a secularization of terrible harshness. Nevertheless, this devout spirit and unique consciousness has persisted uninterrupted among iconpainters into our own time, a spirit and consciousness sometimes informing whole villages wherein, from one generation to the next, there has passed this spiritual self-awareness of being workers in a high and sacred task, a self-awareness accompanied by the transmission of semi-secret techniques of iconpainting, of divine processes of working. It is a unique and enclosed world of witnesses. And if it has remained so into our time, then we have great difficulty even imagining rightly that spirit-bearing atmosphere whence, in antiquity (when the whole of earthly life was set in order), there flowed into the whole ecclesiastical body that manifestation of divine beauty whose spiritual principles were and are the unshakable axis that was and is the Holy Mysteries of Christ.

A Dialogue with Sophia Ivanova

The History of Artistic Technique, Western and Iconic

There is nothing accidental in the organization of sacred custom: neither in the iconic forms nor in the lives of the iconpainters. It is quite incorrect to assert that the cultic order employs either iconic forms or iconpainters from beyond itself, unaware that they represent its own powers. Rather, the cult in itself serves to reveal the sacred faces and, again in itself, to guide the lives of the iconpainters. Plainly, then, the holy images of iconpainting are incarnated by these servants of the Church through the use of artistic strategies that are in no way alien to the cultic metaphysics or that employ media which do not flow from the sacred purpose. Concerning the cult, neither the techniques nor the materials themselves are accidental; none of them may be understood as having simply arrived—in the accidents of history—inside the Church, as if any of them could be painlessly and easily replaced by other techniques and other materials. We would not so think

in relation to any other art form, that any artistic concept could be executed with any artistic technique or material, as if materials and techniques were somehow arbitrarily connected with artistic ideas and concepts, somehow extrinsic to esthetic essences. How much more so, then, should we see nothing whatever accidental, subjective or capricious about the techniques and materials of that art wherein is revealed the spiritual nature of all humanity. The field of this art is therefore bounded in itself in ways beyond any comparison to any other human art, for nothing alien—no "alien fire"—could ever be placed on its sacred altar. It is impossible, then, to conceive even as a purely esthetic experiment an icon composed in an alien technique with alien materials: it could not possibly be an icon. But this impossibility becomes vividly clear when we consider the spiritual essence of the icon. The artistic strategies and tactics of iconpainting, i.e., the materials used and the ways of technically using them, are the metaphysical modalities by which the icon possesses incarnate life. The materials and techniques of an art—any art—are symbolic: for each single one of them possesses its own concretely determined metaphysical aliveness through which it corresponds to a unique spiritual fact.

But even granting all this, consider the matter on some purely empirical issue of artistic surfaces (affirming, of course, that there can be nothing superficial that does not also possess inward manifestation). The issue we shall consider is the consistency of the paint. If we think about the surfaces of iconpainting—about the exact biology and physics of the artistic surfaces (i.e., their chemical and physical natures), about what precisely coheres the color-pigments as well as their chemical constituents; if we think about what various dissolvents and varnishes exactly do in the icon; if, in short, we think about all the myriad *material causes* operating in any art, then we are already directly engaged in reflecting upon that profoundly metaphysical disposition which the creative will expresses in and as its wholeness. It may well be that the artist will deploy these so-called material causes instinc-

tively, moving subconsciously as he fashions this or that artistic pattern or focus; but such instinctive and subconscious movements not only do not gainsay the deeper metaphysics of creativity; on the contrary, they compel us to see in creativity something far beyond the merely mental arbitrariness of rational choice; to see, rather, the way wherein the powers of creativity continue the primary activity of organic organization, that activity through and in and of which the physical body is itself woven. We may say, then, that the choice of media, of the material causes set in motion within an art work, is not a choice made in the arbitrariness of individuality—not even if we say that the artist is choosing from far within the inward depths of his being; rather, the choice is solely made by the mind of history, by that collective mind of nations operating in time to shape the entire artistic style of an age. Thus, we may be quite correct in saying that artistic style and artistic materials are two circles that everywhere intersect; for we know assuredly that the material causes of a given work of art express far more fully the beliefs of an age than does any concept of style deduced merely from the shared characteristics, or common denominator, of the most popular art forms.

Is it not completely clear to us that the sounds of purely instrumental music—even the sound of the full organ—are wholly alien to an Orthodox liturgical service? Even apart from their role in a given composition, such sounds are impossible in an Orthodox church. This clear impossibility arises directly from our sense of taste, completely apart from any theoretical considerations, because the sounds of instrumental music conflict in our consciousness with the whole style of the Orthodox services, breaking apart their self-integrated wholeness even if we consider the services as merely artistic unities: isn't this completely clear? For isn't it clear that these sounds, taken solely by themselves, are far too remote from the precision, the comprehension, the verbal and intellectual energies of the Orthodox services to become the material basis of their sonic art? Don't we clearly experience the

sounds of the organ as too slow, submerged and alien, too engulfed in the darknesses of human nature, for the crystalline transparency of Orthodox liturgical life? I am attempting in this not to judge but to comprehend the issue of deeper stylistic integrity; whether my comprehension is wholly accepted or entirely rejected is, finally, of no consequence to me.

"But you are talking about organ sounds now when I thought you wanted to be talking about the visual arts. Have you completely forgotten: isn't this essay supposed to be about iconpainting?"

Yes, of course, but the sounds of the organ are not at all irrelevant. Please, let me go on, and you'll see why I'm thinking on these lines. So, about the organ:

It is a musical instrument intimately connected to that particular historical period and culture called the Renaissance. In talking about Western Catholicism, most people usually forget that the Roman Church before and after the Renaissance are two vastly different things. For in the Renaissance, the Roman Church survived a very grave illness wherein it gained certain immunities but suffered immense losses, for the price it paid for the few immunities it gained was the distortion of the whole of spiritual life. It is therefore very doubtful whether medieval Catholic culture would even recognize post-Renaissance Catholicism; and all of modern Western European culture derives precisely from this post-Renaissance Catholicism. And the essential sonic expression of this Catholicism is the organ sound; thus, it is by no means an accident that the production of organs flourishes in the second half of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth: the period, that is, most fully manifesting and expressing the essence of Renaissance culture. I am not attempting here merely to draw an analogy; no, I am reaching for a far more deeply grounded relation—

"Let me guess: are you trying to connect the sound of the Renaissance organ with the oil paint on a Renaissance canvas?"

Exactly right. The very consistency of oil paint has an obvious affinity with the oily-syrupy sound of the organ; and the flatness and liquidity of oil colors inwardly connects them to the sonic liquidities of the organ. Both the colors and the sounds are wholly of earth and flesh. Historically, the art of Renaissance oil painting develops exactly at the point when the art of building organs and composing for them flourishes most strongly; here, then, beyond all shadow of a doubt, are two material causes arising from the same metaphysical root; for both Renaissance painting and the art of the organ express the identical attitude in varying spheres—

"Wait a moment. Let me try again to put this essay back on the track it began on, figurative arts. You said before that artistic materials have intrinsic artistic meanings, including the very surface on which the paint is applied. I think it'd be just about impossible to give an example of that. I mean, if a surface is completely covered with painted imagery, and the surface becomes invisible, then it can have no relationship whatever with anything like the artistic spirit of a given era; and therefore that surface can be replaced by any other surface (provided, of course, that the new surface can take the paint without peeling). In other words, the meaning of a surface is entirely technical and not stylistic."

No, that's not exactly right—in fact, it's not right at all. The properties of a surface strongly determine the way one applies the paint and even the paint itself. You cannot put just any paint whatever on any given surface—you can't put oils on thin paper nor water-colors on metal. But more than that: the character of a brush stroke is determined entirely by the nature of the surface, and from the stroke arises the whole esthetic texture of the painting. And far more deeply than that: through the texture created by the stroke, and through the textural construction created by all the colors, that underlying surface which is the painting's primary plane becomes manifest. Still further: in becoming manifest, that

primary plane which is the surface is visibly revealed to a degree far greater than before the color was applied. While the surface is bare, its essential properties are asleep; when the paint is put on it, it awakens:—it is exactly the same as clothing that, by covering the body, reveals the underlying physical structure far more fully than would a direct gaze at the naked body, for the complicated folds of the clothing can reveal the body's surface irregularities in ways no direct observation ever could. Firm or soft; pliably resilient or actually flabby; smooth or rough and uneven; by one property or another absorbing the paint or resisting it; and so on—every property of the underlying surface becomes intensified and magnified when transfigured into the texture of the work. Moreover, every underlying surface property creates in the manifest texture a dynamic equivalent; that is, what was hidden, passive, and inert in the surface becomes in the texture a source of power that invades what surrounds it. In the same way that the iron filings will make the magnet's invisible force-field become something we can see, so too in the painting: what is static in the bare surface becomes dynamic once the colors are applied; and the more perfect the work of art, the more this dynamic of manifesting declares itself. The more acute and perfective the intelligence at work in the artist's hand, the more this intelligence understands—beyond mere ratiocination—the essential metaphysics of all the interactive forces operating in the figurative surface; and the more deeply the hand's perfective intelligence is penetrated by this essential metaphysics, the more it can discern in these interactive forces its own spiritual structure and its own metaphysical style (provided, of course, that the intelligence has in fact chosen materials that accord with the true demands of its style). Once it has comprehended the dynamic structure of the surface, the hand's perfective intelligence can manifest it in and through the texture of the brush strokes. Such manifestation occurs when the raw materials and the artist's intention stylistically correspond; but when they do not, when the predetermined nature of things

intrinsically precludes such a correspondence, then the perfective intelligence will identify this fact in the activities of the surface, and the artist will reject the surface as inappropriate and alien. Thus, the metaphysics of the figurative surface—

"I'm sorry, I must interrupt. I have to ask you, do you really see in a piece of canvas, stretched on a frame, something like the entire spirit of Renaissance art? I mean, it seems as though the canvas, for you, is some sort of total history, something that can bring into parallel both organ music and oil painting."

Is it possible for you to—well, I don't want to say *think* but something more expressive: is it possible for you to *feel* differently? The way the artist's hand *moves,* its characteristic *motion* in applying paint, doing it over and over: this motion is connected to inner life; and if this characteristic movement for some reason does not correspond to inner life, thereby conflicting with it, then it must inevitably be changed—and changed not merely in the practice of one artist but in the artistic practice of a whole people, nation, and history. Is it even conceivable that thousands of artists for dozens of centuries somehow, during all their nearly countless artistic lives, moved their hands in ways and rhythms that had no inward connection with their souls? The choice is obvious: either the figurative surface will possess the capacity to generate its own rhythmic dynamics in such a way that the artist—individually or historically—must submit to that surface dynamics and thereby risk not becoming what he, in the structure of his highest spiritual calling, could become; or else the artist—again, individually or historically—will insist on the primacy of his own rhythm and find a new surface whose properties correspond to his rhythm. An artist must either submit to the given surface or else find a new one; for it is beyond anyone's powers to alter the metaphysics of an existing surface.

Now, concerning canvas: the stretched surface of it, resilient yet pliable, responsive to the slightest touch, makes it dynamically

equal to the artist's hand. He engages it as his brother, consciously apprehending it as a living organism and, moreover, as something that can be turned and directed in any way he wishes, for its illumination is wholly dependent upon the artist's will, and it can relate to its surrounding only as he himself desires. The icon board: immovable, hard, unbending, it is far too strict, obligatory, and ontological for the hand of the Renaissance artist—for he is looking for the way to realize himself solely among earthly appearances, without the obstacle of another world; and his hand craves the feeling of autonomy, of being a law unto himself, and so his hand does not want to be disturbed by encountering something that does not submit to his will. The icon board's unyielding surface can only remind him of those other strongholds he would much prefer to forget. For naturalistic images, for depicting a world free of God and Church where he is his own law entirely—such a world demands the greatest possible *sensuous liquidity,* a world where all the images proclaim their manifest sensuousness as loudly as possible, a world where these images are placed not on a firm but on a highly unstable surface—a surface whose instability expresses the very unsteadiness of all earthly things. Perhaps the Renaissance artist, and the whole of Renaissance esthetic culture, never consciously think about what I am saying here; but his hand—and the collective hand of the culture—think unceasingly about nothing else: about the relativism of all existence, about how the ontology of all things is displaced by the sensuous and dissolving phenomenology of all things, and about how human beings—as relative, nonontological phenomena—*alone have the right* to establish laws in this world of shifting metaphysical delusions.

The classical Renaissance perspective arises necessarily from the Renaissance self-understanding. I cannot here explore it in any great detail; but I can say this: typically in this outlook, there is combined a sensuous brightness with an ontological instability of existence, a combination that finds its most exact artistic expression in an art of

liquid instabilities, an art that finds its most perfect technical expression in the act of applying oil paint onto a stretched canvas.

"And so (if I follow you correctly) you would also see a connection between the art of engraving and this whole worldview —is that right? And yet the art of engraving is rooted in the soil of Protestantism, and the greatest graphic artists all develop in the various Protestant sects. I think especially of Germany and England—here is rooted the culture of engraving and etching and printmaking and similar arts. Yet doesn't engraving also take root in Catholicism? I guess I am asking myself this question, not you; essentially, I find myself agreeing with what you are saying."

Certainly engraving is rooted in both Protestantism and Catholicism. But how remarkable it is that, in Catholicism, engraving and the related arts do not seek to be genuinely *graphic,* and so they therefore engage not in the tasks of engraving but in the tasks of oil painting. In their work, the Catholic engravers and printmakers use broad strokes that directly imitate the oil painter's brush strokes, trying to create effects of color not in a linear fashion but in the wide, flat bands which the oil painter uses, thereby essentially abandoning the true work of the graphic arts; for in the graphic arts, paint serves only to distinguish one surface area from another and not, strictly speaking, to create color—whereas the flat band creates if not exactly color at least something very like it. In the true practice of engraving in Protestant culture, the line is wholly abstract, without either width or color. Unlike the brush strokes in an oil painting, where each stroke attempts to become the sensuous double of the thing depicted (at least in part if not entirely), the lines in an engraving seek to be free of even the least touch of what is sensuously given. If an oil painting is the manifestation of sensuousness, then an engraving manifests the intellectual construction of images from elements wholly unlike the elements in the object being depicted; i.e., from the rational intellect's combining of various affirmations and negations. The

engraving is therefore a schematic image constructed on the axioms of logic (identity, contradiction, the excluded third, and so on); and, in this sense, engraving has a profound connection to German philosophy, for, in both, the essential and definitive act is the deductive determination of reality solely through the logic of affirmation and negation, a logic with neither sensuous nor spiritual connections—in short, the task in both is to create everything from nothing. Such is the true aim of engraving, and the more purely it attains its goal—i.e., without either sensuous or psychological insight—the more definitive its perfection as an engraving is revealed. But notice the practice in Catholic countries: there is the ceaseless attempt to slip the sensuous into the logic of affirmation and negation. And so, yes, I agree that the art of engraving has an inner affinity with Protestantism. And I say again: just as there is this inner affinity between Protestant rationalism and the figurative linearity of engraving, so there is also an inner affinity between Catholic esthetic imagination and the sensuous techniques of oil painting. Protestant rationalist art wants to schematize its object by reconstructing it through a process of logical clarification that, in itself, possesses neither color nor two-dimensionality. An engraving wholly recreates its image along lines that have no relation to sensuous perception, and it does so in such a way that the image's whole structure, shadows and all (i.e., the structure not only as the image's essence but also as all its living contextual surroundings), would be schematically manifested by a number of rationally determined dimensions in space, with the result that there would be in the image nothing else except these rational dimensions and their correlations.

Now, it is a truism to note that German idealist philosophy (especially Kant) eliminated sensuous space from philosophic thought. But were Kant and Hegel, Fichte and Cohen, doing anything other than what Dürer had done in engraving? Not at all. Consider once more the juxtaposition of the engraved line and the brush stroke. The brush stroke is not (like the line) trying to

reconstruct the image but to imitate it, in effect to *replace* the object not by rationally reconfiguring it but by sensualizing its image so that the object in the painting becomes something more imaginatively surprising than the object in reality. The brush stroke seeks to surpass the figurative surface of the canvas and to enter into the sensuousness directly given to the touches of paint or to the colored relief or to the painted statue; in short, the brush stroke imitates the image by interposing itself for the object, thereby entering into life not by symbolic but by empirical factors. The outer limit, then, toward which the art of oil painting tends can be seen in all the Catholic madonnas dressed in those brightly popular clothes. On the other hand, the outer limit of the art of engraving may be (if we sharpen our thought in caricature-fashion) discerned in a purely geometrical pattern or even in a differential equation.

"But I still don't see the meaning (in the sense we saw earlier) of the figurative surface in the art of engraving. I mean, I see the surface of the engraving as somehow *accidental,* as something not connected with the master engraver's whole way of working. I see now that oil paint cannot be used on any surface without that surface reflecting its whole character. All this is clear now. But this isn't at all the case in engraving. For an engraving can be printed on almost any surface whatever without changing the character of the print (except maybe slightly)—whether on a variety of different kinds of paper, or on silk, or ivory, or wood, or parchment, or stone, or even metal—it is all the same in regard to the engraving's *artistic* structure. More than that, even the paint in an engraving is more or less indifferent if it can be replaced by another paint—if not by a different color at least by a different consistency. So given these two *conditional* characteristics of the engraving's primary material causes—namely, surface and paint—I am beginning to doubt everything you have been saying; though I'm sure you have noticed that I've taken up your whole style of thinking..."

But I think it's just the opposite; it's only that you're not following through with the ideas you've well begun. Consider: in this freedom to choose the surface and the paint, engraving manifests that very deception at the heart of Protestantism—its cry for freedom of conscience in its denial of the Church tradition—more: in its denial of the universally human tradition. What are we given by the printmaker's plate? A piece of paper, the least durable thing imaginable, for it can be crumpled or torn easily, it absorbs water, it burns instantly, it grows moldy, it cannot even be cleaned—in short, the symbol of earthly corruption; and it is upon this, the most perishable of all surfaces, that we see the engraver's strokes. If we ask, are the strokes actually done on the paper, we know that, of course, they are not. Yet look at the lines: they plainly show that they have been drawn on a very hard surface, one attacked and torn and deeply cut by the engraver's sharp knife. Thus, in the print, the visual appearance of the engraved strokes wholly contradicts the actual properties of the printed surface; and this contradiction serves to make us forget these properties and to assume that the paper is, in fact, very hard. In the esthetics of the circumstance, then, we attribute to the paper a durability far exceeding what it possesses in reality. And that attribution, in turn, makes us suppose that, because the strokes on the paper are not really deep, the engraver's power is immeasurably greater than it is: for we see that his hand, in encountering the extremely hard surface of the plate, was not conquered and did not shake but remained inflexibly strong. And so the impression arises that the engraver does not introduce material changes into the surface but, instead, demonstrates the "pure" (in the Kantian sense) reconstructive act of form-creating and that, therefore, this form can (again, as in Kant) be easily accepted by any surface. And so it comes to seem that the engraver's creation of forms exceeds the boundaries of the material he works in and that, therefore, his creation is pure in possessing absolute freedom to choose—even arbitrarily—this or that sur-

face. *But exactly this is the deception.* To understand it, let us begin with the fact that what we call the engraving is not the thing that was engraved. In the precise sense of the word, the engraving is the metal or wooden plate; but we substitute for it the print; and so when we speak about the engraving, we are actually *thinking* about the print. This confusion is no accident. Now, in the plate, the texture of the art work is not something arbitrarily chosen by the engraver but is, instead, the necessary consequence arising from the properties of the plate's surface; for in the plate there is not the slightest trace of those esthetic deceptions we described before.

Historically, this clarity is how engraving first happened. In the beginning, the art of engraving was the art of carving on metal and wood (sometimes on stone); it had nothing at all to do with printing. There was produced an art object, i.e., a surface covered with engraved images; but there was no piece of paper. What we call an engraving originates in a mere technique: after covering a carved surface with ink or paint, it was pressed onto a piece of paper—and, lo and behold, a print. But that print was not originally the aim of the art; now, however, we see the process of making the plate as mere preparation—whereas, originally, the print was made solely in order to have an exact copy of the carving in the eventuality of the engraver's wanting to reproduce it. This original circumstance in engravings can be seen today in certain of our woodcarvers—for example, the famous Khrustachevs of Sergiev Posad, a father and his sons—where they take photographs of their remarkable works before they deliver them to the people who commissioned them.

"Yes, the distinction between the engraving and the print has been badly distorted—the first is indeed the art work, for the engraved plate, even if reproducible, is always creative, while the other, the print, is merely the matrix for generating exact repetitions. We have it the other way about: the mechanically reproduced print has become for us the art work itself, while the engraving has come to seem the reproductive matrix, something only the printer himself cares about."

Let's explain our thinking on all this by drawing up a table on the origins of engraving:

1 The starting point is the *tesserae hospitales* of antiquity, called in ancient culture 'symbols,' which meant 'broken things,' whose halves served as tokens of pledges. The broken coins of lovers, etc. (Sir Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* has a fine example).

2. Pre-cut objects used as receipts or tickets, examples of which include the small wooden sticks used in the Yaroslavl and Tambovsk provinces here in Russia (as in the Yaroslavl Museum); also, the Chinese bamboo sticks.

3. Khan's mark (i.e., footprinting in Chinese culture); fingerprinting in the legal and record-keeping systems; etc.

4. Seal imprinted on wax, including lead-relief.

5. Ornamental carvings on wood and metal.

6. Seal imprinted on charcoal or paint.

7. Color proof-prints used to keep a copy of an engraving.

8. Finally, entirely self-sufficient prints, metal engravings, and woodcuts as instances of graphic art.

"All this, I think, is quite clear. But (picking up where we left off), what is it that explicitly connects engraving and Protestantism?"

It is this: the artistic freedom to arbitrarily choose the surface (i.e, paper, wood, and so on) and the paint corresponds to Protestant individualism and freedom—or, more precisely, to Protestant arbitrariness; but then, upon these arbitrarily chosen materials, the supposedly Pure Reason (i.e., total rationality stripped of any sensuous dimension) draws its graphic schemata of reality, either religious or empirical. These schemata are placed on materials that have nothing in common with them, thereby revealing Reason's

freedom of self-determination: and so Reason comes to enslave the reason of everything surrounding it, for, in exercising its freedom of self-determination, it violates the self-determination of the world; while, in proclaiming its own law, it thinks it unnecessary to attend to that law whereby all things in creation become authentically real. Protestant individualism is thus a mechanical imprinting of its own engraved plate upon all existent beings, a plate with no content whatever, constructed entirely through binary logic. But this Protestant freedom of choice is, in fact, delusion: for it is not the process of applying wise spiritual understanding to the unique activities of individual beings (as is authentic creative freedom, flexibly conforming itself to given realities); no, Protestant freedom does not apply itself to unique individual beings but, instead, simply and wholly neglects them, for it has prepared in advance of any encounter a stamp, or seal, which must be printed without the least differentiation upon every single soul it meets. Protestant freedom is thus an attempt at tyranny using the words of freedom, words like a song permanently cut into the grooves of a record—

"And what's the instrument it cuts with?"

I think your real question is: what is the inner faculty used by the Protestant spirit and how does it connect to the engraver's knife and the etcher's needle?

"Exactly."

Reason is the unique faculty of Protestantism; perhaps better, reason is the faculty it always *proclaims* as uniquely its own. For others, Reason is not uniquely Protestant, that it is the very intellect of humankind and not merely a Protestant faculty. For Protestants themselves, Reason is something like the imagination, something operating far more passionately than it does in Catholicism, something burning with the spiritual fires of *prelest*, something struggling against a surface that is immeasurably more ontological than it is in Catholicism.

"But just where are these (as you call it) spiritual fires of imagination?"

What do you mean, *where?* Do you mean you have never noticed that impetuous fantasizing called systematic philosophy which springs from Protestant soil? Boehm and Husserl are obvious examples, for in general all Protestant philosophers first build castles in the air from nothing at all, and then they harden them into steel so as to make fetters for all the living flesh of the world. Even Hegal, dry as dust, writes in such a state of drunken intellectual rage that Jean's remark is not at all a mere witticism: in the intoxication caused by nitrous oxide, one will perceive and think of the world in Hegalian fashion. Protestant philosophy is the situation of being completely drunk oneself while compelling everyone else to be sober.

"But let's go back to our starting point: not oil painting and engraving as such but iconpainting. What is the inner connection in iconpainting, how do its technical properties connect to its spiritual tasks?"

In a word, iconpainting is the metaphysics of existence—but a concrete, not an abstract, metaphysics. Where the oil painting will express the world in sensuous images, and the Protestant engraving will give us the world in rational schemata, the icon makes visually manifest the metaphysical essence of the event or person it depicts. And where the techniques of oil painting and engraving developed in response to their respective cultural imperatives and thus represent, in themselves, the distillations of searches carried on entirely within the terms of their given cultures, the techniques of iconpainting arise wholly from the need to express the concrete metaphysicality of the world. Thus, in iconpainting (if I may be permitted to say, without offense, something essentially true and necessary), not only are there no empirical accidents, there are also no metaphysical accidents.

Therefore the world's sinfulness and perishability should not be considered as merely empirical accidents, as things spoiling the world; instead, when considered in relation to the world's divinely created spiritual essence, sinfulness and perishability are metaphysical accidents without need or necessity; for we can discern in them nothing whatever of earth's essentiality but only its passing circumstances. And iconpainting does not seek to express these circumstances, for they only overshadow the true nature of things; instead, iconpainting's true subject is this very nature itself, the world created by God in its transworldly beauty. Everything depicted in the icon, all the details, constitute the image, or reflexive representation (ἐκτύπωμα), of the prototypical world of sacred beings.

"But granting that idea to be generally true, mustn't we immediately add some qualifying word or other, like 'in general' or 'essentially' everything in the icon reflects the prototypical world? I mean, even for Plato the question arose of whether or not the 'Idea of one hair' existed. If an icon represents a contemplation upon an idea, then isn't the idea to be comprehended in the icon's total significance, while the details—life events, body structure, architecture, landscape, and so on—are external and accidental in the sense that they are, in relation to the total idea, devices for expressing that idea? Let me give an example. The garments in an icon don't have metaphysical meaning, do they? Aren't they depicted so as to give the icon its intricate, beautiful and expressive areas of color? I think that even the purely decorative touches in an icon possess power, that the details of it have not only metaphysical meaning but even naturalistic importance—look at the gold in the halo and in the golden highlights on Christ's garments. Don't you think this gold represents something in the actual person? I think so, and I think it was seen as something very beautiful, and it is, and it pleases us deeply to see the church decorated with many icons, especially in the beautiful light of the oil lamps and the candles."

Iconic Clothes and the Meaning of Gold

Well, to use Liebniz's language, you are right in your assertions and wrong in your negations. But let's approach the question not through what's right but what's wrong, beginning with the common question of meaning. You most certainly think of metaphysics in a concrete way, and so do I, seeing in ideas the visually manifest faces of things, the living appearances of the spiritual world, for such is the way all of us see. But when the moment arrives of actually applying these ideas to particular cases, I'm afraid that a certain cowardice overtakes us: our foot is in the air but we dare not complete the step—and we won't even consider turning back to the abstractions of metaphysics and the meaning of meaning, where validity is never visual. Nor can we look about for some intermediary step in understanding, for none exists.

A living organism is integral, and everything in it is constituted by the energy of aliveness, for if there were something dead in it—even the tiniest thing—then the organism's whole integrity would collapse. A living organism exists solely as the visual manifestation of living energy (or form-creating idea); or else it doesn't exist at all and the very word *organism* should be dropped from the dictionary. Just so, a work of art is an organism: if something in it is accidental, then that accident bears witness to the fact that the art work is not wholly incarnated, that something in it has failed to emerge into the sunlight, that something is still covered by the veil of inert earth. The concrete revelation of metaphysical essence must, in the icon, be an entirely visual revelation, and the icon's appearance (for an icon is nothing but its appearing) must—because all its details constitute a unified whole—be visual; for if something in an icon were either purely abstract or merely decorative, then it would unmake the icon's appearance as an integrated unity; and then the icon would not be an icon.

In this connection, I remember once I heard a theologian give a talk on the resurrection of the body, in the course of which he

tried to distinguish between the organs we will need in the Kingdom of God and those we won't: only the first will be resurrected while the rest (particularly the digestive system) will not be. Well, if we credit these assertions, then we must entirely discard the integral connectedness of the living body. For what kind of resurrected body are we talking about here, what will it look like after extracting all the "unnecessary" parts: a skin balloon inflated with ethereal air? For if we think of the body in purely naturalistic terms, then it has no metaphysical significance in constituting a spiritually living organism; and in the Kingdom of God, the body can have no role, neither in part nor in whole, and therefore every organ, as mere "flesh and blood," must be cut off from inheritance of the Kingdom of God. But if, on the other hand, we consider the physical body *symbolically,* then the totality of it in all its details visually manifests the spiritual energy, or idea, of the human person; and then *all* the organs of the physical body, mystically transfigured, will be resurrected as witnesses to the spirit, for just as every organ in the living body is essential to physical life, each one needing all the others in order to function rightly, so also in the order of spiritual life, everything is needful for everything else, for each thing serves to manifest the idea and, without each thing, the idea would lose in manifestation. The icon images forth the coming Kingdom of God, and it permits us to see the images (though they shimmer as in a fortune-teller's mirror) of the Kingdom that is coming. These shimmering images are wholly concrete, and to talk about some parts of them as mere accidents is to ignore the very nature of the symbolic. For if we do that, if we say this or that detail in the icon is accidental, then we must follow our theologian about the resurrection of the body.

"But are you saying that there is never anything accidental in any icon whatever?"

No, I'm not saying that at all. On the contrary, a great deal is often entirely accidental. But the accidental (in the sense of the

unintentional) can be not only *not* secondary and minor—"one hair," as you quote Plato—but precisely that which is of paramount significance: and this can happen not merely in the clothes but in the very face and even in the holy person's eyes. This happens, though, only through (as it were) the historic accident wherein an iconpainter who—in clumsiness, ignorance, and arbitrariness—dares to deviate from the iconpainting tradition and thereby brings "the philosophy of the sensuous" into spiritual symbolism. The accidental is then *in* the icon but not *of* it; it instead belongs to—or is *of*—the iconpainter. And it is clearly the case that, the more significant some part of an icon is, demanding a far greater attentiveness, the more likely it is that some distortion will enter the icon through that part, some accidental lines or some metaphysically uncertain touches of color which, in relation to the icon's spiritual essence, become like splashes of mud thrown onto a window by some passing vehicle: that is, such accidents both prevent us from seeing into the distance and block the outside light from reaching into us. And it does not matter that such distortions may enchant our gaze; they are merely muddy spots, nothing more; but it can happen that there can be so many muddy spots that an icon's spiritual essence will finally become invisible. But this is not to say that any given kind of detail—not by its execution, not by its 'development in the painting,' but in itself as such—is inherently accidental, expressing nothing spiritual.

"But what about the clothes?"

The clothes? Rozanov is the only one, I think, who somewhere says that in the Kingdom of God everyone will be naked; and then, in some kind of hostile spasm against the Church and the idea of bodily resurrection, he suddenly sees in this sacred nakedness the circumstance of being embarrassed, at which point he rejects entirely the dogma of bodily resurrection. But, as you know, the Church's teaching is precisely the opposite, and the Apostle Paul even expresses the fear that those of us who will

endure the fires of purification will not, in fact, become naked (1 Cor. 3:13). If Rozanov has reason to think that his personal clothing is inflammable, then he needs immediately to begin thinking more deeply—but that's not the reason to think his supposed 'stripping naked of the world' outrageous. For in the icons we see depicted those persons whose earthly actions will be preserved in the fires of purification, actions become only more beautifully highlighted in their last traces of earthly accident. Such persons will probably not become nude. To express this at once more figuratively and more precisely, we can call their clothes the covering woven by their acts of spiritual discipline, or *podvig;* and this is not mere figure but the exact expression of the idea that the saints, in and through ascetic *podvigs,* actually generate in their physical bodies new tissues of lightbearing organs so that their bodies may be brought continually closer to the great sphere of spiritual energies; and in terms of visual perception, this spiritual expansion of the body is symbolized by the clothes. Yes, "flesh and blood do not inherit the Kingdom of God," but the clothes do. Clothes are part of the body. In ordinary life, clothes are the body's outward expression, analogous to the fur and feathers of birds and animals; and they are added to the body semi-dynamically, and I say this because between the clothes and the body there is a relation closer than any other except human touch, for in penetrating the thin outer layers of the body's constitution, clothes become partly rooted in a living organism. In the visual order of art, clothes are the body's very appearance, for in themselves, through their surfaces and angles, they disclose the body's constitution. Clearly, then, if we can affirm that the human physical body artistically reveals the human metaphysical essence, then we must also affirm that clothes possess the same power, for the clothes are like an amplifier for the body, making louder and more direct the words the body is saying as witness to its own inner idea. A nude figure is therefore not obscene or ugly; rather, it is metaphysically less intelligible, for in it we discern with

far greater difficulty the essence of sacred humanity. But I repeat: this spiritual necessity of clothes arises not from some ordinary moralistic ground but from the spiritual essentialities of icon-painting, i.e., from the visual symbolism of the icon itself.

And in this iconographic sense, clothes provide an extraordinary insight into the spiritual style of a culture. For example, consider the folds in the garments.

With a unique exactness, the long practice of Russian icon-painting reveals the entire history of ecclesiastical spirituality by the characteristic folds in iconic garments, so that one need only glance at the folds to know when the icon was done and to understand the whole spirit of the culture reflected in it. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the archaic folds—at once naturalistic and symbolic—point to an immense but still unconscious ontology joined to sensuousness; they are sharply rectilinear folds yet still softly material, with a great many of them and showing little evidence of a strongly experienced spirituality; hence, they exhibit little overall unity, yet in their individual strength, each fold shows the power to pierce the thickness of the sensuous.

From the beginning of the fifteenth century and up to the middle of the sixteenth, the folds become longer and wider and they lose their material softness. In the first half of the fifteenth century, the folds are straight, somewhat short, and joined at angles. At first, their character is almost mineral-like, as if the person's lines and planes were crystallized matter; but then, in time, this crystalline hardness softens into something of the resilience of vegetative stems or grain stalks; and this style holds to the beginning of the sixteenth century, becoming long, widely spaced, nearly straight lines whose ends seem tightened into slight curves by the very resilience of the lines. As a result, what the iconic clothes now show is a spiritually resilient energy fulfilling a developed and coherent power.

Clearly, then, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries there is a process of growing spiritual self-consciousness (including a self-consciousness in and of Russia herself), a process wherein all of Russian life is organized to co-inhere with the spirit through the collective ascetic disciplines of the emerging nation, a process that generalizes ascetic experience into an integrated world-view. And, furthermore, the folds in this period grow intentionally straight and stylized, becoming rationally abstract yet with a strikingly attractive tendency to naturalism. If we knew nothing at all about the second half of the sixteenth century, that period we call The Time of Troubles, then—if we had the icons, or even only the *folds* in the icons—we could understand what happened in the great spiritual transformation of medieval Rus' into the Renaissance Kingdom of Moscow; for in the iconpainting of the time already is manifest that spiritual sickness of Russia called The Time of Troubles. But the healing of that sickness in the seventeenth century was merely a restoration, a temporary repair; and in the restoration, the new life of the Russian people began with the Baroque—

"Yes, of course it's essential to see the folds as connected to the icon's spiritual meaning; but you must still explain what is the *realistic* role of the iconpainting techniques. Whatever their varying characteristics, all kinds of folds can express something spiritual because they exist in the real world. But gold paint, for example, or the gold highlights or the gold-leaf on the garments: all this corresponds to nothing at all, and so it's hard to see them as anything other than purely decorative—which means they signify nothing except, possibly, the iconpainter's own personal diligence."

Oh no, on the contrary. The *assyst* you are talking about, i.e., the exacting iconpainting technique of adhering gold-leaf in wide bands or narrow strips, is one of the most conclusive proofs that iconpainting possesses a concretely metaphysical meaning. It is, I

suppose, understandable that the historical character of gold-*assyst* seems at a superficial glance to be unvaryingly monotonous; but in its essence, in its intricately refined patterns, the technique changes almost at the histological level from one style of iconpainting to another; thus, this extremely delicate golden network most expressively and conclusively manifests the icon's ontological constitution.

"But why is *gold* used? It corresponds to nothing, except maybe to the gold of jewelry. Isn't it obvious: the lustre of gold can't compare, can't correspond at all, with paint? I mean, it's no accident that nearly every visual art refuses to use gold, even in a powder form, for gold is completely alien to all paints. And, look, even the golden things in paintings are never actually painted in a gold color; and in those very rare instances where a gold color is actually used, it looks really terrible and lies on the surface like something accidently stuck onto it. All we want to do is pick it off."

What you say is completely true. But all you're really doing is clarifying—and not rejecting—this traditional technique, one absolutely necessary to the whole iconpainting tradition but not so in any other art. I would make, though, one small change in something you said: besides gold, silver was for a time also used in iconpainting, not often, but when it was, it was always exclusively used in garment folds and ornaments. However, this use of silver did not become part of iconic technique. And this fact, that silver never entered the history of iconpainting, gives us our starting point in understanding gold.

To begin with, notice that silver was used in plain opposition to the canonic traditions of iconpainting, and it is worth mentioning that one intricately detailed icon (unquestionably of aristocratic origins) used both silver and gold—and, moreover, silver highlights are put on the garments of the Mother of God in places where even gold-*assyst* never goes and, hence, in violation of *assyst*'s symbolic meaning; so that the overall impression this icon

gives is one of overly conspicuous luxury, an impression arising either from the demands of the person commissioning the icon (probably as a wedding gift) or from the iconpainter himself. No instruction manual, no text on the authentification of icons, ever mentions even an exceptional use of silver; gold, however, is everywhere required. Not incidentally, silver (but not, as you rightly say, gold) is not as antagonistic to paint as is gold, for silver has an inherent correspondence with some blue-gray and especially white colors.

Furthermore, in the iconpainting from the period of its great flowering in perfection, we see only gold-leaf being permissibly used, a gold that possesses a full metallic lustre completely alien to paint. But as naturalism invaded iconpainting, the earthly style displaced the gold-leaf, and the gold was ground into a powdery matte that was far closer to paint than the leaf.

Now, you also point out that, in all the fine arts, golden objects—and, in general, anything metallic—are never depicted by either gold itself or gold color. In iconpainting equally, can one point to even a single instance where a golden object in an icon is depicted by gold-leaf or gold color—or even any metallic object by some kind of metal? One can't. And why, if gold-leaf is always permissible, can it not serve as a base color for an object that, in point of realistic fact, has metallic lustre, a base that could be then softened by gold paint?

"Well, you prove my point exactly: gold isn't used in the icon when it could actually portray something real, nor is it used (as in this case you're describing) when it could actually harmonize with paint. Therefore gold is completely meaningless, and the iconpainter's whole concern is to keep the imperceptive spectator from realizing it. So, as it turns out, it's as if the iconpainter—or, better, the whole iconpainting tradition—writes in capital letters on every icon: LET HIM WHO CAN SEE NEVER TRY TO SEE WHAT THE GOLD IS DEPICTING, FOR THE GOLD IS POINTLESS."

That's almost so; but, you know, in such matters 'almost so' is equivalent to 'not at all so.' One of iconpainting's great tasks is to establish an absolutely necessary distance between gold-leaf and paint; for, by emphasizing fully the metallic lustre of the gold, the whole of iconpainting seeks to prove—with an ultimate persuasiveness—that the gold and the paint are wholly incommensurable. The happiest icon attains this, for in its gold we can discern not the slightest dullness or darkness or materiality. The gold is pure, 'admixtureless' light, a light impossible to put on the same plane with paint—for paint, as we plainly see, reflects the light: thus, the paint and the gold, visually apprehended, belong to wholly different spheres of existence.

Gold is therefore not a color but a tone. Abstractly understood, gold is analogous (in a certain sense) to the white line in engraving but in polar opposition to it. In the engraving, the white line is, precisely and not abstractly, white and so it exists on the same plane with every other color; therefore, the white line cannot be considered the positive pole in relation to the genuinely negative pole constituted by the black line, for the former is not a true abstraction, while the latter is. The true positive pole to the black line is the gold-*assyst*, for this is pure light in direct contrast to the complete absence of light that constitutes the engraving's network of black lines. Both the *assyst* and the black line are abstractions without sensuousness, which, because completely devoid of any psychological resonances, are therefore directly related to the rational sphere. Nevertheless, despite this profound correspondence, the two are as distinct from one another as yes from no: the icon's golden stroke is the presence of reality while the engraving's black line is its absence.

"But what possible reality—that is, not what independent reality but what artistically *figurative* reality—could the *assyst* represent, since (as you have plainly just said) the gold corresponds to nothing at all."

But I did not say that the gold corresponds to nothing at all; what I was saying was that, because gold and paint have no correspondence, that which forms the boundary of gold is precisely that which corresponds to paint. Therefore to discover that which does *not* correspond to paint, it is necessary to find some artistic means other than color. If our understanding of the world is wholly naturalistic such that the content of our experience becomes solid, unbroken sensuousness, then any radical split in the means of artistic representation is at once condemned and dismissed as a flagrant lie; for if the world is solely the world we can see, then all artistic means for representing the world must be both self-consistent and conformed to the world, being wholly sensuous. Such is the case in the fine arts of the West, which exclude from their experience everything supersensuous, and which therefore not only exclude the artistic use of gold but tremble in very fear of it, as if gold would destroy the whole integrity of (say) painting's style of spirituality. Consequently, when gold is in fact used, it is badly used as a crude imitation of naturalistic metal—like, in fact, those bits and pieces of newspaper or photographs or sardine cans stuck onto the so-called artworks of recent revolutionary artists. In such cases as these, gold is plainly not at all an artistic means but is merely an empirical *thing*.

"Do you think, then, that the gold-*assyst* in the icon—like the line in engraving—is trying to reconstruct the representation in spite of the visual data; that it wants to show the vital *form* of the represented thing?"

We are not afflicted, I think, with the Kantian arrogance of Protestantism, that pride that will not accept even from God the full, flowing life of the world, rejecting it solely because it is entirely *given* to us as that which God created *for* us but not *by* us. And *why* (even if it were possible) why should we want rationally to reconstruct those dimensions of the world that, through God's blessings, we receive through our five senses, apprehending them

in and through our essential fullness? In this, we, like the Roman Catholics, do not reject the full truthfulness of colors; but we further know that, through spiritual sobriety, colors are themselves made spiritual, growing always more transparent, purer and penetrated with light such that they abandon all earthliness and approach the condition of precious gems, becoming in the end intense concentrations of planetary rays.

But there exists not only the visible world (albeit in a spiritualized mode); there is also the invisible world wherein the divine blessing, like metal melting, streams in the deified reality. This world is sensuously unapproachable and is comprehended, instead, by the intellect (using the word, of course, in the ancient and ecclesiastical senses of it). In this sense, then, one could rightly talk about the *reconstruction,* or deliberate fashioning, of spiritual reality. But there is the deepest opposition between this kind of reconstruction and what happens in Protestantism. In the icon, as in Church culture as a whole, that which is deliberately constructed is that which is sensuously unavailable, and for which we therefore need at least some schematic to assist our visual imagination. In Protestant culture, on the other hand, the invisible world is scarcely even mentioned, and, instead, it turns what is immediately available to sensory experience into abstract schemata. We fulfill the thirst to know by apprehending the whole of the visible world and then adding to this comprehension the knowledge of the invisible realm; the Protestant attempts to express *from himself* that which is already before him. Moreover, the ecclesiastical act of construction is carried out within spiritual reality, for in the iconic construction light itself (that is, the spiritual reality of nature) everywhere radiates. Gold, metal, and the sun are all colorless because they are all almost equivalent to the sun's light. That is why Vasnetsov said to me many, many times—and it is deeply true—that the sky cannot be represented by any color, that it can only be depicted in gold. Look into the sky, especially at the area around the sun, and you will see vividly

that blue is not the essential feature of sky; rather, it is a *light-bearingness,* a saturation of space by light, a depth of light that can be expressed only in gold—and which would become flat, muddy, and opaque were paint to be used to express it. And so from purest light, the iconpainter carries out his constructive work, fashioning not just anything but only the invisible realm comprehended intellectually, a realm wholly present in and as the non-sensuous content of our experience, and therefore a realm that must be represented in a way distinct from all sensuous dimensions of experience. It is precisely the same in other areas of Church thought, especially in its world-view, where dogmas concerning the invisible world are golden formulations connected to—but not mingled with—the color-formulations fashioned by science and philosophy to describe the visible world. Protestant thought, on the other hand, is like Protestant graphics in wanting to construct without using the light of true reality, using instead the absence of reality, the darkness of nothingness (one is reminded again of Cohen's work).

"Are you saying, then, that the golden strokes of *assyst* accomplish a metaphysics in highlighting what is depicted? Is the ontology of (say) clothes, or books, or footstools—that is, the ontology of everything that is—being revealed this way? I'm understanding you to say in this that, in the lines of gold-highlight (*assyst*), one sees the invisible realm somehow become comprehensible to us and, further, its primary energies become actualized into sensory images, energies whose interactions constitute the ontological skeleton of a thing. For, yes, then we can say that the *assyst*-lines are the lines of energy constituting the force-field that is the thing itself. Thus, we can also say that these lines of pressure and tension perceptible by the intellect but invisible to the sight signify a system of potentialities; for example, the highlights on garments show the lines along which the fabric would fold."

What you are saying about lines of energy and force-fields is exactly right: and it's also well known in the correct way. Consider. If an artist in depicting a magnet were to be satisfied with showing merely the visible aspect (I mean, here, visible and invisible in the common way of speaking), then he would be depicting not a magnet but merely a piece of steel; the real essence of the magnet—that is, its force-field—would go not only unrepresented but also unindicated (though undoubtedly we would simply imagine it into the representation). Furthermore, when we speak of a magnet, we *mean* the force-field along with the piece of steel—but we don't mean the opposite: a piece of steel and, secondarily, a force-field. Now, consider the other approach. If an artist were to use some physics textbook in depicting the force-field as something visually equal to the steel of the magnet, he would thereby be mingling thing and force, visible and invisible, in his representation, and in doing so he would be fashioning a visual lie about the thing as well as misrepresenting the definitive characteristics of the field (i.e., its invisibility and its activating power); hence, he would be showing two untruths about the magnet in his depiction, none of which is the magnet. Clearly, in depicting a magnet, both the field and the steel must be shown; but their depictions must also be incommensurate, showing that the magnet's two dimensions belong to two different planes. The steel could be shown in *color* while the field must be depicted *abstractly:* only so could one avoid the unanswerable question of why the field is shown in *this* color and not *that.* I dare not try to instruct the artist in how actually to represent this unmingled mingling of two planes of existence; but I am entirely certain that figurative art has the capacity to do it.

In the final analysis, depicting this unmingled mingling is the representation of the invisible dimension of the visible, the invisible understood now in the highest and ultimate meaning of the word as the divine energy that penetrates into the visible so that we can see it. This very invisible energy is also the most powerful

force, for it is the most actual force field. And just as the invisibility of God's power infinitely exceeds the invisibility of the magnetic field, so too does the ontological effectiveness of His power exceed the effectiveness of not only the magnetic field, but of every earthly force-field as well. Analogically, then, we can say this: the form of the visible is created by these invisible lines and paths of divine light.

"But I thought a while ago you were going to talk about what I said being 'not at all so,' but you have only spoken about it being 'almost so.'"

Well, that's not quite right. For you were using *force-field* in a naturalistic, almost physical sense, while I am using it merely as an image; and I am not talking about *natural* form-creating forces in reality (although these might reside in the very depth of the correspondant reality) but about *divine* forces.

"But isn't any force divine since God has created it?"

In some senses, yes; but in other senses we can properly distinguish some divine forces as belonging more directly to God than others. But there is no need here to establish this essential distinction because the very assertion of cultic significance itself presupposes the distinction; and in the absence of the assertion, the question itself cannot arise. Similarly, one can speak of either the revelation of nature or the revelation of God in nature: the latter can reveal the power of God in a more *direct* sense while the former may reveal His power in a more *specific* sense; but both are powers of God. And I want to assert that the gold-*assyst* in icons does not articulate the metaphysics of the natural order (though this order is divinely created), but that it instead corresponds directly to the manifest energy of God. Look very closely: in the icon, the *assyst* is placed not just anywhere but only upon that which has a direct relationship with the power of God, i.e., upon that reality which is itself not metaphysical even in any special

sense but which nevertheless has entered into a direct relationship with God's manifest grace.

Therefore (ignoring those rare deviations from Church tradition, spontaneous and inessential), the *assyst* was placed upon: the garments of Christ (either child or adult); the Gospel held by Christ or the saints; the throne of Christ; the thrones of the Angels in the representation of the Holy Trinity; the footsteps of Christ and the Angels of the Holy Trinity; and a few other rare instances in those ancient icons where the spiritual meanings were fully comprehended—as, for instance, the altar table. In every case, the gold clearly corresponds to the spiritual gold that is the divine light of God.

Later on, the gold is turned into a powder and takes on the characteristics of paint, and it is used in later icons to highlight the garments of saints and other things; but even so, it continues to signify heavenly grace—although a dogmatic question arises whether it is in fact in accord with the iconpainting tradition to transfer (even so gently) what is intrinsically of God to the earthly saints. Thus, the *assyst*, as the exact placement of gold, expresses the energy not of ontology in general but of God in particular, becoming the supersensuous form that penetrates the visible. Spiritually understood, gold-brocade vestments—especially the brocade woven in the traditional pattern of widely spaced golden threads—are a material image showing the flesh purified through the penetration of heavenly light into this world—

"Wait a moment, please. I'm afraid my questions have pushed our conversation in several different directions at once, and because the confusion is entirely my fault, I shall assume the unpleasant task of calling us back into some semblance of order. What we have just now been saying elucidates merely one detail of iconic technique; but it was supposed to shed light upon the entire history and practice of iconpainting as an expression of Church culture. After our illumination of Catholic painting and

Protestant engraving, it was only natural that we went on to the spirituality of certain iconic techniques (which are implicitly connected to Church cultures)—but wouldn't it be more persuasive to explore the explicit connections inside iconpainting itself? Is it possible to do this?"

Yes, of course. And as witness to the wholly unaccidental character of the traditional iconpainting techniques, let us remember that we encounter them throughout the whole of Church history and that Church art has faithfully observed and honored them from the very beginnings in earliest antiquity. In these techniques, one can clearly see the basis of a universal metaphysics and way of wisdom, a way that constitutes the humanly natural mode of seeing and comprehending the world, a way therefore opposed to the artificial modes exhibited in the techniques of Western art. Attend, for example, to the evidence from the fourth and fifth centuries; in this evidence we plainly see that the techniques of the early period are easily and absolutely identified in the techniques of all the later periods of iconpainting. St. John Chrysostom (347-407), called The Enlightener, once compared the passing of the Israelites through the Red Sea to the sacrament of Baptism, seeing the first as the *image* (τύπος) and the second as the *truth* (ἀληθεῖα), i.e., the image of reality and the reality itself, asking: "How is it possible to think of the first as the proto-image of the second?" and then responded to his question: "You can think this when you truly learn what an image is and what truth is; then the explanation can be given."

Let us therefore ask, What are shadow and truth? When we turn to representations fashioned by great artists (it is worth noticing, in passing, that excellent iconpainters in Russia and Greece were called *sographs* or *isographs*), we notice an interesting fact: in aristocratic circumstance whenever an artist would make a darkly-colored image (in Greek, κυανόχρως is the dark blue of the night sky), he would trace white lines (γράμμα) on the dark

ground to depict the Czar or his throne, his horse and armies, spearmen, enemies, even people tied and cast down on the ground. But though we have seen these images many times, we have not fully recognized and understood everything we are seeing; for what is being drawn *are* the man and the horse, not clearly. . . [There is a break here, of an unknown though probably brief length, in the original manuscript.]

The Ontology of Making the Icon

"Yes, I see the truth of all this; it is all very like the iconic techniques employed in the fifteenth century and later. But tell me: what do these techniques show us about the Church world-view?"

To begin with, in choosing the figurative plane, the unstable surface of the Renaissance canvas simply does not correspond to the Church's ontology, an ontology that equates the process of making the icon to the shifting appearances of circumstantial reality, an ontology that therefore does not correspond even slightly to the ephemeralities of the engraver's paper, for these ephemeralities give the illusion of easy triumph over extreme difficulty. In the fine arts, the figurative plane is brought down into the conditional; in the engraving arts, the figurative plane pretends to ascend by means of the artist's legerdemain into the realm of pure reason. Church art seeks for itself an extremely stable surface, one not merely *resembling* stability but one actually strong and unyielding; and iconic imagery therefore must possess a moment of strength comparable to this strong surface, and therefore be capable of belonging directly to Church consciousness instead of to individual consciousness in its moment of flowing into individually creative feminine receptiveness.

"Then I take it that you can see in Western art the fragmentation of iconpainting, where some elements of iconic art were one-dimensionally realized in Catholic fine arts while other elements were taken up by Protestant engraving. In regard to the

figurative plane, iconpainting probably realizes in reality all the demands of engraving in such a way that you would undoubtedly say that what an engraving hungers to be an icon perfectly is. But the surface as such—i.e., this firm, immovable surface—is really best imagined as a wall, a stone wall, for that's the perfect symbol of ontological firmness. In this sense, then, fresco-painting meets the demand; but iconpainting mostly—in fact, almost always—is not done on a wall—"

But on what, then?

"Well, clearly, on a board."

No, because the iconpainter's first task is to transform the board into a wall. Remember: the initial acts in fashioning an icon—what is called the *preparation of the board*—all together culminate in the backgrounding of the board. In this process of preparation, the carefully chosen board is first well dried, then a depression is made on the front side so that a raised margin frames the depressed surface, and then the whole board is strengthened by traverse splines on the reverse side to prevent later warping. Then the gessoing is done in seven stages. First, a nail or awl is used to scratch a screen-pattern on the front surface. Next, a hot, liquid glue is applied to the front and, after the glue dries, a piece of linen cloth (linen canvas or wide-wale hemp) is glued on using a thicker glue spread over the entire front. Then an additional layer of glue is spread on the top of the linen, and this layer is allowed to set for twenty-four hours. After the glue dries, the board is white-washed with a thoroughly mixed liquid of glue and chalk, which is then allowed to dry completely. When the white-wash is dry, the gessoing begins, and it is done in six or seven steps over three or four days. The gesso is prepared by adding in the white-wash (two-fifths of which is boiling water), a little olifa (i.e., boiled linseed oil), and chalk. The gesso is applied with a wide spatula and, after each layer, the board is allowed to dry completely. When a layer dries, it is polished with a damp pum-

ice-stone; and this is done several times, after each layer of gesso has thoroughly dried. And then it is dry-polished with the pum-ice-stone. The final polishing of the gesso is with the horsetail plant or (in our practices now) with extremely fine sandpaper. Now, and only now, is the figurative surface ready. Clearly, this surface is nothing other than a wall—more accurately, a wall-niche—for the icon-board condenses all the accumulated properties of a wall: its surface whiteness, its structural fineness and solidity, are the very essence of a wall; and it therefore permits that noblest form of fine art, wall-painting. Historically, iconpainting arose from the technique of wall-painting and is its essential aliveness released from the strictures of external dependence upon the accidents of architecture.

"In wall-painting, a stylus, or other sharp instrument, is used to trace or score the drawing onto the wall—which you would interpret, I suppose, as an engraver's act. And it is indeed engraving; but is there anything that corresponds to it in this metaphysical concentration of wall-painting called iconpainting?"

Yes, there is, for the work on the figurative surface begins with such an act of engraving. The iconic engraver first draws in charcoal or pencil onto the gessoed surface the *pattern* of the iconic image (i.e., the pattern recognized as sacred by the Church), and then he cuts the pattern in with a stylus, i.e., a needle-sharp instrument with a wooden handle, called a *graphia.* The Greek verb γράφω means "to cut, scratch, engrave" as well as "to write," and a γράφη is an engraver's knife. The *graphia* is a very ancient instrument whose origin is buried deep in the centuries; in one form or another, it is the primary instrument of figurative art. For iconic engravers, to use this instrument for tracing the pattern is an act of awesome responsibility, especially in cutting the folds of the garments, because such engraving is the act of translating the things of the other world into evidence sensorily present to thousands of believers praying, evidence held

sacred by the Holy Church, and even the tiniest, most minute alteration in this sensory evidence will give it an entirely different style and whole other spiritual structure. Even at this initial stage, then, the engraver feels responsible to the integral wholeness of the iconic tradition, i.e., to the truth of its ontological evidence even in its simplest first formulations. This act of engraving is pure abstraction, eventually almost invisible, yet it, too, partakes of the sensory order. Therefore the engraving must attain fullness of clarity in order to be visual; and when the iconic engraver completes his task and passes on the work to the hands of the other different masters—

"But this seems so *mechanical* in its execution, so like mass production. For I doubt very much that the essence of an icon—as a work of art—can have anything corresponding to this passing from one pair of hands to another."

You're raising a very significant question here, and I want to speak directly to your doubt. To begin with, an icon is not an art-work, a self-enclosed piece of art; rather, the icon is a work of witness that employs art as well as many other things. What you contemptuously call "mass production" is therefore essential to iconpainting, for its sensory evidence must enter into every home and every family, becoming in the authentic sense popular in its proclaiming of the highest spiritual reality concentrated within ordinary everyday life. One possibility in iconpainting technique, then, is rapid execution—a possibility that can cause very fine icons to appear in ways that permit (as with the Stroganovs of our era) the vanity of wealthy accumulation, whereby sacred things can become mere objects in a vast art collection.

But about the specializations in iconpainting: they arise not simply through external causes, for even a 'first-appeared' icon is never conceived as an act of solitary creativity; rather, every icon belongs in essence to the collective work of the Church; and even if, by chance, a particular icon is fashioned entirely by one single

master, some ideal participation of other iconpainters is always implied. Just so, every Divine Liturgy is always served by more than a single priest serving alone; and if by chance it is singly served, then there is still everywhere implied in that Liturgy the participation of the bishop and other priests, deacons and all the orders of the clergy. In secular fine arts, an artist sometimes gives part of his work into the hands of another, but the work nevertheless everywhere implies individual creativity; in iconpainting, on the other hand, the iconpainter may sometimes work alone, but the collectivity of work is necessarily implicit in the icon. In fine arts, an artist's stylistic uniqueness demands the absence of other people; in iconpainting, the primary goal is always the clarity of a collectively carried and transmitted truth; hence, if by chance some purely subjective view of things spontaneously creeps into one moment of the iconpainting process, it will be balanced in the final icon by other masters mutually correcting one another.

And so the engraver finishes his work and the colorists begin theirs: and this permits the colorists to develop within themselves a special attentiveness wherein they never disturb that dimension of iconpainting which must adhere most exactly to sacred Tradition. But the colorists are separated into those who paint the faces, hands and uncovered areas of the body and those who paint the covered figures and backgrounds. This profoundly meaningful division corresponds to the principles of inward and outward, of "I" and "not-I," whereby the face expresses inward life while everything not the face serves to manifest the whole world created for humanity. In iconpainting terms, the face is termed the *countenance* (*lik*), while everything else—body, garments, rooms, buildings, trees, rocks, and so on—is background, or prior steps, to painting the face. Painting the face is called *lichnoe* while painting everything else is termed *dolichnoe;* and by *lik* is understood those secondary organs of expressiveness (i.e., the "little countenances") of hands and feet. In this division of the icon's whole content into the processes of *lichnoe* and *dolichnoe* we

plainly see the Greek patristic understanding of existence being divided into *man* and *nature;* a division wherein each is at once distinct and inseparable from the other; hence, it is a division expressing the primordial paradisical harmony of inwardness and outwardness. On the other hand, when sin rended the creation asunder, man and nature became opposed to one another, an opposition concluding itself precisely in the fine-arts division between landscape and portraiture; for in landscape, man is at first suppressed, then made into an accessory, and finally wholly excluded from the landscape, while in portraiture everything surrounds man and thereby ceases to have its own unique countenance (*lik*), becoming merely an environmental atmosphere; and finally the body disappears from the portrait, leaving only a face now alienated from the whole created world—and the portrait's real goal now is merely the face's expression. Thus, when we consider the processes of *lichnoe* and *dolichnoe,* we must see not only an external arrangement of productive methods but also the possibilities of a polyphonic expressiveness. Similarly —though I won't explore them now—the person who applies the background, the one who applies the facial colors, the one who puts on the olifa finish, the person who does the gilding: all these specializations possess their own inner sense.

"But, plainly, the primary division is between the engraver and the painter. But tell me, who paints the background for the figures in the icon?"

To ask the question in iconpainting terms is to ask who does the *light.* I call your attention to this remarkable sentence: *the icon is executed upon light*—a sentence perfectly expressing the whole ontology of iconpainting. When it corresponds most closely to iconic tradition, light shines golden, i.e., it is *pure* light and not color. In other words, every iconic image appears always in a sea of golden grace, ceaselessly awash in the waves of divine light. In the heart of this light "we live, and move, and have our being"; it

is the space of true reality. Thus, we can comprehend why golden light is the icon's true measure: any color would drag the icon to earth and weaken its whole vision. And just the same way that the creative grace of God is both cause and condition of all earth's creation, just so in the icon: after the abstract pattern is sketched, the process of incarnating the icon begins with the gold-leafing of light. Further, in the same way that the icon begins with the gold of creative grace, it ends in the highlighting with the gold of illumination, *assyst.* In this visual ontology, the painting of the icon repeats the main stages of God's creation from absolute nothingness to the holy creation.

"I was thinking the very same thing as you spoke. But, you know, I have another thought: it seems as if the ontologies of the Church and of Plato are so extraordinarily intertwined in the iconpainting process (and both to the ontology of ancient art) that this very intertwining must itself be explained. For I know that Platonism is primarily a religious practice, that its essential terminology is the language of mystery, that its essential images possess a consecrative nature, and that Plato's Academy is somehow related to the Eleusinian Mysteries and is thought to be the primary ontological architect of ancient idealism wherein the patterns of the heavens were transmitted into the divine works of earthly artists. My question is this: isn't it possible that ontology itself is merely a theoretical formulation of iconpainting?"

Well, if you want to talk about the deepest inner affinities between them, then, yes, it is as you say. But, you know, I am essentially opposed to the conceptual unification of different activities, for if the differences were merely appearances, then they would not exist in reality, and so they would have sprung not from each other but from some common root. I firmly believe that both the canonic colors of iconpainting and the theoretical formulations of iconographic ideas reveal the same spiritual essence, that in fact the colors are the visual images of the ideas; at the very

least, there is a great parallelism. For when, on some hypothetical icon, there appears that first concreteness (i.e., first according to spiritual rank and historical emergence) which is the golden light, then the white silhouettes receive the first level of concreteness and actualize what until then had been only the abstract possibility of existence, a possibility that was not, in the Aristotelean sense, a potentiality but, rather, a merely logical schematon and therefore precisely a *non-existent* (τὸ μὴ εἶναι).

Western rationalism believes that it can create something—indeed, everything—from this non-existence. But the ontology of the East believes otherwise, saying that *ex nihilo nihil* and that something—again, everything—is created only by the Real One, by the Creator. In the iconpainting process, the golden color of superqualitative existence first *surrounds* the areas that will become the figures, manifesting them as possibilities to be transfigured so that the abstract non-existents become concrete non-existents; i.e., through the gold, the figures become potentialities. These potentialities are no longer abstract, but they do not yet have distinct qualities, although each of them is a possibility of not any but of some concrete quality. Τὸ οὔχ ὄν (the non-existent) has become τὸ μὴ ὄν (the potential). Technically speaking, the operation is one of filling in with color the spaces defined by the golden contours so that the abstract white silhouette becomes the concrete colorful silhouette of the figure—more precisely, it *begins* to become the concrete colorful silhouette of the figure. For at this point, the space does not yet possess true color; rather, it is only not a darkness, not wholly a darkness, having now the first gleam of light, the first shimmer of existence out from the dark nothingness. This is the first manifestation of the quality, color, a little bit illumined by light. In the operations of *dolichnoe,* this dark color—which, at every stage, bears the tonality of the next layer of paint—is known in Russian as *raskrishka,* which means both "opening" and "coloring." The *dolichnoe* painter "opens" the garments and other solid areas of the icon by floating the colors on.

This *floating* of colors is a highly significant detail of the iconpainting process, for it shows that both the painterly brushstroke and the glazing technique are impossible in iconpainting, for here, in the icon, there are no half-tones or shadows: instead, reality is revealed by the degrees of the manifestation of existence—but not by putting one piece or quality alongside another. Here, then, is the deepest technical opposition between the icon and the oil painting, for in the oil, the image always is executed by parts and never whole.

The coloring is followed by the execution of the folds. The folds and other details are darkened by using the color of the same tone but lightened to a greater intensity so that the lines within the contours now move from the abstract to the concrete: the creative word manifests the abstract possibility. Next in the *dolichnoe* is the first highlighting of the leading edges of the lighted surfaces. The highlights are applied in three stages, each one mixed with more white and applied in narrower areas than the preceding. The third, the narrowest and brightest, is termed *ojivka,* which in Russian means both "highlight" and "enlivener." (Some iconpainting terminologies call the first two applications "execution" and only the third "highlight.") The final phase of the *dolichnoe* process is the extremely fine execution of the gold-*assyst* technique using, in the early history of iconpainting, a special glue made from thickened beer but, in later iconpainting, employing a liquid gold technique called 'feather-like' execution. In exactly the same manner are executed the highlights on chambers, mountains, clouds, and trees: two or three applications of *ojivka;* the colors are applied in a floating technique where the paint is more watery than that used in the garments—as opposed to painting the faces, where the color is thicker than that used on the garments. Thus, the garments establish a link between the inner world of the face and the outer natural world, becoming an intermediate reality between the two other realities, an intermedi-

ate existence between the two poles of creation, humanity and nature.

"But in describing the process of iconpainting, you have left out the main thing: *lichnoe,* the painting of the faces. This is, in general, where painting really begins."

Yes, painting begins there. But iconpainting finishes with it. But before we try to reach any real clarity, let's recall the primary stages of the *lichnoe* process. The stages have essentially the same sequence as in *dolichnoe.* The first stage of *lichnoe* corresponds to the first application of color in the icon, and it is termed *sankiring,* from the word "sankir," which is the primer paint used for the face. The act of sankiring determines in significant measure the icon's main character and whole style. Sankir does not have a definitive color; instead, it is the potentiality for the face's future color; and because the human face possesses infinite color and is therefore subject to infinite interpretations, the sankir has over the ages of iconpainting differed in composition and tone. Byzantine sankir was grey-blue with an indigo tone; the Italo-Crete sankir was brown; while in Russia, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was at first green and then darkened toward brown; and by the later sixteenth century, it had become dark tobacco brown; and so on. Equally as the tone changed, so did the composition of the sankir change: in the time of the second period of the Stroganov school, sankir was composed from umber with some white and ochre added; later, according to Pancelios, sankir had to be composed of equal parts of white, ochre, green (used for frescos), and one-quarter part of black; and contemporary sankir uses burnt umber, light ochre, a tiny quantity of Holland soot; and so on, with varying compositions. The sankired face initially is, we may say, the face's concrete non-existence. When the sankir dries, the iconpainter executing *lichnoe* retraces in lines of color every contour in the face, both inner and outer, in a process called *opis,* meaning "outlining" or "re-drawing"; as a result, the face acquires its first determination, moving from concrete non-existence into the first stage of visuality. The colors used in this re-drawing vary according to the iconic style. Just as with the coloring in *dolichnoe,* the more vivid the colors used in *opis,* the less the icon expresses the graphic linearity of engraving—and the more it pulls away from rationalism.

In the fourteenth century, the *opis* was done only on part of the face and then in bright red to contrast with the green of the sankir. Then the *opis* grew darker, becoming more coherent and more brown, but the lines were still soft in the style of fine art painting; later, corresponding to the rationalism of the fifteenthth century, the *opis* became stronger, sharper and blacker, rather like the lines of a pen, increasingly resembling engraving lines. Then, in the seventeenth century (but earlier in Greece), there appeared in the *opis* a series of white strokes following the contours and resembling the shadows in an engraving. It should also be said here that the lines defining the eyes, eyebrows, hair and (in male faces) beard are all redrawn in a darker sankiresque color. Then the execution of the face is done in a process corresponding to the highlighting in *dolichnoe.* The points where light happens in *lichnoe* are the forehead, cheeks, and nose, all of which are covered with a watery paint composed of ochre or (in Russian) *vochra,* whence the Russian iconpainting tradition derives its word to describe the executing of the face in ochre: *vochreniye.* The *vochreniye* color varies according to the period and style of the icon: in the fourteenth century, *vochreniye* used a warm pink; in the fifteenth century, it became brownish orange while, in the sixteenth, it was brownish yellow; the seventeenth century deliberately archaized the *vochreniye* by again using a warm pink; and the eighteenth century began to employ white, probably imitating powder. Thus, the other names for *vochreniye*—ones that do not bind the process to a particular color—are undoubtedly more correct, even though these names have not become part of traditional iconic terms: and especially right is the term *incarnation*

taken from French and English. Now, the first application of the ochre highlighting is diluted at the edges with a liquid solution of color between the ochre and the sankir. This dilution serves to soften the disjunction between sankir and ochre; and at these same disjunctive edges there is also applied a mummy color mixed with either ochre or cinnabar to indicate rosiness in the cheeks and other parts of the face. Then a second layer of ochre is floated, lighter than the first and covering all of it, including the rosiness as well as part of the diluted edges. Then a third layer is applied in the very lightest places, and sometimes this third layer is called (as in *dolichnoe*) *ojivka,* meaning both "highlight" and "enlivener." Finally, the features of the face are redrawn as well as the hair; and the places of greatest significance (in terms either of facial structure or spiritual illumination) are done in pure white either as short, thick lines or as long, narrow stripes: the former are called "motions" and the latter "marks," and sometimes together they are termed "incisions."

In some much later icons, the edges between sankir and ochre were further softened by a thin, white hatch-pattern. But iconpainting traditions have mostly eschewed the technique as antithetical to the spirit of iconpainting, believing that its necessity in the icons employing it arises solely from the iconpainter's inability to float color with the requisite skill.

"Does this complete, then, the making of the icon?"

Yes, it does—except for the soul of the icon, the written inscription. But this is not the icon's full completion, for now the whole icon is covered with olifa: with, that is, vegetable oil boiled—as well as applied—by methods that bear in the art a great responsibility (and that therefore are closely kept professional secrets). Whatever way it is made and applied, the olifa has an enormous impact. And, by the way, contemporary icon-restorers make a great mistake in seeing the olifa merely as a technical means for preserving the colors; in reality, it is an artistic force that

draws all the colors into a common tonality while simultaneously giving them great depth. I am certain, too, that the olifa and its various applications serve to distinguish styles of iconpainting. I remember especially the many times I saw how the high significance of an old icon's artistry was entirely destroyed by removing the golden warmth of the ancient olifa and replacing it with a new, colorless olifa. The old icon would look merely like a background for some later work.

"It's no doubt the case, too, that the metalwork in an icon—that is, the *riza* or the elaborately worked metallic frame around the icon—is also part of the icon's artistic wholeness—isn't that the case?"

In certain cases, yes, particularly in modern instances where the iconpainter himself has considered the matter—in these cases, it's not merely an artistically irrelevant expression of a patron's luxury; even a *riza*'s precious inlay-stones can clearly be integrated into the icon's wholeness. But most of the time the *riza* and other such things have been merely external ornamentation. Gold and precious stones possess an artistic symbolism too overwhelming to be useful to most iconpainters—

"You know, we've taken the icon up through its final stages and we've discussed all the essential meanings of the acts, but—"

Have we left something out?

"Well, look at this and tell me: one of the most important things of all in the teaching of fine arts is *shadows*: both theory and practice give perhaps their greatest attention to precisely this, to the skills and means of creating *shadows*; for the artists plainly believe that the way they create *shadows* determines their whole artistic style. So, naturally, I'm a bit bewildered: how have we gotten all this way in iconography and not once even mentioned the word *shadow*?"

We haven't forgotten it; it's simply that, in iconpainting, shadows have no place. The iconpainter never enters into an affair with darkness and so he never creates shadows in the icon.

"But why not? All iconic images stand in some kind of relation to things in the real world, and so why doesn't the iconpainter as he depicts these real things also depict their shadows?"

Because an iconpainter depicts the *being* of a real thing, even the essential *goodness* of the being: a shadow, on the other hand, is not being but the absence of being. Thus, to depict a shadow would be to characterize an absence by something positive, by a presence—and that would be a radical distortion of ontology. If the world is what the Creator creates, and if artistic creation manifests the divine image in humankind, then its entirely natural to expect parallelism between creativity in essence and creativity in likeness. It's also entirely natural to expect that the different phases of the art that is more universally human and sacred—that these phases would repeat the primary stages of the metaphysical ontogenesis of things and beings. And in terms of psycho-physiology, it would be strange indeed to depict 'something' not only that one cannot see even partially or weakly but that also is in fact the *whole absence* of something.

"But you can't deny that, in the fine arts, shadows *are* depicted, especially in watercolor where (and this is quite clear) paint is *not* applied to places of light and *is* to the areas of shadow. I think this technique is inevitable because an artist, metaphysically, moves from light into shadow, from illumination into darkness. The metaphysical opposite is plainly wrong; for in ontology as in cognitive perception, *omnis determinatio est negato:* that is, for a thing to have individuality of form (*determinatio*), something must be taken away (*negato*) from its fullness. Cognition is therefore analysis; it deconstructs so as to emphasize; and so we cognize a thing by cutting out its perceptible boundaries from the surrounding space it inhabits. The artist, I think, does something

very like this; and, in doing so, he adheres quite closely to the underlying methodological philosophy—"

Of the Renaissance; and in this, I quite agree with you. But you're ignoring the fact that there exists an absolutely opposite philosophy and that, as a result, there exists an art corresponding to it. Really, you know, if iconpainting did not exist, *il faudrait l'inventer,* one would have to invent it. But it does exist and it is as ancient as humanity itself. The iconpainter moves from shadow into light, from darkness into illumination. And our entire discussion of iconic techniques arose from this essential characteristic: an abstract schema and, surrounding it, the light that defines the silhouette (which is potentially the image and its color), and then the consequent revelation of the image, its configuration and reconfiguration as the image is shaped through the process of highlighting; next, the layers of paint, each lighter than the last and ending in special highlights, create the final image in the darkness of nonbeing—and so this image arises from light. An artist in oils seeks to understand the thing he paints as something real in itself, apart from and opposite to the light; and through his wrestling with the light (i.e., his painting of shadows) he seeks to assert the reality primarily of himself. Thus, in the fine-arts' understanding, light is merely the empirical occasion wherein a thing manifests itself. For the iconpaianter, on the other hand, light has no empirical reality and so it cannot be an empirical occasion.

For something to become uniquely individual, nothing need be negated—nor is there anything to negate, for until a thing is formed by light, it has no existence whatever; for a thing comes to possess concreteness not by negation but the positive act of creation: that is, by the quick play of light. At first, there was void; then, through an act of creation, nothingness appeared—that is, positive nothingness, the embryo, the beginning of a thing; then, as it is penetrated by light, the nothingness begins to assume shape, and it continues to do so until that which determines the

form more essentially is more illumined, while the less significant is illumined less. But: precisely upon that which the light comes to rest, there—in the measure of its illumination—is that which enters existence. Concreteness, individuation, and existence are positive. The divine Yes to the world is the incarnate, creative Word, because the voice of God we see as light, while the heavenly harmony is planetary movement. It is not without reason that poets can hear sounds in light, for although in the silent speech of God, in His faint whispering, one may see less of light, it nevertheless remains fully light and never darkness: full darkness is absolutely imperceptible because it has no being and is empty abstraction. And it is not without reason that one famous contemporary engraver depicts both deep shadows and invisible worlds not by depiction but by translation: that is, by the abstract whiteness of the empty paper. At the conclusion of everything, it all comes to this: either we believe in this world's ontological primacy and self-sufficiency, a world that self-generates and self-destructs; or else we believe and acknowledge that this world is the direct creation of God. The art of Renaissance painting has always (if sometimes inconsistently) served the first world-view; iconpainting has always chosen the second. From this ontological difference arises all their technical differences.

"It follows from all this that one should want to re-examine how light acts in Western art-works, because there *is* light in them, even quick strokes of light very like the *ojivki.*"

Yes, this is an essential question. But to answer it rightly, it is essential to remember very clearly that Western art (as opposed to iconpainting) has never from any angle—not even in its most classicistic moment—exhibited coherence. Iconpainting is a purely coherent art, one wherein everything connects to everything: substance and surface; drawing style and subject matter; the meaning of the whole and the way we comprehend that meaning—everywhere in the icon a coherence exists that corresponds to the rich organic wholeness of Church culture. The whole culture of the Renaissance, on the other hand, is in its deepest essence eclectic and contradictory; it is an analytically fractional culture composed of contradictory elements each of which ceaselessly strives for complete independence. What is true of Renaissance culture is true of the art: it lives in—even as it negates—the theocratic integrity of its own life, for it lives in the nourishment it draws from its medieval roots; and if it were ever to uproot itself from these conditions of nourishment, it would arrive at self-destruction.

For example, consider this very simple thing: how much of Renaissance art would be left if it excluded all religious subject-matter, if it moved entirely away from all ecclesiastical promptings? I don't want to engage this question here in any great length; instead, I merely want to point out that Renaissance art for the most part views light as an external, physical energy. By contrast, the Church understands light as an ontological force that mystically creates what exists.

"You're saying, then, that in Western art all objects exist solely in themselves and that light exists solely in itself and that any correlations between them are merely accidental; i.e., that any given object is merely lit by the light and, therefore, that the bright strokes of light could be put anywhere. These strokes may be accidental in relation to one another, but their mutual relations are never accidental, for it is these that determine that object of objects, the light source.

By the unity of perspective, the artist seeks to express the spectator's uniqueness as perceiving subject; but by the unity of chiaroscuro, he seeks to express the objectivity of the light-source. I clearly see this as the positivistic, equalizing task of Renaissance art: to *de-exist* the hierarchy of existence and to equate both the illuminative light and the contemplative spirit with the external

objects, putting everything on the plane of the conditional. But how, in the end, can we think the inverse of all this?"

To begin with, Western art itself swerves from its own great task, exceeding its own tutelary spirit. Thus, though the art everywhere proclaims the techniques of perspective, in its supreme masterpieces it deliberately abandons the norms of perspective; and equally it abandons the unity of light. If Western art recognized light as solely accidental and arbitrary, then it would think light as something entirely non-ontological, and an illumined object would be merely a form that is lighted and not something light-formed—and that is how we would understand what the artist means in proclaiming the relations of light and object as purely spontaneous ones. But, in actual fact, the Western artist deliberately *chooses* the lighting, for he plainly considers that it is not just any light but only *this* light which will rightly shape the forms he is painting. One light will reveal while another will distort the truth of forms, and thus, by a secret attentiveness, the artist discovers that not only the object's visual appearance but also its true form is being given him by the activities of light—and it can be either well or poorly given. But think: what does "well given" mean here except (half-consciously) "ontologically given?" And therefore an artist of sufficient depth will deliberately break the unities of chiaroscuro so as to shape his forms truly and essentially.

"It appears, then, that the shaping of forms becomes an activity of light."

More: the shaping is *from* acts of light. This metaphysics of the Church was more or less intuited by some Renaissance artists; but others, who did not care at all about adhering to strict Renaissance techniques, openly pursued this way of light-shaping and thereby entirely abandoned the unities of chiaroscuro. What is Rembrandt's high relief (*alto relievo*) if not the materiality of light? Even to raise in Rembrandt the issues of strict chiaroscuro and

perspective is plainly absurd. Rembrandtian space is closed and the light-source is banished, all material things becoming unravelings from an inner core of substantial luminescence.

"Is this also true of the icon, that it also strives for this inner luminescence, like fox-fire from decaying wood?"

Of course not, for the Renaissance culture of self-deification in the world especially condemns a Rembrandt, for he stands in relation to the sober Dutch the same way Jacob Boehm stands in relation to Kirhgoff and Hertz.

Iconpainting depicts objects as forms created by light rather than as things lit by a light-source—but in Rembrandt there is not any light (the objective cause of things), nor are things created by light; instead, there is a primordial light, which is the self-luminescence of primordial darkness; and this primordial light is Boehm's Abgrund. This primordial light is, of course, pantheism—which is the polarity created by Renaissance atheism.

"But it is remarkable how (in contrast to Italian rationalistic magicalisms)—it is remarkable how the North has this general tendency to pantheistic phosphoresence.

The definitive characteristic is the self-deification of the world joined to a rejection of asceticism, proclaiming that the disciplines of holiness are not needed for earthly illumination; thus, for the German mystics, the height and value of what is mystically apprehended is entirely unrelated to the height and value of the spiritual disciplines that refine the physical body. Reubens is a shining instance of the self-luminescence of large, heavy flesh. I am sure you will agree about Reubens, but I think you haven't sufficiently attended to the deep affinity that Rembrandt and Reubens have with the spiritual basis of the whole Dutch school, for the mysterious Rembrandt has countless relatives among the Dutch still-life artists.

And so I found it strange to hear you talk about sober Dutch burghers—for all these extremely beautiful grapes and peaches and apples, all these succulent vegetables and fish: if these are merely naturalistic, what would we ever call metaphysical? But in Dutch still-life, of course, we are seeing the *idea* of grapes, the *idea* of apples, and so on. And all of it, like in Rembrandt, is luminescence from within—"

I don't deny this moment of self-luminescence in Dutch still-life painting, but—in opposition to Rembrandt—these fruits and vegetables everywhere exhibit partly what I call a *righteous* connection to the earth: for in them there is something of iconpainting, something of things being created by light. But in the Dutch still-life, the unities of chiaroscuro and the external relation of form to light are entirely absent; and our question, as you remember, concerns the dominant *tendency* of Western art to which tendency (and not to art itself) we are opposing the tendency of iconpainting or its tendency (in this case, it makes no difference).

Iconpainting considers light not as something external to objects; neither does it consider light as belonging to some primordial substance: for iconic light establishes and builds things, becoming the objective cause of their existence; and, precisely because it cannot be conceived as external, iconic light is the transcendental origin of things, a creative origin that manifests itself through things but does not terminate in them.

"Yes, you are quite right, the techniques and materials of iconpainting are such that the images they depict can only be comprehended as being generated by light; consequently, the spiritual ground of every iconic image is that one wholly light-bearing and transcendentally brilliant Face. But I wonder: is this Face only an inevitable impression, merely some kind of metaphysical illusion arising from the iconpainting techniques—some entirely unintended consequence of the artistic process—or is it a

genuine metaphysics that is being consciously and deliberately expressed through iconpainting?"

Are you certain that you are stating the dilemna correctly? You ask whether the metaphysics of the icon are something illusory and therefore not worth discussing philosophically, as if the metaphysics had no rational content, or as if they were some abstract theory that had to be carefully applied to the icon, thereby making the icon into something allegorical. The whole question puts us at a fork in a road where, no matter which way we take, we end up in the same place.

"And what place is that?"

The place where the icon is rejected as a visual image of the other world. For if we say that the metaphysics of iconpainting are *either* accidental illusion *or* deliberate intention, we arrive at the same conclusion: the actual icon is soulless. That is, either way the actual icon itself becomes mute, empirical, and external, while its vital spirituality becomes something abstract and wholly apart from its visual actuality. If the metaphysics are illusion, then the spirituality follows behind the visual actuality; if they are intentional, then the icon's spirituality runs ahead of the visual. The fact of the matter is that the true sense of the icon is precisely in its visual rationality, or its rational visuality, that is, in its incarnation. I don't know whether you see how your question leads us into the denial of the icon; but I clearly see that it does; and so, rather than denying the icon, I prefer to deny your question.

"But I had no idea that such catastrophe attended my question; and I still cannot see where the grave danger lies."

Well, consider: what is this tacitly assumed notion we have silently introduced about abstract metaphysics, about metaphysics as abstract thought? The whole assumption is radically rejected by religious thought; more precisely, abstract constructions *per se* are not recognized by the Church. The Church flatly denies the spiritual meaning of any idea that is not grounded in concrete

experience, for She ceaselessly affirms the metaphysicality of life and the aliveness of metaphysics. When the Church talks about the purely metaphysical content of this or that visual appearance, She understands that, in a coherent parallelism, She is speaking of *two* revelations of the same concrete experience. You, however, were talking about metaphysics on the one hand and, on the other hand, iconpainting; but in the concrete experience of the icon, the fulcrum for both iconpainting and metaphysics is neither an abstract idea about the nature of things nor the sensory qualities of the empirical colors but, rather, the spiritual experience—

"But wait: do you talk about a *vision* of a saint?"

Yes, certainly I do. But to avoid ambiguity in this, let us try to use a word that will bring together vision and illusion, and so let us speak of a saint's *appearance.* Both metaphysics and iconpainting are grounded on the same rational fact (or factual rationality) concerning a spiritual appearance: which is that, in anything sensuously *given,* the senses wholly penetrate it in such a way that the thing has nothing abstract in it but is entirely incarnated sense and comprehended visuality. A Christian metaphysician will therefore never lose concreteness and so, for him, an icon is always sensuously *given;* equally, the iconpainter can never employ a visual technique that has no metaphysical sensuousness. But the fact that the Christian philosopher consciously compares iconpainting and ontology does not lead the iconpainter to use the philosopher's terms; rather, the iconpainter expresses Christian ontology not through a study of its teachings but by philosophizing with his brush. It is no accident that the supreme masters of iconpainting were, in the ancient texts, called *philosophers;* for, although they did not write a single abstract word, these masters (illumined by divine vision) testified to the incarnate Word with their hands and fingers, philosophizing truly through their colors. This is the only way to understand what the patristic texts ceaselessly repeat and what the ecumenical councils repeatedly assert:

what the words of the sermon are for the ear, so the icons are for the eye. And this is so not because the icon conditionally 'translates' some written text or other but, instead, because both icon and text have as their immediate subject—a subject from which neither seeks to be separated and to the manifesting of which both essentially seek—: both have as their subject the same spiritual reality. And according to all of the ancient world, what manifests concretely the spiritual realm is philosophy. Thus, all true theologians and all true iconpainters were equally called *philosophers.*

"And so you would say that iconpainting *is* metaphysics, just as metaphysics is in a certain sense verbal iconpainting."

Yes, and for this reason: we can discern in the work of both an unceasing parallelism—even though the parallelism isn't consciously (better: isn't *intentionally*) active. For example, consider the style of those verbally baroque theologians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for in their writings and sermons we can plainly see a deliberately spiralling tangle of verbal folds moving in a complex and elegant ceremonious dance: a perfect verbal mimesis of the Baroque icon; and in this inner correspondence in subject and style between theology and iconpainting is a matter awaiting scholarly examination. But my point here is the far more important issue concerning the metaphysics of light, for this is the primary characteristic of all iconpainting.

"I know that, in ancient philosophic culture long before Christ, the highest and most supremely valued senses were sight and hearing. Thus, when, for example, Heraclitus said, "The eyes and the ears are not reliable witnesses," he was saying that *even* the eyes and ears are wholly and merely sensuous. I also know that (at least in classical Greek thought) sight is more valued than hearing. In fact, the definitive characteristic of Greek thought is precisely the sense of sight, and, in Platonism, the spiritual essence of a thing is its *appearance* (εἶδος) rather than its sound or smell or taste or touch. Moreover, in ancient philosophy, the highest state

of knowing the metaphysical ground of all existence was expressed always as inner illumination, as inward light. All Platonic ontology, of course, is elaborated in visual schemata, because all reality (Plato said) is a blend of, or juncture between, darkness (non-existence)and appearances or ideas (existence); and the metaphysical ground of these latter is the sun of the ideational world, which Plato called the idea of the Good—that is, *the source of light.* No one who studies Plato can fail to see the concrete clarity of Plato's *ideational light*—and see also that this concrete clarity, far from accidental, is based on Plato's mystical experience. There is much to say on this, but I was coming to this question: do you see Church teaching, in the general connecting to Platonic tradition, within this framework of understanding?"

The Metaphysics of Light and St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians

Yes, I do, and the definitive point is the word light itself. There are at least a hundred compound words in Church language composed of this word: light-bearer, light-giver, light-like, light-of-light, light-manifesting, and on and on, not even counting the vast instances of the single word *light.* Some time ago, literary criticism discovered that a work of literature is dominated by this or that character, image or word; that the work is, in fact, created for that image or word; that that image is the *embryo* of the work itself—

"And the embryonic word in all Church writings—and especially in the liturgical services—is of course *light.* This dominant tonality of light in the services cannot be denied. But can you talk more concretely and (if possible) more concisely about this metaphysic of light?"

No one is more concise about this than the Apostle.

"What do you mean?"

Πᾶν γὰρ τὸ φανερούμενον φῶς ἐστιν: "whatsoever doth make manifest is light" (Eph 5:14). That is, everything that

appears, the full content of every experience, every existing thing, is *light.* Thus, anything that is not light cannot appear, for it is not a reality. Every darkness is unfruitful, and so the Apostle calls the "works of darkness" precisely "unfruitful" (Eph 5:11). This unreality is the pitch darkness located outside God. In God is all existing, all fullness of reality; outside Him stretches the nothingness of Hell's darkness. By the way, in Greek the word *Hell* or *Hades* (ἅδης, ἀιδης) means *without view, viewless,* i.e., that which is deprived of "view" or appearance. Reality is appearance, idea, countenance (*lik*); unreality is appearancelessness, Hell, darkness.

Every existing thing also possesses the active energy by which it manifests its reality; thus, something unable to act so is unreal—"only nonexistence lacks energy," the Fathers would say. And so darkness, being fruitless, as the Apostle says, therefore lacks energy; it is (in the unique sense of the word) nonbeing and death. But suddenly a light will shine in it and awaken in it "children of light" who bear fruit "in all goodness and righteousness and truth, proving what is acceptable unto the Lord" (Eph 5:9-l0). Thus, the fruit borne by the acts of light is the "proving" or searching (δοκιμάζοντες) the will of God, that is, searching the ontological ground of existing. This searching is the manifesting of every existing thing, that is, the comprehension of the incommensurability between the earthly realm and its spiritual idea in the divine Countenance; but this manifesting occurs (as the Apostle says) *by light.*

"The general idea that 'whatsoever doth make manifest is light' is undoubtedly correct in Church teaching. But can we, keeping to the literal sense of these words to the Ephesians, explain their ontological and iconic senses? I think it's entirely impossible to have conflicting views about their moral meanings; but what about their ontological meaning? Consider the context of chapter 5 of Ephesians: the Apostle Paul is telling them to 'walk in love,' to avoid lechery and every impurity and wantonness and loose talk and wild laughing, and so on, and he forbids them to

over-indulge in wine, teaching them to obey one another in God; then he sketches the duties of a wife to a husband, while in chapter 6, he teaches the right relation between parent and child, servant and master. My point is this: 'whatsoever doth make manifest is light' explains why the children of light have the energy and obligation to expose the works of darkness; the words have this ethical and instructional intention."

Your perceptions are right but not your conclusion. You create a context; let me do the same and locate this passage from chapter five within the context of the whole Epistle. But let me first say this: I am not trying to prove a point but only indicating what I personally feel about it.

So: the Epistle is addressed to the people of Ephesus, a city widely known for its veneration of—and art devoted to—the goddess Artemis, a center of both magical practices and the producing of idols. From the *Acts of the Apostles,* we know of the great rebellion led by one Demetrios the Silversmith against the Christians of Ephesus whose teachings had greatly hurt the market for idols. Throughout the Epistle, I feel a secret contrast between, on the one hand, this soulless *business* of Ephesian paganism (represented by sculpture) and, on the other, the ancient figurative art of making God incarnate by and in the image (the art which, in time, becomes iconpainting). As a highly educated Jew, the Apostle could not help but be almost viscerally repelled by the idolatrous Ephesian statuary—but the city's ancient figurative and relatively more symbolic art, which was still far from supernaturalist essence, was for him more acceptable, for its light-generating technique approached both Scriptural teachings about the creating of the world and Platonic understandings about the generation of ideas—understandings themselves (according to Philo's tradition) close to Judaic theology by virtue of both their essential content and their historic interaction.

A great antithesis arises: the act of seeing opposes the act of touching in the same way the art of light opposes the art of darkness. The overwhelming *tactility* of pre-Christian pagan art is well known, a special link exists between this sense and paganism; and the Holy Fathers even more acutely see a special link between tactility (more than any other sense) and the place where purity is broken. All of these and related ideas the Apostle could not help but have in his mind (if only in some hidden corner of it)—nor could his Ephesian readers. For even when he is engaged in merely ethical instruction, he is holding in his mind this great image of illumined art defeating the fruitless business of darkness—

"You were going to point out the meaning of the Epistle's ethical teaching."

This is exactly what I am doing. For the supreme image of the great Artist creating by and in light "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph 1:6)—here is the image of the world as the whole house-building of God. And when the Apostle Paul talks, in the very beginning, about our being chosen in Christ "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4), and when he concludes with admonishing us to be children of the light, revealing to us concretely the living image of such an illumined childhood, then is not that immense process the very one the iconpainter replicates, in small, through fashioning the icon, beginning with the pre-imaging (i.e., outlining in gold the future images) and ending with those pictures of the illumined children radiating light shining in gold? By the way, you argued just before against the ontology of the Apostle's words, insisting on their moral meaning. I answer that the Church, in the highest sense, sees ethical morality as alien; and that if one wishes to speak in a Christian way about *behavior,* one must speak only ontologically and never moralistically and, above all, never legalistically. Seeing the ethical as alien distinguishes all of the Apostle's writing but especially this Epistle. But why do we even talk of this? Who better than the Apostle knew the emptiness

and arrogance of "the business of the Law," of trying to save oneself by morality? And after everything he had inwardly overcome, could he have ever proposed ethical rules *without* faith in Christ, i.e., without the ontological nourishment of Christ's fullness?

The Epistle to the Ephesians has three features that distinguish it from the other epistles. The first is the spiritual height of its content, along with a corresponding elevation of style and breadth of concept. St. John Chrysostom writes:

> The Apostle, they say, when he was teaching the people of Ephesus, was already entrusting them with the deepest truths of the Faith. For the Epistle is filled with the highest and most immense meditations; in it, he explains things he wrote about almost nowhere else....

The vision of our ceaseless blessing in Jesus Christ exalts the Apostle, and vivid feelings and ideas so abound within him that he hasn't the time to catch them in words. Thought flows irrepressibly into thought until they exhaust the whole subject that had inspired the saint. And every word multiplies into other words, for he seeks only to outline every conceivable subject and not to dwell specially on any one, endowing all with the vision wherein ideas flow in, through and as pure consciousness. Just in its content, then, and in its tone of voice, this Epistle stands to the other letters of the Apostle's the way the Gospel of St. John stands to the other three Gospels.

The second distinguishing feature of the Epistle directly arises from the first: universality. The Apostle gives a general description of essential Christianity: how, from the depths of ages, God chose to save us in His Son; how the Son of God came to earth and established this salvation; how all of us participate in this salvation; and how, given all this, we must live and act. He adduces no specific historical context for all this, holding that everything he says applies to everywhere that Christians live. There is only one distinction made, that between "we" (who are Jews) and "you" (who are Gentiles) who now, in alliance with the Jews, form the one body of God's holy church, the body that is the starting point

of all the Apostle's inspired contemplations. It is this universality that has led some to call the Epistle to the Ephesians a common Christian catechism.

The third feature is the complete absence of all empirical particularities concerning either the Apostle himself or the Ephesians. As Bishop Theophanes wrote: "The Apostle did not want to descend into ordinariness, so extraordinary were the contemplations he sustained in writing them down." The Epistle's intent lies in the hope that "God will give them the enlightened eyes of the heart." The Apostle desires above all that the Ephesians will be raised up—as far as possible for those on earth—into a clear vision of the divine order of things, the economy of salvation, for he wishes them to behold what he himself beholds; "and higher than the Apostle's vision, no one has ever seen nor ever will."

To attain this end, the Apostle tells in the first half of the mystery of salvation, and in the second he describes the growth of the Body of Christ and its vital life; and this second part is, in both its general meaning and its specific details, represented as concretely manifesting the ontology of salvation; and, as a golden background to everything, he sustains a stream of spiritual contemplations that, throughout the Epistle, make the empirical details of actual life seem to be further revelations of the saving ontology. Thus, in the case before us, we must understand the words 'whatsoever doth make manifest is light' not in the reinterpretations of moral rules; rather, their meaning, according to the Apostle, is determined wholly by the ontology of light.

With absolute exactness, the Apostle bears witness to the ontological reality of the other world, a world he beholds with his own eyes; and he above all desires that his own witness become a seed of contemplation for and in all believers. Thus, it is entirely natural that his partially articulated evidences of spiritual visions become the most exact formulas for expressing the meaning of

that secondary evidence of the spiritual realm;
i.e., the meaning of iconpainting