

**Jean-Luc Marion – “Envoi” and “The Idol and the Icon” from *God Without Being*. (1991, trans. T. Carlson).**

## **ENVOI**

One must admit that theology, of all writing, certainly causes the greatest pleasure. Precisely not the pleasure of the text, but the pleasure - unless it have to do with a joy - of transgressing it: from words to the Word, from the Word to words, incessantly and in theology alone, since there alone the Word finds in the words nothing less than a body. The body of the text does not belong to the text, but to the One who is embodied in it. Thus, theological writing always transgresses itself, just as theological speech feeds on the silence in which, at last, it speaks correctly. In other words, to try one's hand at theology requires no other justification than the extreme pleasure of writing. The only limit to this pleasure, in fact, is in the condition of its exercise; for the play from words to the Word implies that theological writing is played in distance, which unites as well as separates the man writing and the Word at hand - the Christ. Theology always writes starting from an other than itself. It diverts the author from himself (thus one can indeed speak of a diversion from philosophy with all good theology); it causes him to write outside of himself, even against himself, since he must write not of what he is, on what he knows, in view of what he wants, but in, for, and by that which he receives and in no case masters. Theology renders its author hypocritical in at least two ways. Hypocritical, in the common sense: in pretending to speak of holy things - "holy things to the holy" - he cannot but find himself, to the point of vertigo, unworthy, impure - in a word, vile. This experience, however, is so necessary that its beneficiary knows better than anyone both his own unworthiness and the meaning of that weakness (the light that unveils it); he deceives himself less than anyone; in fact, here there is no hypocrisy at all: the author knows more than any accuser. He remains hypocritical in another, more paradoxical sense: if authenticity (remembered with horror) consists in speaking of oneself, and in saying only that for which one can answer, no one, in a theological discourse, can, *or should*, pretend to it. For theology consists precisely in saying that for which only another can answer - the Other above all, the Christ who himself does not speak in his own name, but in the name of his Father. Indeed, theological discourse offers its strange jubilation only to the strict extent that it permits and, dangerously, demands of its workman that he speak beyond his means, precisely because he does not speak of himself. Hence

the danger of a speech that, in a sense, speaks against the one who lends himself to it. One must obtain forgiveness for every essay in theology. In all senses.

It will be necessary, however, to justify a few points in what follows. Under the title *God Without Being* we do not mean to insinuate that God is not, or that God is not truly God. We attempt to meditate on what E W. Schelling called "the freedom of God with regard to his own existence." Put a different way, we attempt to render problematic that which seems obvious, about which the philosophers descending from metaphysics agree with the theologians descending from Neo-Thomism: God, before all else, has to be. Which means at one and the same time that before other beings, he would have to be, and that before every other initiative, he would have also to take that of being. But does Being relate, more than anything, to God? Does God have anything to gain by being? Can Being - which whatever is, provided that it is, manifests - even accommodate any(thing of) God? Just to approach this question, to render it conceivable and audible, one must treat Being starting from that instance which provokes all bedazzlements and makes them appear insurmountable, the idol. Thus we attempt first to contrast the idol and the icon, one reinforcing the other in a common antagonism, in order to advance to Being-the name of God that in theology is assumed to be the first, just as in philosophy God, as first being, supposedly invests Being. For as soon as Being itself acts as an idol, it becomes thinkable to release oneself from it - to suspend it. Hence, without Being, the two new instances where an opening to God is destined: vanity and, conversely, charity. And what if God did not have first to be, since he loved us first, when we were not? And what if, to envisage him, we did not have to wait for him within the horizon of Being, but rather transgress ourselves in risking to love - bare, raw. As love, however, remains essentially inaccessible to us, the suspension that delivers God from Being becomes feasible for us only in its negative aspect - the vanity that melancholy pours over the world of beings. Hence Dürer. Hence the experimental rigor to which we aspire here for charity - for love: even he who does not love experiences more than nothing in this disaster; he experiences vanity through melancholy. He experiences the irreducibility of love, by default. In short, melancholy opens (to) distance.

Because God does not fall within the domain of Being, he comes to us in and as a gift. "God who is not, but who saves the gift"; the poet speaks correctly, with one slight reservation: God saves the gift precisely inasmuch as he is not, and does not have to be. For the gift does not

have first to be, but to pour out in an abandon that, alone, causes it to be; God saves the gift in giving it before being. The horizon that Being clears by its retreat opens on the gift, or, negatively, on vanity. The highest question becomes love or, what amounts to the same thing, charity. It long remains before us, unquestioned and redoubtable.

Where, however, does this lead? Obviously, love is made more than it is analyzed. One way of proceeding, as far as God is concerned, stems from the Eucharist: in it the Word leaves the text to be made flesh. *Outside the text* indicates less an addition than a deliverance, or rather a final *corps-à-corps*, where love makes the body (rather than the reverse). The Eucharistic gift consists in the fact that in it love forms one body with our body. And if the Word is also made body, surely we, in our body, can speak the Word. The extreme rigor of charity restores us to speech that is finally not silent.

The book that follows I wrote in solitude, but not alone. All these texts result from questions, debates, and lectures, all for particular circumstances (literally - surrounded by others); they owe to those who occasioned them their unity, their objectivity, and, I hope, their rigor. I am therefore perfectly aware of returning here - with slight editing - what was given to me - in the mode of inquiry. There again, the gift preceded the fact of being. I want to acknowledge my debt to the insistence of Maurice Clavel in making me attack head-on the great struggle of Being with the cross. What follows constitutes a way of keeping my promise without truly fulfilling its vows. I would like also to recognize, among many others, two friends without whom this book - and many other things as well - would not have seen the light of the day, Jean Duchesne and Robert Toussaint. As for Rémi Brague, who, with his philological probity, preferred to correct our proofs rather than suffer by finding too many errors, I offer him all my gratitude. The insufficiencies are my own, and I, more than others, am aware of them.

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## **THE IDOL AND THE ICON**

That the idol can be approached only in the antagonism that infallibly unites it with the icon is certainly unnecessary to argue. The two concepts most certainly belong to two distinct,

and in many ways competing, historical moments: *eidōlon* presupposes the Greek splendor of the visible, whose polychromy gives rise to the polysemy of the divine, whereas *eikōn*, renewed from the Hebrew by the New Testament and theorized by patristic and Byzantine thought, concentrates - and with it the brilliance of the visible - on the sole figure of the one whom Hölderlin named *Der Einzige*, The Only One, only by comparing and finally integrating him with Dionysus and Heracles. But such a conflict unfolds in a dimension far more essential than any possible polemic between "pagan art" and "Christian art"; rather, this very formulation covers (and dissimulates in rendering banal) a much more essential issue. For the historical succession of two models of "art" permits one to disclose a phenomenological conflict - a conflict between two phenomenologies. The idol does not indicate, any more than the icon, a particular being or even class of beings. Icon and idol indicate a manner of being for beings, or at least for some of them. Indeed, a determination that would limit itself to opposing the "true God" (icon) to the "false gods," in extending the polemic of the vetero-testamentary prophets, would not be suitable here. For the Christian iconoclasts of the eighth century gave the name "idol" to that which had been conceived and venerated as icon of the true God, and the Jews of the Old Covenant rejected all representation as idolatrous, even representation of the God of the Covenant (the "Golden Calf," it has been argued, perhaps only personalized the God of the Covenant, and the very Temple of Jerusalem could have been deserted by the divine *Shekinah* only insofar as it foundered in idolatry). Fortunately, every effort to take seriously the destinal momentum (*Geschick*) and initial support of Greece implies that a more receptive interpretation dismisses the accusation of pure and simple idolatry, and tries - in vain or successfully, it hardly matters here - to acknowledge the authentically divine dignity of that which, in the monuments of that age, offers itself for veneration (Hegel, Schelling, Hölderlin). In short, the icon and the idol are not at all determined as beings against other beings, since the same beings (statues, names, etc.) can pass from one rank to the other. The icon and the idol determine two manners of being for beings, not two classes of beings.

Their interference thus becomes all the more problematic and seems to demand attention all the more urgently. But, one can rightly object, even if certain beings can pass from the idol to the icon, or from the icon to the idol, only changing thus in status when venerated, not every being is able to do so: indeed, not just any being can give rise to, still less demand, veneration.

Even if the number of those that demand veneration and the mode of that veneration vary, all admit nevertheless to certain common, minimal characteristics: it is a question of *signa* concerning the divine.

*Signa*: the Latin term means much here. The only works that can pretend to the contradictory status of idol and/or icon are those that art has so worked that they no longer restrict their visibility to themselves (as in what are so rightly called the "pleasurable arts" [*arts d'agrément*]), but, as such and by thus remaining absolutely immanent in themselves, that they signal indissolubly toward another, still undetermined term. More specifically, this referral does not signal toward another instance than that which the work of art itself constitutes, coming to overdetermine the work from the outside by some "symbolic value"; on the contrary, this referral constitutes the most essential dignity of the work. The work appears as such only in signaling, because it is only in signaling that the work has the value of a *signum*. One thus would have to interrogate the *signa* concerning their mode of signaling, suspecting that the idol and the icon are distinguishable only inasmuch as they signal in different ways, that is, inasmuch as each makes use of its visibility in its own way. The diversity of these ways for signaling and becoming *signa* no doubt, however, decides everything between the idol and the icon.

*Signa*, but also concerning the divine: without even pretending to approach the most extreme difficulty (would the being that accedes to visibility only as *signum* be able to signal a referent other than the divine itself and itself alone?), one must at least note that the divine comes into play here only with the support of visibility. But in having to do with the divine, visibility is expressed in several manners. Or rather, variations in the mode of visibility indicate variations in the mode of apprehension of the divine itself. The same mode of visibility would not suit just any figure of the divine, but maintains with the divine a rigorous and undoubtedly constitutive relation: the manner of seeing decides what can be seen, or, at least negatively, decides what in any case could not be perceived of the divine.

In outlining the comparative phenomenology of the idol and the icon, it is therefore a question of specifying not any particular matter of aesthetics or art history, but two modes of apprehension of the divine in visibility. Of apprehension, or also, no doubt, of reception.

## **1-First Visible**

The idol never deserves to be denounced as illusory since, by definition, it is seen - *eidōlon*, that which is seen (\**eidō*, *video*). It even consists only in the fact that it can be seen, that one cannot but see it. And see it so visibly that the very fact of seeing it suffices to know it - *eidōlon*, that which is known by the fact that one has seen it (*oīda*). The idol presents itself to man's gaze in order that representation, and hence knowledge, can seize hold of it. The idol is erected there only so that one see it: the monumental statue of Athena shone from the Acropolis to the gaze of the sailors of the Piraeus, and if the darkness of a *naos* shaded the chryselephantine statue, it followed that in order to divine it, the worshiper experienced that much more of its fascination when, approaching, he could finally lift his eyes to it. The idol fascinates and captivates the gaze precisely because everything in it must expose itself to the gaze, attract, fill, and hold it. The domain where it reigns undividedly - the domain of the gaze, hence of the gazeable [*regardable*] - suffices as well for reception: it captivates the gaze only inasmuch as the gazeable comprises it. The idol depends on the gaze that it satisfies, since if the gaze did not desire to satisfy itself in the idol, the idol would have no dignity for it. The most common criticism of the idol asks with amazement how one can adore as a divinity that which the hands that pray have just forged, sculpted, decorated - in a word, fabricated. "Delivered from idols," Claudel acknowledges in the idol no more than the aberration of "the savage who builds himself a canoe and who with the one superfluous board fabricates Apollo." This Criticism, however, misses the essential: for the fabricated thing becomes an idol, that of a god, only from the moment when the gaze has decided to fall on it, has made of it the privileged fixed point of its own consideration; and that the fabricated thing exhausts the gaze presupposes that this thing is itself exhausted in the gazeable. The decisive moment in the erection of an idol stems not from its fabrication, but from its investment as gazeable, as that which will fill a gaze. That which characterizes the idol stems from the gaze. It dazzles with visibility only inasmuch as the gaze looks on it with consideration. It draws the gaze only inasmuch as the gaze has drawn it whole into the gazeable and there exposes and exhausts it. The gaze alone makes the idol, as the ultimate function of the gazeable.

Since the gaze alone characterizes the idol, how are we to understand the multiplicity of idols, their variable validities, their contingent figures, their disparate dignities? The gaze makes the idol, not the idol the gaze - which means that the idol with its visibility fills the intention of

the gaze, which wants nothing other than to see. The gaze precedes the idol because an aim precedes and gives rise to that at which it aims. The first intention aims at the divine and the gaze strains itself to see the divine, to see it by taking it up into the field of the gazeable. The more powerfully the aim is deployed, the longer it sustains itself, the richer, more extensive, and more sumptuous will appear the idol on which it will stop its gaze. To stop the gaze: we could not do better than to say, to stop a gaze, allow it to rest (itself) in/on an idol, when it can no longer pass beyond. In this stop, the gaze ceases to overshoot and transpierce itself, hence it ceases to transpierce visible things, in order to pause in the splendor of one of them. No longer transpiercing itself, the gaze no longer pierces things, no longer sees them in transparency; at a certain point, it no longer experiences things as transparent - insufficiently weighted down by light and glory - and a last one finally presents itself as visible, splendid, and luminous enough to be the first to attract, capture, and fill it. This first visible will offer, for each gaze and in the measure of its scope, its idol. Idol - or the gaze's landing place. What, then, does the idol indicate?

## **2-Invisible Mirror**

Before presenting the idol's characteristic visibility and its intrinsic meaning, one must interpret its very appearance. When the idol appears, the gaze has just stopped: the idol concretizes that stop. Before the idol, the gaze transparently transpierced the visible. To be exact, the gaze did not see the visible, since it did not cease to transpierce it - to transpierce it piercingly. 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 stage without stopping, but forms a stage in 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 the gaze. The idol, the first visible, from the beginning, 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. But consequently, if in the idol the gaze sees its first visible, it discovers in it, more than just any spectacle, its own limit and proper place. As an obstacle to a transmitter sends back waves and indicates the transmitters location in relation to that obstacle, the idol returns the gaze to itself, indicating to it how many beings, before the idol, it has transpierced, thus also at what level is situated that which for its aim stands as first visible above all. The idol thus acts as a mirror, not as a portrait: a mirror that reflects the gaze's image, or more exactly, the image of its aim and of the scope of that aim. The idol, as a function of the gaze, reflects the gaze's scope. But the idol does not at once manifest its role and status as mirror. For the idol, precisely because it fixes upon itself the light and the scope of the gaze, shines immediately with a brilliance by definition equal (at least) to what this gaze can see; since the idol fills the gaze, it saturates it with visibility, hence dazzles it; the mirror function obscures itself precisely by virtue of the spectacle function. The idol masks the mirror because it fills the gaze. The mirror lets its function be obfuscated by the glare of the gazeable, which is finally visible. Because it offers to the gaze its first visible, the idol itself remains an invisible mirror. That the mirror remains invisible, since the visible dazzles the gaze, makes it so that the idolater never dupes, nor finds himself duped: he only remains - ravished.

The idol, as invisible mirror, gives the gaze its stopping point and measures out its scope. But the idol would not fix any gazeable object if the gaze by itself did not first freeze. The divine, like the sun that Valéry evokes (in an involuntary echo of Aristotle), can be fixed in a thousand and one idols, where its splendor is visibly reflected:

Yes, gigantic sea delirium-dowered, Panther-hide, and chlamys filled with holes  
By thousands of the suns dazzling idols. . .

But, in order for an idol to appear and, fixedly, draw the attention of a gaze, the reflection of a stable mirror must accommodate it. Instead of the gaze floating along unstable waves of "the sea, the sea perpetually renewed," it must present itself in a mirror, a gaze as mortally immobile as coagulated blood: "The sun drowned in its blood which coagulates" (Baudelaire). In order that the idol may fix it, the gaze must first freeze. Thus the invisible mirror that the first visible offers it does not only indicate to the gaze how far its most distant aim extends, but even what its aim could not have in view. When the gaze freezes, its aim settles (in the sense that when a wine



settles it attains maturity), and hence the not-aimed-at disappears. If the idolatrous gaze exercises no criticism of its idol, this is because it no longer has the means to do so: its aim culminates in a position that the idol immediately occupies, and where every aim is exhausted. But that which renders a gaze idolatrous could not, at least at first, arise from an ethical choice: it reveals a sort of essential fatigue. The gaze settles only inasmuch as it rests - from the weight of upholding the sight of an aim without term, rest, or end: "to sleep with the sleep of the earth." With the first visible and the invisible mirror, the idol offers the gaze its earth - the first earth upon which to rest. In the idol, the gaze is buried. The idol would be disqualified thus, vis-à-vis a revelation, not at all because it would offer the gaze an illegitimate spectacle, but first because it suggests to the gaze where to rest (itself). With the idol, the invisible mirror admits no beyond, because the gaze cannot raise the sight of its aim. The invisible mirror thus marks, negatively, the shortcoming of the aim - literally, the *invisible*. The visible begins where the aim stops. The invisible mirror is concealed in the first visible, which thus marks the *invisible*. The idol allows no invisible, first because it conceals its function as invisible mirror, in the brilliance of its light, and then because, beyond it, even more than the invisible, the *invisible* opens, or rather closes up. For an invisible would imply first that a yet obscure aim stretches toward it in order to open it.

Consequently, the genuineness and the limits of the idol can be defined: in the idol, the divine actually comes into the visibility for which human gazes watch; but this advent is measured by what the scope of particular human eyes can support, by what each aim can require of visibility in order to admit itself fulfilled. In short, the advent of the divine is fixed in an idol only if the human gaze is frozen and, thus, opens the site of a temple. The idol is measurable by the *templum*, which, in the heavens, the gaze of man each time delimits to its own measure - "deus is, cujus templum est omne id quod conspicias" - "that God, whose temple is everything that you see." That god whose space of manifestation is measured by what portion of it a gaze can bear - precisely, an idol.

### **3-Dazzling Return**

Thus the idol consigns the divine to the measure of a human gaze. Invisible mirror, mark of the *invisible*, it must be apprehended following its function and evaluated according to the scope of that function. Only then does it become legitimate to ask what the material figure given

to the idol by human art represents, what it resembles. The answer is that it represents nothing, but presents a certain low-water mark of the divine; it resembles what the human gaze has experienced of the divine. The idol, such as any archaic *kouros*, obviously does not claim to reproduce any particular god, since the idol offers the only materially visible original of it. But consigned to the stone material is what a gaze - that of the artist as religious man, penetrated by god - has seen of the god; the first visible was able to dazzle his gaze, and this is what the artist tries to bring out in his material: he wants to fix in stone, strictly to solidify, an ultimate visible, worthy of the point where his gaze froze. Rock, wood, gold, or whatever, tries to occupy with a fixed figure the place marked by the frozen gaze. Terrorizing as much as ravishing, the emotion that froze the gaze would have to invest the stone as it invested the gaze of the religious artist. Thus the spectator, provided that his attitude become religious, will find in the materially fixed idol the brilliance of the first visible whose splendor freezes the gaze. That his attitude should become religious means that, to the brilliance fixed by the material idol, the scope of his gaze exactly corresponds, and hence his gaze, with that brilliance, will receive the first splendor that might stop, fill, and freeze it. The idol consigns and conserves in its material the brilliance where a gaze froze, in the expectation that other eyes will acknowledge the brilliance of a first visible that freezes them in their ultimate scope. The idol serves as a materially fixed relay between different brilliancies produced by the same first visible; it becomes the concrete history of the god and the memory of it that men do or do not keep. For this very reason, no one, not even a modern of the age of distress, remains sheltered from an idol, be he idolatrous or not: in order for the idol to reach him it is sufficient that he recognize, fixed upon the face of a statute, the splendid brilliance of the first visible where, one day, his gaze was frozen in its scope. Robert Walser recorded this threat and described this invasion of the divine with quasi-clinical precision in an unforgettable prose poem. Because the idol allows the divine to occur only in man's measure, man can consign the idolatrous experience to art and thus keep it accessible, if not to all and at all times, at least to the worshipers of the god, and as long as the gods have not fled. Art no more produces the idol than the idol produces the gaze. The gaze, by freezing, marks the place where the first visible bursts in its splendor; art attempts, then, to consign materially, on a second level, and by what one habitually calls an idol, the brilliance of the god. That only this brilliance should merit the name of idol is proved by the necessity, in order to recognize this brilliance on the material face, of a corresponding gaze, hence also of a gaze whose aim settles

and freezes with such a first visible. In short, the fact that idols do not coincide with their pure and simple statues is proved by the ease with which we desert idolatry, when our gaze takes off from work, visiting a particular temple or museum - to the extent that these visits lack the aim whose expectation could let itself be fulfilled and hence frozen, the signs of stone and color must wait, as mute gazes, for some animated eyes to reach them and be dazzled once again by the still-confined brilliance. Often we do not have, or no longer have, the means for such a splendid idolatry.

#### 4-Conceptual Idol

If we occidentals, dated (and endowed) by the completion of metaphysics, lack the aesthetic means to grasp the idol, others remain or even open up for us. Thus the concept. The concept consigns to a sign what at first the mind grasps with it (*concipere, capere*); but such a grasp is measured not so much by the amplitude of the divine as by the scope of a *capacitas*, which can fix the divine in a specific concept only at the moment when a conception of the divine fills it, hence appeases, stops, and freezes it. When a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names "God," this concept functions exactly as an idol. It gives itself to be seen, but thus all the better conceals itself as the mirror where thought, invisibly, has its forward point fixed, so that the *invisible* finds itself, with an aim suspended by the fixed concept, disqualified and abandoned; thought freezes, and the idolatrous concept of "God" appears, where, more than God, thought judges itself. The conceptual idols of metaphysics culminate in the *causa sui* (as Heidegger indicates) only insofar as the figures of onto-theo-logy have all undertaken to consign to a concept the ultimate low-water mark of their advance toward the divine (Plato, Aristotle), and after that toward the Christian God: thus the conceptual idol of the "*moralischer Gott*, the God of 'morality'" (Heidegger) limits the horizon of the grasp of God by Kant – "the presupposition of a moral author of the world" - just as it does that of the "death of God," since, by the very admission of Nietzsche himself, "Im Grunde ist ja nur der moralische Gott überwunden, At bottom it is only the moral God that has been overcome." In both cases, in that of theism as in that of so-called "atheism," the measure of the concept comes not from God but from the aim of the gaze. So here also Feuerbach's judgement stands: "it is *man* who is the *original model* of his idol." Perhaps we could then glimpse why it belongs constitutively to the idol to prepare its twilight. We could have experienced this twilight twice: first aesthetically,

once the oracles were silenced, in the period when the brilliance of the Enlightenment obfuscated that of the *signa* forged by hand; and today, when in the black sun of nihilism we seem delivered, or simply deprived and disinherited, "of books and of Ideas, of Idols and of their priests."

### 5-Icon of the Invisible

The icon does not result from a vision but provokes one. The icon is not seen, but appears, or more originally seems, looks like, in the sense that, in Homer, Priam is stupefied by Achilles, *hossos eēn hoios te; theoisi gar anta eōkei* (*Iliad* 24:630): Achilles is not counted among the gods, but he seems like a god, like the semblance *of* a god. In him, so to speak, something characteristic of the gods rises to visibility, though precisely no god is thus fixed in the visible. Whereas the idol results from the gaze that aims at it, the icon summons sight in letting the visible (here, Achilles) be saturated little by little with the invisible. The invisible seems, it appears in a semblance (*\*eikō/\*eoika*) which, however, never reduces the invisible to the slackened wave *of* the visible. Far from the visible advancing in search of the invisible, like quarry not - yet - seen, which the gaze would flush out, one would say rather that the invisible proceeds up into the visible, precisely because the visible would proceed from the invisible. Or even, not the visible discerning [*discernant*] between itself and the invisible, hemming in [*cerner*] and reducing it, but the invisible bestowing [*décernant*] the visible, in order thus to deduce the visible from itself and to allow itself to appear there. In this sense, the formula that Saint Paul applies to Christ, *eikōn tou theou tou aoratou*, icon of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), must serve as our norm; it even must be generalized to every icon, as, indeed, John of Damascus explicitly ventures: *pasa eikōn ekphantorikē tou kruphiou kai deiktikē*. For what is said here of Christ and of God must be understood for every icon (unless this should be the inverse, as we will see) - icon not of the visible, but indeed of the invisible. Hence this implies that, even presented by the icon, the invisible always remains invisible; it is not invisible because it is omitted by the aim (*invisable*), but because it is a matter of rendering visible this invisible as such - the unenvisageable. That the invisible should remain invisible or that it should become visible amounts to the same thing, namely, to the idol, whose precise function consists in dividing the invisible into one part that is reduced to the visible and one part that is obfuscated as *invisable*. The icon, on the contrary, attempts to render visible the invisible as such, hence to allow that the visible not cease to refer to an other than itself, without, however, that other ever

being reproduced in the visible. Thus the icon shows, strictly speaking, nothing, not even in the mode of the productive *Einbildung*. It teaches the gaze, thus does not cease to correct it in order that it go back from visible to visible as far as the end of infinity, to find in infinity something new. The icon summons the gaze to surpass itself by never freezing on a visible, since the visible only presents itself here in view of the invisible. The gaze can never rest or settle if it looks at an icon; it always must rebound upon the visible, in order to go back in it up the infinite stream of the invisible. In this sense, the icon makes visible only by giving rise to an infinite gaze.

## 6- The Face Envisages

But what does it mean to render visible the invisible as such? Unless the concept of the icon simply fails, is this not just a great deal of verbal clatter taking the place of a concept? The invisible as such could not render itself visible; no doubt if the invisible and, above all, the divinity of the gods or of God are understood in (metaphysical) terms of *ousia*: either *ousia* becomes visible (sensible, intelligible - which for our purposes are one) or it does not, and the idol, which itself produces the dichotomy, can decide. It remains that *ousia*, at least for theology, does not exhaust what can occur. Indeed, the conciliar definition, definitively confirming the theological status of the icon, bases the icon on *hupostasis*: "He who venerates the icon venerates in it the hypostasis of the one who is inscribed in it." 19 Reverence conveyed to the icon concerns in it the hypostasis of the one from whom the traced face arises. *Hupostasis*, which the Latin Fathers translate by *persona*, does not imply any substantial presence, circumscribed in the icon as in its *hupokeimenon* (and this as opposed to the substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist); the *persona* attested its presence only by that which itself most properly characterizes it, the aim of an intention (*stokhasma*) that a gaze sets in operation. The icon lays out the material of wood and paint in such a way that there appears in them the intention of a transpiercing gaze emanating from them. But, a superficial listener may object, in defining the icon by the aim of an intention, hence by a gaze, do we not rediscover exactly the terms of the definition of the idol? Absolutely, but in a nearly perfect inversion: the gaze no longer belongs here to the man who aims as far as the first visible, less yet to an artist; such a gaze here belongs to the icon itself, where the invisible only becomes visible intentionally, hence by its aim. If man, by his gaze, renders the idol possible, in reverent contemplation of the icon, on the contrary, the gaze of the invisible, in person, aims at man. The icon regards us - it *concerns* us, in that it allows the

intention of the invisible to occur visibly. Moreover, if man's gaze envisages the blind side of the first visible, or of its material consignment in the icon, he who sees it sees in it a face whose invisible intention envisages him. The icon opens in a face, where man's sight envisages nothing, but goes back infinitely from the visible to the invisible by the grace of the visible itself: instead of the invisible mirror, which sent the human gaze back to itself alone and censured the *invisible*, the icon opens in a face that gazes at our gazes in order to summon them to its depth. One even must venture to state that only the icon shows us a face (in other words, that every face is given as an icon). For a face appears only inasmuch as the perfect and polished opacity of a mirror does not close it; that a face closes up implies nothing but its enclosure in a radiant mirror: precisely, nothing closes a face by a mask more than a radiant smile. The icon alone offers an open face, because it opens in itself the visible onto the invisible, by offering its spectacle to be transgressed - not to be seen, but to be venerated. The reference from the perceived visible to the invisible person summons one to travel through the (invisible) mirror, and to enter, so to speak, into the eyes of the icon-if the eyes have that strange property of transforming the visible and the invisible into each other. To the invisible mirror where the gaze freezes succeeds the opening of a face where the human gaze is engulfed, invited to see the invisible. The human gaze, far from fixing the divine in *figmentum* as frozen as itself, does not cease, envisaged by the icon, there to watch the tide of the invisible come in, slack on immense visible shores. In the idol, the gaze of man is frozen in its mirror; in the icon, the gaze of man is lost in the invisible gaze that visibly envisages him.

## 7- Visible Mirror of the Invisible

The possibility of rendering visible the invisible as such now becomes conceivable: in the idol, the reflex of the mirror distinguishes the visible from that which exceeds the aim, the invisible because *invisible*; in the icon, the visible is deepened infinitely in order to accompany, as one may say, each point of the invisible by a point of light. But visible and invisible thus coexist to infinity only insofar as the invisible is not opposed to the visible, since it consists only of an intention. The invisible of the icon consists of the intention of the face. The more the face becomes visible, the more the invisible intention whose gaze envisages us becomes visible. Better: the visibility of the face allows the invisibility that envisages to grow. Only its depth, that of a face that opens to envisage, permits the icon to join the visible with the invisible, and this

depth is joined itself with the intention. But the intention here issues from infinity; hence it implies that the icon allows itself to be traversed by an infinite depth. However, whereas the idol is always determined as a reflex, which allows it to come from a fixed point, an original from which, fundamentally, it returns (the idol as specter, *un revenant* - *Gespenst* indeed covers certain uses of *eidōlon*) – the icon is defined by an origin without original: an origin itself infinite, which pours itself out or gives itself throughout the infinite depth of the icon. This is why its depth withdraws the icon from all aesthetics: only the idol can and must be apprehended, since it alone results from the human gaze and hence supposes an *aisthesis* that precisely imposes its measure on the idol. The icon can be measured only on the basis of the infinite depth of the face; the intention that envisages in this manner depends only on itself - for *aisthesis* is substituted an apocalypse: the invisible disengages itself in the visible, along an intention, only by the pure grace of an advent; the heavens can be rent only of themselves, for the face to descend from them (Isa. 63:19). The icon recognizes no other measure than its own and infinite excessiveness [*dém mesure*]; whereas the idol measures the divine to the scope of the gaze of he who then sculpts it, the icon accords in the visible only a face whose invisibility is given all the more to be envisaged that its revelation offers an abyss that the eyes of men never finish probing. It is, moreover, in this sense that the icon comes to us from elsewhere: certainly not that it should be a question of recognizing the empirical validity of an icon "not made by the hands of men" but indeed of seeing that *ackeiropoiēsis* in some way results necessarily from the infinite depth that refers the icon back to its origin, or that characterizes the icon as this infinite reference to the origin. What characterizes the material idol is precisely that the artist can consign to it the subjugating brilliance of a first visible; on the contrary, what characterizes the icon painted on wood does not come from the hand of a man but from the infinite depth that crosses it - or better, orients it following the intention of a gaze. The essential in the icon - the intention that envisages - comes to it from elsewhere, or comes to it as that elsewhere whose invisible strangeness saturates the visibility of the face with meaning. In return, to see, or to contemplate, the icon merely consists in traversing the depth that surfaces in the visibility of the face, in order to respond to the apocalypse where the invisible is made visible through a hermeneutic that can read in the visible the intention of the invisible. Contemplating the icon amounts to seeing the visible in the very manner by which the invisible that imparts itself therein envisages the visible - strictly, to exchanging our gaze for the gaze that iconistically envisages us. Thus, the

accomplishment of the icon inverts, with a confounding phenomenological precision, the essential moments of the idol. As an astonishing sequence from Saint Paul shows: "We all, with face unveiled and revealed [*anakekalummenō prosōpō*], serving as optical mirror to reflect [*katoptrizomenoi*] the glory of the Lord, we are transformed in and according to his icon [*eikona*], passing from glory to glory, according to the spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18). It seems practically useless (and impossible as well) even to outline a commentary: Let us briefly point out the reversal: here our gaze does not designate by its aim the spectacle of a first visible, since, inversely, in the vision, no visible is discovered, if not our face itself, which, renouncing all grasping (*aesthesis*) submits to an apocalyptic exposure; it becomes itself visibly laid out in the open. Why? Because, as opposed to the idol that is offered in an invisible mirror - invisible because dazzled as much as dazzling for and by our aim - here our gaze becomes the optical mirror of that at which it looks only by finding itself more radically looked at: we become a visible mirror of an invisible gaze that subverts us in the measure of its glory: The invisible summons us, "face to face, person to person" (1 Cor. 13:12), through the painted visibility of its incarnation and the factual visibility of our flesh: no longer the visible idol as the invisible mirror of our gaze, but our face as the visible mirror of the invisible. Thus, as opposed to the idol which delimited the low-water mark of our aim, the icon displaces the limits of our visibility to the measure of its own-its glory: It transforms us in its glory by allowing this glory to shine on our face as its mirror-but a mirror consumed by that very glory, transfigured with invisibility, and, by dint of being saturated beyond itself from that glory, becoming, strictly though imperfectly, the icon of it: visibility of the invisible as such.

## 8-The Icon in the Concept

Holding its qualification only from the distance of infinite depth, the icon is not the concern, any more than is the idol that here at least it confirms, of the artistic domain. The painter presents one of the possible media - the perceptible - to the opening of a face, just as the sculptor, who consigns to stone the brilliance of the god - the first visible - mobilizes the memory by a perceptible medium. But, as the idol can exercise its measure of the divine by concept, since the gaze as well can invisibly reflect its own aim and in it dismiss the *invisible*, the icon also can proceed conceptually, provided at least that the concept renounce comprehending the incomprehensible, to attempt to conceive it, hence also to receive it, in its own excessiveness.



But precisely, *can* such concepts be conceived? The only concept that can serve as an intelligible medium for the icon is one that lets itself be measured by the excessiveness of the invisible that enters into visibility through infinite depth, hence that itself speaks or promises to speak this infinite depth, where the visible and the invisible become acquainted. When Descartes establishes that the *idea Dei* would be given as *idea infiniti*, and that this "ut sit vera nullo modo debet comprehendi, quoniam ipsa incomprehensibilitas in ratione formali infiniti continetur," he indicates a path that is at least similar: the icon obliges the concept to welcome the distance of infinite depth; obviously this distance is valid only as infinite, hence indeterminable by concept; however, it is not a question of using a concept to determine an essence but of using it to determine an intention—that of the invisible advancing into the visible and inscribing itself therein by the very reference it imposes from this visible to the invisible. The hermeneutic of the icon meant: the visible becomes the visibility of the invisible only if it receives its intention, in short, if it refers, as to intention, to the invisible; that is, the invisible envisages (as invisible) only in passing to the visible (as face), whereas the visible only presents to sight (as visible) in passing to the invisible (as intention). Visible and invisible grow together and as such: their absolute distinction implies the radical commerce of their transferences. We find again, at work in the icon, the concept of distance: that union increases in the measure of distinction, and reciprocally: Without here taking up again the intrinsic relation of the icon to distance, let us simply indicate some of the perspectives that one opens on the other. (a) Valid as icon is the concept or group of concepts that reinforces the distinction of the visible and the invisible as well as their union, hence that increases the one all the more that it highlights the other. Every pretension to absolute knowledge therefore belongs to the domain of the idol. (b) The icon has a theological status, the reference of the visible face to the intention that envisages, culminating in the reference of the Christ to the Father: for the formula *eikōn tou theou tou aoratou* concerns first the Christ. It would remain to specify in what measure this attribution has a normative value, far from simply constituting just one application of the icon among others. (c) As much as idolatry, because it measures the divine according to the scope of a gaze that freezes, can nevertheless attain to an actual experience of the divine only at the cost of being reduced to one of the "so-called gods" (René Char), so the icon, as it summons to infinity-strictly-contemplation in distance, could not but over-abundantly subvert every idol of the frozen gaze - in short, open the eyes of the frozen gaze (as one opens a body with a knife), open its eyes upon a face. The idol places its

center of gravity in a human gaze; thus, dazzled as it may be by the brilliance of the divine, the gaze still remains in possession of the idol, its solitary master.

The idol always moves, at least potentially, toward its twilight, since already in its dawn the idol gathers only a foreign brilliance. The icon, which unbalances human sight in order to engulf it in infinite depth, marks such an advance of God that even in times of the worst distress indifference cannot ruin it. For, to give itself to be seen, the icon needs only itself.

This is why it indeed can demand, patiently, that one receive its abandon.