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Beauty and Art in Solovjev's (1850–1903) and in Bulgakov (1874–1948). Does Beauty Save the World?

*For she [Sophia] is more beautiful
then the sun
and above every constellation of stars
Compared with the light she is found
to be more radiant.*

(Book of Wisdom 7, 28–30)

In one of his many lectures, Solovjev mentioned the famous icon of Divine Wisdom

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in the cathedral in Novgorod, exclaiming:

„Who is it who sits there in royal dignity on the throne,
if not Holy Wisdom, the true and pure ideal of humanity itself,
the highest and all bound to God,

who unites everything existing in the temporal world with Her”.

Elsewhere he remarks: „Every conscious effort of the human being,
which bases on the idea of universal harmony and syzygy [appearance in pairs],
and every effort whose goal is the manifestation of all-unifying ideal [Sophia],
creates spiritual and even physical vibrations.

These vibrations gradually spiritualise the surrounding material world
and manifest one image or another of All-unity”¹.

¹ T. Schiplinger, *Sophia-Maria. A Holistic Vision of Creation*, York Beach 1998, p. 170.

I have never seen more beautiful and museful eyes than his.
 His [Solovjev's] countenance expresses
 the victory of spirit over the brut².

To philosophise for a Christian is to be attached to two extremes, the prophets and the philosophers, is to situate oneself in the distance between the Jew and the Greek, to be pulled in opposite directions thinking sober and rational words of the philosophers while being intoxicated by cries and visions of prophets. Also Solovjev's theosophical thinking was fired by faith and driven by a hope for something impossible, something impossible always to come. Pursuing the possibility of the impossible has been Vladimir Solovjev's philosophical search, indeed: man was, as he affirmed, by no means the end in itself, but was called to creatively unite the Created with the Creator. Solovjev firmly believed that Creation is incomplete: especially the fifth book of *Istoriia i buduchshnost' teokratii* (*History and Future of Theocracy*)³ unambiguously declares Creation as awaiting man's conscious unification of the Created with God, which he called „all-unity (*vseedinstvo*)”⁴. „All-unity” unites „objective truth (*obektivnaia istina*)”, the „objective good (*obektivnoe blago*)”, and „objective beauty (*obektivnaia krasota*)” and it has been Vladimir Solovjev's theosophical program and has been at the same time his prophecy following Fjodor Dostojevskij in believing that „[b]eauty saves the world”⁵.

His unfinished *Theoretical Philosophy*⁶ argues that human „thought (*myshlenie*)” aims at the discovery of „objective truth”, „practical will

² Memory by M. Kowalewski quoted by Sytenko. L. Sytenko, T. Sytenko, *Vladimir Solovjov [Solovjev] in der Kontinuität philosophischen Denkens*, Schaffhausen 1997 (foreword).

³ Cf. S. Solovyov, *Vladimir Solovyov [Solovjev]: His life and Creative Evolution*, transl. E. Gibson, Virginia 2000, p. 216–228, for biographical and bibliographical details concerning the development of this work. Solovjev never wrote the three volumes intended. The sizeable volume one deals with biblical history, the second was to be devoted to Church history.

⁴ Cf. V. Solovjev, *Istoriia i buduchshnost' teokratii*, [in:] *Sobranie sochinenij Vladimira Sergeevicha Solovjeva*, ed. by S. M. Solovjev et al., Vol. 4, Bruxelles 1966, p. 579.

⁵ Cf. idem, *Krasota v prirode*, [in:] ibidem, Vol. 6, p. 33. He uses this famous quote as a foreword.

⁶ Cf. idem, *Teoreticheskaia filosofija*, [in:] ibidem, Vol. 7, p. 89–168.

(*deiatel'naiia volia*)” at „objective good”, and „feeling (*chuvstvo*)” searches for „objective beauty”⁷. Already his doctoral thesis *Critique of Abstract Principles*⁸ expanded the outlines of „All-unity (*vse-edinstvo*)” that unites „the good”, „the true”, and „the beautiful” as objective truths respectively. Neither „abstract (*otvlechennye*)”, nor „negative (*otritsatel'nye*) forms” of cognition can fully grasp these truths, for they are part of life bearing themselves a „living character (*zhizennyj kharakter*)”⁹. True, beauty is somehow present in everybody's life, yet, in Solovjev teaching beauty is not a quality, not an attribute, and beauty does not arise at random, but beauty is substance. He suggested „beauty” and „the good” to be Siamese twins. He predicted that beauty will transform „material being (*veshchestvennoe bytie*)” to a „moral order (*npravstennyj poriadok*)”¹⁰! If life's moral organisation can be achieved with the help of beauty, then beauty must be actively attainable by everybody at all times, else the „good” and „beauty” degenerate to attributes of an elite. In order to understand Solovjev's creed more deeply, I shall briefly glance at things he considered beautiful and also I'll look at his theory of beauty. Then I'll try to understand ways and means of salvation with the help of beauty.

The sun, created on the first of seven days cosmically represents „All-unity”. It sheds rays of light on everything that exists¹¹. Only when nature finds itself in the midst of the sun's light, beauty can arise. The diamond, for example, as a stone is not beautiful, only when the sun's light breaks through it beauty arises. The simple becomes a precious stone,

⁷ Cf. G. Kline, *Hegel and Solovjev*, [in:] *Hegel and the History of Philosophy: Proceedings of the 1972 Hegel Society of America Conference*, ed. by J. O'Malley, K. Algozon, F. Weiss, The Hague 1974, p. 166.

⁸ V. Solovjev, *Kritika otvlechennykh nachal*, [in:] idem, *Sobranie sochinenij...*, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 1–398.

⁹ Cf. ibidem, p. 398–407, and many other places throughout his works.

¹⁰ Cf. V. Solovjev, *Obshchij smysl' iskusstva*, [in:] *Sobranie sochinenij...*, op. cit., Vol. 6, p. 77.

¹¹ Cf. idem, *Krasota v prirode*, op. cit., p. 48, and idem, *Istoriia i buduchshnost' teokratii*, [in:] *Sobranie sochinenij...*, op. cit., Vol. 4, p. 574–579.

a beauty¹². It's possible to express the same in axiomatic words: Nature's elucidation by the cosmic representative of „All-unity”, the sun, connotes unification of totally independent from each other parts, which is what Solovjev calls *syzygy* (appearance in pairs). Fundamentally, beauty is such a *syzygy*, it is a conjunction of independent from each other phenomena and at the same time signifies a third entity¹³.

The sun is beauty's primordial source: Solovjev uses Jakob Boehme's (originally Plato's) symbolism, associating the One, the source of love, with light (*svet*) and the sun's role in the cosmos correlates – human *consciousness* in the world. Man is the most „beautiful” of all creatures, because he is the most „conscious”: his countenance expresses co-existence of the spiritual and the material, the ideal and the real, the subjective and the objective¹⁴. Man's self-consciousness is, as Solovjev confirms, built up from ideas, whereby ideas for him are points of culmination of thought and feeling. The relationship between the animals' and human consciousness signifies the same relation as beauty in nature versus beauty in life and in art¹⁵. Art organises reality by manifesting the „Godly element in life”¹⁶, art witnesses man's search for freedom, namely freedom from the chains of natural causality¹⁷.

Unfortunately, there is no theory either of art or of beauty in Solovjev teaching. Nonetheless, in *The Sense of Love*¹⁸, *Beauty in Nature*¹⁹, and *The General Idea of Art*²⁰, which are three short essays, he presented strong points for a *Theory of Beauty*. The strongest point seems to me that he does not make a distinct difference between life and art but speaks of art as if it was the same as life is. Both, beauty in life and beauty in art are

¹² Cf. idem, *Krasota v prirode*, op. cit.

¹³ Cf. idem, *Smysl' liubvi*, [in:] *Sobranie sochinenij...*, op. cit., Vol. 7, p. 57 (see esp. first footnote on this page).

¹⁴ Cf. idem, *Obshchij smysl' iskusstva*, op. cit., p. 76.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 74.

¹⁶ Cf. V. Solovjev, *Kritika otvlečënnnykh nachal'*, op. cit., p. 352 ff.

¹⁷ Cf. idem, *La Sophia*, [in:] *Sobranie sochinenij...*, op. cit., Vol. 7, p. 9–17.

¹⁸ Cf. idem, *Smysl' liubvi*, op. cit.

¹⁹ Cf. idem, *Krasota v prirode*, op. cit.

²⁰ Cf. idem, *Obshchij smysl' iskusstva*, op. cit.

created by lucid ideas which spiritually transform nature, creatively give to natural life true meaning. So Beauty is a „servant of existence”, for while beauty exists, it implants ideas anew, ideas unifying the ideal with the real, the objective with the relative.

The last paragraph in *The Sense of Love* tells us that we should intensify life in „syzygial unites”, and should change our attitude towards nature²¹, which doubtlessly is an ecumenical, ecological, and universally modern request. Changes in attitude are active deeds. What has beauty to do with this change and what for is it? This of course are crucial questions that are not unambiguously answered by Solovjev himself but need a creative reading of his theosophy.

Discrediting the Marxian variant of materialism thoroughly²², the young Solovjev rephrased materialism and introduced his notion of „religious materialism” in *Judaism and the Christian Question*²³. He distinguished three forms of „materialism”: „*practical materialism*” means no more than egoistic, hedonistic, little sensible forms of life. Practical materialism has been theoretically developed by what Marx called „*scientific materialism*”. A third type of materialism, „*religious materialism*”, describes the Hebrews’ thought and mentality. They did not separate „spirit” from its material appearance: „matter” did not have any independent existence, it was neither God nor devil, but represented rather yet undignified dwelling that was nonetheless inhabited by God’s spirit. The believing Hebrew understood nature having God and His wholeness at its disposal²⁴. Because the Hebrews deeply believed in a permanent interrelation between God, nature, and man by means of spiritualised nature, they were the chosen people to whom Christ

²¹ Cf. idem, *Smysl’ ljubvi*, op. cit., p. 59 f.

²² Cf. H. Gleixner, *Russisches Denken im europäischen Dialog*, Wien 1997, p. 250; see also, K. Breckner, *Vladimir Solov’ov [Solovjev] as the Mentor of Anti-Marxian Socialism: Concepts of Socialism by S. N. Trubetskoy, S. N. Bulgakov and N. A. Berdiaev*, [in:] *Vladimir Solov’ov [Solovjev]. Reconciler and Polemicist*, ed. by E. v. d. Zweerde et al., Louvain 2000, p. 461.

²³ Cf. V. Solovjev, *Evrejstvo i khristianskij vopros*, [in:] *Sobranie sochinenij...*, op. cit., Vol. 3, p. 135–185.

²⁴ Cf. ibidem, p. 142–150.

appeared firstly. Yet, as Solovjev affirms, Christ demanded from them two things, namely the abandonment of national egoism and national prosperity. If they had fought against the empire of Rome as martyrs, they would have won it over and finally would have had a great triumph in uniting with Christianity. Despite the Hebrews' neglect their duty and the Christians' task remains the same: the establishment of universal Church²⁵, meaning, as it were, the formation of a righteous society that lives in beauty which springs off nature's and society's permanent spiritualisation by the sun-like lucidity of ideas that brightly illuminate matter. From the beginning, between spiritual and material being there is no real dichotomy but both are intrinsically bound to each other²⁶, that is why beauty's creation is possible at all times, everywhere, and by everybody. We should as the Hebrews did and as the example of the diamond in the dark was to show illuminate all nature and all matter by our conscious ideas which means to give life to them. Man's consciousness should brightly shine through nature, re-create beauty in nature.

It's interesting that the Creator appears in Solovjev thought as a syzygial power, for his concept of „All-unity” defines the properties of being in terms of a duality in God Himself: nature is in Him, it is His

²⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 160 ff. It is reported (cf. D. Strémooukhoff, *Vladimir Soloviev [Solovjev] et son oeuvre messianique*, Lausanne 1975, p. 298) that Solovjev devoted his last prayer before dying on 31st July 1900 (old Russian calendar) to the Jews, for his hope on their self-communion was related to believing on a drawing near of theocracy only in this case. Confirmed by many other scholars, he had an intensive reading of Catholic dogmatic. He studied multi-volume work *Reflectiones theologicae* by G. Perrone and apparently also studied in original more or less all works by the popes Gregory VII and Innocent III. His writings *Istoriia i budushchnost' teokratiia* (1884–1886, *op. cit.*) and *Dogmaticheskoe razvitiie tserkvi v sviazi s voprosom o soedinenii tserkvej* (1886, [in:] *idem, Sobranie sochinenij...*, *op. cit.*, p. 1–67) are dedicated to an analyse of dogmatic differences between Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. He concluded that there aren't any significant discrepancies. The vision of a drawing near unification of both Churches under the roof of Rome was central in his thought. He is even believed to have been in contact with the pope in this mission. It brought in from the Tsarist side a prohibition of all his works concerning this issue.

²⁶ Cf. V. Solovjev, *Opravdaniia Dobra. Nравstvennaia Filosofia*, [in:] *idem, Sobranie sochinenij...*, *op. cit.*, p. 553.

„portrayal” and „counterpart”²⁷. Nature is Uncreated as He is and is at the same time created. Nature now holds Divine living being that does not differ from God and the same does differ, for nature is also a part of the created. This, of course, is a paradoxical situation that opens up a significant riddle. Solovjev himself solves this riddle only implicitly. His eschatology says that nature's creation has not ended after Seven Days, but nature yields the seeds to sophianic co-Creatorship. This is precisely why man should change his attitude towards nature by spiritually enlivening it. Nature's spiritualisation does not depend on the Church's action, does not even depend on a distinct Christian creed. Solovjev did not designate any specific role to the Church with respect to the problem of how it should ignite the beautiful, or to be more exact, ignite man's change vis a vis nature in order to accelerate salvation. On the other hand, the Churches' unification, the future Universal Church, the manifestation of „All-unity”, would of course correlate to the beautiful. This doubtlessly is the main concern of his theosophy, is the main meaning of his prophecy.

Co-creatorship, man's task and ability to re-create beauty by changing his attitude towards nature doubtlessly belongs to the spheres of theurgy. This is the point where Sergej Nikolaevich Bulgakov begins the discussion with Solovjev and makes quite a different point.

Departing, as he reports, from some „gloomy revolutionary nihilism”²⁸, Bulgakov quickly became an acknowledged specialist on Marxian surplus value. However, his Marxist period was extremely short, since 1901 under the spiritual influence of Dostoevskij and Solovjev he has started to turn from a social scientist to a theologian. In 1926, he became a director of the Institute of St. Serge in Paris where he died in 1948. My article does not consider mean Bulgakov's purely theological works after his expatriation in 1919, but concentrates on his

²⁷ Cf. S. N. Bulgakov, *Priroda v filosofii Vl. Solovjeva*, [in:] *O Vladimire Solovjeve*, ed. by E. Kolchuzhkin, Tomsk 1997, p. 20, and cf. S. Solovyov, *Vladimir Solovyov...*, op. cit., p. 217.

²⁸ Cf. S. N. Bulgakov, *Autobiographical Notes*, [in:] *Sergius Bulgakov. A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. by J. Pain, N. Zernov, London 1976, p. 4.

critique of Solovjev's viewpoint on the theurgic magic of beauty. Discussing his belief that „beauty saves the world” Bulgakov strictly refuted his notion of theurgy. As he insisted, beauty in nature and in art does not „save the world” at all. Certainly, beauty gives pleasure to a man, at certain times comforts him, however this comfort is of little effect and does not change anything essentially²⁹. When in 1916, Bulgakov edited his essays collected in *Svet nevechernyj* – a collection of essays which in parts also dealt with art and beauty – he was already close to ordination as Orthodox priest and had abandoned every non-Christian explanation concerning whatever issue. Beauty – a special form of absolute truth, hence an extraordinary phenomenon – has necessarily to do with bowing before the cross and also carrying it. Creativity walks along a „path full of rocks (*kremnistyj put'*)” and in this very context he looks at Simon of Cyrene who has dragged himself with the cross on his shoulders without having desired it. Liberation from carrying the Cross, which means from tragedy, has the heavy price of spiritual paralysis. Consequently, hypocrite „prettiness (*krasivost'*)” that lacks true meaning³⁰, overtakes beauty's place³¹. Else wise said, there is no beauty created exclusively out of human resources and simple „prettiness” cannot fully reach the artists' aspiration to create a new absolute reality.

The creation of „absolute realities” one of which is beauty, belongs to the spheres of theurgy. He corrected Solovjev insisting that only God's descending acts into this world make theurgy, make Creation's existence possible. Only God's acts directed at the world

²⁹ Cf. idem, *Svet nevechernyj. Sozertsaniia i umozreniia*, Moskva 1994, p. 320 f. Cf. also: ibidem, p. 304–330, on art and economy. Fundamentally, both bear „sophianic” character. Until the fall „white theurgy” [*belaiia magiia*] determined man's relationship with the Created. There was no difference between art and economy. Life's acts [*zhiznennyj protsess*] pursued beauty and harmony. After the fall, „grey theurgy” [*seraia magiia*] made man a bondsman of nature and put him in the dire need to conquer nature with the help of labour. Henceforth art and economy are diametrically opposed to each other forms of *creativity*: while art creates beauty in an „erotic” [in the Platonian sense – K.B.] ascent, economy pure struggle in order to physically survive within numerous chains of causality. Economy is bound to time, place, and all sorts of enslaving circumstances.

³⁰ Cf. ibidem, p. 319.

³¹ Cf. ibidem, p. 320–325.

denote theurgy in the narrow sense of this expression. Inversely man, of course, ascends to God which is certainly a necessary creative act, however it is not sufficient. Basically, theurgy depends on God's will, there is nothing man can do out of his own inspiration, be it religiously inclined or else. However, God's „theurgic descent” and, as he called it, man's „sophianic ascent” join together and generate the possibility of co-creatorship, another of Christianity's miracles. This intersecting of ascending and descending wills and wishes is what Bulgakov called „Sophia-urgy”³², a concept that adds his view on *Sophia* to the discourse. Consequently we finally have arrived at a question difficult to answer: *what or who is God's wisdom, is Sophia?*

For most scholars, theologians or philosophers concerned with Bulgakov it has become almost a commonplace either to differentiate between the creaturely and the heavenly *Sophia* (the former bearing shards of the latter), or between the earlier (more philosophical) and the later (more theological) concept of her. In either case the first conception doesn't appear perfectly reconcilable with the second³³. However, in my eyes the solution is obvious: Bulgakov ascribed *Sophia* (*God's wisdom*), to each of the three Persons in God respectively. When Christ, who embeds Sophia, came into the world as the first Godman (*bogochelovek*) the heavenly Sophia became a „*living principle*” that reaches out in the world. The world's hypostatisation becomes a possibility that man is to use by spicitualising nature and matter possible. Hypostatisation denotes the potentiality of someone or something to turn into a hypostasis, that is to incarnate the Godly substance on earth. Bulgakov discusses Sophia's modes and forms from the highest in God to the highest on earth, which, of course, is the Church³⁴. Diametrically

³² Cf. *ibidem*, p. 321 ff.

³³ Cf. P. Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology. Bukharev, Soloviev [Solovjev], Bulgakov. Orthodox Theology in a New Key*, Edinburgh 2000, p. 264 ff.

³⁴ Cf. S. N. Bulgakov, *Sophia. The Wisdom of God. An Outline of Sophiology*, transl. by P. Thompson, O. Fielding Clarke, X. Braikevitch, New York 1993, p. 33–35, and cf. *idem*, *Ipostas' i ipostasnost' (Scholia k Svetu Nevechernemu)*, [in:] *Issledovaniia po istorii russkoj mysli*, ed. by M. A. Kolerov, Vol. 6, Moskva 2001, p. 19–53, p. 28 ff.

opposed to Solovjev, Bulgakov defended that God entrusted theurgic might to the Church exclusively. Nonetheless, for every singular believer there one a possibility to partake of God' wisdom, because the *Eucharist sacrament* signifies the keys to this wisdom, to theurgy. Consequently, ordinary persons have theurgical might at their disposal if they belong to a parish and follow the rules of a Christian life³⁵. The Eucharist sacrament shelters, as I conclude, the „sophianic” knowledge that is needed to begin the world's transformation into beauty.

Man – through the Church's mediation – is merely „recipient” of theurgy, never its „creator”. On the condition that a „sober spiritual attitude”, „enthusiastic prayer”, and the „bringing together of all personal spiritual capacities” come together, man partakes of theurgic magic: the act of self-sacrifice in front of God is necessary condition³⁶. What we're talking about then is „spiritual art (*dukhovnoe isskustvo*)”³⁷ and „spiritual beauty (*dukhovnaia krasota*)”³⁸. „Spiritual beauty” is not of this world, but it is bound to the Eucharist³⁹, the cradle of life.

We're coming to the end: the ideal foundation of Orthodoxy is, as Bulgakov confirmed, esthetical not ethical: Orthodoxy holds up the vision of *spiritual beauty*. To gain this specific type of beauty one must develop spiritual art that is ignited, inspired by the Heaven⁴⁰. „Spiritual art” hence doesn't create beauty *ex nihilo*, but takes it from Jesus who tried to overcome chaos, ugliness and evil⁴¹. Artists sometimes overtake the role of „prophets”, yet art corresponds to, as Bulgakov called it, the „Old Testament of Beauty” that announces the second arrival of the „Comforter”. This arrival will be catastrophic: „darkness”, a deep „yearning for beauty” must be before that⁴².

³⁵ Cf. idem, *Svet nevechernyj...*, op. cit., p. 321.

³⁶ Cf. ibidem, p. 322.

³⁷ Cf. ibidem, p. 323.

³⁸ Cf. S. N. Bulgakov, *Sophia...*, op. cit., p. 98, and idem, *The Orthodox Church*, New York 1988, p. 154.

³⁹ Cf. idem, *Svet nevechernyj...*, op. cit., p. 321.

⁴⁰ Cf. idem, *The Orthodox Church*, op. cit., p. 154.

⁴¹ Cf. idem, *Svet nevechernyj...*, op. cit., p. 330.

⁴² Cf. ibidem, p. 333.

I'm concluding: beauty in Bulgakov's and in Solovjev's teachings, is another expression for the spiritual reunification of the created and the Uncreated, of the world and Heaven, subject and object, in short the re-arrival of beauty. Beauty is an eschatological idea. Similar to Solovjev Bulgakov awaited spiritualisation of nature and everything that has been or is created. This is the condition *sine qua non* to beauty's future reign. Only Bulgakov focused on the Church's tasks to incarnate Sophia, the beauty of God's Wisdom re-manifested on earth.