



BRILL

Poetics of the As-If: A Response to B. Keith Putt

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1 The As/As-If Distinction

B. Keith Putt has many insightful and challenging things to say in his review essay on my recent work. I am very honored and grateful. In my response, I will concentrate on just one particular point, which I deem central to my hermeneutic writings – the distinction between “as” and “as if.” Putt states: “One must never forget that the movement from fictional configuration to creedal transformation, from considering God *as if* God were a character in the story, a literary or semantic cipher, to committing to God *as* a presence or call within the structures of experience, always occurs within the restrictions of the hermeneutical circle, which remains both carnal and poetic. In other words, there is no escaping figuration; it remains literary and not literal; it demands more imagination than speculation; it compels the perpetuation of both the *as if* and the *as*. Consequently, one lives repeatedly in the risk and uncertainty of faith, in the anatheistic wager, and in the negative capability that constantly cautions us never to forget that there is no absolute way to the Absolute.”

Extremely well formulated and certainly an invitation to more thought. *Cette pensée donne à penser!* So let me try to clarify my position here, beginning with a brief phenomenological recap. The *as/as-if* distinction – which recurs throughout my work from *Poétique du Possible* (1984) to *Debating Otherness* (2018) – corresponds to the basic hermeneutic distinction between what I call figuration and fiction. The former operates throughout all our experiences of the world and can take several forms: prefiguration, configuration, disfiguration, transfiguration and so on.¹ Figuration corresponds to what Heidegger calls the “hermeneutic as” in *Being and Time*, referring to the fact that when we experience anything in our existential world we do so in the

1 Richard Kearney, *Poétique du possible: Phénoménologie herméneutique de la figuration* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984). See especially Part II, entitled “*Phénoménologie de la figuration*,” 45–90.

mode of “understanding” (*Verstehen*) – that is, by interpreting it as this or that kind of thing.² All understanding is, therefore, understanding-as. Just as, more carnally, all seeing is seeing-as; all hearing is hearing-as; all tasting is tasting-as, and so on. If I encounter a rock on my path, I may interpret it – without ever resorting to theoretical reflection – as an obstacle, a weapon, a building brick or (if I am a sculptor) material for a new work of art. Such figuring-as, as I call it, is even more the case when it comes to human persons, where our most immediate experiential encounters are always filtered and inflected by certain pre-reflective carnal interpretations of the other as this or that *kind* of person. The eye is never neutral. Nor the ear. Nor the hand. The stranger (*hostis*) before me is seen “as” hostile or hospitable, distant or near, cold or warm – or, more often than not, a composite mix calling for tactful discernment. “Nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so,” Shakespeare tells us. And this extends to “thinking” with our nerves before a thought ever enters our head (as I argue in the opening chapter of *Touch*).³ That is what carnal hermeneutics is all about. Figuration goes all the way down. We are beings who are always *figuring* our world from beginning to end. Prefiguring, configuring, disfiguring, transfiguring. “The flesh is not an organ but a medium (*metaxu*),” as Aristotle reminds us in *De Anima*. Everything is mediated. Or as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “perception is already style.”

So much, in a word, for figuration as the condition of possibility of experience. But what of fiction? Fiction shares the same etymological root as figuration – *fin-go-fingere-finxi-fictum*. And we may say that all experience is figural to some degree. Even “facts” derive from the same root – *factum-fictum*. Namely something made; which does not, mind you, always mean to make up. There is no literal world, for the literal is already literary in the sense of a general marking, signifying, interpreting, inscribing (see Derrida’s *archi-écriture* and his claim that “perception does not exist”). But that is not to say we cannot distinguish between what is real or unreal, what is true or false, figurative or fictional. There *is* a difference between figuration and fiction, between figuring the world “as” this or that and fictionalizing it “as if” it were this or that. Most acts of common figuration imply a truth or reality claim. They involve, at a basic level, an act of crediting our everyday lived experiences to be “as” we perceive them. A simple assumption that the event I am experiencing is *really*

2 See Martin Heidegger on the “hermeneutical-as,” in *Being and Time*, trans. Robinson and Macquarrie (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973) paragraph 44.

3 See Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering our most Vital Sense*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), especially chapter 1, “Coming to our Senses: Tact, Savvy, Flair, Insight, Sound,” 9–22.

happening (Covid is real, suffering is real, suffering people are real people, etc.). That both figuration and fiction involve an element of “faith” (*credo/credit/credence*) is so to the extent that both the “as” and “as-if” involve a certain “gap” between self and other – a certain minimal distance mediating all our relations. Which means we never “know” for certain what the other person or thing is: we believe it be so and trust our belief qua figurative reading of the world. But, I repeat, this does not mean our everyday figurative experiences are unreal or untrue. Only that reality is itself always already prefigured by our most basic senses (tactile, auditory, optical, olfactory, gustatory) before we even “figure out” reflectively what is going on. Our carnal experience means something before we ever know what it means. The visceral precedes the theoretical. Savvy precedes savoir. Touch precedes thought.

But if reality is figured, fiction is doubly so. Fiction configures what our historical lived experience prefigures. Story is not the same as history; it is more or less than history – depending on how you see it. Story is more imaginative and less empirical than history. And this is where the as-if comes in. A proper sense of fiction involves a *poetic* faith. (I will come to the question of religious faith in a moment). Unlike history, fiction makes no truth claim on reality as such. Art augments and amplifies reality; negates and transcends it; emplots and re-describes it. Art invents its own rules. It creates its own reality, which we call unreal, surreal, hyperreal. And that is its beauty. Kant was right in the Third Critique when he observed that the aesthetics of the beautiful involves an experience of “purpose without purpose” – an autonomous formal realm of “freedom” from “nature” (understood by Kant as the world of determinate judgements, empirical objects and inclinations).⁴ Art is beautiful precisely because it is playful, impractical, for its own sake. In other words, a world of pure “as-if” where imagination takes free pleasure in playing with concepts of understanding and schemas of sensibility “without why,” without necessary cause or consequence, without any claim on the real world of everyday actions and passions. In other words, the aesthetics of “as-if” signals a whole new hermeneutic ballgame. And even if we don’t go as far as Kant and the Romantics in claiming a purely autonomous realm for art, we recognize the point. Van Gogh’s painted peasant shoes are not real shoes – when we see the portrait in a museum we don’t ask “what size are they? What are they made of? Where can I buy a pair? How much do they cost?” Art is useless, as Plato already argued in Book 10 of the *Republic*; and Kant confirms this in his Third Critique. In short,

4 See Immanuel Kant on “beauty” in *Critique of Judgment* (part 1, Division 1, paras 41–51) and our critical analysis of this discussion in Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, (London: Huteson, 1988), 174–177.

I repeat: the as-if makes no truth claims regarding reality. Novels, dramas, epics, sculptures, pastels are about other worlds that do not exist. When Hamlet stabs Polonius on stage, we do not cry “murder” and call for the police. When Lear dies, we do not bury him. When we fall in love with Cleopatra, we do not try to kiss her or vie with Caesar to marry her. It is only literature.

2 Hermeneutics of Faith

So, to return to Putt’s pivotal question: how does the difference between “as” and “as-if” play itself out in a hermeneutics of religion? Or to flesh it out more: how might we negotiate the distinction between 1) the everyday “prefiguration” of religious experience (the sharing of bread and wine, the smell of candles and incense, the touch of charity’s hand; 2) the poetic “configuration” of a sacred story – be it a scriptural narrative or spiritual testimony operating in the realm of as-if (e.g. texts where we relate to Abraham, Christ or other holy persons “as-if” they were present in religious images and words, even though they are not actually there); and 3) the “creedal transfiguration” of religious experience – lived or aesthetically mediated – which takes the form of an act of *faith*: a wager which may, or may not, follow from 1) and 2) (namely, from the empirical encounter of people and things we experience “as” epiphanies in the lived here and now; and from the poetic accounts of such sacred encounters which we experience “as-if” they were present even though we know they are not).

Let’s take a classic scene from scripture. When Thomas touched Jesus’s scar, he experienced it “as” the wound of his beloved teacher. He prefigured the wound as the flesh of someone who had died and apparently returned. That was how Thomas experienced it in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. Now if we read the Gospel account today, two thousand years later, we experience the touching of the wound “as if” we were there with Thomas or he was here with us. We *configure* the story as a paradox of presence in absence (there is no longer the empirical presence of a body) – a hermeneutic phenomenon that we may choose to *transfigure* by an act of faith – passing with Thomas from doubt to belief in the risen Christ – or not (the wounded body could be that of an imposter or a very persuasive ghost, or mere delusion). In short, in reading this gospel story we are invited to relive the hermeneutic wager of “doubting Thomas” and confirm or deny his final act of faith. Or remain agnostic.⁵

5 On the hermeneutics of Thomas and touch see Richard Kearney, *Touch*, 77–80.

Now let's take a further step. If we were to amplify the hermeneutic circle by beholding Caravaggio's painting of this scene now hanging in Dublin's National Gallery or by reading literary accounts of this or other aspects of Christ's resurrected body in fictive narratives by the likes of Dante (*The Divine Comedy*), D.H. Lawrence (*The Man who Died*) or Nikos Kazantzakis (*The Last Temptation of Christ*), we would experience a double "as-if": a fictional configuration in so far as these imaginary accounts make no truth claims, qua poetics, regarding something that actually happened. Especially when it comes to contemporary audiences. Disbelievers can enjoy the aesthetic-poetic power of these works just as much as believers. Indeed, not even the scholars of the "historical Jesus" claim that we have actual empirical evidence that Thomas touched the risen Christ or that Christ went on to marry Mary Magdalene (Lawrence) or was tempted to do so (Kazantzakis). Novelistic fantasies are just that – fantasy; and we know it. Reading these literary-artistic configurations, we enter the secular "kingdom of as-if" (to borrow Ricoeur's term) and can imagine what we like. Without censorship: "*L'imaginaire ne connaît pas de censure*" (Ricoeur).⁶ We freely suspend all matters of belief or disbelief and become, in the poetic imagining of the moment, literary agnostics. What is being described in fiction may or may not be true – it does not matter in the sanctuary of "as-if." We enjoy a temporary asylum from reality. That is why it makes no sense to accuse Lawrence or Kazantzakis of lying because they portray Christ "as if" he had sexual relations with a woman, since their stories are not making any historical reality claim to that effect. It is only literature. Or as my mother used to assure me when I got upset at scary stories as a child, "It's only pretend." No one is violated by a book, as the judge in the New York censorship trial against Joyce's *Ulysses* remarked. So too, logically, no one should be outraged by a story about Jesus desiring a woman – or having an erection, copulating and fathering a child. Why? Because we are in the fictional laboratory of "as if" where all things are possible and anything can be imagined. With freedom and impunity. And perhaps, at times, even with a special secret power of intuiting "essential truths" – as Aristotle argues regarding the fictive capacity of plot (*mythos-mimesis*) in the *Poetics*: a wisdom which the mere chronicling of historical facts does not allow.⁷

6 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), Vol. 3.

7 Aristotle *Poetics* (London: Everyman, 1969), Part III, and our analysis of Aristotle's theory of the transformative/cathartic power of narrative plot in Richard Kearney, *On Stories*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 123–15.

To extend the range of cultural reference still further, we might add that when Herman Hesse writes a fictional account of the Buddha (*Siddhartha*) or Salmon Rushdie conjures a novelistic fantasy about Mahomed (*The Satanic Verses*), they are exercising a “poetic license” to freely vary all kinds of possibilities (carnal, spiritual and intellectual) for their protagonists. Possibilities not permitted by either historical or scriptural accounts, with their respective truth claims to tell things “as they actually happened.” So perhaps it is good – for truth in all its rich plurality – to expand our hermeneutic framework to allow for not only empirico-historical truth claims (re reality) or theological truth claims (re Revelation) but an altogether different kind of truth – what Ricoeur calls a “truth proper to fiction.” There are things that can be imagined in the realm of the “as-if” which are not permitted in the realm of the “as” (empirical seeing-as or religious believing-as). When imagination goes on holiday anything can happen. All is permitted.

3 Holy Fools and Supreme Fictions

Let me explore the point further with one final example – the notion of the “holy fool.” This is a tradition dating back to early Christianity, epitomized in Paul’s bold claim that to be wise you must be a fool (1 Corinthians 3:18). It gave rise to many unofficial legends and rituals down through the ages – Mardi Gras, St John’s night, All Souls, *el día de los muertos* – where Christ could appear as a donkey or dancer or comic stranger in all kinds of dress. The notion of the holy fool is also to be found in popular lives of certain Saints (like Francis with his animals or St. Brigid with her lake of beer), in certain kinds of mystical literature where the transgression of ordinary norms of verisimilitude, logic and behavior is witnessed; and, in modern times, in numerous fictional figures like Prince Myshkin in Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*, Christy Mahon in Synge’s *Playboy* or Meursault in Camus’s *The Stranger* (Camus said Meursault is the only Christ we deserve). In such “as if” fictions the human imagination is invited to play God as fool, something forbidden in the official canons of ecclesiastical orthodoxy. And so doing it may well capture a quintessential aspect of the divine that would otherwise escape us. A wisdom aspect which the Franciscan Richard Rohr describes thus: “The holy fool is the last stage of the wisdom journey. It is the individual who knows their dignity and therefore does not have to polish or protect it. It is the man or woman who has true authority and does not have to defend it or anyone else’s authority. It is the child of God who has met the One who watches over sparrows and fashions galaxies, and therefore can comfortably be a child of God. They and they alone can be trusted to proclaim

the Reign of God.”⁸ The reign of God may well require us to pass through the prism of supreme fictions and holy fools. As Dostoyevsky put it, “my hosanna has come through the great crucible of doubt.” And he might well have added a second crucible of “play.”

In this sense I fully agree with Putt that the “imagination is not just imaginary,” and that certain truths can be expressed by a creative mix of *figuration-as* and *fiction-as-if* (double figuration/configuration).⁹ A mix which may lead, in religious hermeneutics, to a third optional faith wager of what we might term *transfiguration as-if-as*. The atheist wager. Figuration-fiction-faith. So, to reiterate Putt’s leading question about the relation of “literary configuration” to “creedal transfiguration,” we might reiterate this basic tenet of atheist hermeneutics: while literature can free us to imagine endless possibilities of human and divine existence, it cannot make us believe or disbelieve. Nor, if it is genuine poetics, does it wish to do so. Literature conjures rather than commands. It opens an agnostic space – where free minds (including secular atheists) can explore sacred matters without fear or penalty, exercising a poetic license regarding primary faith claims (Ricoeur’s first naïveté). In art, imagination goes rogue with immunity. Some of the most interesting poetic explorations of holiness were made by non-believers like Joyce, Woolf and Proust (as I argue in *Anatheism*),¹⁰ or like Wallace Stevens as Putt so movingly reminds us. Poetics may open paths but it does not prescribe the journey. It is neither preaching nor propaganda. At best, from a religious angle, literary

8 Richard Rohr, “The Holy Fool,” Reflection for *Center for Action and Contemplation*, February 27, 2021.

9 Kant was the first to elucidate a philosophy of double imagination. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), he argued that while all ordinary human knowledge was shaped by the works of productive imagination (as “common root” and “hidden art” of both sensible intuition via schematism of time and space, and conceptual understanding via the synthesis of categories), works of art were *doubly* shaped by the secondary acts of aesthetic imagination, creating a “second nature” of freedom, beauty and play. Samuel Taylor Coleridge develops this idea of Kant’s (and Schelling’s) two imaginations – everyday and artistic – in his highly influential treatise on romantic aesthetics, *The Biographia Literaria* (1817): a text in which he enunciates his classic idealist theory of Primary and Secondary Imagination. Jean-Paul Sartre further elaborates on this idea of two acts of imagining which he describes as “double negation” (the first, like Kant’s productive imagination, producing the synthetic totality of our lived everyday experience through an act of basic primary *néantisation*, the second effecting a second negation which creates a properly fictional-aesthetic-beautiful world of unreal ‘as if’ unreality). See J.-P. Sartre, *The Imaginary*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

10 For a discussion of the “atheist” fiction of James Joyce, Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf, see our *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 101–133.

configurations may explore possibilities of faith freed from creedal prefigurations (first naïveté) and clear a way for possible later transfigurations (second naïveté). Fiction can experiment with imaginary wagers – to leap or not to leap – but only faith can take the leap. An atheist leap, which if taken, is all the more genuine after its passing through the agnostic “as-if.”

To say that everything is figuration is not therefore to say there is nothing beyond it. To say everything is figural is not to say everything is *only* figural. There is more to religion than poetics even though it ignores poetics at its peril. Poetics keeps faith decent and open. If hermeneutics begins as a circle, it sometimes ends as a spiral. If one chooses to go that way. The wager is all.

We might sum things up thus: the figuring-as of history is different from the figuring as-if of art – and both are different from the figuring-as-if-as of faith. When it comes to religious hermeneutics, we have, therefore, three distinct if often related modes of interpretation. The first is seeing-as (everyday empirical experience), the second is imaging-as-if (free variation of possibility), the third is believing as-if-as (atheist faith). Prefiguration, configuration, transfiguration. Three modes of imagining, not always in that order. With no necessary dialectic or system. Nothing determined. Nothing forbidden. All possible. All inviting. A matter of wagering again and again.