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VIOLENCE AND THE SACRED: VJAČESLAV IVANOV AND WALTER BURKERT

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The figure of Vjačeslav Ivanov as a poet's poet and the magus of Symbolism in Russia has eclipsed his figure as author of two brilliant studies of the cult of Dionysus, the first of which is *The Hellenic Religion of the Suffering God* (1903-1905).[1] It was written in the same burst of insight as *Pilot Stars* (*Kormčie zvezdy*), his first collection of verse, and like both *Pilot Stars* and the better part of his vast subsequent production, it reflects Ivanov's fascination with ecstasy as the stimulus for all human creativity. For that reason *The Hellenic Religion* has often been cited as a gloss to his lyric and dramatic poetry or a key to his critical and theoretical essays. Yet it has never been evaluated or even read in its own terms as a philological contribution to history and anthropology. Soviet scholarship assigned it to oblivion for its inconsistency with Marx and Engels and from more than fifty years of oblivion translation alone can rescue it – as it is indeed about to do. These remarks are made by the translator in eager anticipation of the broad response that Ivanov's book will no doubt elicit from scholars and non-scholars alike when Yale Press offers it to the Western public.

The argument of *The Hellenic Religion* invites comparison with the argument of a profound and subtle book published by the Swiss historian Walter Burkert, now the foremost authority on sacrificial ritual and myth in pre-Homeric Greece. Burkert's book is *Homo Necans* (1972): "man the killer". On the basis of inferences about pre-Homeric worship these books set forth two theories of the origin of religion, both of which involve a relationship between violence and the sacred. The object here is to explore how

each author deals with only one example of pre-Homeric ritual: the cult of the god and prophet Zalmoxis, to whom the Getae, "noblest and most just of all the Thracian tribes", offered human sacrifice in hope of immortality. The cult of this dying god is attested in Herodotus 4.93-96. How does Walter Burkert lead us to interpret this text in *Homo Necans*? How does Ivanov interpret it in *The Hellenic Religion*? What do their conclusions imply for the future of modern culture and the possibility of its renewal?

Each of them undertakes, as an historian, to discover the nature and origin of religion, which both equate with the origin of humanity. They propose to discover it by hypothetically reconstructing the ritual forms of prehistoric Greek religion. Moreover, in offering this reconstruction, each one addresses what he believes to be the central issue of his own contemporary society. Burkert addresses the issue of human aggression. Ivanov addresses the issue of individuality that we know from Nietzsche. Although they wrote at different times and could not read each other, Burkert agrees firmly with Ivanov on two cardinal points. One is that blood sacrifice was the earliest form of religious action and laid the foundation for human culture in general and for the Christian eucharist in particular. The other is that, in blood sacrifice, the victim killed, be he man or beast, was always meant and felt to be human. Agreement on this point closes the door to potentially endless debates about whether the Greeks, the Hebrews or any other ancient people actually practiced human sacrifice – a point on which Ivanov and Burkert do not agree.

Now for the god and prophet Zalmoxis. Herodotus tells us that he is the only god of the Getae. When it lightens and thunders, they aim their arrows at the sky and threaten him. When they depart this life they believe they go to join him. Herodotus records a ritual in which the Getae act out this belief. Every five years they cast lots to choose one man among them whom they designate as messenger to the god. They entrust this man with requests. Then they send him off as follows. Seizing him by his hands and feet, they toss him up so he will fall on the upraised spears of his fellow tribesmen. If he dies impaled on the spears, they say that Zalmoxis has blessed them. If he does not die, they hold him unworthy and choose another messenger. Here ends the first part of Herodotus's account.

The second part gives the view of Zalmoxis held by Greeks from the Hellespont and the Pontus. They identify him with a Thracian slave who once belonged to the philosopher Pythagoras at Samos. This slave, once freed, grew rich and returned to Thrace where, having already learned the doctrine of his former master and the ways of the Ionian Greeks, he wined and dined his simple countrymen in an especially designated chamber where he taught them that neither he nor they, his guests, nor any of their descendants would ever die but would all go to a place where they would continue to enjoy every imaginable good. While wining and dining his countrymen he

was also digging the pit for a chamber underground where he secretly withdrew once it was ready and where he remained for three years. For those three years he was mourned as dead. When he emerged from underground and showed himself to his companions, they believed the truth of what he had taught them about the after-life.

Since readers of *Russian Literature* can be expected to know the work of Ivanov better than that of Burkert, let us take up *Homo Necans* first. For 50,000 years before he became a farmer, man was a hunter and he continued to hunt five times longer than he has farmed. It was as a hunter that he made the transition from primate to *homo sapiens*. Man can virtually be defined as "the hunting ape".[2] Biologically he was not suited to be a hunter as the predatory animals are. But he had to kill in order to live, so he taught himself to hunt. Man did not merely compensate for his biological deficiencies by making weapons and using fire to temper them: he left women behind and worked cooperatively with other men rather than engage in the intraspecific aggression provoked by sexual or territorial rivalry. His energy, both psychological and biological, found another object in the hunter's quarry, which hunters treated as a quasi-human enemy and a sacrificial victim. Killing became a ceremonial as well as a utilitarian activity. It began with preparation (abstinence both from women and from food), followed by the irrevocable "act" of killing an animal, which then provided a meal at which abstinence ceased and restitution for the act of killing might be made.

"A discussion of religion," Burkert declares, "must be anything but religious,"[3] and he observes that those who turn to religion for salvation from the evil of aggression are confronted with murder at its very heart. His reconstruction of prehistoric ritual draws on Konrad Lorenz's biological study, *On Aggression* (1963), read in the light of Sigmund Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus myth in the book entitled *Totem and Taboo* (1924). Burkert proceeds from Lorenz's study to argue that community is always founded on aggression, which in turn is linked with male sexuality. This he understands in terms of the Oedipal complex. The sons of primeval man band together to murder their father for denying them his women but the father's murder is avenged by the sons' guilt. They renounce the newly acquired women and engage in inordinate veneration of their father. Burkert concedes that Freud's interpretation is a myth, but discerns a grain of historical truth in it: "Conscious killing is a kind of patricide,"[4] and the hunting feast enjoyed immediately afterward is a kind of restitution for the guilt incurred by committing it.

Konrad Lorenz defines ritual as a behavioral pattern that loses its primary function – present in its unritualized model – but which acquires instead the function of communication. The ritualized behavior pattern replaces reality with symbols, i.e. signs, whether verbal or non-verbal, in place of objects. In this new function ritual provokes and affirms social interaction; it

fosters the continuance of group identity. It does so by simulating reality and, should it fail in this, there may be a regression from symbolism back to reality itself.[5] This means human sacrifice and even cannibalism. In the rituals of the hunt and of blood sacrifice, aggressive behavior is diverted from men to animals; however, in myth, which is a verbal form of communication, the as-if dimension of ritual becomes reality, and the sacrificial victim becomes human. This would explain to Burkert why Ivanov reads the myths as evidence that human sacrifice was a fundamental institution in all prehistoric communities.

Archeology confirms that, whether or not gods were worshipped in the Paleolithic era, animal sacrifice did indeed occur, most often at burials, where it served to renew the memory of death. The sequence of events in these funerary rituals corresponded to the sequence of events in the hunt: abstinence, the "act" of killing itself, and then the funerary meal. However, there was another occasion for sacrifice. This was the initiation of the young by confrontation with death in male societies formed in order to strengthen the community of men: Burkert uses the word *Männerbund* to describe them. When man became a farmer, these male societies endured as secret societies where, in Burkert's expression, the activities wavered between demonic possession and horseplay.[6] Young men no longer learned to hunt and the sacrifice performed at their initiation became one at which the boy to be initiated was threatened with death, only to be replaced by an animal at the last moment. It is such a *Männerbund* that Burkert discerns in the cult of Zalmoxis.

Burkert cites the cult at the very end of his book as a conclusive and final example of how communal aggression in the form of blood sacrifice produces a sense of community. He does not explicitly analyze the cult but a kind of analysis is implied in the conclusion that he draws from it. He observes that, like the initiates at Eleusis, the Getae are "an elite group that sees the future 'bliss' of the initiate only in contrast to the lot of the uninitiated, who 'will lie in the mire'". The sacrifice itself Burkert takes to be an initiation ritual.

> The Getai [...] were convinced by Zalmoxis that "he and his drinking companions would not die": membership in the tribe and participation in festive eating and drinking guaranteed one's hopes for the next world.[7]

How does Burkert arrive at this conclusion? By the complex analogy that follows.

In chapter II of *Homo Necans* Burkert interprets the myth of Lycaeon, ancestral king of the Arcadians, who slaughtered a boy at the altar together with the sacrificial animals and mixed the boy's entrails with their meat, which he served up to the gods at his table. Zeus put an end to the commu-

nity of men and gods established at this meal and turned Lycaeon into a wolf (hence his name). The myth of Lycaeon as Burkert reads it serves to explain an initiation ritual hypothetically reconstructed from ancient sources that associate it with the altar of Zeus on the summit of Mount Lycaeon. The ritual was a nocturnal feast at which all participants ate from a dish they were led by tradition to fear might contain human entrails. The youngest participants were boys who, being most open to the power of suggestion, often believed themselves to be turned into wolves and who then, either spontaneously or as a result of manipulation, fled into the night to return nine years later as men. The boys must die before they enter the sphere of manhood.

Given that Burkert believes the Getic tribesman in Herodotus constituted a *Männerbund*, he would presumably read the myth of Zalmoxis much as he does the myth of Lycaeon. The boys of Thrace, like those of Arcadia, would have to "die" before they could enter the sphere of manhood. The Getic tribesmen would toss them not onto the row of upheld spears but just beyond them. Then they would feast with the boys on a sheep impaled and subsequently roasted in their stead. However this may be, Burkert's conclusion moves deliberately from the initiation ritual with its simulation of death in sacrifice to the actual experience of death. He maintains that once ritual has assimilated death into a pattern, "a real death [he does not say "one's own death" although that, apparently, is what he means] seems no more than a repetition, anticipated long ago." This is as close as Burkert comes to individual experience. Death for him is a social phenomenon. "The death of the individual," he writes, "is an integral part of communal life, for which reason the encounter with death is unavoidable. This, in turn, can elicit both the triumphant ecstasy of survival and the willingness to die."[8]

Now for Ivanov. Although community is no less a concern to Ivanov than it is to Burkert, Ivanov is intensely concerned with depth psychology as experienced by the individual and his discussion of religion is, if not dogmatically religious, nevertheless written in an idiom that recognizes the authenticity of transcendental experience in its own terms. Whereas Burkert bases his argument on a foundation of biology, anthropology and academic psychology, Ivanov's constructs his argument on personal intuition, for which he presents evidence *ad hoc*. The argument is elaborate but its kernel is simple. Every man is a god by virtue of his death. No other scholar has maintained this thesis: not Frazer before or Burkert after him. The god in question is of course Dionysus. In sacrifice, the priest of Dionysus who slaughters him also becomes identified with him, as both victim and god; so that in effect Dionysus falls victim to Dionysus and every man is a god by virtue of his own real or symbolic death, which is identified with that of Dionysus. Zalmoxis is the pivotal example of this thesis in *The Hellenic Religion*. Ivanov writes: "The dual nature of Zalmoxis is this: before death a man, after death a god."[9]

How can every man be a god by virtue of his death? By losing himself in ecstasy. Every man can be a god if, and only if, the outer change wrought by death goes hand in hand with an equally fundamental inner change. This change implies ambivalence and violence of feeling. The pleasure and pain of it are so intense that pleasure can bring pain and pain pleasure. It entails giving up one's rationally or socially defined self and, at the same time, gaining unity with the reality that lies beyond that self. It is by no means limited to physiological experience but it does take place in death and in orgasm understood as a temporary death. On these two physiological experiences Ivanov bases the two rituals of the Dionysus cult: human sacrifice and sexual revelry, the latter providing relief from the pity and fear aroused by the spectacle of death in the former. Human sacrifice and sexual revelry later developed into the art forms of tragedy and comedy. The history of masks provides a clue to the original unity of art and ritual. The first masks to be made were the death masks of fallen heroes. Later these masks came to be worn by stage performers who acted out the heroes' death. By their very nature they symbolize change and loss of self, for the easiest way to cease being oneself is to put on a mask.

Ecstasy is a no less visceral experience than aggression but, since it presupposes the temporary suspension of reason (and therefore also the presence of reason), it constitutes an exclusively and definitively human faculty. It destroys order. It also creates it. So Ivanov speculates that it may have generated the very faculties of language and reason which it suspends. "It is hardly possible to distinguish the origin of language from the general awakening of rhythmic and musical faculties, for the ecstasy of rhythm was also the first intuition of a religious order."[10] Ivanov singles out ecstasy as both the religious and the human faculty: man was a religious animal before he became a political animal and, as his first "human" behavior was ecstatic, he was and remains above all an ecstatic animal. Moreover, it is his ecstatic faculty that breaks the socially established bonds that separate him from other individuals and establishes true community.

To Ivanov the cult of Zalmoxis recalls periodic memorial feasts once held in honor of dead heroes who, in the person of masked surrogates, would return from the grave to join their votaries. Such feasts gave rise to the cults of many heroes, but only in the cult of Zalmoxis is the hero's surrogate said to be a messenger. The cult of Zalmoxis also recalls the equation of victim with god on the one hand and of priest with god on the other: that, in fact, is the obvious significance of the messenger in Herodotus's account. He is a new Zalmoxis, and the requests entrusted to him are prayers addressed to the god who descends to the underworld, whence he has power to bless or curse the living. Here is the religion of Dionysus at its inception: human sacrifice, orgiastic worship at funerary and memorial feasts, a god that dies and comes to life again. Zalmoxis is obviously no more than an abstraction of periodi-

cally repeated sacrifices or, in other words, of deification by sacrificial manslaughter. The logic of Getic ritual points to the same conclusion. If the one whom Herodotus calls the emissary is not pierced with spears, he cannot be god and the participants in the bloody revel are deprived of the communion with god that they would have obtained by staining themselves crimson with his sacrificial blood; he is clearly just a wicked man because he has not been graced with deification.[11]

The Getae deny death, it is true: death is just a temporary removal from this world. Yet though they deny death, they also worship it. Their god is not spared the necessity of that removal, transformation and restoration. He must taste death together with mankind, in whom he dwells. Every member of the ritual community is a Zalmoxis by virtue of his participation in the sacrifice and his right to become a victim. Every executioner is a potential victim. They are Zalmoxeis in the plural by analogy not just to the communities of Bacchoi but also to those of Bassars and Saboi, which Ivanov describes as proto-Dionysian. The god is hence the continuity of victims and, in that sense, the deification of death, which Ivanov understands to be, like orgasm, a form of ecstasy (and not vice versa).

If those facts of life, basic though they are, exhausted Ivanov's idea of religion, it would be roughly analogous to Burkert's idea. But the god is also the deification of ecstasy, which is broader still than death and sex. Ecstasy embraces all of human creativity, which results from the continual disintegration and reintegration of the human self and even, historically, of human culture, which through all changes remains, like Ivanov's concept of Dionysus, forever the same. The point of Ivanov's thesis is that Christianity has come to block the very impulse that originally motivated it: the impulse to change from within. Whenever religion blocks that impulse, it ceases to respond to the human condition. Open yourself to the confusion and hell of life: to the fear of being hurt. Then life is possible. Opening up means letting go of one's self-assigned self. It is repentance without the layers of dogmatized morality. A true penitent sees what he is and what he has done. He answers the Baptist's cry by gambling his identity in change.

Whereas Ivanov views religion as a way of expanding and fulfilling human potentiality, Burkert views it as a way of containing and inhibiting human aggression. He laments the breakdown of the ritual tradition and hopes for its renewal or for the appearance of a "new, non-violent man". The act of sacrifice, as Burkert conceives it, implies a transgression that brings with it the communal guilt of murder just as it also brings the possibility of expiating that guilt. It is, at its very origin, a highly ambivalent moral act. The crux of Burkert's theory is that, whenever this act is ritually performed or commemorated, the sacred turns violence against itself. The logic that underlay the ritualization of the hunt and once diverted the energy of *homo sapiens* from intraspecific aggression to other objects can now perhaps ward

off regression to brutality and even nuclear destruction. The observance of sacrificial ritual from generation to generation, which once taught each member of the species how to face his death, can still make death part of communal life. Death is overcome for social purposes by confrontation with death.

To Ivanov death is just one of an infinite series of inner changes. This holds true both in the individual and in the species. Violence is peripheral to his theory and he seldom uses the word, however often he may describe brutality and gore. Sacrifice knows no moral distinctions. Its principle is ecstasy, not guilt or fear, and though ecstasy crosses the borders of the self it is not transgression. It motivates both those religions which, like Christianity, are based on sacrificial ritual, and those religions which, like Buddhism, have no sacrificial ritual and replace frenzy with what Ivanov calls "the ecstasy of contemplation", which he compares with the philosopher's "aha" experience. The figure of Socrates, who knows the ecstasy of contemplation and dies for the truth at the hands of his fellow Athenians, becomes comparable in these terms with the figure of Jesus Christ.

Ivanov believes that religion at its inception was not a social institution: it was a visceral experience from which social institutions subsequently arose. Sin implies someone else's law. When I transgress that law, I sin. But if god dwells in me, then I am no longer preoccupied with sin. Since this experience opens the door to human intimacy, ethics necessarily and inevitably accompanies it. But it is a reflex of inner experience and not its cause. Ivanov and Burkert disagree on the nature and function of religion. Nevertheless, they are both right. If death and sex are the basic facts of life, this is reason at once for inhibition and for celebration. The cup of the eucharist, as sacrifice and funerary meal, is the suppression of the primitive. It is also the recovery of it.

NOTES

[1] Chapters I through V of *The Hellenic Religion of the Suffering God* (*Ėllinskaja religija stradajuščego boga*) first appeared in *Novyj put'* (*New Way*), 1904, Nos. 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 and 9 but, as that journal was abruptly closed, chapters VI through X (renumbered VI through X) were placed in another journal, *Voprosy žizni* (*Questions of Life*), 1905, Nos. 6 and 7. The title of Ivanov's study was changed in this second journal to *The Religion of Dionysus: Its*

Provenance and Influences (*Religija Dionisa: Ee proischoždenie i vlijanija*). A revised edition under the original title was printed and bound in 1917 by M. and S. Sabašnikov but, owing to a warehouse fire, it was never actually published. All quotations here refer to the periodical edition.

2 Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans* (Transl. Peter Bing). Berkeley 1983, p. 17.

3 *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 295.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 296.

9 *The Religion of Dionysus*, III, 'Orgiastic Clans', *Questions of Life* (*Voprosy žizni*), 1905, No. 6, p. 215.

10 *The Religion of Dionysus*, V, 'Conclusions', *Questions of Life* (*Voprosy žizni*), 1905, No. 7, p. 318.

11 This and the following paragraph very closely paraphrase *The Religion of Dionysus*, III, 'Orgiastic Clans', *Questions of Life* (*Voprosy žizni*), 1905, No. 7, pp. 214-215.