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ICONOSTASIS

Introduction: The Spiritual Structure of Dreams

In the beginning of Genesis—"God created the heavens and the earth"—we have always recognized as basic this division of all creation into two. Just so, when we pray the Apostles' Creed, we name God as "Maker of all things visible and invisible." These two worlds—the visible and the invisible—are intimately connected, but their reciprocal differences are so immense that the inescapable question arises: what is their boundary? Their boundary separates them; yet, simultaneously, it joins them. How do we understand this boundary?

Here, as in any difficult metaphysical question, the best starting point always is what we already know in ourselves. The life of our own psyche, yes *our own soul's life,* is the truest basis upon which we may learn about this boundary between the two worlds. For within ourselves, life in the visible world alternates with life in the invisible, and thus we experience moments—sometimes brief, sometimes extraordinarily fleeting, sometimes even the tiniest atom of time—when the two worlds grow so very near in us that we can see their intimate touching. At such fleeting moments in us, the veil of visibility is torn apart, and through that tear—that break we are still conscious of at that moment—we can sense that the invisible world (still unearthly, still invisible) *is breathing:* and that both this and another world are dissolving into each other. Our life in such moments becomes an unceasing stream in the same way that air when warmed streams upward from the heat.

Dream: this is our first and simplest (in the sense that we are fully habituated to it) entry into the invisible world. This entry is, more often than not, the lowest. Yet even the most chaotic and crude dream leads our soul into the invisible, giving even to the least sensitive of us the insight that there is something in us very different from what we uniquely call life. And we know this, too: when we stand on the threshold between sleep and waking, when we stand at the boundary between the two worlds, our soul is engulfed with dreams.

We need not prove the point. Long ago it was shown that our deepest sleep—what we call sleep itself—is wholly without dreaming. It is only when we sleep lightly at the boundary between sleep and waking that we are in the time—more precisely, in the temporal *environment*—where dream images are born. One understanding (and it is almost right) says that dream images correspond to the immediate passage from one area of psychic activity to another. And as we begin to awaken, we begin to transpose these dream images into daylight consciousness where they can unfold in the temporal sequence of our visible world. But, taken in themselves, these dream images have a unique, incomparable time, a time that cannot be measured in the terms of the visible world, a "transcendental" time. Let us recall a brief proof.

"The sleep was brief but the dream was long": such is the simple formula of dream images. We all know this. We sleep for, say, a brief few minutes—yet in those few minutes, we pass through days, months, even years, sometimes even centuries and millennia. There can be no doubt whatever about this: sleeping is sealed off from the visible world. Thus, a dreamer passes into another system, another dimension, another measure wherein time is understood and experienced in ways completely unlike the ways of time in the visible world. In this new experience of time,

the dreamer's time, compared to time in the visible world, runs at infinite speed.

Many would agree, then, even with knowing nothing whatever about the principle of relativity, that in different dimensions there is different time and it moves in different speeds and different measures. Few have sufficiently considered, however, the infinite speed of the dream-time, the time that turns inside out, the time that flows backward. For, indeed, very long sequences of visible time can, in the dream, be wholly instantaneous—and can flow from future to past, from effects to causes. This happens in our dreams precisely when we are moving from the visible world to the invisible, between the actual and the imaginary.

The first understanding of instantaneous time was advanced by Baron Carl Duprel. A young man at the time, he took the first important steps in the right direction, the most substantial step being the articulation of the *fact* of it. But the even more substantial discovery—that time flows backwards as well as forwards—he failed to make. He approached this discovery; but he grew always more and more uncertain; he finally did not comprehend the invisible that lay before him.

We can schematize our understanding of dreams this way. We all know the dreams—we have had them times beyond all counting (though we have never reflected upon them deeply enough)—when some tiny external stimulus causes the dreams. A sharp noise, or other sound, a loudly spoken word, a blanket that has slipped away, a sudden odor, a ray of light, and so on: anything whatever can provoke a sequence of dream images. It might be wise, then, to recognize that all dreams are externally caused. But to this recognition (or assertion) we rarely compare the composition of the actual dream. Most often, we do not even attend to the dream's content, letting our inattentiveness be fed by the opinion that dreams are empty and unworthy of consideration and thought. But even the most "occasional" of dreams is, in

fact, constructed on quite different lines. Let us look at such a construction.

We dream (let us say) a sequence of persons, places and events whose *causal linkages* reside not in some 'deep comprehension' of those persons, places and events but, instead, are found in the empirical surfaces of the dream. We plainly understand, in the dream, how one event causes another, and how (possibly quite absurdly) two or more events are connected because the first one is causing the next ones to occur; moreover, as the dream unfolds for us, we see plainly how the whole chain of causation is leading toward some conclusive event, some *denouement* to the dream's entire system of cause-effect. Let us call this conclusive event X; and let us say, too, that X occurred because of some previous event T, which, in turn, was caused by S, whose cause was R, and so on: going from effect to cause, from latter to prior, from present to past, until we arrive at the dream's starting point, some usually quite insignificant, even meaningless event A: and it is this event A that is understood *in the dream* as the first cause of the entire system. But what about the tiny external stimulus, the quick sharp noise, the brief ray of light? To waking consciousness, this external stimulus is the cause of the whole composition: the cause, that is, of the whole causally interlocked system in which persons, places and events arose in the dream. Let us call this external cause Ω.

Now, what makes the dreamer awaken? When we look at this question from the viewpoint of waking consciousness, we might want to say that it is Ω (the noise or the light) that awakens us. From within the dream, however, it is plainly the conclusive dream event X—the *denouement*—that, precisely because it ends the dream, awakens us. Taken together, we can see that Ω and X almost perfectly coincide in such a way that the *dreamed-content* and the *wakened-cause* are one and the same. This coincidence is usually so exact that we never even wonder about the relation of X

and Ω: the *denouement* is unquestionably a 'dream-paraphrase' of some external stimulus invading our dream from without.

For example, I dream that a pistol shot goes off, and in the room near me someone is really shot, or somebody has slammed a door. So there is no doubt that the dream was accidental; of course the pistol shot in the dream is a spiritual echo of a shot in the outer world. The two shots are, if you wish, the double perception—by the dreaming ear and by the sober ear—of one and the same physical process. If in a dream I should see a multitude of fragrant flowers at the very moment someone puts a bottle of perfume under my nose, then once more it would be wholly unnatural to think that the coincidence of the two fragrances (the flowers' fragrance in the dream and the perfume's in the world) is accidental. Or I dream that someone falls upon me and begins to strangle me, and I awake in terror to find that a pillow has fallen on my chest. Or I dream I am attacked by a dog, and I awake the find that a mosquito has bitten me. There are uncountable thousands of such instances; in all of them, the coincidence of X and Ω—of, again, the dream's *denouement* and its external cause—is under no circumstances an accidental coincidence.

But note what we are saying: the same event is being differently seen by two consciousness: by waking consciousness, it is Ω, while by dream consciousness, it is X. This would scarcely be worth our notice at all except for the extraordinary fact that X has a contradictory double status: in waking consciousness, it is a dream effect of external cause Ω while, in the dream, it is the final effect of the dream's strongly welded causal chain begun by trivial event A. Thus, X concludes two entirely distinct lines of causation, lines whose respective starting points (the external noise and dream event A) have no connection whatever: plainly, Ω cannot in any sense *cause* A to occur. But we can say that if A and all its chain of circumstances did not exist, then the whole dream would

not occur, and consequently there would be no X—which means that Ω did not reach our consciousness.

Thus, while X is a reflection of Ω in the imagery of the dream, it is clearly not some *deus ex machina* with no connection to the dream's logic of events, some alien intruder who senselessly terminates the stream of inner imagery. No, X is a true *denouement*: it genuinely concludes the dream. In dreams, events do not happen the way people who are insensitive to God's providence think they happen, as the train crash or the pistol shot terminates the promising life. In dreams, everything happens as in a perfect drama, and the *denouement* comes because all the prior events of the dream have fully ripened and because it therefore fulfills and unifies the dream's entire drama and meaning. The dream *denouement* is therefore not some independent event glued from the outside onto the dream's causal chain; in some unfathomable way, it never interrupts the dream's logic and shape and whole pattern of interlocked details. A dream is unquestionably a complete truth, a self-enclosed coherence, in which the *denouement* is predetermined from the very start in such a way that we may say that the end determines both the beginning and everything that occurs between the beginning and the end. A dream, in other words, is wholly coherent; it cannot be sundered anywhere without destroying it entirely. Just as is always the case with the well-written play, where a plot without its conclusive consequences lacks all significance, so we may say that the composition of the dream is teleological: its events occur because of its *denouement*, in such a way that the *denouement* will not be left hanging in the air but will, instead, exhibit deep programmatic rationality.

Let us look at some dreams. Here are those dreams that stem from the same external stimulus, the ringing of an alarm clock (these are Gilderbrand's observations).

1.

It's a spring morning and I'm going for a walk through green meadows, and I come to the neighboring village. I see the villagers dressed in Sunday clothes, carrying their prayerbooks, a big crowd of them all heading for the church. Today is Sunday and Divine Liturgy will soon begin. I decide to go to Liturgy but I'm a bit warm from walking, so I decide first to rest in the cemetery next to the church. I start to read the epitaphs, and then I notice the bell ringer start to go up the bell tower. The bell must be rung to start the service, but it still hangs unmoving. Then the bell begins to sway and suddenly it peals out in loud, piercing sounds—so piercing, in fact, that I awake to find that the piercing sound is my alarm clock ringing.

2.

It's a clear winter day, and the streets are covered with snow. I've promised to go on a sleigh ride, but I have to wait a long time. Then I'm told that the sleigh is ready at the gate. I make ready to leave—I put on my heavy fur coat; a footbag is taken out—and at last I sit down in the sleigh. But there's more waiting now, until finally the impatient horses are given the reins. The sleigh bells on the reins start trembling with their famous "yanichar" music; they ring out louder and ever more vigorously—until the dream tears open and I find that the strong sound of sleigh bells is my alarm clock ringing.

3.

I see the kitchen maid going down the hallway to the dining room, and she's carrying a stack of two or three dozen porcelain plates. I sense that the stack is tipping out of her hands. "Watch out," I cry. "The whole load will fall." She argues back—inevitably. "It's not the first time I've carried plates, you know. I'm used to it." But I'm keeping an anxious eye on her as she goes to the dining room. On the threshold she trips, and all the dishes fall from her hands, cracking and ringing out in hundreds of flying

pieces. But the sound keeps on, and it's not the dishes crashing but the sound—I'm now awake—of my alarm clock ringing.

Let us take one more example, a famous one in the psychology texts. In this one, the dreamer experiences the French Revolution, participating in the very beginnings of the Revolution and—for over a year inside the dream—goes through a long, complicated series of adventures: persecution, pursuit, terror, the execution of the King, and so on. Finally, the dreamer is arrested with the Girondists, thrown into prison, interrogated, and then condemned by the Revolutionary Council to die. The wagon rolls through the streets to the guillotine, and he is taken from the wagon and his head is firmly placed on the headrest, and then the guillotine blade falls heavily onto his neck: and he awakens in horror.

It is the final event that interests us: the touch of the blade on his neck. Can anyone doubt this: that the whole dream sequence, from the first stirrings of Revolution to the conclusive fall of the guillotine blade, is one seamless whole? Doesn't the entire chain direct itself precisely to that conclusive event (touch of cold steel) that we termed X? To doubt this total, interlocked coherence is to deny the very dream itself—an improbable supposition.

And yet the dreamer found, in the moment of his terrified awakening, that the metal bedstead of his bed had somehow broken and had heavily struck his bare neck. We cannot doubt the coherent wholeness of his dream, a coherence that starts from the Revolution's first stirrings (A) and concludes with the guillotine blade falling (X). Equally, we cannot doubt that the sensation of the blade (X) and the touch of bedstead metal (Ω) are the very same event: but perceived by two distinct orders of consciousness, dream and wakened.

None of this would, I repeat, be at all extraordinary if the touch of the bedstead (Ω) had awakened the sleeper and, in the instant of this awakening, the touch had been enfolded by the symbolic image of the touch, and if this symbolic image (amplified by thematic associations with the French Revolution) had unfolded into a dream of sufficient length. But in actual fact this dream, as with countless others of the same type, flows reversely to what we expect when we think in the Kantian sense of time. We say that the external cause (Ω) of the dream (which is a single, coherent unit) is the touch of the bedstead on the dreamer's neck, and that this touch is symbolized by the image of the guillotine blade's touch (X). Hence, the spiritual cause of the whole dream is this event X. Thus, in daylight consciousness and according to the scheme of daylight causation, this event must precede A, which spiritually flows from this event X. In other words, in the time of the daylight world, event X should be the start of the dream's drama and event A its *denouement*. But here, in the time of the invisible world, it happens inside out, and cause X appears not prior to all the consequences of A and (in general) not prior to the entire series of consequences (b, c, d...r, s, t) but following them, concluding the whole row and determining it not as its efficient cause but its final cause: τέλος.

Thus, time in the dream runs, and acceleratedly runs, towards the actual and *against* the movement of time in waking consciousness. Dream time is *turned inside out,* which means that all its concrete images are also turned inside out with it: and that means we have entered the domain of *imaginary space.* The very same event that is perceived from the area of actual space as actual is seen from the area of imaginary space as imaginary, i.e., as occurring before everything else in teleological time, as the goal or object of our purposiveness. Contrarily, the goal seen from here appears (in our failure to appreciate goals rightly) as something cherished but lacking the energy of the ideal; but seen from *there,* through the other consciousness, the goal is comprehended as living energy that shapes actuality as its creative form. So, in general, runs the inner time of organic life, the flow of which is diverted from consequences to cause-goal. But usually this inner time only very dimly reaches our waking consciousness.

A person I knew very well once dreamed (after the death of close relatives) that he was walking along a cemetery, and the other world seemed to him dark and gloomy. But all at once the deceased in the cemetery—or perhaps he himself somehow understood (I don't remember how)—explained to him how very wrong such a thought was; for, directly beneath the surface of the earth, foliage was growing but with its roots up, not down, so that the same green and succulent foliage and grass were there, just as in the cemetery—but even more green and succulent; and the same trees were there, and their great crowns grew down and their roots reached up, and the same birds sang in the same azure sky where the same sun shone—all of it more radiantly beautiful than in our world on this side.

Don't we recognize in this reverse world, in this ontological mirror reflection of our world, the sphere of the imaginary, an imaginary which is nevertheless actual for one who is oneself turned upside down, who reaches into the world's spiritual density—an imaginary truly real in the way one is oneself real? Yes, this realm is real in essence—and not in a way completely different from the reality of our world, for whatever God creates is blessed into unity; rather what the journeyer to the other side sees and what the deceased also contemplates is the same existence as here. The true countenances and spiritual forms of things are seen by one who has himself realized his own true, original countenance, that countenance which is the image of God (and the Greek for which is ἰδέα); for the ideas of the Existing One *see,* having been themselves illumined by the Idea, and thereby in and through themselves they reveal to our world here the ideas of the supreme world.

And so dreams are the images that separate the visible world from the invisible—and at the same time join them. This boundary-space of the dream establishes the relationship of the dream images to this world as well as to *that* world. From the perspective

of the visible world and its ordinary images (i.e., what we call 'actuality'), a dream is 'merely a dream,' nothing—*nihil visible,* yes *nihil,* but *visible* nothing, visible and perceptible and therefore always approaching the images of *this* 'actuality.' But time in the dream—i.e. its most general characteristic—runs *reversely* to time in the visible world. And therefore although it is something perceived, the dream is wholly teleological, saturated with the meanings of the invisible world, meanings that are invisible, immaterial, eternal yet nevertheless visibly manifest and (as it were) vividly material. A dream is therefore pure meaning wrapped in the thinnest membrane of materiality; it is almost wholly a phenomenon of the other world. The dream is the common limit of both the sequence of earthly states and the sequence of heavenly states, the boundary where the final determinations of earth meet the increasing densifications of heaven. The dream makes into symbols this meeting of the lowest experiences of the highest world with the highest experiences of the lowest world; thus, the dream is the last splashes of the higher world into the lower—although the perceptible patterns of these heavenly splashes are predetermined by our earthly circumstances. For this reason, the kind and quality of our dreaming changes through a night of sleeping. Early on, our dreams are primarily psycho-physiological in kind, gathering imagery from everyday waking experience (usually immediate); later on, and especially toward dawn, our dreams are cleansed of such empirical obsessions and, filled with night-consciousness, grow ever more mystically purified.

A dream, then, is a sign of a movement between two realms—and also a symbol: of what? From the heavenly view, the dream symbolizes earth; from the earthly perspective, it symbolizes heaven. A dream therefore occurs when—simultaneously but with differing orders of clarity—both shores of existence are given to consciousness. We might say, then, that a dream happens whenever we cross from one shore to the other: but it may be more accurate to say that

the dream happens whenever our consciousness *hugs the boundary of the crossing* and therefore sustains the double perceptiveness that occurs whenever we either lightly dream or drowsily keep awake. For there is where all significant dreaming occurs: in the light dream or in the sudden separation from ordinary waking reality. There are, it is true, other possible phenomena of the invisible realm. But for such phenomena to occur in us, it is necessary that some powerful inward shock take place, some essential separation of oneself from oneself—as if we were to be plunged into some twilight of consciousness wherein we would wander the borders of the two worlds but would lack the power to penetrate deeper into either one.

Spiritual Sobriety and the Iconic Face

What we say about the dream holds true (with minor changes) about any movement from one sphere to another. In creating a work of art, the psyche or soul of the artist ascends from the earthly realm into the heavenly; there, free of all images, the soul is fed in contemplation by the essences of the highest realm, knowing the permanent *noumena* of things; then, satiated with this knowing, it descends again to the earthly realm. And precisely at the boundary between the two worlds, the soul's spiritual knowledge assumes the shapes of symbolic imagery: and it is these images that make permanent the work of art. Art is thus materialized dream, separated from the ordinary consciousness of waking life.

In this separation, there are two moments that yield, in the artwork, two types of imagery: the moment of ascent into the heavenly realm, and the moment of descent into the earthly world. At the crossing of the boundary into the upper world, the soul sheds—like outworn clothes—the images of our everyday emptiness, the psychic effluvia that cannot find a place above, those elements of our being that are not spiritually grounded. At

the point of descent and re-entry, on the other hand, the images are experiences of mystical life crystallized out on the boundary of two worlds. Thus, an artist misunderstands (and so causes us to misunderstand) when he puts into his art those images that come to him during the uprushing of his inspiration—if, that is, it is only the imagery of the soul's ascent. We need, instead, his early morning dreams, those dreams that carry the coolness of the eternal azure. The other imagery is merely psychic raw material, no matter how powerfully it affects him (and us), no matter how artistically and tastefully developed in the artwork. Once we understand this difference, we can easily distinguish the 'moment' of an artistic image: the descending image, even if incoherently motivated in the work, is nevertheless abundantly teleological; hence, it is a crystal of time in an imaginal space. The image of ascent, on the other hand, even if bursting with artistic coherence, is merely a mechanism constructed in accordance with the moment of its psychic genesis. When we pass from ordinary reality into the imaginal space, naturalism generates imaginary portrayals whose similarity to everyday life creates an empty image of the real. The opposite art—symbolism—born of the descent, incarnates in real images the experience of the highest realm; hence, this imagery—which is symbolic imagery—attains a *super-reality.*

What is true of art and dream is also true of mystical experience: a common pattern holds everywhere. In mystical experience, the soul is raised up from the visible realm to where visibility itself vanishes and the field of the invisible opens: such is the Dionysian sundering of the bonds of the visible. And after soaring up into the invisible, the soul descends again into the visible—and then and there, before its very eyes, are those real *appearances* of things: ideas. This is the Apollonian perspective on the spiritual world.

How tempting it is to call 'spiritual' those images—those soul-confusing, soul-absorbing, soul-consuming dreamings—that first appear to us when our soul finds its way into the other world.

Such images are, in fact, the spirits of the present age that seek to trap our consciousness in *their* realm. These spirits inhabit the boundary between the worlds; and though they are earthly in nature, they take on the appearances of the spiritual realm. When we approach the limits of the ordinary world, we enter into conditions that (like the ordinary) are continuously new but that have patterns which differ entirely from those of ordinary existence. Here, then, is the area of our greatest spiritual danger: to approach this boundary while still willing earthly attachments; or to approach it without a spiritual mind—either one's own or a spiritual director's; or to approach it before we are, in the spiritual sense, truly grown-up. What happens, at such an encounter of the boundary, is that the seeker is engulfed in lies and self-deceptions. The world then ensnares the seeker in that net of temptation in which—by granting him an apparent entry into the spiritual realm—it actually enslaves him to the world. For it is not at all the case that every spirit guarding these points of entry is a true Guardian of the Threshold, i.e., a good defender of the sacred realms; for a spirit may well be not a genuine being of the higher realm but rather an accomplice of (in the Apostle's phrase) "the prince of the power of the air"; for such spirits are the ones who keep the soul on the boundary of the worlds, tangled in the seductions of spiritual intoxication.

A day of spiritual sobriety, when it holds our soul in its power, is so sharply different from the spiritual realm that it cannot even pretend to be seductive, and its materiality is experienced not only as a burden but also as a yoke good for us in the way gravity is good for earth, a yoke restricting our movements but giving us a fulcrum, a yoke reining in the swiftness with which our will acts in self-determination (for both good and bad) and in general extending in the will its instant of the eternal, i.e., the will's angelic self-determination toward this side or that, an instant lasting our whole life and making our earthy life not an empty existence passively manifesting every possibility but, rather, the

ascetic exercise of authentic self-organization, the art of sculpting and 'chasing out' our essence. This lot, or fate, or destiny, εἱμαρμένη, μοῖρα, i.e., that which was decided from above, *fatum* from *fari*—this destiny of our simultaneous weakness and strength, this gift of our divine creativity, is *time-space.*

Time-space sobriety on earth is never seductive, then; neither is the angelic realm when the soul comes directly into contact with it. But in between, at the boundary of this world, are concentrated all the temptations and seductions: these are the phantoms that Tasso depicts in describing the Enchanted Wood. If one only possesses the spiritual steadfastness of will to go through them, neither fearful of nor yielding to their seductions, then one finds that they will lose entirely their power over the soul, becoming mere shadows of sensuality, empty dreamings of no value at all. But if, instead, one's faith in God weakens in the midst of such a spiritual siege, then one looks back at these phantoms—and in so doing, one pours the reality of one's own soul into them. Then the phantoms will gain great power, seizing the soul and sucking from her the power to materialize still more, thereby weakening the soul into further fear and more yielding. In such a state, it is extremely difficult—almost impossible—to break their grip without the intervention of another spiritual power. Such, then, are the elemental swamps at the boundary of the worlds.

This disastrous enslavement is called by the ascetic tradition *prelest*: it means spiritual pride or conceit, and it is the direst spiritual state a person can be in. In committing any other sin, a person acts in such a way that he falls into a relation with the external world, with its objective properties and laws, within which he is working against the sacred order of God's creation, hitting against and striving to break it. Thus, an ordinary sinner can discover in this relation the fulcrum to change his conscious-

ness and bring repentance (*to repent* in Greek is μετανοεῖν, to change the totality of consciousness at the deepest level of being).

Prelest, however, is entirely different. Here, the deluded self does not seek superficial satisfaction of this or that passion; but—far more dangerously—it imagines itself to be moving along the perpendicular to the sensory world, withdrawn from it. Thus completely unsatisfied, the self-absorbed soul in *prelest* is held by the spirits who inhabit the boundary and who are, then, nourished by the soul's own troubled, unsatisfied passions—that soul already burning with the fires of Hell. The soul closes into itself, and then all occasion is gone wherein the soul could—with intense agony—awaken once more into consciousness: the encounter with the objective world of God's creation.

Prelest, of course, brings images that stir passions in us. But our real danger lies not in the passions but in our appraisal of them. For we may, if caught in *prelest*, take the passions as something directly opposite to what they really are. Usually, we would see our sinful passions as a dangerous weakness, thereby finding the humility that heals us of them. In *prelest*-stirred passions, however, we see them as attained spirituality, as sacred energy, salvation, and holiness. Thus, where ordinarily we would seek to break the grip of our sinful passions—even if our attempts were weak and futile—in *prelest*, driven by spiritual conceit, spiritual sensuality, and (above all) spiritual pride, we seek to tighten the knots that bind us. An ordinary sinner knows he is falling away from God; a soul in *prelest* thinks it is drawing ever closer to Him, and while angering Him thinks he is gladdening Him.

Such disastrous confusion occurs in us because we confuse the images of ascent with the images of descent. We may put the whole matter this way: the vision that appears to us on the boundary of the worlds may be either (1) the absence of the reality of the visible world; that is, an incomprehensible sign of our own inner emptiness, our own *prelest*-impassioned banishing of God's

objective reality; and then, inhabiting the neat, empty room of our soul, we will find those masks of reality that are the total renunciation of the real world; or the vision may be (2) the presence of the superior reality of the spiritual world.

In this sense, then, ascetic self-purification also has for us the same double significance. When spiritual neatness becomes an end in itself, then Pharisaic self-consciousness arises and, inevitably, self-admiration. In such asceticism, the soul becomes empty and, freeing itself from all earthly attachments, grows still emptier; then, finding this growing emptiness ever more intolerable, one's nature invites into the emptiness those spiritual forces that prompted the whole Pharisaic practice of self-purification in the first place, those greedy, twisted, and radically impure forces. Our Savior talks precisely of such self-centered asceticism in His parable about the swept room:

> When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first. (Matthew 12:43-45)

Thus, what was self-consciously intended issues finally in its direct opposite. This occurs because the man assures himself and others that he himself, in his innermost heart, is really good—that all his mistakes and transgressions are somehow accidents, mere phenomena and not essentialities, things that somehow just happened; and that all he spiritually needs to do is to tidy up the room a bit. Such a man is wholly desensitized to his own radically flawed will, inevitably seeing his actions as arising from outside God and solely from his own efforts; hence, he exhibits the complacency of spiritual self-satisfaction.

But if you continually acknowledge your own sinfulness, you never have the time to think whether or not you—in your own

eyes—are spiritually 'tidied up'; instead, your soul hungers and thirsts for God, trembling in fear at the spiritual catastrophe of being without Him; and thus your one real concern becomes no longer yourself but that which is the most objective of all: God; and what you genuinely now want is not a clean inner room to congratulate yourself about but—in tears—for God to visit the room of your soul, this even hastily picked up place, God who can with a word transform a tiny hut, even a hovel, into a splendid palace chamber. With this direction to your inward life, a vision will come to you not when, by your own will, you are attempting to override the given boundaries of your spiritual growth, exceeding the measure of what is open to you; instead, it will come when—mysteriously, incomprehensibly—your soul has been lifted into the invisible world by the very powers of that world itself, and then (like the rainbow after the divine deluge, like "the sign of the covenant") the heavenly vision will appear in your soul, the visible image of the highest realm, given to you as both reminder and the revelatory 'news' of eternity and as teacher of the way to incarnate the invisible in the daylight consciousness of your entire life. Such a vision is more objective than the objectivities of earth, far weightier and realer than they, for it is the fulcrum of all our earthly creativity, the crystal wherein—conformed to its own crystalline laws—is crystallized out our earthly experience, thereby becoming in its total structure a symbol of the spiritual world.

The ontological opposition between these two types of vision—between those arising from our emptiness and those born of our fullness—may be best expressed by the opposition between the words *mask* (Russian: *lichina*) and countenance (*lik*). But there is also the word *face* (*litzo*): so let us begin with it. By *face* (*litzo*), we mean that which we see in ordinary daylight consciousness, that which we see as the recognizable appearance of the real world; and we can speak—doing no violence to ordinary language—of all natural things and creations with whom we are in

conscious relation as having a face: as, for example, we speak of the face of nature. Face, we may thus say, is nearly synonymous with the word *appearance*—meaning, however, *appearance to daylight consciousness*. But in saying this, we must not deprive the word *face* of all objective reality; rather, we must see in *face* a boundary between subjectivity and objectivity, a boundary whose clear distinction is never given to our consciousness, a boundary whose fading away causes in us the perceptual circumstance wherein we know for certain that we are perceiving something but we do not know what precisely, in the thing we are seeing, is objectively real. In other words, when we see a *face,* we see its objective reality only (as it were) hiddenly, as if it were organically absorbing our consciousness and thereby subconsciously forming in us the basis for a further process of knowing. In this sense, a *face* is the perceptual raw material upon which the portrait-artist is now working but whose esthetic details are, at the moment, still unfinished. Once completed, the *face* becomes (using the language of literary criticism) an artistic image, a perceptual portrait that is not the ideal form but is, instead, one that is simultaneously typical and relative.

Thus, this perceptual portrait that we fashion is, of course, a quick sketch, one of many possible sketches for depicting the face we are seeing; however, in the *face* itself, our sketch is no more expressed than are all other possible sketches; and, in this sense, our sketch is something external to the *face* itself, revealing at least as much if not more its own artistic self-determination, and the artist's own cognitive organization, as it does the ontological reality of the *face* itself.

On the other hand, the *countenance* (*lik*) of a thing manifests its ontological reality. In *Genesis, the image of God* is differentiated from *the likeness of God*; and long ago, the Holy Tradition of the Church explained that the *image of God* must be understood as the ontologically actual gift of God, as the spiritual ground of

each created person; whereas the *likeness of God* must be understood as the potentiality to attain spiritual perfection: that is, to construct the *likeness of God* in ourselves from that totality of our empirical personalities called the *image of God*, to incarnate in the flesh of our personality the hidden inheritance of our sacred likeness to God: and to reveal this incarnation in our *face* (*litzo*). Thus, our *face* gains the precision of a spiritual structure quite different from our ordinary face; but this difference is, in turn, quite distinct from our face as an artistic image or portrait—not, however, due to any motivation of our own (i.e., our face's 'composition' or 'tone' or 'character'); rather, this difference is due to the material reality of our face conforming to the deepest tasks of its own essence. Everything accidental, everything caused by things external to this essence—i.e., everything in our face which is not the face itself—is swept away by an energy like a strong fountain of water breaking through a thick material husk, the energy of the image of God: and our *face* (*litzo*) becomes a *countenance* (*lik*).

We are beholding a countenance, then, whenever we have before us a face that has fully realized within itself its likeness to God: and we then rightly say, Here is the image of God, meaning: Here is depicted the prototype of Him. When we contemplate this holy countenance, we thus behold the divine prototype; for those among us who have transfigured their faces into countenances proclaim—without a word and solely by their appearance to us—the mysteries of the invisible world. In Greek, we remember, *countenance* is called εἶδος or ἰδέα (i.e., idea), for ἰδέα is precisely the meaning of countenance: the idea of revealed spiritual being, eternal meaning contemplatively apprehended, the supreme heavenly beauty of a precise reality, the highest prototype, the ray from the source of all images: such are the meanings of idea in Plato; and from him, they spread to all philosophy and theology and even into the popular understanding of the word

'idea'. From all these meanings we gather and make wholly transparent our understanding of *countenance.*

The absolute opposite of *countenance* (*lik*) is *mask* (*lichina*). The first meaning of mask may be seen in the old word "larve" (related to modern *larva*), meaning that which resembles a face, being both presented and accepted as a face but which is empty inside; that is, it has physical materiality but no metaphysical substance. By contrast, a countenance is the *appearance* of some reality and, as such, it mediates between our act of comprehending and that which we comprehend in the sense that it opens for our speculative sight the essence of that which we are seeking to comprehend. Thus, if the countenance did not so function, it could not have for us any meaning. But this meaning would become negative if, instead of revealing to us the image of God, the countenance gave us not merely no hint of it but also actively lied to us, falsely pointing to non-existent things. Then the countenance would be not a face but a mask.

In using the term *mask,* we shall ignore entirely the ancient religious meanings of masks as well as all the corresponding classical terms *larve, persona* and *prosopon* (and so on), because in the ancient classical cultures, the masks were less masks in our understanding of the term and more a type of icon. But when the ancient religions became corrupted and spiritually drained, and the cultic icons became correspondingly profaned, then from this blasphemy there arose the modern meanings of the mask: deceptive illusion, spiritual fraudulence, and even the triviality of scariness.

Significantly, the Latin term *larva* had already, in the ancient Roman culture, acquired the meaning of *astral corpse,* "empty" (*inanis*) or "substance-less," that which is left after death: that is, the *larva* or *astral mask* as the dark, impersonal vampire who seeks its sustenance in fastening onto a living face and sucking out all the blood from it, showing forth the face's essence as its own. It is remarkable how even quite different traditions use the very same

terms to express this false reality of the astral mask: in the Kabbalah, it is called the *klipot* (the husk), while in Theosophy it is termed the "shell." And it is most remarkable that this emptiness of the false reality, this kernel of the shell, is the basis in folk wisdom for the quality or attribute termed "impure" and "evil." Thus, in both German and Russian fairy tales, we see the evil spirit who is inwardly empty, a hollow tube *without a backbone* (hence, without the physical basis of bodily strength), a false body who is consequently a false entity. Also, we see in Egyptian folk tradition the god who imitates reality and goodness, i.e., the god Osirus, depicted by the hieroglyph *Dzedu,* whose ideogramic meaning is the backbone. Evil or impure spirits, however, in lacking backbone, lack substance; hence, the substantial and the good, because they possess backbone, have the very basis of being.

Such interconnections might seem to us quite arbitrary—until we recall the work of positivist philosopher Ernst Mach. He at first rejected the notion that the human personality possessed a philosophically substantive kernel or core. But he saw that the idea persisted and thrived everywhere in human societies; hence, as an intellectually honest seeker of knowledge, he recognized the necessity of finding the empirical basis of that idea. And he found it exactly in that part of the human body which is inaccessible to outward interactions and which cannot be directly seen: in, that is, the back and its structural determination, *the backbone.* Thus, a rigorous empiricism led this archpositivist to the very starting point of German psychology: to, that is, the miraculous fairy tales of Caesarius of Heisterbach (1170-1240), in *Dialogus Miraculorum* (Dialogue on Miracles, 1223).

In the most general terms, then, the evil and impure has no authentic substance. Only the good, and everything which acts by it, is real. Medieval thought called the devil "the monkey of God"; hence, because the first Satanic temptation was "to be as gods"—that is, to be a god not substantively but deceptively—it is wholly

accurate to talk not about a monkey but about sin: about, that is, the mask, the illusory semblance of reality emptied of all essence and strength. The essence of a human being is the image of God. Thus, in penetrating the entire structure ("the temple," in the Apostle's terms) of a human personality, sin acts not only to block the outward expression or appearance of a person's essence but also to hide the very essence itself. In such a case, the expressed appearance of the personality separates from its essential kernel, or center; and in thus having been exfoliated, the appearance becomes a shell. Then the appearance—the light by which we who comprehend are penetrated by that which we comprehend—this light of appearance becomes a darkness that separates and isolates not only we who comprehend from that which we comprehend but also the real essence of the comprehended thing from itself: and the word "appearance" thus shifts its meaning from the Platonic-theological meaning of the disclosure or revelation of reality to the Kantian-positivistic meaning of illusory, deceptive. It would be, then, a grave mistake to deny the Kantian meaning of the word "appearance"; it would be an even graver mistake to deny the Platonic significance. But the two meanings point to two *distinct* phases of spiritual existence: where the Platonic meaning points (especially in the ecclesiastical *Weltanschauung*) to goodness and sanctity, the Kantian significance indicates the sinful and the evil—and both therefore, as directions of thought, possess their own subject of investigation.

By exfoliating essence into appearance, sin brings into a *countenance* (*lik*)—i.e., into the purest revelation of God's image—that which is alien to the countenance and, in so doing, it overshadows the light of God: and the face becomes a light mixed with darkness, flesh which becomes here and there corroded, through the twisting of its beauty, into sores. As sin possesses a personality, and as the face ceases to be a window through which God's radiance shines, becoming streaked with the always more visible darknesses, the face separates from the personality—from,

that is, its creative origin—and loses its vitality in becoming a chilling mask of possession by the passions. Dostoevsky well understood this process in his character Stavrogin, whose face had become a stony mask and no longer a real face: such is one of the steps in the disintegration of personality. Further, when a face has become a mask, we can know nothing whatever about what Kant would call its *noumenon;* neither can we (with the positivists) find any reason at all to affirm the real existence of that face. For (using the Apostle's phrase) "having their conscience seared," these mask-faces are dark: not one single ray from God's image within them reaches the surface of their personality: and so we cannot know whether or not God's judgment has been wholly accomplished in them and that they have had taken away from them the token, or covenant, in them which is God's image. It may not yet be accomplished, and so the bright gold talent may still be buried beneath the mountain of dark ash. But it also may be accomplished: if so, then the personality long ago became like those wraiths in the fairy tales who have no backbone. Conversely, high spiritual attainment transforms the face into a lightbearing countenance by driving away all darkness, revealing everything that was under-revealed, 'chasing' everything that was under-chased; and the countenance then becomes an artistic self-portrait whose living material details arise from the art of arts. This art is the practice of selfless asceticism, wherein the devoted practitioner, the ascetic, comes —not merely by his words but by his entire self together with his words; i.e., not abstractly, not by abstract argumentation—the ascetic comes to *bear witness* and prove the truth of authentic reality. Such a circumstance is plainly written on the ascetic's face: as Jesus says, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." (Mt. 5:16) "Your good works": this is not "good works" in the Russian understanding of the words—i.e., not philanthropy and moralism—but rather it is ὑμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα, literally, "the works of your beauty", i.e., the lightbearing

and harmonious manifestations of spiritual personality and, above all, the illumined face whose beauty arises from the dispersal of inward light into the outward appearance; and the light of this face so overwhelms those who behold it that they glorify the heavenly Father whose image corresponds to this brightness before them. And this correspondence is what the onlookers of the first Christian witness to Christ's work saw in his face: "And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15); and it is what is seen in all the holy witnesses of Christ, the last of whom is St. Seraphim of Sarov, and shall always be seen; for all testify to the sacred lightbearing faces of the ascetics, to the radiance surrounding them like discs of sunlight; all who beheld these bearers of blessed life saw with their own eyes at least the rudiments of this transfiguration into light of a face (*litzo*) into a countenance (*lik*).

Nevertheless, it need hardly be insisted upon that the Church, in thus bearing witness to the *bodily* transfiguration of persons, does *not* say that a person's essence—i.e., the inward image of God—also must be transfigured. No; this essence is already pure light; and thus it is itself the creative form by which is transfigured the whole empirical personality, the whole content of a person, including the physical body. For here, in the essential light, dwells the word of God, and by this word is established the direction of ascetic and spiritual practice—as the Apostle writes

> I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. (Rom 12:1-3)

Thus, the Apostle instructs the Romans to "present" (or make) their bodies into "a living sacrifice...unto God"; for the making of one's body into a sacrifice is a *service of the word,* i.e., it is a service that bears witness to the truth because the body bears within it the word of God. Christians speak by their bodies. Further, the Apostle tells what, properly speaking, it means to make the body a sacrifice. It does not, of course, mean the torture and death of martyrdom—for in that kind of sacrifice, those who condemn the martyrs to death are the ones who are presenting the Christians' bodies as sacrifice and not the Christians themselves. What the injunction does entail is explained by the Apostle: "be not conformed to this world." That is, do not share the world's common scheme of things, its common law of life, its common way of being in the world's present circumstances: such is the negative meaning of presenting one's body as sacrifice. The positive meaning is: "be ye transformed," that is, be transfigured, change the scheme of things, the law of life, the way of being. What does it mean to change the spiritual constitution of one's body from something conformed to the world into something transfigured; how does one accomplish this? The Apostle goes on: "be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind"—i.e., the body's transformation, or transfiguration, is accomplished in the renewing of the mind, the renewing of the whole essential center. The sign of such renewing is the doing of God's will. In other words, to present one's body as sacrifice means to attain the spiritual sensitivity of knowing God's will as "good, and acceptable, and perfect." But such sanctity is, as it were, the thesis to which is opposed the antithesis wherein our yearning to so know God's will initiates in us a desire to philosophize about it, thereby replacing a true contact with heaven with our own abstract reasonings. God gave everyone their measure of faith, that is, "a revelation of invisible things." And true thought can occur only within the boundaries of faith; for exceeding the boundaries results only in distorting the thought. The Apostle expresses this in Romans

12:3 with an almost untranslatable aphorism: μὴ ὑπερφονεῖν παρ' ὃ δεῖ φρονεῖν ἀλλὰ φρονεῖν εἰς τὸ σωφρονεῖν, turning upon the wholly opposite meanings of two verbs that nevertheless share the same root: *hyper-phronein* and *so-phronein.* These verbs are thus two poles that correspond: the first (*hyper-phronein*) is the total conforming of the body to this world (whence splits off the mask, *lichina*), while the second is the transfiguration of the body "according to the time to come"—whence shines forth one's true countenance, one's holy face (*lik*).

Orthodox Services and the Icon

The services of the Orthodox temple are the way of ascent. Seen in the aspect of time, a temple service is an interior movement creating in us an inward separation at the fourth coordinate of depth and leading us into the highest realm. But a temple service is also an organized action in space, an action whose surface "membranes" continually direct us to the central kernel; and so temple space and temple time have, in the service, one and the same meaning. (More precisely, they have the same meaning along verbal and numerical coordinates, although they differ along other coordinates.) The temple's spatial center, or kernel, is defined by "membranes": narthex, vestibule, the temple itself, sanctuary, altar-table, antemension, chalice, the Holy Mysteries, Christ, the Father. As has been said before, the temple is Jacob's ladder, leading from the visible into the invisible. But the whole altar is (in its wholeness) already the place of the invisible, the area set apart from this world, separate, withdrawn, dedicated. The altar in its wholeness is heaven as sensible, as mind-apprehendable, as τόπος νοερός and even as τόπος νοητός, as one with (in the phrase from the Divine Liturgy) "the most heavenly and spiritual altar." The symbolic meaning of the altar differs according to the different symbolic meanings of the temple: but the various meanings converge in aligning the incomprehensible with

the actualities of the temple itself. For example, when (following Simeon of Salonica) we see the entire temple in christological terms as Christ God-Man, then the altar signifies the invisible God while the temple means the visible Man. If we use a purely anthropological approach, then the altar represents man's psyche or soul while the temple is his body. Theologically considered, the altar reveals to us the mystery of the Trinity in its incomprehensible essence, while the temple signifies the Trinity as comprehensible in the world's province and power. Finally, in a cosmological interpretation, the same Simeon recognizes in the altar the symbol of heaven while, in the temple, he sees the symbol of earth. Thus, the very diversity of these interpretations strengthens the ontological center of the altar's meaning as the invisible realm.

But this realm, by its very invisibility, is impossible to look at; and the altar, as *noumenon,* would for the spiritually blind be as impossible to see as would the flowing clouds of incense be for the physically blind—for the incense is a landmark which, because it is sensorily comprehensible, reveals the invisible world. Thus, the altar is necessarily limited in order to be something for us; but this limitation arises only through the realities of our dualistic power of perception. If these realities were wholly spiritual, they would be incomprehensible to our weak nature—and what exists in our consciousness would therefore not be made better. But if these realities were only in the visible realm, then they would be unable to indicate where lies the boundary between the visible and invisible: nor would they themselves know where that boundary existed. Heaven and earth, altar and temple: this separation can only occur through the visible witnesses of the invisible world, those living symbols of the co-inherence of this world and the other—i.e., through the holy people. These holy persons, visible in the visible, are nevertheless not conformed to this world, for they have transformed their bodies and resurrected their minds, thereby attaining existence beyond this world in the invisible. Thus, they bear witness to the invisible as they bear witness to

themselves by their holy countenances. They live with us, and they are more easily accessible to us than we are to ourselves. They are not earthly ghosts but persons standing firmly on our earth, not abstract, not bloodless. But neither are they held in bondage to earth; rather, they are the living ideas of the invisible world. Thus, they are (we may say) the witnesses on the boundary between the visible and the invisible, the symbolic images of those visions that arise when passing from one state of consciousness into another. In this sense, they are the living soul of humanity by and through which mankind enters into the highest realm; for they, having left behind all the delusions and fantasies of the ascending passage, and having received the other world—they on their return to earth have transfigured themselves into angelic images of the angelic world. And it is no accident that these witnesses who, by their angelic countenances, have made the invisible close and accessible to us have, since ancient times, been popularly termed angels in the flesh.

When air currents of differing heights and speeds make contact, wavy clouds are formed at the point of contact. At the surface of such contact, the currents continue to flow contrariwise in layers one above another, and the winds that formed the clouds therefore cannot move them away—nor are the layers of air currents moved by their own swiftly moving flows. And so fogs are created that fall to cover the mountain summits; and though mountain windstorms may rage, the foggy cover does not move. Such a fog-cloud is a boundary between the visible and the invisible. It renders inaccessible to our weak sight that which nevertheless it reveals the real presence of; and once we open our spiritual eyes and raise them to the Throne of God, we contemplate heavenly visions: the cloud that covers the top of Mt. Sinai, the cloud wherein the mystery of God's presence is revealed by that which clouds it. This cloud is (in the Apostle's phrase) "a cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1), it is the saints. They surround the altar, and they are the "living stones" that make up the living

wall of the iconostasis, for they dwell simultaneously in two worlds, combining within themselves the life here and the life there. And their upraised gaze bears witness to the operation of God's mystery, for their holy countenances in themselves bear witness to the symbolic reality of their spiritual sight—and, in them, the empirical crust is completely pierced by light from above.

The wall that separates two worlds is an iconostasis. One might mean by the iconostasis the boards or the bricks or the stones. In actuality, the iconostasis is a boundary between the visible and invisible worlds, and it functions as a boundary by being an obstacle to our seeing the altar, thereby making it accessible to our consciousness by means of its unified row of saints (i.e., by its cloud of witnesses) that surround the altar where God is, the sphere where heavenly glory dwells, thus proclaiming the Mystery. Iconostasis is vision. Iconostasis is a manifestation of saints and angels—*angelophania*—a manifest appearance of heavenly witnesses that includes, first of all, the Mother of God and Christ Himself in the flesh, witnesses who proclaim that which is from the other side of mortal flesh. *Iconostasis is the saints themselves.* If everyone praying in a temple were wholly spiritualized, if everyone praying were truly to see, then there would be no iconostasis other than standing before God Himself, witnessing to Him by their holy countenances and proclaiming His terrifying glory by their sacred words.

But because our sight is weak and our prayers are feeble, the Church, in Her care for us, gave us visual strength for our spiritual brokenness: the heavenly visions on the iconostasis, vivid, precise, and illumined, that *articulate*, materially cohere, an image into fixed colors. But this spiritual prop, this material iconostasis, does not conceal from the believer (as someone in ignorant self-absorption might imagine) some sharp mystery; on the contrary, the iconostasis points out to the half-blind the Mysteries of the altar, opens for them an entrance into a world closed to them by their

own stuckness, cries into their deaf ears the voice of the Heavenly Kingdom, a voice made deafening to them by their having failed to take in the speech of ordinary voices. This heavenly cry is therefore stripped, of course, of all the subtly rich expressiveness of ordinary speech: but who commits the act of such stripping when it is we who fail to appreciate the heavenly cry because we failed first to recognize it in ordinary speech: what can be left except a deafening cry? Destroy the material iconostasis and the altar itself will, as such, wholly vanish from our consciousness as if covered over by an essentially impenetrable wall. But the material iconostasis does not, in itself, take the place of the living witnesses, existing *instead of* them; rather, it *points toward* them, concentrating the attention of those who pray upon them—a concentration of attention that is essential to the developing of spiritual sight. To speak figuratively, then, a temple without a material iconostasis erects a solid wall between altar and temple; the iconostasis opens windows in this wall, through whose glass we see (those of us who can see) what is permanently occurring beyond: the living witnesses to God. To destroy icons thus means to block up the windows; it means smearing the glass and weakening the spiritual light for those of us who otherwise could see it directly, who could (we could figuratively say) behold it in a transparent space free of earthly air, a space where we could learn to breathe the pure ethereal air and to live in the light of God's glory: and when this happens, the material iconostasis will self-destruct in that vast obliteration which will destroy the whole image of this world—and which will even destroy faith and hope—and then we will contemplate, in pure love, the immortal glory of God.

Thus, as beginning medical students, we first need to inject into the veins of the body the colors that will focus our attention on the body's paths and tendencies—in the same way that when we first study geometric figures, we carefully and exactly trace out in different colors, in different thicknesses of line and shadings, the various surfaces and lines upon which we are seeking to erect

geometric proofs; or in the same way that when our moral education is begun, our teachers first give us the plainest, most vivid cases of illness, disaster, and suffering that attend the consequences of sin. But when our attentiveness grows more resilient, and we are led past surfaces into a concentration upon an object of knowledge, and we ourselves, from and in ourselves, are able to separate out from the surrounding noise of empirical expressiveness the single note that is the real object—and to do so even when it is lost amidst the other noise that assails us but that is useless for our understanding: when this happens, then the sensuous prop is no longer needed to focus our attentiveness, and it falls away. And the same is true in the realm of metaphysical sight: the spiritual world of the invisible is not some infinitely far off kingdom; instead, it everywhere surrounds us as an ocean; and we are like creatures lost on the bottom of the ocean floor while everywhere is streaming upward the fullness of a grace steadily growing brighter. But we, from the habit of immature spiritual sight, fail to see this lightbearing kingdom; most often, we fail even to assume that it exists, and therefore we only sense unclearly in our hearts the spiritual currents of what is really happening around us. When Christ was healing the blind man in Bethsaida (Mk 8:22), He asked him what he saw, and at first he said, "I see men as trees, walking"—such is the way we first see the images of our spiritual visions. We never see, however, the flights of angels—not "as trees, walking," not even as the quick shadow of a distant bird flying between us and the sun; for, although the most sensitive of us can sometimes sense the powerful motions of the angelic wings, we can experience these great motions only as the very faintest breathing. An icon is the same as this kind of heavenly vision; yet it is not the same, for the icon is the outline of a vision. A spiritual vision is not in itself an icon, for it possesses by itself full reality; an icon, however, because its outline coincides with a spiritual vision, is that vision within our consciousness; finally, therefore, the icon—apart from its spiritual vision—is not

an icon at all but a board. Thus a window is a window because a region of light opens out beyond it; hence, the window giving us this light is not itself "like" the light, nor is it subjectively linked in our imagination with our ideas of light—but the window is that very light itself, in its ontological self-identity, that very light which, undivided-in-itself and thus inseparable from the sun, is streaming down from the heavens. But the window all by itself—i.e., apart from its relationship to the light, beyond its function as carrier of light—is no longer a window but dead wood and mere glass. The thought is simple enough. But almost always we stop in the middle of it, whereas it would be far righter either to stop long before or to go way beyond it; hence, our usual understanding of a symbol as something self-referentially (if conditionally) true is, at bottom, false: a symbol is either more or less than that. If a symbol *as carrier* attains its end, then it is inseparable from the superreality it reveals: hence, it is more than self-referential. If a symbol does not manifest a reality, then it attains no end; thus, we should not see in it any pattern or organization of 'carrying over' or transference; and, in the absence of such, the thing is not a symbol—i.e., it is not a spiritual instrument—but it is merely empirical matter. Let us repeat: the window in itself is not a window—because the very idea of window (like any culturally constructed thing) possesses 'carrying over' or transference, for if it did not, it would not be a thing fashioned within a culture. Thus, a window is either light or else mere wood and glass, but it is never simply a window.

Icons, too, as St. Dionysus Aeropagite says, are "visible images of mysterious and supernatural visions." An icon is therefore always either more than itself in becoming for us an image of a heavenly vision or less than itself in failing to open our consciousness to the world beyond our senses—then it is merely a board with some paint on it. Thus, the contemporary view that sees iconpainting as an ancient fine art is profoundly false. It is false, first of all, because the very assumption that a fine art possesses its

own intrinsic power is, in itself, false: a fine art is either greater or less than itself. Any instance of fine art (such as a painting) reaches its goal when it carries the viewer beyond the limitations of empirically seen colors on canvas and into a specific reality, for a painting shares with all symbolic work the basic ontological characteristic of seeking to be that which it symbolizes. But if a painter fails to attain this end, either for a specific group of viewers or for the world in general, so that his painting leads no one beyond itself, then his work unquestionably fails to be art; we then call it mere daubs of paint, and so on. Now, an icon reaches its goal when it leads our consciousness out into the spiritual realm where we behold "mysterious and supernatural visions." If this goal is not reached—if neither the steadily empathetic gaze nor the swiftly intuitive glance evokes in the viewer the reality of the other world (as the pungent scent of seaweed in the air evokes in us the still faraway ocean), then nothing can be said of that icon except that it has failed to enter into the works of spiritual culture and that its value is therefore either merely material or (at best) archaeological.

St. Joseph of Volotsk writes about the great icon by St. Andrei Rublev called the Holy Trinity:

> How the icon came into life, and how it does so for us now, are things we must imagine and describe. And it is precisely for such a description that we on earth are given the Thrice-Holy Hymn to the One-in-Essence and Life-Giving Trinity whereby our immeasurable desiring and loving ascend in spirit to the icon's incomprehensible prototype so that, by means of its material appearance, our mind's thoughts fly to the heavenly Desiring and Loving where we venerate—not the material thing—but the manifestation of that which makes the material thing beautiful; hence, in a transference, we come to venerate not the icon but the prototype; and in so doing, the Holy Spirit illumines and enlightens us not only now but in the age that is coming when we shall receive the great, incomprehensible gift, the age when all the saints in their physical bodies shall shine with a light brighter than the very sun itself: and it shall happen so because, in kissing this icon with love, they venerate the One Essence of God in the three angelic persons of the icon as they pray to the Holy and Life-Giving Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and give thanks to our God.

This understanding of iconpainting as a way of attaining supersensible perception, a way followed by both the great iconpainters and those who supervised the iconpainting process: such understanding is our goal. Among the iconographic decisions made by the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 is this: "only the technical part of iconpainting belongs to the artist; the determination of the icon itself [διάταξις, i.e., its structure, arrangement and whole formal pattern] plainly belongs to the Holy Fathers." This direct proclamation is not setting forth some supposedly anti-artistic dogma against—or any doctrinal censorship of—iconpainting creativity; rather, it reveals precisely the ones whom the Church has always known to be the true iconpainters: the Holy Fathers. They create the art because they are the ones who contemplate the persons and events that the icon must depict. How could someone create an icon who does not have continuously before him—who has never even glimpsed—the icon's prototype? Even in the everyday world of ordinary experience, an artist must, from his earliest childhood, ceaselessly search the intricate multiplicity of analogous things to find the exactly right models for his art. All the more so, then, would it not be the height of arrogance for people to claim that they have depicted the spiritual realm (that realm which even the saints behold only fragmentarily and fleetingly) when they themselves have never seen it at all?

From the Renaissance on, the religious art of the West has been based upon esthetic delusion. The Western religious artists have loudly proclaimed the nearness and truth of the spiritual reality they claim to represent in their art; but, lacking any genuine relation to that spiritual reality, they think it completely unnecessary to heed even those few scanty instructions about iconpainting (hence, about spiritual reality) that the Roman Church gives them. For the fact is: iconpainting is the transfixing

of heavenly images, the materialization on a board of that living cloud of witnesses streaming about the throne. Icons empirically define those holy countenances that sacred significance has permeated, those hyper-empirical 'ideas' that make heavenly vision accessible to almost everyone; and the iconpainter becomes the witness to these Witnesses, giving us the images (εἶδη, εἰχόνες) of his vision. By virtue of its formal patterns, an icon bears direct visual witness to the reality of this pattern; an icon *speaks*—in color and line. And what it says—written in color—is the Name of God; for what else would God's image be—what else that spiritual light streaming from the saint's holy countenance—except the Name of God written in that countenance? In something like the way that a martyr's speech bears witness not to himself (even though he is the one speaking) but to the Lord, just so do the iconpainters—these witnesses of the Witnesses—bear witness not to their iconpainting, i.e., not to themselves, but to the saints who, in themselves, are bearing witness to the Lord Himself.

Thus, the most persuasive philosophic proof of God's existence is the one the textbooks never mention, the conclusion to which can perhaps best express the whole meaning: There exists the icon of the Holy Trinity by St. Andrei Rublev; therefore, God exists.

In the iconpainting images we ourselves—wholly selves—see the illumined countenances of the saints and, in them, behold both the revealed image of God and God Himself. And like the Samaritan woman to Christ, we say to the iconpainter:

> Now we believe—not because you bear witness to the sanctity of saints by your icons but because we ourselves can hear coming out from them, through your brush-work, the self-revelation of the saints, and not in words but in their holy countenances. We ourselves can hear how the supremely sweet voice of God's word, the True Witness, penetrates into the essence of the saints by its supersensible sound and brings their entire being into perfect harmony. For it is not you, O iconpainter, who has created these images; it is not you who has shown to our joyous eyes these vividly alive ideas; no, they themselves have appeared within our contemplation, and you have simply taken away the obstacle that hid their light from us, for you have helped strip away the scales that covered our spiritual sight. And because you have helped us, we now see—no longer your masterpiece—but the wholly real images themselves. I gaze into this icon and I say in myself: this is She Herself, not Her image, but She Herself who, with your help, iconpainter, I am contemplating. As through a window, I see the Mother of God, the Mother of God Herself! and it is She Herself that I am now praying to face to face and not to an image. A window is only a window, and the board of an icon is merely wood, paint, and finish. But through the window I behold the Mother of God, a vision of the Most Pure. Yes, iconpainter, you have shown Her to me, but you did not create Her; rather, you have parted the veil so that She, who was behind it, now stands as a real experience not only for me but also for you; and She appears to you and is found by you, but she is never invented by you even in the strongest currents of your highest inspiration.

Contemporary empirical positivism underestimates the icon; one can also overestimate it; but it is essential never to become fixated upon its psycho-associative power, i.e., upon the icon as pure art. Iconic art accords to its essential symbolism and thereby reveals its spiritual essence in nothing other than our (the viewers') spiritual ascent "from image to prototype," i.e., in our attaining ontological contiguity with the prototype itself. For then, and only then, does the empirical sign become so filled with the living waters that the sign (always inseparable from its prototype) is no longer merely "art" but is rather the first wave called forth—*evoked*—by essential reality; and all the other ways wherein reality becomes spiritually present to us are also the waves that reality evokes—just as our whole life communicates with the essence of reality in a series of continuous waves: because we can communicate with an essence only through its energies and never directly with the essence itself. And because an icon makes the light of an illumined person *appear* to us, it is an energy; more precisely, the grace of God exceeds our capacity to think it, even if our thought is self-certifiably "sober"; for since ontology and the icon are fully contiguous, the icon possesses cognitive meaning.