

MEMES AND ICONS

Reflections on the Spiritual Meaning of Two Species of Imagery

By Nicholas Meverel

1.

Simply to function in the world, we need to assume that the future will resemble the past to some degree. Taken too far, though, this assumption blinds us to the new. With respect to internet media, I sense the old guard of the humanities is averting its gaze from the bitter truth and hopes to die or retire rather than come to terms with the preeminent artistic medium of our day—memes.

You will know the preeminent artistic medium of your day by this sign: It arouses anger and is enjoyed on the sly. Whereas literary works today are prescribed smugly as moral medicine, “[t]he shocking innovators of [their] day—Swinburne or Zola—were read in secret by the young,” Jacques Barzun tells us, “who also went to see the Impressionists, hear Debussy, and sneak into a private performance of Ibsen.” (80) Place the riots at the Rite of Spring alongside the sea of geriatric coughing that now sandwiches every symphony movement. Calcification heralds the aging of art. When your artistic medium matures and hardens into institutions overseen by compliance officers, it turns harmless, as night follows day, and, because of its harmlessness, the young consider it a very pretty corpse. Art metamorphoses the

minds of the young only when sober managers find it hard to soberly manage. And no medium now is as unruly as memes.

Despair or denial may seem fitting when crude pixel drawings supersede paintings, prose, and even music and movies as the vital form of our time. To that sentiment, the only healthy response is, “Tough.” What happened must be reckoned with, or no counterattack will take.

2.

But before contending with memes, a few words about St. John of Damascus. In the early seventh century A.D., Muslim armies swept across the Levant and established their administrative capital at Damascus, where John was born around 675 to a Christian father who worked at the court of the caliph. John eventually abandoned his legal career for monasticism, joining the brotherhood at Mar Saba outside Bethlehem. Meanwhile, in Constantinople, Emperor Leo III began to champion a faction, the iconoclasts, who considered it blasphemous to venerate icons, and in 730 Leo banned their use. John is still remembered best for the vigorous literary stand that he took in favor of the veneration of the sacred images. Ironically, it was because John lived under the rule of Muslims, iconoclastic themselves, that Byzantine iconoclasts had difficulty laying hands on him, and he spoke his mind freely.

Many religious quarrels seem abstruse until we grasp their metaphysical stakes. So it is with icon veneration. All great religions acknowledge an infinite source of being, which in English we call “God.” This source obviously bears some relation to finite beings like us. But what is the nature of that relation?

Various traditions differ in their emphases: some accentuate God's high foreignness, others his intimacy with his creatures, and some even declare identity. Christianity announces that a human being once willingly tortured to death during the reign of Tiberius possesses the same being as this fathomless source. In light of this, it seems that even the most miserable finite beings attain a fresh dimension: they can be engrafted to the infinite. Puny things are still puny but suddenly out of them shines something colossal.

It should come as no surprise that such a faith made holy images. By the time of John of Damascus, the Byzantine world was awash with them: paintings, sculptures, carvings, frescoes, mosaics, of Christ, of saints, of the Mother of God. Monastics showed a special fervor for them. Yet because Christianity inherited the Israelite abhorrence of sacrifice to finite beings in the place of God ("idolatry"), the tradition of kissing and bowing to icons kindled the wrath of certain Christians. During a period of bloodshed and revolt, sacking and fleeing, various Byzantine sovereigns barred or restored the veneration of icons until their use was authorized for good in 843.

But what was the reason for allowing prayer before icons, given that they are clearly not God? "John of Damascus expressed the consensus of the great majority of the Council Fathers," Ivan Illich explained, "with his doctrine that an icon is a threshold. It is a threshold at which the artist prayerfully leaves some inkling of the glory which he has seen behind that threshold." (114) The icon painter presses visions of divinity into the least likely material. "What is more insignificant than colored goatskins?" wrote John in an iconophile polemic. "Are not blue and purple and scarlet

merely colors? Behold the handiwork of men becoming the likeness of the cherubim.” (Wilken 2601)

The Byzantine icon has its own peculiar genius. Its approach is neither the “realistic” one of pseudo-photographic perspective, nor the flattening of abstraction. It seems that by appearing in an icon the finite being becomes *a symbol of itself*, pointing back toward itself not through the vacuum-sealed chamber of postmodern reference, but by announcing its being in a more luminous dimension. Continual staring at icons instills the stance that finite things beckon beyond themselves, and icons implant a competence for sensing this beyond. Icon veneratorators feel convinced that an infinite context enfolds and sustains all that we touch and see. And so when Nietzsche mocked Christianity as “Platonism for the people,” he hardly understood the compliment he was paying it.

3.

A dozen centuries following the iconoclast controversy, in 2005, the American Matt Furie introduced into his comic strip the character Pepe the Frog, who seemed to be in the lineage of twentieth-century cartoon creations, notably in that copyright law could rap the knuckles of any who drew his likeness. Soon, though, a lawless online scene dedicated itself to renditions of Pepe—relying first unashamedly on the crude color palette of the Paint computer program, and later swelling to depictions more elaborate and accomplished than even those by his sidelined father. Pepe’s mien underwent a lasting change: he now stared into the notional camera with an air of raffish and self-conscious transgression, and a smile of devilish mischief contorted his taut,

green face. Jokesters, nihilists, and committed extremists merrily plastered Pepe on every available surface of the web until his infuriating expression prompted formal denunciations from esteemed journalists and non-governmental organizations. Like Dr. Frankenstein shooting at his creature, Furie brought a series of legal actions against the more visible disseminators but could do nothing to repress Pepe as such, the Ur-Pepe of his drawings having long ago been eclipsed by the mature folk deity. Pepe was off and away, rearing up with glee like a donkey on the loose, antinomian as the Gingerbread Man.

Pepe the Frog symbolized a sea change in technological media and is the prototype of the meme *qua* meme in his becoming *totally autonomous from his creator*, in the custody of no person or organization. True, speech itself has something of this autonomous and imitative quality, and a rumor takes on a life of its own. But Pepe was fixed, unlike a whisper—he was an artifact, though an ever-changing one. And true, slang, student doodles, bathroom stall etchings, and the “Kilroy was here” drawings beloved by American GIs during the Second World War all represent faint antecedents with their deliberately scandalous form of theme and variations. But Pepe was visible, global, and insolently posted into the feeds of revered cultural personages. And true, Cervantes himself was pestered by knockoff *Don Quixotes* that outsold his own. But Cervantes wrested back control of his creation. Pepe truly marked a clean break from the tradition of stable authorship. Never before had humanity had in its grips the gadgets to publish an interlocking array of digital bathroom graffiti that could fascinate, inspire, appall, distract—and dement.

But a meme is never simply a shared digital image, movie, or text, although it is always one of those; it needs additional features to become genuinely memetic. Three features supply the meme's quintessence. A meme must, first, be either bizarre or outrageous. New gadgets make possible new intensities of the weird. Elements of hitherto isolated cultural spheres can be juxtaposed, and footage of strange occurrences that would never have warranted broadcasting in the age of centralized media is now transmissible to millions. The irruption of content that old media considers scandalous or irrelevant is essential to the meme. Second, the meme is an alloy without precedent of the public and private spirits. People consume their memes not gathered in person but solitarily staring at a screen—brandishing memes in person is still an eccentric action. Nevertheless, the consumer is conscious that many others are consuming the same meme in the same condition of privacy, and anonymous posting only heightens the *sui generis* double sense of public and private. Third and finally, memes admit nearly limitless variation. The meme makers take an almost Beethovenian relish in working out of every possible transformation of a simple joke. And precisely because the making of memes is cheap, memes can mutate into the battle standard of any online faction. Although a meme in its purest state is a single image bestrewn with text, other media partake of the meme spirit insofar as they embody these traits. A simple text or article, if sufficiently bizarre or outrageous and posted online to elicit response, carries significant memetic admixture.

The three meme traits interpenetrate. The absurdity key to memes rests on their being surreptitiously consumed, and their limitless variation depends on their being a collective enterprise.

The utterly fresh public-private chimera given life by memes is itself an expression of new gadgetry—high-speed wireless internet and a populace saturated with interlinked screens. But just as the spread of automobiles and equal temperament both opened up and closed off possibilities for city life and classical composers respectively, the superabundance of linked screens conferred us new powers even as it choked others we thought were natural as air. This is the devil's bargain ingrained in all technological advancement: the gift of new capacities at the cost of being made rigid. Rail laid for a train allows spectacular improvements in tons hauled per hour, but this movement can now follow only one fixed path.

Our goal should not be simply to describe how memes function but to reach their meaning, which requires reaching their supposed ends. To understand the ends seemingly served by memes, we need to revert to the first principles of human desire. Assuming they have full bellies and a warm place to sleep, human beings crave above all *social recognition* and an *object to revere*. Memes supply, or seem to supply, these desiderata on the cheap. Every technology is a means to certain ends. But the nature of the means can distort how human beings come to think about ends. When the means becomes sufficiently intricate and addictive, we can even forget the ends, and our actions become almost independent of our original intentions as we jerk through life like robots. Memes do this to our impulses toward social recognition and reverence.

4.

First, social recognition. “Vanity is so anchored in the heart of man,” explained Pascal, “that a soldier, a soldier’s servant, a cook, a porter brags, and wishes to have his admirers. Even philosophers wish for them.” (39) Pathological narcissists are still in the minority as of this writing, but all crave at least a dose of appreciation, and to be acknowledged in the eyes of others. But the appreciation delivered by memes is of a peculiar kind. Precisely because memes are imbibed in private, people air attitudes and give free rein to sensibilities that they might otherwise suppress. The result is a feeling of easy and instant community, forged not through the shared work of building a household, attending a school, training an army, running a business, or any other social endeavor requiring us to push and sculpt the heavy world around us, but instead through the dexterous manipulation of images, light as balloons to my touch. This gives an intense and historically unprecedented sense of freedom and fellowship. My sense of righteousness, humor, or disgust is as peculiar to me as my own face, but I must compromise, sometimes even betray, my innermost feelings if I want to be friendly with the several dozen people I encounter most frequently in the offline world. I eschew controversy as the price of admission to society. Even those who highly prize their relationships will be familiar with the sense of suffocation that this bargain can engender, and those who feel especially alien to their locale may in the past have escaped into some subculture or intentional community.

But now, the recourse to Brook Farm or Goth culture becomes unnecessary, its expense having been suddenly undercut by a cheaper product: with the ascendance of the smartphone, my

other side, the side normally bound in a straitjacket, finds astonishingly generous validation online and a million whooping comrades 'round the girdled earth. My special obsession—social, sexual, political, artistic, religious, or whatever else—that once found no correspondence in my daily life is now magnified through the magical portal in my pocket, and we chant together like tree frogs. Highly specific communities form with an ease and in a multitude never possible before the internet. The outrageous and bizarre nature of memes signals and celebrates the fresh capacity of people to throng around previously weird and narrow interests.

But something has been betrayed, in the very act of my liberation: precisely because I sought these people out for a single aspect of them, they are reduced to that aspect, since online communities tend to monomania. Online, I can befriend only fragments of people, those fragments germane to the monomania, and can offer only a fragment of myself in turn. Those socialized through memes exhibit toward each other an attitude of devotion that flips instantaneously into loathing, an attitude previously reserved only for celebrities, since in the twentieth century only celebrities appeared to us mediated through gadgets. This democratization of the evils of celebrity is highly significant. Great literature has depicted how little we know about even those we know best. Yet through family, friendship, and work, we come to know human beings as many-faceted and replete with contradiction—rewarding, at times, but always difficult due to their independent existence. In contrast, online personality is a product of mechanical self-fashioning, and online community acculturates us to a society not of human beings but of

abstractions from the human. Both modes are “real,” yes, but online community is *intrinsically abstract*, and it reduces the rich though always inadequate language of face-to-face relation into the relatively impoverished language of the social media platform, which, because of its artificiality, is always smaller than the world it purports to represent, just as no map is the territory. But the relative ease and handy manipulability of this mechanical society makes it irresistible to many, as easy a choice as when the bourgeoisie exchanged their tiresome root cellars for refrigerators.

Another aspect of meme abstraction should be singled out for special attention. On social media, recognition, that dearly desired thing, is not only mechanized but quantified: likes and indignant replies receive a number, a *magnitude*, and opinions can be laid side by side as on a Cartesian plane to see which is truly better. Traditionally, our esteem for things escaped measurement, despite the muddle-headed efforts of the Utilitarians: how do I know whether my love for a certain bend in a river is “bigger” than my love for a certain piece by Shostakovich? Love isn’t made of matter; no rigid yardstick can be carried back and forth between my various values. But, under the reign of memes, love and hate *petrify into quantity*. The integers assigned to rate me are disturbingly definite, and everyone has an animal sense that victory goes to the poster with the bigger number. The action of pressing a button to signal approval or reproach is homogenous and easy, and the human being is reduced to the mathematical magnitude of the “content” he has posted. All these innovations replace the organic relationship to

value with rigid mechanism. When we fulfill our desires through mechanism, addiction always follows, and an addict is never free.

The kinship between mechanism and addiction is worth spelling out. A mechanism proceeds by necessity, according to its structure or programming, and undergirding these the immutable laws of physics. Biology reveals an aspect to organisms also proceeding along these lines. But organisms depart from mechanism in their longing for certain values. Any living thing values the avoidance of death: no asteroid ever considered it evil to be sucked into the sun. In human beings, matter comes to incarnate the longing for goodness, beauty, and truth for their own sakes, and some human beings even follow this longing unto death. This part of us no mechanism could produce. But the mechanical aspect of the human being remains, waiting, so to speak, for a chance to creep up and snatch the territory belonging properly to our *eros* toward value, and when this trick is accomplished the mind itself turns all compulsion. Surrounded, soothed, and slavishly entranced by mechanism, the human mind turns thought by thought mechanical and engineers away its native freedom. In his novel *The Third Policeman*, Flann O'Brien imagines a hell where bicyclists gradually transform into bicycles the more they ride them. The conceit is apt. Memes, which promise audacious new freedoms of expression and association, give their addicts a meme mind and so a mechanical one.

5.

Besides social recognition, human beings also need an object to revere. "So long as man remains free," said Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, "he strives for nothing so incessantly and so painfully

as to find someone to worship.” But memes are a gutter of endless ridicule, the very opposite of reverence. How could they scratch this particular itch?

The meaning of comedy has been much misunderstood. Irreverence is the essence of humor, and any joke that lands does so by stripping away with a jolt the mantle of importance worn by its pretentious victim. A successful joke juxtaposes the self-serious with its deflation: John Cleese’s stern face with his silly walk. But just as the establishment of borders gives shape to a country, irreverence gives the sense, illusory or not, that the unserious is being whittled away and what will remain deserves true reverence as “the one thing necessary.” *Homo sapiens* is the only species who laughs because he is the only species who worships, and comedy is corrosive liquid into which we dip the things of this world, supposing only the holy could survive the bath. Irreverence is the Newtonian “equal but opposite reaction” to the action of our movement toward the sacred. That standup comedy resembles no form of oratory so much as a sermon is no accident.

But the mechanical nature of memes again imprisons us in addiction. Twentieth century mass media had already led many into a compulsive irreverence, and a theme in essays late in that century was writers’ ungranted wish to stop sneering at everything and everyone, a wish that betrayed the knowledge that irreverence is properly only reverence’s shadow. But if T.V., music, and movies were gin, memes are fentanyl. Under their tutelage, irreverence becomes automatic and high-speed; when your phone outfits you with the ability to lob mockery at any ridiculous person on the globe, your finger comes to click almost

against your will. So it always is when desire amalgamates with mechanism. Irreverence might have once been an effluvium of our longing for the sacred, but this ultimately spiritual seeking now sinks into mechanism, unable to extricate itself from the gears where it finds itself caught.

But isn't this picture incomplete? Although memes spread irreverence, even the most callous internet nihilist maintains a little shrine in his heart to something—a political cause, a social movement, a private relationship. He may freely admit his irreverence toward everything he doesn't revere—obviously—but finally he does love something. This is true enough for him but immaterial to the species, which has since its infancy taught itself to see holiness by no path more potent than *worship in common*. The psychologist Thomas Suddendorf has distinguished human beings from all other animals in our thirst for joint attention to an object, a tendency first apparent when children beg their parents to “Look! Watch!” Consciousness itself seems almost like a skill honed through shared staring and common acts of acclaim and censure.

Turn from this ethos to the meme world where a joke comparing, say, Immanuel Kant to an obscure sitcom actor can quickly find for the first time in history an appreciative audience of hundreds. But this congregation of the likeminded conceals a deeper fragmentation: this small troop is bound by common praise and disdain, but of such a specific nature, mediated by such a private argot, that its binding within is its alienation without. Members socialize by circulating memes that would be unintelligible or unacceptable outside the group, as a kind of

blood oath signaling their commitment. All online communities consider themselves beleaguered by outsiders and wrecked by saboteurs, and the ritual expulsion of heretics only heightens the purity of their isolation. When dust congealed to form stars, it set an abyss of light-years between them.

The result for humanity as a whole is the conviction that *nothing can be revered in common*. Online factions may agree about nothing else, but they agree about that. Even if a community considers some aspect of the world beautiful and holy, they consider everything else absurd. Once diametrically opposed convictions cancel each other out, the consensus creed remaining is simply that the better part of the world is a disgusting freakshow. Under this belief, my fellow feeling toward colleagues, acquaintances, and people on the park bench is profoundly sapped. Lonely among the lonely, I redouble my devotion to my online faction, and the cycle continues.

Richard Weaver told us that the true basis of society is a “metaphysical dream,” “[w]ithout [which] it is impossible to think of men living together harmoniously over an extent of time. The dream carries with it an evaluation, which is the bond of spiritual community.” (18) Memes are to the metaphysical dream as moths are to a wool shirt.

In addition to these spiritual goals, memes commandeer a goal necessary to our physical survival: namely, the will to manipulability. All organisms must come to terms with their surroundings, but human beings excel all others in the fabrication of environments intended for our convenience. The more I set up my place for handy use, the safer I feel—yet this tendency enfolds

a seed of evil because an environment capable of hasty assembly is also capable of hasty disassembly. Our technological society is full of changes, vertiginously quick, that no individual seems to will. Concepts too are a kind of technology in that they are a rigid means for thought. When concepts become inscribed in our gadgets as memes, we feel soothed, the way a blacksmith feels soothed when he grips his favorite hammer: here is something we can wield. But precisely because our concepts are now fabricated artifacts capable of cheap dissemination, they can dissolve and be replaced: in a memetic climate, the weather fronts of ideology shift in the blink of an eye. Aping our more palpable technologies, memes produce a set of concepts at first pitilessly rigid and then inexorably mutable. Under the sway of mechanical thought, the present is no longer nourished by the past, and the future no longer appears to us as a creative prolonging of the present but as an arbitrary lurch. The cumulative essence of culture as the work over generations, or even over months, becomes obsolete as vinyl records, surviving only as an antiquarian curiosity.

6.

It might seem that if memes are so spiritually deleterious, men and women of good will should oppose them—a worthy goal frustrated only by the fact that the victory of meme culture is inevitable. Splash colored liquid into a vessel of water: the dye will slowly diffuse throughout the vessel, moving from places of higher concentration to the lower, at a rate mathematically predictable. Yet, as Erwin Schrödinger explains, the movement of any given dye particle is in no way predictable: each particle “suffers the same fate of being continually knocked about by the impacts of

the water molecules and thereby gradually moving in an unpredictable direction . . . “ (14) Yet because the particles number in the millions, the *aggregation* of their random movements obeys an iron law expressible as a partial differential equation. Something similar happens online. Meme addicts may never intend, with their particle-sized efforts, to effect the tendencies of meme culture as a whole and to impose its iron laws. Nevertheless, jostling together in their millions, they do nothing else so well. Their pet causes may fail, or not; but the meme sensibility triumphs.

The accomplishment of seductive short-term goals helped bring memes to power. A potent motive for the memetic vanguard was to smash the narratives of twentieth century mass media and education, whose leaders had superintended minds through centralized organizations and seemed touchingly to believe even decades after the appearance of the internet that their reign would last in perpetuity. As organized propaganda put greater and greater distance between itself and the reality people saw with their own eyes, the temptation to take up new weapons became irresistible, and the charismatic churn of memes began to trouble the dreams of the old hierarchy. Panicking, certain credentialed “thought leaders” began to frankly proclaim their privilege to describe the real, and these confessions only strengthened the resolve of the memetic rebellion. But the result was not the replacement of poisonous orthodoxies with better ones but the abolishment of orthodoxy altogether and the shattering of consensus into numberless, jarring sects.

The spirit of the meme even washes backward into the residual media it supplanted: an editor may place an outrageous headline over an article of subtlety and depth, and the headline alone circulates online, prompting calls for the author to be hog-tied. Two successful recent movies, *Joker* and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, seemed to arrive already blended and speckled with meme thought, and their social media reception seemed more like the real artwork, compared to which the movies were mere occasions. Pundits trained up under the moribund literary culture try to practice their art on social media, but a gravitational pull inclines their work toward a meme sensibility, and punditry interfused with memes replicates with Darwinian remorselessness.

But even withdrawal from the meme culture bolsters its character, just as the rumspringa of the Amish, in which Amish teenagers live in the wider world before choosing whether to return to the fold, boils off those members unsuited to their special way of life. Forswearing memes, I remove myself from the ideological gene pool. With a Satanic genius, meme culture hedges its bets and turns a profit whether one participates or not.

Still, some memes try to call people to a higher, even a metaphysical purpose. Images of Byzantine icons in particular seem to enjoy a lively life online. It needs emphasis that these admirable efforts are still irrelevant to memes' consequences in the aggregate. Whether I support this or that cause is negotiable, from the perspective of memes; what isn't negotiable is the spirit of compulsive irreverence, the fanatical feeling of kinship with people I know only abstractly, and my acquiescence to the

constant mutability of cultural reference. I may even explicitly deplore these tendencies and yet by participating in meme culture do their will. To reverse Mephistopheles, I become part of that power which eternally wills good and eternally works evil.

The contrast between an icon culture and a meme culture could hardly be starker. Under memes, the iconographic vision of the material world as a cracked and tarnished mirror catching the image of infinite beauty can be sustained only by the individual, not in common, and because people are socialized into their values, the notion that we live at the threshold of a beyond must join the endangered species list. The icon is a particular, material thing, capable of destruction or preservation, and its venerators treat it almost like a living being. The meme has no location and constantly mutates under the palpations of its addicts. The icon invites its venerators to glimpse intimations of holiness in even the most abject creatures. The meme induces its addicts to quantify love and hate and to become caught in a compulsive irreverence that sterilizes the world of holiness. The icon allows participation in the good as such. The meme is always instrumental to some other good, theoretical and distant. The icon is an inherently public thing, even when cloistered; it announces itself visually. The meme pops into a screen angled at one avid face.

The ultimate significance of the meme is its channeling of fundamental human urges into a medium entirely abstract and manipulable. In doing so, it trains the human being to see existence as a mechanism, which is self-enclosed and self-explanatory. The sense of the beyond that has nourished

religion, art, and philosophy for millennia is extinguished with a tip of the pail, following the lighter sprinklings that began with radio and newsreels. “O God,” said Hamlet, “I could be bounded in a nut shell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.” Not because of any particular “content” but *by its very nature as a mechanical medium*, the internet blots up the bad dreams that harried Hamlet, Lao Tzu, Heraclitus, and so many other “impractical” people. Hamlet’s nutshell becomes an impregnable fortress.

Given what memes inculcate in us, what should we expect from a meme culture? We will see a bipolar swerving between a smug addiction to routine and attempts to savagely tear down the mechanisms we have ourselves erected. We will see pseudo-religious movements rise and fall with extraordinary speed and violence. We will see an intensified craving for recognition of any kind and for any reason. We will see any person or project set up for admiration immediately attacked for the sheer vicious fun of it, and, correspondingly, people and projects raised up for no other reason than to induce splenetic rage. We will see individuals considered only as instances of a type, and intricate schools of human typology will emerge to supply a counterfeit understanding of our fellow beings. We will see matter regarded only as our obedient slave and otherwise of no account, and artwork tolerated only insofar as it propagandizes approved social reform. The trend away from gatherings in person will accelerate, and strangers, even neighbors, will treat each other with at best a provisional surface friendliness that conceals abiding suspicion. Finally, and most profoundly, we will see not the presence but the absence of the sense that anything exists

beyond what we can measure and manipulate. But precisely because this is an absence, few will remark on this greatest mutation of all, the mutation making possible all the rest.

7.

In the twentieth century, another rash of iconoclasm visited Russia. As a young Soviet Pioneer, Vladimir Soloukhin witnessed his classmates gleefully breaking icons and even held up for praise by their teachers for tossing their parents' household icons into the furnace. Traveling as a state-sanctioned writer, the adult Soloukhin discovered that the black boards he found barring doors, knocked into potato crates, and covering smelly barrels were in fact icons, often centuries-old: the icon painters had applied a varnish of boiled linseed oil that turned black in a century, but, as Soloukhin learned from friends, the assiduous rubbing of cottonseed oil could restore their radiant color. The first time he witnessed this process, Soloukhin was transported: “[i]t was like looking at a bright screen from the dark of an auditorium—a screen showing a different period of time, a different beauty, a life other than ours. Another planet, another civilisation, a mysterious, fairy world.” (22) He became a frankly obsessed collector of icons, having previously had, as he put it, as little interest in them as in the “problems of starfish migration in the Kara Sea.” (15)

Visiting the home of two old sisters on the rumor that they had an interesting collection of icons, Soloukhin idly stretched out his hand toward a broken black board whose surface suggested dimly “a picture of the Virgin with huge mournful eyes.” (78) One of the sisters snatched it away and hid it under her apron:

“Haven’t you mocked them enough? Are you still not satisfied? Don’t I remember how you went at them with axes? You shan’t, I tell you! Hit me if you like, chop me to bits, throw me into the stove—I won’t let you touch it!” (79) Soloukhin was then still an agnostic art collector, and then still a loyal servant of the state.

“But why did she hide that broken-off piece and not one of the other icons?” Soloukhin asked the other sister.

“Because it has a special history. There used to be a miraculous icon called the Galitsky Mother of God. When they closed the church, the village teacher chopped it up for firewood, and my sister crept into his backyard at night and found the part with the Virgin’s face on it, and she’s kept it like this ever since. You see, she’s not to be blamed really. It was the only consolation of her old age, and when people are no longer young you can’t re-educate them.” (79)

Poor old woman, with her incapacity for reeducation! We suffer from no similar weakness. But it may be only the rediscovery of this ancient weakness that can prepare a way for our resurrection from the meme culture.