eschatos Adam), Paul suggests that the transfigured – or what he calls “heavenly” – body of Christ is in fact the secret goal of divine creation aimed at from the very beginning, though it is only revealed in the eschaton. And this eschatological revelation or pleroma will be one in which each person may find itself transformed according to Christ’s image and likeness. “And as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the heavenly one . . . we are all going to be changed, instantly, in the twinkling of an eye, when the last trumpet sounds” (2 Cor 15.49). That at least is the promise of the messianic persona. It is all humanity that is invited to be transfigured according to the image-eikon of Christ. In this universalist scenario the “old self” is “renewed in the image of its Creator” (Col. 3.10–11). A renewal open to everyone: “in that image there is no room for distinction between Greek and Jew . . . slave and free. There is only Christ; he is everything and he is in everything.”

This eschatological promise requires not only grace but ethical action on our part. The instauration of the eschaton of Creation is inseparable from human innovation.11 In short, for Paul the transfigured–transfiguring Christ is not some elsol to be emblemed and enshrined but the eikon tou epouranion: the icon of the ultimate persona prefigured from the origins of time. This divine persona is what, finally, both safeguards what is unique in each one of us – what stiches each in its mother’s womb, what knows every hair of our head – and what convenes us in a shared humanity. When Christ appears in the kingdom, as John (a witness of Mt. Tabor) writes, “we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is” (John 1.2).

Messianic Time

This brings us to the crucial question of what Levinas and Derrida term “Messianic time.” Our story of transfiguration as a re-figuring of Adam and a pre-figuring of Christ-come-again surpasses the limits of what is ordinarily known as history.12 The persona is “eternal” in its very unicity to the extent that it remains irreducible to the laws of a purely causal or dialectical history. Its eschaton does not operate according to the objective laws of cause–effect or potency–act (though it does recognize that this is the chronological time in which human persons exist). Nor is it exhausted in the world-historical muta-
tions of some teleological plan à la Hegel or Hartshorne. The reason that Paul says that the kingdom will come in a "blink of an eye" is to signal the utterly unpredictable and unprogrammable character of its coming. That is how we should understand the paradoxical language of anterior–posteriority which Christ and later Paul use to describe the eschatological kingdom. The kingdom is already "amongst us" yet still to come (Luke 17.20–5). Or as we might add, the eschatological *persona* is transfiguring always, in each moment, but always remains to be ultimately transfigured, at the end of time. Which is another way of saying its temporality exceeds the limits of ordinary time.33

Walter Benjamin offers this intriguing gloss on the subject in his *Theologico-Poetical Fragment* (1921): "This future does not correspond to homogeneous empty time; because at the heart of every moment of the future is contained the little door through which the Messiah may enter."14 That is why we need always to remain vigilant and expectant. There is no guarantee or calculus as to how the transfiguring Messiah will come. When he comes, if he comes, it will be a surprise. An instant event that takes us unawares (as it does the three apostles on Mt. Tabor) even as it is prefigured from the beginning of time (and prophesied by the three holy figures on the same mountain, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus). Maybe it is this very unpredictability which has Jesus swear his apostles to silence both after Mt. Tabor, and also after the questioning scene with Peter which precedes it. For remember, Jesus does not here declare himself the one and only Christ. No, he asks the question: "Who do you say that I am?" And when the crowds and disciples seek to capture and capitalize on his divinity, he invariably rebukes them, deferring them to the "Father in heaven" - the same father of Moses and Elijah and every son of man.

True, the Father calls him his "chosen one." But does not Christ's transfiguring *persona* do the same for each of us? Are we not all called to be chosen ones? If you do it to the least of these you do it to me. "For Christ plays in ten thousand places... To the Father through the features of men's faces."

Some early Christian commentators seem to point in this direction. The *persona* of the transfigured Christ is, as John Damascene suggests, "both this and that, of the same essence as the Father (the universal kingdom) and of the same race and nature as us (the particular descendants of Adam)."15 The transfiguration thus is as much about us as it is about God, for the transfigured Christ "renews our nature in himself restoring it to the pristine beauty of the image charged with the common visage of humanity."16 Such a transfiguring mission includes all who seek justice-to-come. Or as John Damascene's version of Christ transfigured promises: "It is thus that the just will shine at the resurrection, transfigured into my condition... according to this image, this figure, this light, as they sit with me, the son of God."17 Perhaps it is this universal invitation of the Christic *persona* that St Anastasius has in mind when he urges us to waste no further time but hurry towards the kingdom: "We should make speed towards it - I say this boldly - like Christ our precursor with whom we will all shine with spiritual eyes, renewed in the features of our souls, conformed to his image and like him forever transfigured."18 Our understanding of this eschatological
transfiguration of the face does not seek to exclude other messianic (or non-
nmessianic) religions in some sort of Christo-centric triumphalism. On the con-
trary, what I as a Christian mean by the \textit{persona-visage} of Christ is the same. I
believe, as what a few like Levinas believes when he says that when he thinks of
the ethical relation of the “face” he thinks of Jesus Christ.\footnote{39}

\textbf{The New Age Controversy}

The fact that the transfigured Christ is not all there, so to speak – that is, is not
reducible to his actual personal presence there and then – means that his \textit{persona}
remains to be perpetually interpreted. The surplus meaning of the Mt. Tabor
event, marked by this incommensurability of \textit{persona} \textit{vis-à-vis} person, invites a
history of plural readings. (Though this chasm of incommensurable aspects
does not for a moment belie the indivisibility of Christ Jesus – any more than two
sides of a sleeve belie the indivisibility of that sleeve.) Indeed it is, paradoxically,
the very silence which surrounds the event that in turn provokes a plurality of
competing and often conflicting interpretations. Its ineffability becomes the
motor of its \textit{fability} – its translation into a variety of accounts, testimonies, fables,
narratives, and doctrines ranging from the initial versions of John (actually
present on the mountain) and his fellow evangelists, to the multiplicity of later
readings offered by Paul and the Church Fathers and extending down through
the entire “effective-history” (Gadamer’s \textit{Wirkungsgeschichte}) of Christian
theology.

St Paul was especially sensitive to the various ways, good and bad, that
Christ’s promise of metamorphosis could be read. He was as enthusiastic
about the eschatological reading, where Mt. Tabor pre-figures the kingdom
to come, as he was suspicious of the various defigurations of this same
promise – including those attributed to the power of false apostles and
pseudo-prophets to “transform themselves” (\textit{transfigurantes se}) into manipula-
tors of souls (2 Cor. 11.13–15). Even Satan, Paul warns, deploys such fake
mutations – turning himself into an angel of light just as his followers pretend to
“transfigure” themselves into ministers of justice. The very fact, he notes, that
the life and death of the transfigured Christ come down to us in words and
“figures” – in spite of the injunction to keep silent – means that they are always
open to both transfiguring and defiguring interpretations: the former enabling
us to see Christ as an icon of alterity; the latter misleading us into an idolatry of
presence (1 Cor. 4, 6).\footnote{40}

In our own postmodern times, the controversies continue. One recent
debate on the subject is that between Slavoj Žižek’s neo-Pauline reading of Christ
versus the New Age Gnostic nostalgia for the historical Jesus. Žižek’s basic point,
for which I have much sympathy, is that we are currently witnessing a suspension
of the “authentic kernel of Christianity” – to wit, the promise of a New
Beginning, epitomized by such “symbolizing” events as the Transfiguration and
Resurrection. These events represent the true “scandal” of Christ as heralder of a messianic time of miracle and grace: a time which can undo the sins of the past (brushing history backwards) while simultaneously invoking a universal kingdom that is both now and still to come (that is, “eternal” or sur-chronic).

What the advocates of New Age Gnosticism promote, by contrast, is a return to the historical or material Jesus. This Jesus is all too literal—however shrouded in fake mystique—and supposedly escaped from the tomb to live on in the south of France, marry Mary Magdalene, and leave several descendants behind him! This hypothesis ignores the eschatological rupturing of chronological history by the transfigured—resurrected Christ in favor of a banalized Jesus, now little more than a guru-cum-escape-artist who teaches DIY self-improvement techniques: a sort of glorified Maharashi-Houdini. But the banality of this particular New Age thesis has not prevented the emergence of a whole spate of pseudo-scientific bestsellers recounting various attempts to reveal the secret of Jesus, suppressed for millennia by the churches, viz., that he was a crypto-gnostic preaching inner journeying and “purification of the soul”: a man with brothers and brides and babies and all such things besides.

How different these New Age narratives are to the marvelously faithful Last Temptation of Christ by Kazantzakis, which portrays such a naturalist scenario as pure fantasy. Unlike Kazantzakis, the neo-Gnostic craze to literalize the historical line of Jesus takes the eschatological harm (that is, grace) out of the transfiguration. It makes it utterly immanent. Or to use Žižek’s Lacanian language, it contrives to reverse the Transfiguration, qua radical “symbolic” event (creatio ex nihilo), back into the order of the “real.” In the process the very transcendence of Christ’s persona is masked and disavowed. The revolutionary challenge of transfiguration is defused. Emptied of alterity. Explained away.

What is important here, I submit, is not just to expose such pseudo-scientific fabulations but to recognize them as precisely that: fabulations. As part of the inevitable excess of fantasy generated by the very figurative character of the Transfiguration itself. And one, moreover, capable of being read as a symptom of our times. The point is not to resist such a multiplicity of interpretations but to enter the conflict and take sides. And the choice of sides is determined ultimately by which interpretations we deem more faithful to the ethic-eschatological import of the Christ-event. Which readings, we must ask, best testify to the transfiguring (i.e., singularizing-universalizing) power of the persona? For testimony is the bottom line. Faithful and discerning testimony. The rest is indeed silence.

Pascal Testimonies

In this concluding section, I offer some personal reflections on the enigma of transfiguration, as it relates to the resurrected Christ, recorded during a recent visit to Israel.
On the morning of April 4, 1999, I arrived in Tel Aviv with my wife, Anne, and two daughters, Simone and Sarah. We landed in time for Easter Sunday mass at the small French Benedictine monastery of Abu Ghosh, the alleged site of Emmaus, located some 11 miles north of Jerusalem. During the simple uncrowded ceremony, accompanied by plainchant, I could not help being struck by the gospel reading: Jesus appearing to his disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24.13–35). The first thing that hit me was how the two disciples walking on the road failed to recognize their Messiah when he appeared. In a wonderful twist of irony, Jesus asks them what they are talking about: to which they reply that he must be about the only person in Jerusalem who hasn’t yet heard about Jesus being crucified! Continuing the game Jesus asks the disciples to tell him all.

They do, even mentioning – with doubled irony – how the apostles who went to the empty tomb on hearing that Jesus had risen, “did not see him.” Jesus scolds them gently for not believing what the prophets had taught, thus making it necessary for the Messiah to suffer crucifixion before entering into his glory. But still they do not see him. Only, finally, when Jesus agrees to stop off at the village of Emmaus and share their evening meal are the scales lifted from their eyes. In the breaking of the bread they at last recognize him. As soon as they do, however, and their “eyes are opened,” Jesus “vanishes from their sight.” No sooner does he appear than he disappears. Now they see him, now they don’t.

Several things about this story reminded me of the enigma of the Transfiguration. We do not recognize the sons of God there where they appear to us as we wander along the road of life. So full of great expectations are we that we fail to see the divine in the simplest of beings: we overlook the persona in the person. Second, the embodied God cares for our physical and material being: it is in the sharing of food that he makes himself visible. And third, rather than glorifying in some kind of I-told-you-so posthumous triumph, Jesus takes his leave. As soon as he is seen, he absolves himself, goes invisible, refuses to be appropriated, enthroned, idolized; he becomes little or nothing again.

After the mass at Abu Ghosh, I drove with my family the 11 miles south to Jerusalem. There we visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the very ground where the risen Christ had appeared to Mary Magdalene on this same day almost 2,000 years before, and said more or less the same thing he said to the disciples at Emmaus: “Do not hold onto me!” (John 2.11–18). Here Jesus chose to make himself visible to the most despised of sinners – a fallen woman – and to make her the premier evangelist of his risen message. Moreover, standing there on the spot where the gardener appeared to the Magdalene, I could not help recalling that what women prostitutes were in Jesus’s time, the handicapped and homeless are all too often in our own day: scorned, spurned, unwelcomed – the lowest of the low.

Afterwards, as I wandered with my family through those narrow winding streets of Jerusalem, I realized it was in a closed room of this city that Jesus made his third apparition after his death: this time to the disciples (including the two just returned from Emmaus). Once again, we discover one of the simplest mes-
sages of the post-Pascal transfiguration – the overcoming of fear. The apostles are so “terrified” by what they see that they cannot recognize Jesus at first (Luke 24.35–48); they mistake him for a ghost. Doubts invade their hearts. But Jesus tells them not to be afraid – to approach and touch his wounds. And seeing that they are still “disbelieving,” still not accepting that his wounded body is risen from the dead – transfigured – he resorts once more to the nourishment motif. “Have you anything to eat?” It is only then, when he takes some broiled fish and sits and eats with them, that they finally recognize him. They see and hear his message of dying and rising again: a message of transfiguration that comes – paradoxically but tellingly – through the body, a broken body, bruised and hungry for something to eat. Not primarily through power and glory, but through woundedness and want does the transfiguring persona make itself known.

It was, however, when we drove north to Galilee the following day (a Monday) that I began to appreciate some deeper implications of the transfigured–resurrected Christ. Visiting the fourth and last site where Jesus appeared after his death – the shore between Tabha and Capernaum – I was struck by how the miracle of bread and fish was nothing less than the story of Christ himself. Christ as gift of food and life. (The only trace still remaining in Tabha today is a faded fresco of two small loaves and fishes.) The miracle of multiplication from next to nothing, the mystery of excess from paucity, of surplus from scarcity. The mystery of less as more. Of person as persona. Divine criss-crossing. Chiasm. Monstrosity of the not-there in the there.45

Standing on the stony beach of Tabha with my youngest daughter Sarah – who was busily collecting tiny shells (like mustard seeds from the sea) for her friends back in Dublin – I thought about the gospel passage in question (John 21.1–14). When Jesus stood on this same spot on this same day 2,000 years ago, his disciples “did not know that it was Jesus.” The transfigured persona was still incognito, unrecognizable to them in his person standing on that stony shore. And when he called across to them in their boat some 90 meters from shore, asking if they had any fish, and they said no, they still did not recognize him. It was only when he instructed them to cast their empty nets out the other side of the boat, resulting in the famous miraculous catch, that the most impetuous and unthinking of them all, Simon Peter, the very one who’d denied him three times a few days earlier, finally identified him. And jumped into the water! Coming ashore Peter – and the other disciples who still did not recognize Jesus – found a charcoal fire already prepared for them with fish and bread. “Come and have breakfast,” said Jesus. For he knew their hunger. He knew their want, their lack, their need, their desire. He invited them to sit and eat; and it was then and only then that their eyes were opened. Once again, the seeing comes in the sharing of bread and fish. It is in the carnal giving of his persona – the transsubstantiation of his persona into an embodied giver of nourishment – that the transfigured–resurrected Christ reveals his identity. As John writes: “Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with
the fish.” Here we witness the power of transfiguration as ultimate answer to blood-sacrifice – as the epitome of an ethics of kenosis and gift.

Seen thus as kerygma of Transfiguration–Passion–Resurrection, the ethical message of Christ’s post-Pascal visitations might go something like this: if you are hungry and need to eat bread and fish, ask for it and you shall have your fill. If you see a lost loved one standing on the shore and are filled with joy, throw decorum to the wind, jump into the waves and swim to them. If someone gives you food, do not ask for identity papers or credentials (“Who are you?”), just sit and receive. If you are wanting in body or mind – that is, crippled, despised, rejected, downcast – and your nets are still empty after many tries, do not despair; someone will come and tell you where to cast your net so that you may have life and have it more abundantly. Indeed the most transfiguring thing about this God of little things is that he gives with a gratuity that defies the limits of space and time. Now he’s gone, now he’s here, now he’s gone again. Now he’s dead, now he’s alive. Now he’s buried, now risen. Now the net is empty, now it’s full. And more surprising still, the fish is cooked for us even before we get ashore and unload our nets! “Come and have breakfast,” Christ says as the boat touches land.

Conclusion

The post-Pascal message of the transfiguring persona of Christ is that the kingdom is given to fishermen and fallen women, to those lost and wandering on the road from Jerusalem to nowhere, to the wounded and weak and hungry, to those who lack and do not despair of their lack, to little people, to the “poor in spirit.” The transfigured–resurrected Christ testifies that after the long night of fasting and waiting and darkness and need – afloat on a wilderness of sea – breakfast is always ready.

As I returned with my family from the sea of Galilee to Jerusalem, we finally passed Mount Tabor. Peering up at the huge basilica now perched on that hill, I felt how easy it is to compromise the Christian message by erecting triumphal monuments there where Christ himself asked for discretion, for nothing, no tents or temples or memorials, at most a trace. And driving into Nazareth later that afternoon I thought how dispiriting it was to see Christians and Muslims fighting over who would appropriate the vast “millennial” space in front of the Church of the Annunciation (a giant edifice now towering over the ground where a humble young woman once knelt). As dispiriting as it was to witness, the following day, the various Christian sects – Armenian, Greek Orthodox, Coptic, and Catholic – skirmishing with silver turbans and bronze crucifixes over rights of priority procession through the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The message of transfiguration so easily disfigured.

Not that such violence is the prerogative of Christian zealots. Bitter conflicts over the possession of holy places are equally rife in the other revealed religions.
The Jews with their Wailing Wall and the Muslims with their Dome of the Rock. Why such strife and hostility should continue to exist in the Holy City of Jerusalem – that messianic City on the Hill par excellence – as we reach the second millennium is a vexed question. Why the great monotheistic religions are still at war over the rock of Mount Moriah or the tomb of Abraham (in Hebron) is a depressing enigma.

All I knew as I wandered through this ancient Holy Land was that I sensed traces of transfiguration not in the great monuments of power and triumph but in the silent, scattered ruins which still bear testimony – as only traces can – to things that come and go, like the thin small voice, like the burning bush, like the voice crying out in the wilderness, like the word made flesh, like the wind that blows where it wills. Or if I were to cite places I visited that Easter of 1999: like the now-ruined walls of Capernaum where Jesus and the apostles took refuge after their expulsion from Nazareth; like the hill-caves of Sitve and Avdat where the Christian Napoteans (a people of the Spice Trail now extinct) rested on their passage through the Negev desert; or the sequestered hermitages of St George and Maar Saba carved into rockcliffs in the hills of Judea. For these are places which resist the triumphalism of ecclesiastical empire. Hide-outs, off the beaten track, without foundation. Cut against the grain. Self-effacing, modest, vulnerable, welcoming. Sanctuaries for migrants. Shelters for the exiled. Footholds for the forgotten. Arks. Perfect places for rejected personas to come and lay their heads. Cyphers, perhaps, of a new millennium?

Notes

1 R. Kearney, Poétique du possible: phénoménologie herméneutique de la figuration (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984). Chapter 8 of this work, entitled “La Transfiguration de la personne.” was deeply influenced by both Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of the “trace” developed in Totality and Infinity (1961) and Jacques Derrida’s notion of “alterity” outlined in Writing and Difference (1967) and Of Grammatology (1967).
6 Ibid., p. 185.
7 Kearney, Poétique du possible, p. 161. This utopian no-place of persona may well correspond, at the level of the unconscious psyche, to what Winnicott called the “potential space” which exceeds the dualism of internal subject and external other. Indeed we should understand its status of no-place in the context of the Pauline view that God chooses “things that are not [to me anta] in order that he might cancel things that are” (1 Cor. 1.28). It is in a similar Pauline sense that we understand the analysis of persona as personne (no one) below.
8 See Derrida’s intriguing analysis of the Messianic (which he contrasts to messianism) in, for example, Spectres of Marx (New York and London: Routledge), 1994.


Ibid., p. 88.

Lévinas: "Le prochain m'assigne avant que je ne le désigne — ce qui est une modalité non pas d'un savoir mais d'une obsession . . . la conscience ne vient pas s'interposer entre moi et le prochain; ou, du moins, elle ne surgit déjà que sur le fond de cette relation préalable de l'obsession qu'aucune conscience ne saurait annuler — et dont la conscience même est une modification," *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (the Hague, Nijhoff, 1974), p. 100.

Ibid., p. 112.

Robert Magliola, *On Deconstructing Life Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 127–8. Magliola cites here Derrida's rendition of the Mosaic God of Edmond Jabès: "God himself is, and appears as what he is, within difference, that is to say, as difference and within dissimulation"; and he goes on to quote, in this connection, Derrida's reflections in *The Post Card* on the two-in-one nature of the biblical God — "this double bind is firstly that of YHVH."

Lévinas: "Autrui m'apparaissant comme étant dans sa plasticité d'image, je suis en relation avec le multiplicable qui, malgré l'infinitude des reproductions que j'en prends, reste intact et je peux, à son égard, me payer des mots à la mesure de ces images sans me livrer à un dire. La proximité n'entre pas dans le temps commun des horloges qui rend possible les rendez-vous. Elle est dérangement." *Autrement qu'être*, pp. 112–13.


Ibid., p. 173.

Ibid., p. 156.


*Homilie de Damasègne* in Feraudy, *L'Icône de la transfiguration*, p. 177.

Ibid., p. 152. See also the brilliant analyses of this topic in Christos Sidropoulos, *L'Homme Jesus et le principe trinitaire*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Strasbourg, 1978, pp. 116–232. This mystery of "union without confusion" also recalls the presence-absence/universal–singular doubleness of the living divine in *Wisdom* 7.22–8.1, "For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains
entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom."

28 On the necessity, and impossibility, of translating the "messianic" import of Mt. Tabor, see Kearney, Poétique du possible, p. 168.

29 Feraudy. L’Icône de la transfiguration, pp. 130, 175.


31 See Kearney, Poétique du possible, p. 160.

32 On the pre-figuring/re-figuring temporality of the transfiguration see the analysis of Anastasius’ Homily in Kearney, Poétique du possible, pp. 170-1: "Anastase annonce qu’avec la transfiguration du Christ sa "nature adamique, jadis créée semblable à Dieu, mais obscurcie par les figures infinies des âges, a été transfigurée en l’ancienne beauté de l’homme créé à l’image et à la ressemblance de Dieu" (Homilie d’Anastase. L’Icône de la Transfiguration, pp. 128, 138, 149, 152-4, 150). Autrement dit, la Transfiguration est a la fois une préfiguration de la nouvelle création à faire (ce qu’Anastase nomme ‘la terre de promesse’) et une refiguration de la création originelle de l’homme selon l’image de Dieu. Le sens eschatologique de la Transfiguration du Christ nous renvoie ainsi à la création du commencement et de la fin. C’est pour cela qu’Anastase appelle Moïse et lui 'les céléstes préfigurations du Christ' (pp. 135, 138), et affirme que le Christ en tant que 'potentialité divine dans la figure d’un homme', doit être compris à son tour comme 'préfiguration de la parousie': "Tout esquisserait et préfigurait là les mystères de la seconde parousie... le Royaume des cieux à venir’" (p. 142).

33 On this complex notion of "Messianic time" see E. Levinas, Totality and Infinity (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969) and Derrida, Spectres of Marx. A key passage in Luke 17.20–5 where the Christian paradox of Messianic time is found reads as follows: "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For in fact the kingdom of God is among you." The passage continues, combining several of the motifs observed in our above analysis of the transfigured Christ – the whiteness of light, the refusal of immediate presence (literalism), the resurrection following the passion and brokenness of Christ: "Then Jesus said to the disciples, ‘The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. They will say to you, 'Look there!' or 'Look here!' Do not go, do not set off in pursuit. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation.”

34 Cited in Kearney, Poétique du possible, p. 172.


37 Ibid, p. 143.

38 Ibid, p. 132.

39 Levinas in conversation with me during the Levinas Colloquium at Cerisy-La-Salle, Normandy, August, 1987. But in extending the Christian reference to include the Jewish, I do not mean either to replace a Christocentric bias with a Judeo-Christocentric one. Messianic time (as variously outlined by Levinas, Benjamin, Derrida, Marion, and even Heidegger in his pre-Being and Time period), marks a
universal quasi-transcendental condition which may include all religious experience of some sacred "other" time, be it monotheistic or otherwise.

This ethical choice between our transfiguring and defiguring acts corresponds broadly with the Talmudic distinction between the Good and Evil yezer as two opposing drives: namely, to recreate the world according to the design of God or to reduce it to our own ego-image. See The Encyclopaedia Judaica (London: Macmillan), vol. 8, p. 1,319; see also the chapter on the "Hebraic imagination" in R. Kearney, The Wake of Imagination (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 39–53.

See S. Žižek, The Ticklish Subject (London: Verso, 1999), p. 331: "Christianity proper—the belief in Christ's Resurrection—is the highest religious expression of the power of symbolic fiction as the medium of universality: the death of the 'real' Christ is 'sublated' in the Holy Spirit, that is, in the spiritual community of believers. This authentic kernel of Christianity, first articulated by St. Paul, is under attack today: the danger comes in the guise of the New Age Gnostic/dualist (mistranslating, which reduces the Resurrection to a metaphor of the 'inner' spiritual growth of the individual soul."

Ibid, pp. 331–2, beginning, "these narratives endeavour to supplant the diminishing power of the symbolic function of the Holy Spirit (the community of believers) with the bodily real of Christ and/or his descendants. And again, the fact that Christ left his body or bodily descendants behind serves the purpose of undermining the Christian—Pauline narrative of Resurrection: Christ's body was not actually resurrected: 'the true message of Jesus was lost with the Resurrection'. This 'true message' allegedly lies in promoting 'the path of self-determination, as distinct from obedience to the written word': redemption results from the soul's inner journey, not from an act of pardon coming from outside; that is, 'Resurrection' is to be understood as the inner renewal/rebirth of the soul on its journey of self-purification. Although the advocates of this 'return of the Real' promote their discovery as the unearthing of the heretic and subversive secret long repressed by the Church as institution, one could counter this claim with the question: what if this very unearthing of the 'Secret' is in the service of 'undoing': of getting rid of the truly traumatic, subversive core of Christian teaching, the skandalon of Resurrection and the retroactive forgiveness of sins—what then, the unique character of the event of Resurrection?"

Ibid, p. 331: "the crucial point is that this New Beginning is possible only through Divine Grace—its impetus must come from outside; it is not the result of man's inner effort to overcome his/her limitations and elevate his/her soul above egotistic material interests; in this precise sense, the properly Christian New Beginning is absolutely incompatible with the pagan Gnostic problematic of the 'purification of the soul'. So what is actually at stake in recent New Age pop-Gnostic endeavours to reassert a kind of 'Christ's secret teaching' beneath the official Pauline dogma is the effort to undo the 'Event-Christ', reducing it to a continuation of the preceding Gnostic lineage."

In terms of the above controversy I would side with Žižek against the neo-Gnostics. But I also have my differences with Žižek, for whom the symbolic order is in fact an empty void. For Žižek, it is precisely the non-existence and emptiness of God that makes him function as the "big Other" in the symbolic chain, although this function begins to wane (as in our postmodern times) when the religious belief system begins to collapse. I do not see how Žižek's atheist reading is compatible with my theistic interpretation of this Pauline Christ. I also disagree with Žižek's attempt
to evacuate Christ of any carnal or corporeal character, reducing the notion of the “body” to the purely empirical, material order of the historical Jesus. As our above examples of Christ’s post-Pascal apparitions seek to suggest, the body can take on a more significant “transubstantiated” sense in the context of a resurrected—transfigured Christ. Once again I find most suggestive here Merleau-Ponty’s model of the body-subject as chiasmic crossing-over between visible carnality and invisible transcendence: as double but indivisible. It certainly points to a third way beyond the Žižek–Gnostic alternative extremes: either all spirit or all body! For us, as for the Chalcedonian theologians, the two natures are in one person (hypostasis).

On this notion of Christ-bread as “monstrance” see Magliola, On Deconstructing Life-Worlds, p. 128: “In the Benediction rite, the ‘host’ of consecrated Bread (through which form God dissimulates) – the shechina of the New Covenant – is ‘exposed’ and ‘exhibited’ in a golden receptacle (called the ‘monstrance’, from L. monstrare, to show). That is, Christ is concealed/revealed: He is self-concealed under the form of Bread, and thus dissimulates, yet He is really the Bread, and thus self-reveals. Raising the monstrance on high, the priest moves the host in a giant ‘sign of the Cross’ over the adoring faithful, blessing them, marking them, in and into God’s Chiasm.” There follows Magliola’s own profession of faith in the Chiasmic God: “I am called to Christ’s differential way” (p. 129).