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THE VERTICAL FORM - THE ICONOLOGICAL DIMENSION ON
20TH CENTURY RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS AESTHETICS AND LITERARY
CRITICISM

This article is an attempt to highlight and reflect on several interrelated issues that seem to be very important in terms of working out a relevant theological approach to the wide variety of artistic expression, particularly as far as theoretical aesthetics is concerned. I shall focus on some most characteristic ideas developed in 20th century Russian religious philosophy that may appear to be significant not only for the Orthodox tradition of spirituality and thought in which they are rooted, but for other Christian traditions as well.

As for the Russian Orthodoxy, it should be pointed out from the very outset that the relationships between theology and art have always been rather uneasy, and in fact confined to the theology of church arts, icons in particular. Based on the teachings of the Saint Fathers, the Russian Orthodox tradition has always been extremely rich in artistic creativity within the sphere of church arts; however, up to the present moment it has been quite reluctant in acknowledging deep spiritual dimensions of secular arts. There were, of course, many attempts towards religious evaluation of literature, painting, music or poetry, but the gap between "sacred" and "secular" art has always been present and articulated by the Church.

I would not say, however, that it is typical of the *tradition* as such; rather, it was historically and, in some cases, spiritually determined, inasmuch as the primary concern of the Church is to keep people away from the temptations of the flawed world. The tradition, however dominated by certain prescribed norms or rules, is an "open system," and its evolution is characterized by a dialectic of the canonical and the heuristic principles, the static and the dynamic. In Russia, it was not until the beginning of the 20th century that the theoretical heritage of Orthodox iconology started being philosophically and aesthetically deepened and in some ways reassessed in the works of a number of prominent thinkers, so that it became possible to consider the challenge of overcoming the traditional gap between "religious" and "non-religious" spheres of creativity by means of developing a fundamental theoretical basis for the interpretation of art. In the present-day Russia, with the growing interest in theological evaluation of art and literature, this is one of the most crucial issues, as well as it has been in the West.

The following observations, though covering just a few general and purely theoretical points, might provide, I hope, an outline of what could be called

iconological thought in Russian religious aesthetics, how I view it, both rooted in and different (in terms of subject and treatment) from what is known as the theology of Icon.

I. IMAGE/ICON AS A CATEGORY OF RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

This is something that would, perhaps, seem quite natural to Western thought, whereas, for some reason, it is not a common way of reflecting upon the icon in Russia. In fact, the image has always been one of the central categories of Orthodox religious consciousness, a category linking together theology, aesthetics and anthropology. The concept of the divine image that constituted the basis of understanding personal relationship between God and man was, at the same time, the major idea underlying patristic iconology: an icon is always an expression of the divine image as an ontological reality present in human nature.

However, the question arises: how is such an expression possible? From the very beginning, the image (*eikwn*) has, therefore, two inseparable dimensions: ontological and epistemological, i.e. the nature of the image as revelation of the divine is accounted for by the fact that it is an immanent structure, or category, of consciousness; and vice versa: cognition and experience of the divine through the image is possible only because its ontological nature is asserted. It was precisely the categorical aspect of the image that Fr. Pavel Florensky, one of the greatest Russian religious thinkers, stressed in his lectures on Religion and Culture in the 1920's.¹

Before we have an icon as a particular work of religious art, there must be something that would function as the principle, or condition, of the possibility of any artistic expression, i.e. an all-embracing category of consciousness providing for true cognition and experience of the world, man and God. The image could be called a model, if this notion were not associated with particular trends in 20th century philosophy and semiotics. Rather, I would emphasize its immanence to the human consciousness, i.e. its being a *living entity*.

The abstract character of the image as a category does not prevent it from being understood as something *live*, for the abstract is but constituted by things taken in their ultimate characteristic as *being*. The image as a category is the same as a concrete image we see in the world, say, a poetic image, but taken as an ultimately possible and therefore fundamental entity. Thus, the image, or icon (not in its semiotic understanding, but in the understanding that logically follows from religious iconology), is an entity characterizing the way of human existence as expression and as comprehension of the substance, or essence, through expression.

The framework of thought that I am trying to articulate is, I think, more clearly observed in some works of Fr. Sergei Bulgakov, Ivan Ilyin and Alexei Losev. In the case of Bulgakov, it is interesting to notice his thought about artistic creativity moving within the ontological structure of Orthodox

¹ See: Флоренский П.А. Сочинения. В 4 т. М., 1994-1999. Т. 3 (1). С. 480 (Florensky, Pavel. Selected Works (in 4 volumes). Moscow, 1994-1999. Vol. 3 (1). P. 480).

iconology: according to Bulgakov, as he puts it in his most comprehensive theological work *The Unevening Light*, the artist does not *create* images, but sees, hears, feels them as the only adequate embodiments of the substance; he does not *invent* them, but hearkens and contemplates the ultimate reality of things, and then naturally gives appropriate material form to what he has comprehended.²

Ilyin often writes in similar terms: a poetic image is always a revelation of what he calls “the Principal, the Predicate, the Object,” of something that is being “spoken unto” the artist. Ilyin deals with the structure of the aesthetic form in his work *Principles of the Poetic. On Perfection in Art*, which can be regarded as his aesthetic manifesto and as one of the most important critical pieces. The image, according to Ilyin, seems to be an entity lying between two realities: the material embodiment, or the “aesthetic matter,” and the “texture of the world.”

The “aesthetic matter” is the most superficial, physically perceptible layer of a poetic work which should be governed, shaped and lightened by the power of imagination, the power of images lying inside the form. The “texture of the world” (one of Ilyin’s favourite and most characteristic expressions) is what constitutes the basis, the core of a poetic work, the reality which is disclosed in the depth of creative experience, i.e. *being* which is revealed to the artist in contemplation, the ultimate essence of the world seen *from* this world.

The poet is capable of penetrating into the “texture of the world” and grasping substantial “fragments” of it. It is precisely this fragment of the “texture” which has been grasped and comprehended by the artist in contemplation that Ilyin calls the “poetic object.” Among the variety of such substantial “fragments,” which, if not poetically experienced, can only be defined by abstract notions, he mentions, for instance, “divinity,” “perfection,” “sacredness,” “purity,” “serenity,” “light,” but also “torment,” “longing,” “suffering,” “darkness” etc. – he refers to all these realities as objective “circumstances” revealing the ontological status and the existential state of the world. The “poetic object,” thus, is what shines through the whole form, naturally and organically framing all the constituents of a work of art, finding its first, condensed aesthetic expression in images and then properly shaping the “aesthetic matter.”

The eye and the mind of the reader, listener or spectator should penetrate through the “aesthetic matter” into the realm of images and through images, as the “true clothes” of the “Principal,” to the “poetic object.”³ This “vertical” model of the aesthetic form, however simple and straightforward it might seem, rests on the basic iconological principle of *expression as revelation and experience* of the transcendental substance. In Ilyin, we also find a very

² See: Булгаков С.Н. Свет не вечерний: Созерцания и умозрения. М., 1994. С. 242 (Bulgakov, Sergei. *The Unevening Light: Contemplations and meditations*. Moscow, 1994. P. 242).

³ See: Ильин И.А. Основы художества. О совершенном в искусстве // Ильин И.А. Собрание сочинений: В 10 т. М., 1994-1999. Т.6. Кн. 1. С. 123-206 (Ilyin, Ivan. *Principles of the Poetic. On Perfection in Art*. In: Ilyin, Ivan. *Selected Works* (in 10 volumes). Moscow, 1994-1999. Vol. 6. Book 1. P. 123-206).

interesting approach to the very concept of contemplation, which I shall look at later on.

Losev also views the image iconologically, i.e. as a reality through which we can perceive the essence of things, partake of it. The essence of things, according to Losev, is their being lightened and sustained by the energies of God. The task of man is to realize himself and the world as being lightened, penetrated and sustained by the divine energies, and thus to reveal the divine image in himself and in the world.⁴

One of the ways to come to such realization seems to be, though not straightforwardly asserted by Losev, through creative activity in which man forms and perceives images containing, as it were, the “ontological picture” of the reality (I am deliberately alluding to the paradigm found in some Fathers, particularly in St. Theodore of Studios⁵, to underline the iconological context of Losev’s thought, which is far less evident than in Ilyin), i.e. showing to what extent the beauty and glory of God penetrate the phenomena of the world, including human personality.

Clearly, there is also Hesychast tradition present here, especially in early Losev. It does not mean, however, that creativity can be viewed as a way to salvation (as it was suggested once by Nikolai Berdiaev), just as a work of art, though understood iconologically, cannot substitute for an icon used for prayer. Yet, the aesthetic dimension immanent to the human way of existence proves to be an important and helpful sphere of religious experience, since it provides for a special kind of “spiritual enjoyment,” as put by Victor Bychkov, Losev’s pupil and contemporary specialist in Byzantine and Russian Orthodox aesthetics.

I would like now to return to Fr. Pavel Florensky, whom I mentioned in the beginning, to exemplify the way in which categorical understanding of the image/icon can be used in interpreting various works of art, and to sketch some rather problematic issues in Florensky’s theological aesthetics (for it really can be called so). In his *Iconostasis* Florensky introduced the trichotomy *eidos – face – mask* (in Russian *lik – litso – lichina*; perhaps, it could be translated, following the corresponding Greek terms, as *eidos – hypostasis – prosopon*, where *hypostasis* stands for “phenomenon,” according to its use by some Fathers, and *prosopon* is understood negatively, as *larva*, or “mask”) to be applied to aesthetic phenomena with the aim of distinguishing between various degrees of manifestation of the ontological, i.e. the divine, in them. *Eidos* and *mask (prosopon)* form, as it were, two aesthetic poles: positive, deep, ontological and negative, superficial, *meonic* (from *ih on* – “non-existing”); *face*, or *hypostasis*, i.e. aesthetic reality constructed in a particular work of art, may be situated, therefore, somewhere in the space between these

⁴ See: Лосев А.Ф. *Личность и Абсолют*. М., 1999. С. 249-267 (Losev, Alexei. *The Person and the Absolute*. Moscow, 1999. P. 235-267).

⁵ See: Бычков В.В. 2000 лет христианской культуры sub specie aethetica. В 2-х тт. Т. 1. Раннее христианство. Византия. М.-СПб., 1999. С. 462-468 (особенно 465-466 и 468) (Bychkov, Victor. *2000 Years of Christian Culture sub specie aethetica*. In 2 volumes. Vol. 1. *Early Christianity*. Byzantium. Moscow – St.- Petersburg, 1999. P. 462-468 (particularly 465-466 and 468)).

two poles, so that its character, or nature, is accounted for by its position in relation to the stated poles.

In other words, we can speak of an aesthetic *face* either as approximating *eidōs* or as approximating *prosōpon*. In the first case the divine is presented in the work of art in such a way that it can be perceived as fully and flawlessly as it is possible under the present condition of the world; in the second case the divine is either poorly revealed or distorted by the artist, or remains totally hidden and imperceptible under the layers of psychological subjectivity and physical sensuality.

The ideal state of an aesthetic *face* can be observed in church art, particularly in some icons that convey the divine image in Christ, the Most Holy Theotokos and saints with all possible fullness; that is why these images are called in Russian *liki – eida*. The more “psychological” the artistic work is, the more it is plunged into the life of the sinful world, the more it has to do with the passions of human nature – the less ontological, the less graceful, the less revealing it becomes, up to the state when it is completely deceptive, demonic, empty inside, as in the case of the statues or masks of pagan gods.⁶

It is clear that 1) Florensky’s trichotomy, if applied straightforwardly, stays within the opposition between “sacred” and “secular” art, and that 2) it works on the basis of a preelaborated hierarchy of aesthetic phenomena. The first point becomes problematic when it comes to the evaluation of “non-religious” and “non-traditional” works of art, which are viewed as “windows” into the world, unlike icons that are “windows” into heaven.

The second point in fact articulates the ground for Florensky’s most severe criticism of Western art, particularly after the Renaissance. For instance, in his famous work *The Inverse Perspective* Florensky first expressed the idea that the kind of perspective in painting is the decisive criterion of its place in the aesthetic hierarchy described above, along with some other elements mainly concerning composition and colour.⁷

The verdict on the Western tradition in art, however, is what objective thought would hardly tolerate, in spite of the fact that Florensky’s phenomenology is very deep and theoretically productive. On the other hand, the way in which Florensky approached particular works of art was marked by many subjective features, and it could certainly be modified. The above-mentioned trichotomy seems to be precisely the sort of framework that allows to eliminate the strict opposition between “church” and “secular” art (whatever the terminology might be). As for the hierarchy of artistic phenomena, this is something that cannot be ignored, but should be developed in such a way as to meet the need for interpreting the existing variety of artistic works, both with respect to tradition and to the novel.

⁶ See: Флоренский П.А. Иконостас // Флоренский П.А. Сочинения. В 4 т. Т. 2. С. 433-435 (Florensky, Pavel. Iconostasis. In: Florensky, Pavel. Selected Works (in 4 volumes). Vol. 2. P. 433-435).

⁷ See: Флоренский П.А. Обратная перспектива // Флоренский П.А. Сочинения. В 4 т. Т. 3 (1). С. 48-96 (Florensky, Pavel. The Inverse Perspective. In: Florensky, Pavel. Selected Works (in 4 volumes). Vol. 3 (1). P. 48-96).

I have applied Florensky's trichotomy in my interpretations of several works of Russian literature by suggesting, for instance, an iconological reading of Alexander Pushkin's poem *The Prophet* and Nikolai Gogol's short novel *The Portrait*. In Pushkin's poem, the image of the Prophet becomes a symbolic metaphor of poetic creativity seen as a result of Divine inspiration.

Pushkin clearly follows the initially "romantic" paradigm (found, for example, in Blake and Coleridge), but eventually transcends and transforms it in accordance with the tradition of iconological aesthetics, so that the transfiguration of the Prophet described in the poem looks as a gradual disclosure of the eidetic substance of the human being, the "face" of the Prophet acquiring the status of an *eidos*, or *lik*.

In Gogol's *The Portrait*, on the contrary, we come across a diametrically opposite phenomenon. The horrible portrait of a demonic money-lender symbolizing evil, destructive forces mystically affects the mind of the main character, the painter Chartkov, whose personality undergoes a series of transformations inevitably and irrevocably desubstantializing his true self, so that the "face" of the protagonist turns into a mask (*lichina*) concealing infernal, meonic emptiness, that of graceless despair and spiritual death.⁸

I shall now pass on to another issue which will help to develop the theme started in the beginning, somewhat clarifying it, and, hopefully, will provide an appropriate standpoint for further reflections.

II. "ABSOLUTE SYMBOLISM" OF CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW: THE AESTHETIC DEMENSION

The term "absolute symbolism" was introduced into Russian religious philosophy by Alexei Losev to describe the overall quality of Christian aesthetic consciousness. Losev distinguished between three major types of worldview and systems of thought in the history of European spirituality: 1) "absolute apophatism"; 2) "religious rationalism" and 3) "absolute symbolism."

"Absolute apophatism" denies the possibility that the divine may be revealed in the world in any way, and asserts total incomprehensibility of God in His absolute transcendence; the apogee of this trend of thought in history was, according to Losev, Kant's transcendental idealism that proclaimed a gap between the phenomenon and the *Ding an Sich*, absolute autonomy of the phenomena and the noumena, complete impossibility to penetrate into the essence of things.

⁸ See: Комков О.А. «Пророк» Пушкина как икона // Вестник МГУ. Серия 19. Лингвистика и межкультурная коммуникация. 2000. № 3. С. 73-86 (Komkov, Oleg. The Prophet by Pushkin as an Icon. In: Moscow State University Bulletin. Linguistics and Intercultural Communication. 2000 (3). P. 73-86); Комков О.А. Категория личины и inferнальная эстетика в повести Н.В. Гоголя «Портрет» // Вестник МГУ. Серия 19. Лингвистика и межкультурная коммуникация. 2001. № 3. С. 30-46 (Komkov, Oleg. The Category of Mask and Infernal Aesthetics in Gogol's The Portrait. In: Moscow State University Bulletin. Linguistics and Intercultural Communication. 2001 (3). P. 30-46).

“Religious rationalism” (not necessarily in the Cartesian tradition of understanding *ratio*) is viewed by Losev as a system of thought and belief asserting, on the contrary, total comprehensibility of God as substance, full and complete revelation of the Divine in the phenomena of the world, and therefore the possibility of full and complete cognition of God by human intellect *in* the things of the world; this was equally typical of neoplatonic pantheistic systems and of most heresies within Christianity rejecting the heavenly, the transcendent, the mystical in favour of the worldly, the immanent, the rational.

Finally, “absolute symbolism” as the only truly Christian worldview is what lies between these two extremes; it is only “absolute symbolism” that Christian consciousness can accept as a standpoint opposing both “apophatic” and “rationalistic” heresies. “Absolute symbolism” implies that God reveals Himself in the world through His energies, that He is energetically present in the earthly reality with all His infinite properties, at the same time fully retaining His substantial transcendence.⁹

Therefore, the things of the world are seen symbolically, i.e. as entities through which we come to meet a different world, that of eternity, that of God’s glory, which is the only power sustaining creation and constituting the ultimate reality of things. Symbol, thus, is understood (basically in accordance with its etymology – *suiballw*) as an energetic being, as a space where two energies, two wills, two intentions meet: that of God and that of man; at the same time, symbol is always something empirically given, it is a concrete phenomenon of the world, physically embodied and sensually perceptible.

Obviously, such an approach results from iconological thinking, since the above-given definition of symbol (though rather vague) is what actually elucidates the ontology of Icon as an image containing real Divine glory and grace. It is also quite clear, I think, that – in the epistemological dimension – symbol, according to the given understanding, functions as an overall characteristic of a particular type of structures present in the human mind, or consciousness, which symbolic images, or icons, belong to, along with some other possible aesthetic entities such as, for example, *word* and *myth*.

By saying this, I do not suggest that symbolic structures should be viewed as cognitive faculties of the mind; rather, they could be seen as constitutive elements of being as referred to the human existence in the created world, or elements of the “texture of the world” (to use Ilyin’s expression) as realized by the mind. This understanding is actually the basis of Losev’s provocative definition of aesthetic form (which, for him, is the synonym of artistic expression): it is such a form, or expression, which conveys the subject-meaning with *absolute adequacy*, so that the expression fully contains that which is being expressed, and there is no need in deducing the subject-meaning out of the expression with the help of any logical procedures outside the form;¹⁰ i.e. aesthetic form is a symbolic expression that can only be

⁹ See: Losev, Alexei. Op. cit. P. 230-235.

¹⁰ See: Лосев А.Ф. Форма – Стиль – Выражение. М., 1995. С. 45 (Losev, Alexei. Form – Style – Expression. Moscow, 1995. P. 45).

perceived symbolically, or *alogically*, in the sense that it is given first of all to *live in*, not to reflect on.

There is a definition of symbol that became famous in Russian philosophy due to its concise, yet comprehensive wording; it was introduced by Fr. Pavel Florensky and first used by him to articulate the ontology of language (particularly, that of *the name*) in his *Thought and Language*. The definition runs as follows: “symbol is a being that is bigger than itself,” “something revealing that which is different from it, yet which is essentially present in it (or is being manifested through it).”¹¹ As it has been observed by some authors, this definition is very close to the understanding of *existence* in Western phenomenology, particularly in Heidegger (although developed absolutely independently).

What I would like to point out here is that Florensky’s understanding of symbol 1) serves as clarifying the existential implications of iconological thinking introduced in the beginning of this essay: image/icon as a symbol is by no means a mere “construction,” or “product” of whatever or whoever, but a type of being, or, rather, a form, through which being speaks unto man; and 2) provides an adequate viewpoint on ontological links between the realities of language, art and personality, with respect to the ontological paradigm of God’s revelation in His relationship to the world: that is to say, symbolic understanding may equally be applied to images in literature, painting or music, to the phenomena of language, particularly to the word (which is a separate, very wide and fascinating topic in Russian religious philosophy) and to human personality as well as to God’s personality in order to highlight the extent and specific character of the Divine presence, or revelation, in each particular case, i.e. the “ontological picture” of a particular sphere of reality.

At this point, I shall make, perhaps, a slightly unexpected twist from the ontology of image to that of creative process, and look at the concept of contemplation in Ivan Ilyin’s aesthetics. It will be done to elucidate some of what has so far been said, for contemplation in Ilyin seems to be closely connected with the framework being outlined here; so, the following is, as it were, the final variation on the introduced theme.

III. AESTHETICS OF CONTEMPLATION: THE EXISTENTIAL DIMENSION

Contemplation is quite a widely used term, both in philosophy and theology. Because of this wide range of usage, however, it may often appear to be ambiguous or misleading, particularly taking into account its somewhat solemn and elevated connotations. Yet, polisemy must not prevent us from understanding the core meaning of contemplation as one of the basic notions of Christian thought, which borrowed the original term (*qeoria*) from Greek philosophy.

¹¹ Флоренский П.А. Мысль и язык // Флоренский П.А. Сочинения. В 4 т. Т. 3 (1). С. 257 (Florensky, Pavel. *Thought and Language*. In: Florensky, Pavel. *Selected Works* (in 4 volumes). Vol. 3 (1). P. 257).

The most common way to define contemplation is to describe it as a method of cognition, i.e. a process, an act of perception which is based on intuition, rather than logic, and which is often characterized as mystical comprehension as opposed to rational analysis. However, such epistemological definition turns out to be of little help when one comes to consider the ways in which this term was used by some Eastern Fathers as well as by a number of Russian religious philosophers. I would rather prefer to emphasize the existential dimension of contemplation that, in fact, acquired high relevance in the late Antiquity, particularly in Plotinus, to be developed and modified later on in the Fathers.

By the existential dimension of contemplation, I simply mean that it is not actually an intuitive faculty or method used by man, but, first of all, the fundamental *principle* of any intuitive act, i.e. a state or special form of man's existence that becomes an appropriate *condition* for various kinds of mystical or "irrational" comprehension. Indeed, the well-known Plotinus's understanding of contemplation as the principle of Life, as the ultimate goal of existence, as attaining unity with the One, shared by other neoplatonic authors, was transformed by many Fathers at different periods of Byzantine theological thought into a concept denoting one of the highest levels of spiritual experience, when man is able to see the truth of God, His Divine glory, light and beauty in things and beyond things, the level which is described as either close to or coinciding with the state of transformation of personality. Although the terminology of the Fathers may actually vary quite substantially, there is always the core of thought that remains unchangeable and irreducible to anything outside itself: contemplation is conceived as a state of reality that, once attained, provides for the insights into the essential, into being.

It is, therefore, very important to notice that in Russian religious philosophy, particularly in that of the 20th century, the use of the term "contemplation" quite often makes one think of the existential dimension roughly sketched above. There is, however, at least one vivid example of an explicitly articulated understanding of contemplation that can be attributed to the tradition of "absolute symbolism", and that is Ivan Ilyin's "contemplation of the heart."

As I mentioned in the first part of the paper, Ilyin sees aesthetic reality iconologically, as revealing the substance through the image. The comprehension of this substance being revealed requires on the part of the artist, as well as on the part of the one who perceives a work of art, a certain state of "openness" to what is being conveyed, a kind of "intentional" involvement in what is being spoken unto him; this particular state is described by Ilyin as "creative contemplation," or "contemplation of the heart." Following the tradition of understanding the heart as a "mystical organ," the central and deepest point in personality sacramentally connected with the Divine (which is, by the way, a clear example of an iconological paradigm in anthropology shared by Florensky, Boris Visheslavtsev and others), Ilyin discerns the activity of the heart from other man's properties such as intellect, will, desire, imagination etc., and by doing this discerns contemplation as something found in the heart from all possible cognitive

and creative acts, which are discrete as such in time and space, whereas contemplation implies wholeness of being, comprehension and creativity.¹²

In other words, contemplation is the very life of the heart that, once realized and, as it were, released from the constraints of passions, comes to fill the whole personality transforming all psychological properties into spiritual ones. Contemplation is viewed as a state of reality and mind in which the “vertical” paradigm in the poetic form and in creativity is truly and most fully revealed. It is *in* contemplation that it becomes possible for man to truly partake of being; it is *in* contemplation that he finds himself enlightened by the glory of God to perceive “the texture of the world” as reflecting the actual state of things in relation to the Divine; finally, it is *in* contemplation that man can truly *create*, i.e. not really *imagine* something new, but form images of what he has seen as if in “inverse perspective”, *from* contemplation, *from* the state of personal communion with the energies of God.

It should be pointed out that the “contemplation of the heart” in Ilyin’s works does not refer only to the sphere of artistic creativity, is not confined just to “poetic contemplation.” It is, almost as in Plotinus, the principle aim to be sought by man in all areas of his life, be it inner or social life: prayer and family, love and pedagogy, thought and politics; in all these spheres man can discover the ways for creative activity from the heart, once he is in contemplation, which is achieved in personal spiritual experience, through constant care of Christian virtues and worship.¹³

As for the aesthetic implications of contemplation in Ilyin, I would underline that it is quite a significant example of introducing the mystical dimension, originally present in Christian tradition, into a non-mystical discourse in such a way that it appeals not to any intellectual schemes, but to the ultimate depths of human heart; it is a discourse of the heart addressed to the heart at the deepest ontological level, which can hardly be and does not need to be reformulated. In his critical studies Ilyin gave numerous examples showing how his theory of contemplation as well as his conception of the aesthetic form can be applied to the interpretation of literary works by determining and classifying various “types” of poetic contemplation. For instance, in his work *On Darkness and Enlightenment*, which remains an unsurpassed illustrative document in Russian aesthetics and literary criticism, he deals with three outstanding Russian writers of the 20th century – Ivan Bunin, Alexei Remizov and Ivan Shmelev – whose prose receives a detailed hermeneutical analysis highlighting the nature and, as it were, the structure of their contemplation.

Ilyin distinguishes between the “levels” of the “poetic objects” or “existential states” of reality contemplated by each writer and demonstrates how these “objective circumstances” are expressed in the sphere of poetic images and manifested in the “aesthetic matter”, i.e. the language, or style, of the authors. Bunin’s “creative act,” according to Ilyin, is characterized by a “deep”

¹² See: Ильин И.А. Путь к очевидности // Ильин И.А. Собрание сочинений: В 10 т. М., 1994-1999. Т.3. С. 538-544 (Ilyin, Ivan. The Way to Evidence. In: Ilyin, Ivan. Selected Works (in 10 volumes). Moscow, 1994-1999. Vol. 3. P. 538-544).

¹³ Ibid.

contemplation of the “lowest” existential states in man and nature, when the heart of the writer abides in the realm of “generic, sexual instinct,” in the realm of passionate, sensual life; this ontological sphere of existence is naturally reflected in predominantly sensual imagery which, in its turn, shapes Bunin’s famous descriptive style, elaborately picturesque, vivid yet essentially subjective, and his penetratingly emotional narration.¹⁴ In Remizov, Ilyin finds a “creative act” of a _____, a holy fool, a contemplation of the heart which sees and experiences darkness, suffering and spiritual bereavement in the human soul and in the world, and embodies this experience in phantasmagoric images, “whirling fancies” conveyed through a most unconventional, impulsive, uncontrolled and intentionally provocative manner of writing.¹⁵

Finally, Shmelev’s contemplation, particularly in the works based on religious tradition such as *The Lord’s Year*, *The Inexhaustible Bowl*, *The Ways of Heaven*, is regarded by Ilyin as partaking of the “highest” existential states observed in man and God; the heart of the writer contemplates sacredness, sacrifice, purifying suffering and the revelation of the Divine image in the human nature.¹⁶ Shmelev’s imagery is, therefore, considered as substantially spiritual, non-sensual, transcending experiences of purely psychological character and penetrating into the most intimate layers of personality where human divinity is realized through love, mercy and faith. Hence Shmelev’s warm-hearted, cordial style, his forgiving attitude towards his characters, his tender and loving descriptions, the spiritual “music” of his prose celebrating joyful light and reconciliation of warring worldly passions.

The way in which Ilyin views artistic activity may in fact open a new and broad perspective for the analysis of creative process on the basis of symbolic understanding of art, language and personality. Not only does it evoke the question of possible types (degrees, levels) of contemplation, since it is always a deeply personal and essentially *religious* experience, but also raises the problem of correlation between the contemplation of the artist and that of the spectator, listener or reader, i.e. the question of methodology of approaching, describing and interpreting creative acts with respect to poetic contemplation, etc. This may be done by way of elaborating a comprehensive theoretical discourse, modifying and incorporating certain principles suggested by the religious thinkers whose ideas have formed the ground for the present reflective outline.

¹⁴ See: Ильин И.А. О тьме и просветлении. Книга художественной критики. Бунин – Ремизов – Шмелев // Ильин И.А. Собрание сочинений: В 10 т. М., 1994-1999. Т.6. Кн. 1. С. 210-270 (Ilyin, Ivan. On Darkness and Enlightenment. A Book of Literary Criticism. Bunin – Remizov – Shmelev. In: Ilyin, Ivan. Selected Works (in 10 volumes). Moscow, 1994-1999. Vol. 6. Book 1. P. 210-270).

¹⁵ Ibid. P. 271-333.

¹⁶ Ibid. P. 333-406.