

“Into golden dusk”: Orthodox icons as objects of late modern and postmodern desire

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DURING THE PAST FIFTY years, there has been a clear tendency within western European culture and criticism to approach and interpret orthodox Christian icons in close connection with their Byzantine origin. There have been various serious attempts to apply an originally Byzantine theological terminology to late modern and postmodern thought. In some cases it is even relevant to speak about a desire for these icons. The aim of this article is not to treat this wide-ranging phenomenon exhaustively, but to illuminate and discuss some of its salient characteristics.¹

Postmodern theory relies neither on transcendence nor on prototypical origin as the Byzantine theology of icons does. Nevertheless, the well-reasoned Byzantine use of sign theories, of a semiotics *avant la lettre*, has challenged and inspired several postmodern thinkers. They do not draw the same confessional conclusions as Byzantine theologians and icon painters, but they continue to address similar issues as the Byzantines – issues related to the possibilities and limits of artistic representation, to art’s signifying means. As we shall see, this has been done within various postmodern fields, from the point of view of semiotics, linguistics, cultural theory, theology, psychoanalysis, science and intermedial aesthetics.

As the theologian Aristotle Papanikolaou has observed, there is a striking affinity between postmodern thought and Orthodox theology, especially as it has been formulated by Greek theologians from the 1960s onwards, for example by Christos Yannaras, alongside but without referring to Derrida or Kristeva.² As Papanikolaou puts it, “postmodern buzzwords”, such as otherness, difference and desire, have always been central to Orthodox Christianity, and he concludes: “it would be a pity if Derrida had to teach Christians about difference”.³ On the other hand, the Byzantinist Elena Ene D-Vasilescu has suggested the return of the icon as opposed to postmodern trends, *after* postmodernism, in the loss of identity and wholeness. She addresses the global problems of the environment and natural resources, issues concerning individualism and fragmentation of the self, and finds a solution in the

¹ The current article was inspired by one on a similar theme, published in Swedish: P.-A. Bodin 2010.

² Papanikolaou 2007, 538.

³ *Ibid.* 544.

orthodox icon and in its role in helping people to achieve personhood, “to be integrated persons or, depending on the situation, to become persons again”, i.e. live in peace with their own consciences, the surrounding world and God.⁴

The concern of this article is, however, more restricted. It will focus on a discussion of cases where the Byzantine icon – its aesthetics, theology and semiotics – has been explicitly addressed in late modern and postmodern thought and literature. Needless to say, for some decades now, there have also been many uses other than the Byzantine of the original Greek word *eikōn*, which basically means ‘image’ and is spelled ‘icon’ in modern English, in information technology as well as in popular culture.

SEMIOTICS AND LINGUISTICS: THE ICON AS A TRAVELLING CONCEPT

‘Icon’ is an important and active term in modern semiotics, ever since the late nineteenth-century sign theory of Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914). However, his and his later followers’ uses of the terms ‘icon’ and ‘iconicity’ are not equivalent to the Byzantine, orthodox Christian notion. The qualities of the orthodox icon do not match so easily any single modern semiotic category. Resemblance, as in a portrait, is one of the main characteristics of the icon. But it refers also to its object by physical proximity, as it – according to orthodox Christian belief – points to and mediates the presence of the holy person or holy feast depicted. Furthermore, its mediating capacity works together with a developed use of conventional codes, in order to also depict phenomena that cannot be rendered mimetically and thus have to be represented semiotically.

Yet another attempt to pin down the sign qualities of the orthodox icon can be made by referring to the linguistic theory of Roman Jakobson (1896–1982). According to Jakobson, there are metaphors, based on likeness, and metonymies, based on both conceptual and spatial contiguity. If these definitions are transferred to the aesthetics of Byzantine icons, the icon can be defined as being based on both metaphorical and metonymical traits, as it renders a portrait of a holy person or feast, which mediates the presence of the divine reality it depicts. In this way, resemblance and contiguity interact in the icon.⁵ The orthodox icon could thus also be defined as a *medium* – since it mediates between the one praying before it and the holy one represented by the icon.

Aspects like these, especially the relation between divine mysteries and corporeal things, i.e. the icon’s ability to represent the divine by means of portraits or other material objects such as paintings on wood, were discussed already in the eighth century by John of Damascus, in his apology *On the Divine Images*, written in the periphery of Byzantium during the iconoclastic controversy. To him, icons

⁴ Ene D-Vasilescu 2009, 95.

⁵ See further Bodin 2002.

were the logical outcome of faith in the incarnation: "In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. [...] Never will I cease honoring the matter which wrought my salvation!"⁶ Even the mediating aspect of the icon was evident to him, as he wrote: "Matter is filled with Divine grace through prayer addressed to those portrayed in images. [...] By itself it deserves no worship, but if someone portrayed in an image is full of grace, we become partakers of the grace [...]"⁷

This is, however, not the place to elaborate on the Byzantine theology of icons from a historical point of view. As a basis for this article, it will suffice to know that the orthodox icon is a very special kind of sign, which holds and mediates some of the power of the signified.⁸ In an illuminating analysis, Charles Barber has considered the Byzantine icon after iconoclasm as "a site of desire", referring to the final definition of the icon at the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787.⁹ He continues: "It cannot re-present its signified, although this must exist for the icon to be valid. Instead, the icon, as a pure signifier, maintains absence, maintains desire".¹⁰ Without doubt, John of Damascus' defence of icons and his praising of the incarnation, together with the Byzantine definition of the icon, present us with a profound analysis of the semiotic basis of the icon, formulated more than a thousand years before the works of modern semioticians and linguists, referred to above.

During recent decades, the icon has positioned itself not only as a token of a past Byzantine culture but also as one of the so-called travelling concepts of modern and postmodern western culture, migrating between various fields and forming the potential ground for interdisciplinary encounters and studies.¹¹ As a travelling concept, the icon also embodies a prominent feature of Byzantine studies – its genuine interdisciplinarity.

CULTURAL THEORY: BAUDRILLARD AND THE ICON AS A SIMULACRUM

The famous notion of *simulacrum*, a designation of the postmodern hyperreal, introduced by the French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) in *Simulacres et simulation* (1985), is based on a discussion of Byzantine iconoclasm, before it turns to the issue of Disneyland.¹² According to Baudrillard, there is no reality behind a sign which functions as a simulacrum, only yet more levels and possibilities of representation – thus a simulacrum does not point to its signified, but hides

⁶ John of Damascus, "First apology of Saint John of Damascus against those who attack the divine images", *On the Divine Images*, tr. Anderson, 23.

⁷ John of Damascus, "Ancient documentation and testimony of the Holy Fathers concerning images", *On the Divine Images*, tr. Anderson, 36–37.

⁸ A brief and updated introduction to the Orthodox icon is found in Fourounatto & Cunningham 2008.

⁹ Barber 1993, 11 and n. 37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 15.

¹¹ Bal 2002.

¹² Baudrillard 1985.

it: “we live in a world of simulation, a world where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear and to mask this disappearance at the same time”.¹³

When Baudrillard draws a parallel between Byzantine icons and postmodern simulacra, he maintains that icons are also simulacra, aiming to hide their emptiness rather than refer to or represent an epiphany or a reality – “the visible machinery of icons being substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God”:

This is precisely what was feared by the Iconoclasts, whose millennial quarrel is still with us today. Their rage to destroy images rose precisely because they sensed this omnipotence of simulacra, this facility they have of erasing God from the consciousness of people, and the overwhelming, destructive truth which they suggest: that ultimately there has never been any God; that only simulacra exist; indeed that God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum. Had they been able to believe that images only occulted or masked the Platonic idea of God, there would have been no reason to destroy them. One can live with the idea of a distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the images concealed nothing at all, and that in fact they were not images, such as the original model would have made them, but actually perfect simulacra forever radiant with their own fascination.¹⁴

Baudrillard maintains that this is the actual case, since God is dead and there is nothing behind the image, and he calls himself an iconoclast. He nevertheless emphasizes and recognizes the power and effects of images. To an iconodule, whether he be an orthodox believer or a postmodern capitalist, the sign is enough, even without its signified. The image alone – the Byzantine icon or the postmodern simulacrum – can thus be sufficient for an iconodule. As Baudrillard puts it, referring to Byzantine times: “The problem of the existence or non-existence of God was resolved by simulation.”¹⁵

THEOLOGY: MARION AND THE ICON AS AN EPIPHANY

A somewhat similar idea as the one put forward by Baudrillard, but with the opposite result, has been formulated from a theological perspective by the French philosopher, phenomenologist and catholic theologian Jean-Luc Marion (b. 1946). He addresses the Byzantine theology of icons and apophaticism in order to create a postmodern theology, partly independent of confessional boundaries.

Unlike Baudrillard, Marion does not proclaim the death of God but finds the Divine completely withdrawn from understanding, withdrawn from being as such, as indicated by the title of his important work *Dieu sans l'être* (1982), in which he crosses out God's name when writing it, to mark its inadequacy.¹⁶ According to apophatic views, God can only be defined in negative ways, and Marion means that asking for proofs or an absolute knowledge of God's existence is asking the wrong

¹³ Baudrillard 2008.

¹⁴ Baudrillard 1988, 169.

¹⁵ Baudrillard 2008.

¹⁶ Marion 1982. The crossed out name of God, where the 'o' is crossed in English translations, will here be rendered as “Gxd”.

question. Instead, cataphatic knowledge of God, i.e. knowledge expressed in positive terms, is found in affirmative relations of love – as in the icon, the gaze, the face, and to Marion “every face is given as an icon”.¹⁷ As one of Marion’s explicators has put it: “In short, Gxd does not need to be; ‘Gxd gives’ is a sufficient confession”.¹⁸ Or, as Marion himself paradoxically writes: “Only love does not have to be. And Gxd loves without being”.¹⁹

Marion describes the icon as one of those phenomena he designates as *saturated*, characterized by excess and allowed “to overflow with many meanings, or an infinity of meanings, each equally legitimate and rigorous, without managing either to unify them or to organize them”.²⁰ Christ himself is the highest form of saturated phenomena, according to Marion, and the icon is yet another of the highest ones.²¹

Besides the icon, the idol is an important notion in Marion’s writings. In contrast to an icon, an idol can only mirror the gaze, it only reflects the image of the gaze’s aim and scope.²² There is thus an apparent similarity between Baudrillard’s simulacra and Marion’s idols, both of them referring to false images. To Marion, the philosophers’ God, who is explained by concepts, can be regarded as an ultimate simulacrum.²³ The icon also has a different way of functioning from the idol: when someone addresses the icon in prayer, he himself becomes a mirror of the invisible – “the visible and the invisible become acquainted” in the icon, Marion writes.²⁴ As he puts it, the intention behind the icon is neither the painter’s, nor the beholder’s, but God’s: “The icon has as its only interest the crossing of gazes – thus, strictly speaking, love.”²⁵ Marion’s wordings reflect some of the same poetic inspiration as Byzantine praises of God in homilies, hymns and apologies:

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.²⁶

It is no surprise that Marion refers to John of Damascus in a footnote in the end of the quoted passage. Just like the Byzantine theologians, Marion emphasizes the icon as a point of contact, based on contiguity and nearness between the signifier (the icon) and the signified. He writes: “The icon does not result from a vision but provokes one”²⁷ – the icon is itself an epiphany.

¹⁷ Marion 1991, 19.

²¹ Robinette 2007.

²⁴ Marion 1991, 23.

¹⁸ Leithart 2006.

²² Marion 1991, 12.

²⁵ Marion 2004, 87.

¹⁹ Marion 1991, 138.

²³ P-A. Bodin 2010, 37–38.

²⁶ Marion 1991, 22.

²⁰ Marion 2002, 112.

²⁷ Ibid. 17.

PSYCHOANALYSIS: THE ICON AS GAZE AND
GRAPHEIN IN LACAN AND KRISTEVA

Yet another approach to Byzantine icons within postmodern theory is found in the works of Jacques Lacan (1901–81) and Julia Kristeva (b. 1941), both of them psychoanalysts and linguists.

Lacan has only commented parenthetically on icons in a very few enigmatic lines, but his point is most interesting and complicates the positions of subject and object. The actual passage is found in a lecture entitled “What is a picture?” delivered in March 1964 within a series of lectures on the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis.²⁸ The larger context of these lectures is that of the Subject, the gaze and the Other.

Lacan says that the icon holds the beholder under its gaze: “Icons – the Christ in triumph in the vault at Daphnis or the admirable Byzantine mosaics – undoubtedly have the effect of holding us under their gaze.”²⁹ It is thus not the beholder who controls the work of art with his gaze, but the gaze of the icon that exercises its powers over the beholder. Furthermore, to Lacan, it is not only the artist or the beholder but also God himself who is looking at the icon. God enjoys looking at himself in this form: “What makes the value of the icons is that the god it represents is also looking at it. It is intended to please God.”³⁰ The artistry of the icon painter seems to Lacan to be a sacral play with images and things “that may arouse the desire of God.”³¹ He calls an image of this kind “a go-between with the divinity”. God ought to joyfully receive the gift, the sacrifice, which the icon is, as it represents his own gaze. Lacan even seems to suggest that God himself is the patron of the icon painter. Is it not God who has ordered the icon to be created?³² It is tempting to regard Lacan’s analysis as a short circuit of the ordinary communicative functions centred on the icon. According to him, God seems to master all the roles in this sacral play: he can be both the patron and the artist, the beholder of the icon and the one depicted, and eventually the receiver of it.

Lacan has not left us more than this very short comment on icons, but Julia Kristeva provides a large-scale cultural – and personal – analysis of Byzantine and orthodox life, based on psychoanalysis. She was born and raised in an orthodox Christian family in Bulgaria during the communist regime, and even though she has related how she resisted her father’s efforts to bring her “into the Orthodox faith”,³³ she became acquainted with icons and her father’s singing in church, when he was a soloist in the choir, early in her life. In an essay on her relation to Bulgaria, she says that she strives to uncover the dark guilt of orthodox icons, and that she examines the still warm corpse of her maternal memory. Her French politeness and calmness is infiltrated with “a Byzantine unease”.³⁴

²⁸ Lacan 1998 [1977].

²⁹ *Ibid.* 113.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.* 112; P-A. Bodin 2010, 37.

³³ Kristeva 2010, 299.

³⁴ “Bulgaria, my Suffering”, in Kristeva 2000, 167–169.

To Kristeva, issues surrounding Byzantium, orthodox belief and icons have been closely related to the urgent political issue of the origin and future of Europe. She discusses not only icons, but also the orthodox creed, hesychasm, and the former communist orthodox countries and their Byzantine traditions in an essay entitled "Europe Divided: Politics, Ethics, Religion" (2000), originally delivered as an address to *Rencontres Internationales de Genève* a few years earlier.³⁵ In this context, following the French philosopher Marie-José Mondzain, Kristeva has called the orthodox icon "an economy of the divine presence".³⁶ At the same time, in essays on the mandylion and the theology of icons in connection with an exhibition held at the Louvre in 1998, she quotes both John of Damascus and patriarch Nikephoros (early ninth century) and discusses the issue of iconoclasm at length.³⁷

Some years later, she continued to address the importance of Byzantium and icons in a detective and crime novel entitled *Meurtre à Byzance* (2004), soon translated into English as *Murder in Byzantium* (2006).³⁸ In a most fruitful way, Maria Margaroni has emphasized the multi-layered importance of seeing and blindness of this story, opposing in this respect Kristeva's use of Byzantine culture and icons to the western "Society of the Spectacle", a term introduced by Guy Debord.³⁹ Margaroni observes that Kristeva "finds in the textual topos of Byzantium a culture that is centred on images but that refuses to take seeing as natural",⁴⁰ and that Byzantium introduces "another economy of seeing where the image is also a written sign (a *graphein*)",⁴¹ i.e., "an economy of seeing that is not opposed to an economy of reading".⁴² This thought recurs in Kristeva's writings, and was already formulated in "Europe Divided": "This negotiation of the image between invisible and visible does not definitively dissociate Being from appearance, but the image inscribes it rather than manifesting it: the icon is a *graphein*, a sensible trace, not a spectacle".⁴³ According to Kristeva, Christian orthodoxy does not prefer verbal signs, syntax and logical argumentation.⁴⁴ Therefore images like icons become important – they are written signs though still images, they inscribe "instead of representing or figuring".⁴⁵ To designate this special economy of seeing grounded in Byzantine icons, as it is developed in Kristeva's novel, Margaroni eventually coins the portmanteau word *iconomy*.⁴⁶

In psychoanalytical terms – according to Kristeva and as explicated by Margaroni – Byzantium might be regarded as "the repressed, denied Other" of Europe, and in *Murder in Byzantium* it is "invoked as a lost origin".⁴⁷ In an interview concerning

³⁵ Kristeva 2000, 111–162. It should be noted that Kristeva's recurrent and conspicuous discussions of Byzantine and orthodox issues in this volume are mentioned only in its introduction, without any attempt at explication.

³⁶ Ibid. 153; see M-J. Mondzain 2005.

³⁷ "The True Image. A Holy Face" and "A Digression. Economy, Figure, Face", both in Kristeva 2012, 37–46 and 47–64 respectively.

³⁸ Kristeva 2004; tr. J. Delogu. See Bodin 2009a with further references.

³⁹ Margaroni 2009; for Debord, see p. 110.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 111.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. 114.

⁴³ Kristeva 2000, 153.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 149.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 154.

⁴⁶ Margaroni 2009, 116.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 115.

this novel, in which a few icons (frescoes) are reproduced, Kristeva emphasizes that “Orthodoxy saturates” borderline states such as depression, melancholia, mourning, and loss of self “in caresses, sounds, scents.”⁴⁸

These psychoanalytical thoughts are closely connected to Kristeva’s reflections on the aesthetics and functions of the orthodox icon, which she links to medieval perceptions of humanity, where artistic freedom is basically lacking. She emphasizes its appeal to the senses:⁴⁹ “An Orthodox icon is not viewed, it is embraced. You plunge into it, and your eyes are flooded by touch, smell, taste, hearing.”⁵⁰ She continues to elaborate on the role of the incarnation: “The Orthodox faith, if you adhere to it, lets you touch the mystery of the incarnation not with a finger but with your entire body: the Word is made Flesh in an Orthodox church, no doubt about it.”⁵¹ According to Kristeva, there is a “brioche sensibility”⁵² in orthodoxy, and she states: “I am made of this Orthodox sensibility.”⁵³

Margaroni’s term *iconomy* is no doubt illuminating, since Kristeva’s wide-ranging reflections on the icon cover not only her personal experiences but also theological, aesthetical, psychoanalytical, cultural and political perspectives.

SCIENCE: GYLLENSTEN AND THE NEED FOR COMPLEMENTARY THEORIES

Another kind of postmodern use of orthodox icons is exemplified by the work of the Swedish physician and postmodern novelist and essayist, Lars Gyllensten (1921–2006), for several years a member as well as permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy and chair of its Nobel Committee. He set his aesthetic and epistemological discussions about semiotics and representation partly within the realm of Early Christian, Byzantine and medieval western theology, and partly within the realm of modern physics. He emphasized that he was not a Christian, but even if he questioned the icons’ prototype in Christ, he still considered icons to keep their quality of being signs, pointing to the existential significance of the fundamental problems surrounding the representation of reality.⁵⁴ To him, the iconostasis of a Byzantine or orthodox church functions as a mediating “border layer”, as “a sanctified borderland”, bearing witness “to a reality never to be realized, of a freedom never to be described, of an absence impossible to do justice to, desecrate or approach.”⁵⁵

Probably due to these impossibilities, Gyllensten drew a parallel between Byzantine semiotic theory of icons and modern scientific theories, such as quantum physics. While the physicist uses models, hypotheses and terms as insufficient and imperfect tools in order to examine and speak of reality, the orthodox Christian uses images, i.e. icons, to point to Christ. Both the theology of icons and quantum

⁴⁸ Kristeva 2010, 301. See also Kristeva 2000, 149.

⁴⁹ Kristeva 2010, 300–301.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 300.

⁵¹ Ibid. 302.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid. 301.

⁵⁴ See further Bodin 2012.

⁵⁵ Gyllensten 1981, 231–232.

physics are obliged to use tools – models and icons – although these models can never be equal to what they aim to inadequately describe or depict.⁵⁶

Gyllensten also refers to the physicist Niels Bohr's complementary theories on the nature of light, theories which actually contradict each other and are thus mutually incompatible. Yet they are the only means we have to explain what light is. In the mid-1970s, Gyllensten wrote:

An image, an icon is "the third" – "the third", nexus, which connects the subject to the object, the ego with the world or reality. [...] The image or incarnation is a layer of refraction between complementary incompatibilities. [...] It is an active, variable, challenging, paradoxical zone, where things and ideas and phenomena that can neither be called things (reality) nor ideas (conceptions), are in a chaotic and fruitful birth process.⁵⁷

The consequences of this argument, leading to the existence of a multitude of possible worlds, were later elaborated by Gyllensten during a Nobel Symposium on Possible Worlds in the Humanities, Arts and Sciences (1989).⁵⁸ He made it his life's task to develop these connections between the theology of icons and modern scientific theories in a number of novels and essays. In a late note, he concludes: "Exiled, we live among images".⁵⁹

INTERMEDIAL AESTHETICS: POETRY AND MUSIC ENTITLED AND INTERPRETED AS ICONS

The Byzantine liturgy is sometimes described as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where hymns and readings are performed by actors with various roles in a solemn, ritual play against a background of icons. The many studies on the relationship between the various arts and media, especially between images and texts, pursued by W. J. T. Mitchell, one of the most influential intermedial scholars, are important not only to understanding its character and aesthetics, but also the Byzantine notion of the icon. Mitchell regards all arts and media as composite or mixed, "combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes".⁶⁰ Codes, conventions, mediating channels, modes – these categories are useful and valuable tools also when discussing Byzantine icons, their possible transformations into other arts and media, and their transgressions of the conventional boundaries between the arts.

Though not from an explicitly intermedial perspective, Jenifer S. Cushman has made a valuable analysis of a phenomenon that lies near at hand and is of seminal

⁵⁶ Gyllensten 1976, 210–12; idem 1989b.

⁵⁷ Gyllensten 1976, 192: "En bild, en ikon är 'det tredje' – 'det tredje', nexus, som förbinder subjektet med objektet, jaget med världen eller verkligheten. [...] Bilden eller inkarnationen är brytningskikt mellan komplementära oförenligheter. [...] Det är en aktiv, föränderlig, utmanande, paradoxal zon, där ting och idéer och sådant som varken kan kallas för ting (verklighet) eller idéer (föreställningar) befinner sig i en kaotisk och fruktbar födelseprocess."

⁵⁸ Gyllensten 1989a.

⁵⁹ Gyllensten 2004, 188: "Förvisade lever vi bland bilder".

⁶⁰ Mitchell 1994, 83.

importance to western modernist literature: how Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) made use of orthodox icons in his poetry, ever since he had experienced the Russian orthodox celebration of Easter in the Kremlin’s Dormition Cathedral in 1899. Although Rilke himself did not explicitly entitle his poems as icons, Cushman convincingly shows that they can be interpreted as such. She regards Rilke’s poems from *Duineser Elegien* (1923) as “icon language-painting”⁶¹ and quotes his words that the birth of this cycle was a revelation to him, who functioned “not as one who writes, but rather as one in whom, or out of whom is written”.⁶² As for Rilke’s poem “Vom Tode Mariae” from *Das Marien-Leben* (1912), written in close connection to the icon of the Dormition (*Koimesis*), Cushman concludes that Rilke’s poetic exploration of the icon in three parts is carried out not “in a western narrative style, but in an ‘Orthodox’ simultaneous juxtaposition”.⁶³ Thus this and other of Rilke’s later poems function “as more than *ekphrastic* description, for, like icons, they do not merely illustrate *logos*, but attempt to incarnate the creative word synaesthetically for the reader, who may then experience the moment of revelation, and, ultimately, transformation”.⁶⁴

As far as music is concerned, there are several works by internationally well-known composers to reflect upon, but in this article the choral works of John Tavener (1944–2013) will be the only example. Among many other works with similar titles, Tavener has written *Ikon of Light* (1984) and also *We shall see Him as He is* (1992), in which eleven parts, each of them entitled “Ikon”, emanate from a series of icons and are described by Tavener as “musical icons”, depicting the life of Christ.⁶⁵ Himself a convert to Russian orthodoxy, Tavener is able to use both texts and tones (the melodic patterns) of traditional orthodox hymns when composing. In an article on the sacred in art, he writes that his work is a re-creating act, in the end “a miracle”.⁶⁶

Intermedial transformations like these, in which icons are found in various arts, existed already in Byzantine times and are still practised within the orthodox liturgy. Not only paintings and mosaics, but also biblical texts, liturgical words, music and actions can be regarded as icons, so-called verbal icons. As Verna Harrison has pointed out, there is a profound difference between a usual rhetorical metaphor and a verbal icon: “The term ‘metaphor’ points to the absence of the object to which a word literally refers; the term ‘icon’ discloses the presence of a concrete spiritual reality depicted through pictorial language”.⁶⁷

Writing *ekphraseis* of icons or using icons as themes or motifs in modern poems and musical compositions is one matter, but when texts and music are presented as icons, i.e. as works of painted art, the transformation process works in another way

⁶¹ Cushman 2002, 84.

⁶² *Ibid.* 100.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 104.

⁶⁵ Tavener, *Ikon of Light*, Gimell 454 905–2PH (1984); *We shall see Him as He is*, Chandos CHAN9128 (1992). On John Tavener, see <http://www.johntavener.com> (accessed 20 March 2012).

⁶⁶ Tavener 1995. See also the contribution of Tore Tvarnø Lind in this volume.

⁶⁷ Harrison 1988, 40.

and transgresses the traditionally conceived borders between the different arts and media. When this strategy has been used within modernism and postmodernism, it has often been without any Christian confessional intention, but nonetheless the icon's characteristics as a sign have been maintained. The following examples will be taken from Swedish literature and music, where such practices have been quite frequent since the 1960s.⁶⁸

Lars Gyllensten turned to Byzantine icons in order to formulate his literary aesthetics, thus transgressing the boundaries between the arts. In one of his late novels, he established a literary meta-level where narratives were entitled icons.⁶⁹ He also used the Byzantine iconostasis to structure and formulate the narrative strategy of his own literary work, in a way that allowed the reader to engage with several interpretative levels simultaneously.⁷⁰ Gyllensten's aesthetics did not aim for an objective and neutral realism, instead he regarded every piece of art as a subjective experiment and personal gesture.⁷¹ He wished the reader to be stimulated to take an active part in the literary work, in a similar way an icon aims to establish "an intense presence between me and you – where 'you' should be written with a capital letter: You".⁷² As in the original ritual and liturgical context of the icon, where the icon functions as both a prayer and a creed, Gyllensten regards his own literary work as an invocation, devoted to the essentials of life.⁷³

A similar encounter between poem and reader was what the somewhat older Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf (1907–68) also aimed at, even though, like Gyllensten, he never intended his poems to convey a Christian belief. When Ekelöf died in 1968, he was in the midst of a planned large work meant to comprise five parts, inspired by Byzantine culture, hymns and icons. In his working notes, one of his unfinished cycles of poems was entitled "Icons".⁷⁴

In many of his poems, Ekelöf strived to achieve the effect of a change of perspectives, similar to that of the reversed perspective of orthodox icons. He also made use of several of the conventional codes of icon painting, for example the device of 'simultaneous succession', the device of using an inscription, or the device of depicting a person *en face* to enable the beholder (or reader) to meet his or her gaze.⁷⁵ In one of Ekelöf's most famous poems, an icon showing the *Theotokos* (the Mother of God) is directly and lovingly addressed, while she is looking back at the beholder: "You look at me. Hodigíttria. Philoúsa."⁷⁶ But in other cases, when the poet acts as the painter of the icon, the reader (or beholder) of the verbal icon is directly addressed, as in this poem alluding to the icon of the Crucifixion:

⁶⁸ See further Bodin 2011.

⁶⁹ Gyllensten 1998, 47.

⁷⁰ See Brudin Borg 2005, 171–241 and 247.

⁷¹ Gyllensten 1989b, 44.

⁷² *Ibid.* 46.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 47; further references in Bodin 2012.

⁷⁴ Ekelöf 1991, 253–261. For Ekelöf's engagement in Byzantine history and culture, see also Bodin 2009b.

⁷⁵ See Bodin 2005.

⁷⁶ "Xoanon", in Ekelöf 1971; Ekelöf 1966: "Du ser på mig. Hodigíttria. Philoúsa."

Icon
 [...]

The noble thief, was he
 you? No!
 Who was the unrepentant thief?
 You! You who read this
 just as I have painted it.⁷⁷

In this excerpt, the aspect of address seems to hold the essential quality of the icon, even though, in this case, the addressing part of the poem almost accuses the reader, who is identified with the unrepentant thief. It is evident that an icon like this depends on more than one medium – it can be *read* by the one addressed by the poem, but nevertheless it is *painted* by the ‘I’ of the poem.

A similar point, concerning the relationship between the author, the poem and the reader (or, as a result of the intermedial transformation, the painter, the icon and the beholder) can be illustrated by a poem written by the Swedish catholic poet Ingemar Leckius (1928–2011). It is entitled “Painter of Icons” (“Ikonmålaren”) and renders the experience of the painter of an icon, who, by painting, effaces himself until nothing more than his eyes remain:

Painter of Icons

He faces towards Zion,
 beauty’s fullness,
 glowing existence.

Himself a shadow,
 slight imprints of knees
 on the path of perfection.

His brush sheds light
 like a branch from Eden.

With each brushstroke
 he effaces himself some more,
 till he disappears
 into golden dusk.

Now only his eyes remain,
 his denuded eyes,
 and the light streaming from within.

The gaze of a dove.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ [Maneten, min moder] in ”Ikoner”, Ekelöf 1991: “[...] Var den ädle rövaren / du? Nej! / Vem var den obotfärdige rövaren? / Du! Du som läser detta / så som jag målat det.” My translation.

⁷⁸ “Painter of Icons”, in Leckius 2000. “Ikonmålaren”, Leckius 1989: “Han ser mot Sion, / skönhetens fullhet, / det glödande varat. / Själv en skugga, / lätta avtryck av knän / på fulländningens väg. / Hans pensel lyser / som en gren från Eden. / Med varje penseldrag / utplånar han alltmer sig själv, / tills han försvinner in / i det gyllene dunklet. / Nu återstår bara hans ögon, / hans utblottade ögon, / och det inifrån strömmande ljuset. / En duvoblick.” See also the analysis in Stenström 2002, 296–297.

While painting the icon, the painter himself is not only the artist but also the beholder, who "faces towards Zion, / beauty's fullness, / glowing existence". Gradually, he becomes inseparably integrated with his work, the icon. He is contained in it as a gaze, directed towards the transcendental origin of the icon. The painter's intention and personality is nothing. His way to artistic and personal perfection implies humility and obliteration. In this case, the Byzantine aesthetics of icons seems to match postmodern aesthetics. Neither is interested in the intention of the painter or author, while both choose to focus on the icon or text. Its meaning lies in the eyes of the beholder or reader and has to be activated by praying before or paying honour to the icon, or by taking part in the reading of the poem.

The last example in this cavalcade of Swedish late modern and postmodern literary intermedial uses of orthodox icons is a poem by Tomas Tranströmer (b. 1931), who was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 2011. This poem, entitled "Many steps" ("Många steg") may point to reminiscences of a journey to an orthodox Christian country, but its setting has shifted to the realm of dreams and the underworld – both of which are frequent milieus found in Tranströmer's poetry. The poem represents precisely the complex, latent, perhaps both transgressive and concealed, desire for icons, traced in this article:

Many steps

The icons are laid in the earth face up
and the earth trod down again
by wheels and shoes, by thousands of steps,
by the heavy steps of ten thousand doubters.

In my dream I stepped down into a luminous underground pool,
a surging litany.

What sharp longing! What idiotic hope!
And over me the tread of millions of doubters.⁷⁹

When this poem was set to music in 1994 by one of the most influential Swedish composers of modern vocal music, Lars Edlund (1922–2013), it was as one of three pieces making up a suite, and the title of the whole suite was "Icons" ("Ikoner"). In 2000, the recording of this suite gave its name to a CD, comprising yet more of Edlund's choral compositions.⁸⁰ The underground litany and the procession above ground, first experienced in a dream and then articulated by Tranströmer in his poem, were materialized by the singers of Edlund's music. Despite the new title, neither the poem, nor its musical setting are icons in the sense of Cushman, Tavener, Gyllenstein, or Ekelöf, as described above. In this case, the relation between

⁷⁹ "Many Steps", in Tranströmer 1997. "Många steg" in Tranströmer 1983: "Ikonerna las i jorden med ansiktet uppåt / och jorden trampades till / av hjul och skor, av tusen steg, / av tiotusen tvivlars tunga steg. / I drömmen steg jag ner i en självlysande bassäng under jorden, / en svallande gudstjänst. / Vilken stark längtan! Vilket idiotiskt hopp! / Och över mig trampet av miljoner tvivlare."

⁸⁰ Edlund, *Ikoner*. Phono Suecia PSCD 135.

the title, the poem and its music is barely more than thematic. Yet, the eleven years that separate the publishing of Tranströmer's poem "Many steps" in 1983 from Edlund's musical suite for choir, "Icons", composed in 1994, indicate how 'icon' has gradually become not only a term denoting Byzantine art in a special eastern Christian cultural context, but also a valuable, multipurpose concept, travelling between various disciplines, arts and media.

CONCLUSION

Since the 1960s, the French intellectual milieu, comprising theology, cultural theory, linguistics and psychoanalysis, has been an especially fertile soil for the revival of the Byzantine icon. Notions such as desire, gaze, inscription, invisibility versus visibility, power, presence versus absence, medium and, of course, representation and sign, have constantly recurred throughout this broad exposition on late modern and postmodern uses of Byzantine icons, its aesthetics, theology and implicit semiotic theory. In accordance with Byzantine semiotics *avant la lettre* and their relevance to postmodern cultural theories, we have likewise been able to observe an early intermedial perspective in Byzantine liturgical practice and aesthetic theories, attractive to late modern and postmodern poets and composers. None of these notions or perspectives is a mere description of the icon as a work of art or a thematic label for it. They identify a set of complex active relationships involving the icon, the artist, the beholder and the signified, in which boundaries are questioned or transgressed.

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