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Between Idol and Icon. A Critical Appraisal of the Mystery Project of Culture by Vyacheslav Ivanov in the Context of the Thought of Jean-Luc Marion

The subject of the following reflections is the unique position of culture in the system of values of a human defining him – above all – religiously. We are of an opinion that it is in the context of thorough religious self-awareness that the problem of affection towards such a different matter as culture takes its visible shape.

The structure of the following considerations is to discuss – based on the analysis by French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion – two types of religious self-awareness: iconic and idolatrous, and to relate them to the “erotic” concept of culture by the Russian poet, philologist and philosopher – Vyacheslav Ivanov; and finally – to decide what point of view on culture phenomenon is proposed by the Russian thinker.

Let us begin with a short phenomenological juxtaposition of the two mentioned areas of interest: culture and religion. The area of culture, naturally different to that of religion, has been founded upon extremely dissimilar to religious rules (setting up a completely different human attitude). The culture element assumes affirmation, not renunciation; affirmation of life, creativity and physicality. Culture is not about fasting; it is about having a feast of aesthetic forms. It is not about poverty but the splendour of the fruits of human creativity and ecstasy coming from tasting the world rather than suffering. The incompatibility exposed here of the two areas poses a question of coexistence of the two elements within one radically religious awareness.

Jean-Luc Marion's concept draws on two types of human perception of religious culture: iconic and idolatrous ("icon and idol" for short). The theoretical proposal of the French philosopher is based on two theses: First – idol and icon are not distinct, fixed classes of objects but rather manners of the existence of these objects. The second thesis, which opens up a broad perspective for anthropological and culturological analysis commands searching for an "ontological" foundation of being for idol and icon; not as a result of human made object definitely, once and for all classified (as an idol or an icon) but as an object continuously being established as an icon or an idol by human perception. "The gaze makes the idol, not the idol the gaze."¹

Let us ask what the being of an idol is. According to Marion it means that an invisible mirror reflects the perception of human himself. The human, craving The Invisible, holds the perception on what is visible. "The idol with its visibility fills the intention of the gaze, which wants nothing other than to see."²

It is worth asking why the philosopher talks about an invisible mirror. The answer is: "The idol masks the mirror because it fills the gaze."³ The mirror – as Marion explains – fills up the whole human intention to the point that it becomes impossible to notice that in supposititious revelation of sacrum there is nothing more than the one who longs for it. In all honesty, the searching for The Other (what is absolutely transcendent) human gets satisfied with the creation of his own eyes, his own – intellectual, aesthetic and ethical – intention.

The idol testifies to the divine, but each time the divine thought starting from its aim, limited to a variable scope by *Dasein*. Therefore, the idol always culminates in a "self-idolatry" (...). The idol: less a false or untrue image of the divine than a real, limited, and indefinitely variable function of *Dasein* considered in its aiming at the divine.⁴

1 J.L. Marion, *God without Being*, transl. by T.A. Carlson, Chicago 2012, p. 10.

2 Ibidem, p. 11.

3 Ibidem, p. 12.

4 Ibidem, p. 28.

Idol is the “point of failure” of seeking infinity in human perception or in other words it’s “fallen perception.” The French philosopher largely describes this archaic movement of idolatry:

In each visible spectacle, the gaze found nothing that might stop it; the gaze’s fiery eyes consumed the visible so that each time the gaze saw nothing. But here the idol intervenes. What shows up? For the first (and last) time the gaze no longer rushes through the spectacle; it is fixed in it, and far from passing beyond, remains facing what becomes for it a spectacle to *re*-spect. The gaze lets itself be filled: instead of outflanking the visible, of not seeing it and rendering it invisible, the gaze discovers itself as outflanked, contained, held back by the visible. The visible finally becomes visible to the gaze because, again literally, the visible dazzles a gaze until then insatiable. The idol offers to, or rather imposes on, the gaze, its first visible – whatever it may be, thing, man, woman, idea, or god.⁵

This description reveals an idol’s characteristic attitude: without creating distance, hence without causing any pursuit in human, it turns out to be safe, familiar; it turns out to be “the found Eden.” An idol does not hold any secret, but is perfectly visible. What does it mean? It means as much as: it measures up to human: “It is an experience of the divine in the measure of a state of *Dasein*.”⁶

In the above context, the words about the “murderous role of idol”⁷ are not just a coincidental play on words. They signalize real, based on idolatry danger: an idol, striving towards becoming the ultimate appeasement of the human desire for God, wants to kill the desire and eventually – God Himself. The idol category – as a certain way of existence, as opposed to a specific being – could serve as a tool for insightful reflection on all displays of human cultural activity. If beings as “ontologically subtle” as ideas could become idols, it seems that all phenomena, theories, and objects linked with religion are at risk of bearing this identity as well. Does it mean that the whole religious culture should be rejected in case it is defeated by idolatry?

5 Ibidem, pp. 11–12.

6 Ibidem, p. 28.

7 Cf. K. Tarnowski, *Jean-Luc Marion, fenomenolog miłości większej niż bycie*, [in:] J.L. Marion, *Bóg bez bycia*, trans. M. Frankiewicz, Kraków 1996, p. 11.

Not at all. If human perception alone validates idolatry, it is enough to apply vigilance and constant effort to transgress from the idolatrous towards the iconic. For the human as a transcendent being can never rest. This great truth, although difficult for humans, is voiced by an icon.

An icon is a sign of divinity in a completely different than an idol's manner; an icon exists in a different way.

Icon is also a mediative image of God, however the one in which the basic intention does not come from us but comes down from God Himself and captures our sight guiding it towards The Invisible. An Icon is an image, which in the most paradoxical way represents The Invisible as The Invisible, not trying to replace Him with our, even the most pious and sophisticated, images and concepts of God. That is the reason why upon this day we are so fascinated by Byzantine icons.⁸

An Icon doesn't "consume," doesn't "constrain" human perception, just the opposite: in its essence it pushes further, pushes upwards. An Icon does not withhold, because it respects what the unsellable for human to stay human: his continual "journey." Icon does not expect it is viewing, but seeing as deep as the seeing of its own eyes. An Icon causes the Visible only by stimulating infinite perception.

Iconic existence, hence iconic culture, is far from, characteristic to idolatry, fanaticism. This is because the icon takes the human out of his comfort zone every time, coming from the belief of completion of the religious quest. The Icon always first encourages humans to verify their own attitude, their own "being towards," before starting the fight for their own God. In that sense an icon never allows human to say that he possesses absolute knowledge about God. This phenomenon protects from fanaticism and the hypocrisy linked to it.

Marion's phenomenological analysis – as far as we believe – enabled the exposure of the constitutive base of idolatry, in which human perception, failing, creates idols. The great institution

⁸ Ibidem, p. 12.

of idolatry is based each time on individual appreciation; in other words, being an idol is always a result of idolatrous perception. What does it mean? It means that the power of idol creation lies in nobody else's hands – but ours. An Idol cannot exist on its own, even if we were flooded by a sea of tacky objects aspiring to religious status. An Idol wouldn't arise (because it doesn't possess the power to arise), if humans didn't open up to its “anaesthetic” (speaking of “anaesthesia” of human's metaphysical quests) action. This way of putting the matter – although it establishes the existence of idolatry – brings a hope based on the truth about idol's manner of existence: humans can always change perception. Humans can bounce from where their religious intention “solidified” so far and search for the real recipient of their religious susceptibilities. All that matters is making effort to espouse the iconic rather than idolatrous perspective.

Ivanov undoubtedly makes that effort, prioritizing in his anthropology and philosophy of culture the category of Eros – as the metaphysical desire always present in human. This aspect of philosopher's thinking places him within the philosophy of desire for The Impossible. This category opens up the space for a unique rationality which refuses to be driven by common sense. Humans sense God as a “presence of absence” and this absence (The Other) is an object of his desire. What's more, this desire is not accidental, it establishes the essence of a human being. This means that human is in a way secondary in relation to his desire (although he is the subject of that desire at the same time). Desire is the category which enables the revealing of general endeavour of a religious human and – at the same time – sourcefully determine his condition. The essence of the above mentioned condition could be described in words being the reaction to encounter between religious existence and the world: “The true life is absent.”⁹ This, coming from the discord between the inside and the outside world reality, statement signalizes the basic direction of religious existence: towards what is “out of this world” (“What we live from and enjoy is not the same as that life

⁹ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, transl. by A. Lingis, Dordrecht – Boston – London 1991, p. 33.

itself¹⁰), what is in relation to that world – transcendental. The religious human never settles down within the world; just the opposite: he would constantly strive for justifying it against the object of his desire. So what does desire call on? The Platonic Eros as a paradigm of religious desire commands humans to long for the world of Idea hence to long for absolute, divine reality. Ivanov describes this similarly when he writes: “идеи Платона суть *res*.”¹¹ It’s worth mentioning that Eros is – according to Plato’s *Symposium* – “the son of Plenty and Poverty and partakes of the nature of both.”¹² The above paradox reveals the dynamics of the described category: in order to desire something, one has to what is desired – already in some way “own.” A religious human, calling on The Other, already The Other knows due to his internal experience. Hence, based on paradoxical dynamics of desire, term: “presence of absence.” Let us emphasize that desire – as opposed to the easily to fulfil need – can never be fulfilled.¹³

It means that a religious human unsatisfied with the easily achievable possibilities of the world, constantly stays in front of what in its essence is impossible. Therefore, Eros means constant openness to “The Impossible” (“Эрос Невозможного”¹⁴). So does Ivanov – linking culture with desire for The Impossible – bind humans to communing only with idols? Surely cultural phenomena, satisfied out of necessity with the concreteness of the world, never fulfil metaphysical desire.

Let us have a look at Ivanov’s mystery project (pointing out at The Mystery) which, according to the author, would meet the requirement of iconic reference to The Impossible. The focus of this project is on theatrical drama, as much as possible similar to its ritual source – a dithyramb. Let us emphasize that a dithyramb – as a ritual hymn sung in honor of Dionysus as a core of Dionysian mystery festivals – implies a certain anthropological and culturological vision,

10 Ibidem, p. 122.

11 В.И. Иванов, *Две стихии в современном символизме*, [in:] idem, *Собрание сочинений*, vol. II, eds. Д.В. Иванов, О. Дешарт, Брюссель 1974, p. 549.

12 Plato, *Symposium*, transl. by B. Jowett, Stilwell 2005, p. 10.

13 Cf. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, op. cit., pp. 114–115.

14 В.И. Иванов, *Идея неприятия мира*, [in:] idem, *Собрание сочинений*, vol. III, eds. Д.В. Иванов, О. Дешарт, Брюссель 1979, p. 90.

based on leading culture out the most intimate for human source – religion. This everlasting source causes humans to be “doomed” to what is beyond them. This is why various disciplines of culture can be defined by pointing out at them, but at the same time they do not dissipate in their ocularity; they are much more than just empirically visible objects. This way of thinking is close to Ivanov’s: theatre to him is not “just theatre,” aesthetics is not “just aesthetics.” “Театр внеположен эстетике”¹⁵ – the philosopher writes. For theatre, being very concrete cultural reality, pertains to something beyond itself, beyond “aesthetic information.”

Истинное содержание художественного изображения всегда шире его предмета. Творение гения говорит нам о чем-то ином, более глубоком, более прекрасном, более трагическом, более божественном, чем то, что оно непосредственно выражает¹⁶.

A dithyramb as a core of Ivanov’s project is a paradigm of the whole – founded within choral, communal awareness – an act of creation which should become the framework of all areas of culture, not just theatre. Dithyramb is the manifestation of the level common to all human race; it’s a proof of deep, common to all mankind awareness – universal “The Self” (“всечеловеческое Я”¹⁷). Creativity is therefore closely linked to religiousness,¹⁸ understood as universal “religious disposition,” not – positive religion. According to Ivanov, the depth of human religiousness is based on dialogue relationship with The Other, identical with an everlasting desire for The Other. The continuously renewed movement of sanctifying of oneself and the world, caused by the permanent incompatibility with the object of desire (which determines human’s erotic condition), guarantees cultural *energeia* – the everlasting vitality present in culture threads and ideas.

15 В.И. Иванов, *Эстетическая норма театра*, [in:] idem, *Собрание сочинений*, vol. II, op. cit., p. 213.

16 В.И. Иванов, *Предчувствия и предвестия*, [in:] idem, *Собрание сочинений*, vol. II, op. cit., p. 92.

17 Cf. В.И. Иванов, *Новые маски*, [in:] idem, *Собрание сочинений*, vol. II, op. cit., p. 76.

18 “The common ground of art and asceticism is the mystical experience, which reveals the noumenal or transcendental.” Cf. R. Bird, *The Tender Mystery: Romanticism and Symbolism in the Poetry and Thought of Viacheslav Ivanov*, Michigan 1999, p. 303.

Summarising, let us say that theatre based on a dithyramb is, according to the Russian author, a cultural correlate of the religious aspect of humanity; its model would be a ritual or a liturgy in which humans are not spectators but involved participants, and the communal awareness defines it deeper than individual awareness. (“Личность возникает из сонма а не наоборот”¹⁹). The demand to overstep the latter – as one of the most profound moments of Ivanov’s thought – has been expressed by the poet with a formula from the writings of Saint Augustine: *Transcende te ipsum*.²⁰ The imperative is of course related to art as well. Art in its essence (religious sources) cannot withhold the perception of the spectator on itself (the risk of idolatry), but it has to send it deep, towards the source. Only under the above condition would the area of aesthetics gain its iconic sense.

Чтобы произведение искусства оказывало полное эстетическое действие, должна чувствоваться эта непостижимость и неизмеримость его конечного смысла. Отсюда – устремление к неизреченному, составляющее душу и жизнь эстетического наслаждения.²¹

Ivanov’s vision seems to be an example of iconic perception on cultural reality, especially since the poet certainly realized how unreachable The Idea is and how longing for it awakens creativity in humans. In the face of this incompatibility – between the presence of The Idea in desire and its unbearable absence in the world – Ivanov proposes a radical thesis: every attempt to reach for the ideal fulfilment (the attempt of expressing it in the cultural and social world) is not only the sign of weakness, but most of all – it is a sin. If so, it means that the thinker has perfectly realized the ubiquity of idols and their mortal power.

In order to justify the above hypothesis, let us quote the two fragments of Ivanov’s writings drawing on the fact that every activity, including cultural, which leads to implementation of The

19 В.И. Иванов, *Эстетическая норма театра*, op. cit., p. 219.

20 В.И. Иванов, *Две стихии в современном символизме*, op. cit., p. 553.

21 В.И. Иванов, *Предчувствия и предвестия*, op. cit., p. 92.

Idea is – according to human capabilities (“Возможное возможно человек”²²) – bound to end up as the ultimate disaster. “Сотворить ‘возможное’ значит изменить единственно желанному и святому ‘невозможному,’ иначе говоря: безусловному.”²³ “Есть святотатство и жестокость в насильственном низведении, исхищении совершенной Идеи из покоища истинного бытия в быстрину алчущего, но не достигающего полноты ‘существования’.”²⁴ If so, it means that the culture does not hold the power of sending back to the metaphysical world. The human as a creator of culture is situated in a tragic position between Scylla and Chabrydis of the aspects of his own condition. “Печать извечной трагедии человека и человечества тянущихся но недотягивающихся до Божественного.”²⁵ Confronted by The Impossible, everything that belongs to the area of possibility (human world) is sacrilege.

We have shown that “the ideal type” of sacrilege is the idol which doesn’t deny the existence of the sacrum (just the opposite: the idol also grows out of religious experience), however it takes the sacrum away from the human perception focusing that perception on itself (the idol). According to Ivanov, even the biggest personalities, which could, as the common sense suggests, have the biggest chances to bring The Idea “down to Earth,” out of necessity create new, disguised as icons, idols. So it is clear to see that Ivanov’s point of view – against optimistic “erotic” characteristic of culture open to the ideal world – is closer to Nikolai Berdyaev’s concept, in which relation between the inner intention of creativity and its cultural objectifications is called the tragedy of culture.

Furthermore, one should take into account another type of inconsistency. The insightful thinker, who recognizes the “original sin” of man and culture, like a prophet²⁶ presents his vision of the forthcoming organic (synthetic) era. An era in which – through the theatre, based on

22 В.И. Иванов, *Прометей*, [in:] idem, *Собрание сочинений*, vol. II, op. cit., p. 112.

23 В.И. Иванов, *О действии и действе*, op. cit., p. 159.

24 Ibidem.

25 И.В. Кондаков, “Вертикаль” и “горизонталь” в культурфилософии Вячеслава Иванова, [in:] Вячеслав Иванов. *Материалы и исследования*, ed. В.А. Келдыш, Москва 1996, p. 271.

26 “Мы судим по гадательным признакам и самонаблюдению.” Cf. В. Иванов, *Предчувствия и предвестия*, op. cit., p. 87.

dithyrambic paradigm – the mysterious truth about human and culture will be revealed. Is it possible, therefore, that the thesis of the tragedy of culture, which lies in its continuous falling into idolatry, does not apply to its own creator? Had the vigilance of the cultural theorist been put to sleep in relation to himself, just because of the theoretical – and thus not subjected to the allegations of idolatry – nature of his activity? Did Ivanov consider his speculations to be a metatheory, which does not belong to the realm of culture and is not compromised by its frailties? At this point, one should recall the first of the thinkers in question. Jean-Luc Marion knows very well that, due to the human gaze, both tangible objects and – even more effectively hiding the truth about themselves – more subtle entities like notions and theories become idols. And only then do they have the power to refer us to the Transcendence, when no one (neither the author, nor the recipient) absolutizes them.

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