

The Rhetoric of Icons: From Image to Voice

Geng Youzhuang, Renmin University of China

Abstract: Does Jean-Luc Marion mark a transition in his thought from image to voice, from the visual to the spoken? Through a careful analysis of his texts, assisted by the insightful interpretation of David Tracey, this article traces the way such a transition takes place. Here theology and philosophy mingle in the French phenomenological and Roman Catholic tradition in a way that assumes the two are intimate partners.

At the end of my paper, “Aesthetic Theology, or, Theological Aesthetics after Hans Urs von Balthasar,” I wrote, “Perhaps we still need to savour carefully the story told by John Damascene” (Geng 2008: 26). Now, let us first of all “savour carefully” this story:

When Abgar was Lord [*kurios*] of the city of Edessenes, he sent an artist [*zographon aposteilanti*] to make a portrait [*homoigraphesai eikona*] of the Lord [*kuriou*]. When the artist was unable to do this because of the radiance of His face, the Lord Himself pressed a bit of cloth to His own sacred and life-giving face and left His own image on the cloth and so sent [*aposteilai*] this to Abgar who had earnestly desired it (quoted in Ward 2007: 37).

This widely-known story tells of the birth of an icon (allegedly the first icon). According to art historian Hans Belting, the appearance of this story in the Middle Ages points towards three issues. “On the one hand, a portrait after the living model, as distinct from one of invented, fictitious gods, gives evidence of Christ’s historical life and of the reality of his human nature. ... On the other hand, the miraculous or, in other versions, mechanical reproduction of Christ’s features prevented any equation with the ‘gods made by human hands’ or idols ... Finally, Christ’s intention in sending King Abgar an image of himself would prove that he *wished* to have images made of himself. Thus not only the genuineness of the image but also the appropriateness of venerating it were proved legitimate” (Belting 1994: 208–9). The first of these three issues has been the subject of long and heated debate in Christian history, while the third was closely related to the “iconoclastic movement” in the Middle Ages. Seen from a modern perspective, these two questions have lost their immediate significance, but their theoretical significance has remained until today. The second issue constitutes the most significant element of the story and manifests the “logical” significance embodied in paradox and miracle. That the “rhetoric of the icon” might bear certain meaning finds its roots in this story. And this is why this story *per se* deserves further discussion.

In his paper “The Beauty of God,” Graham Ward analyses this story in detail. In Ward’s opinion, we can see from the rhetoric of the story that the birth of an icon originated from an act of communication, an action carried out by God, the artist and the beholder in concert. First, John Damascene uses the same word to address

Abgar (*kurios*, Lord) and Jesus Christ (*kurios*, Lord), which means that Abgar, like any other human being, possesses to a degree certain characteristics of Christ, and that Jesus Christ, as anyone else, possesses certain human characteristics. The evidence here is in the biblical teaching that human beings were made in the image of God, a subject upon which a great many theological treatises have been written. Second, it is Abgar who sent (*aposteilanti*) an artist to make a portrait of Christ, and Christ sent (*aposteilai*) a portrait he himself had made to the hand of Abgar. Abgar desired to have a portrait of Christ, and Christ also hoped to participate in the making and transmission of his sacred image. Therefore, it is not reason/rationality that stimulated, operated or restrained the making of an icon, nor even faith, but a desire (Ward 2007: 36–9). What is more, the event of Christ making a self-portrait constitutes a certain parallel relation with Christ's incarnation: "‘This is my face’ the giving of the cloth suggests; echoing the sacramental ‘This is my body’" (43). The story tells us that the icon is a gift from God. Finally, and the most importantly, the icon as a gift from God is not an image, portrait or painting in a general sense, but is constituted by word, speech and the Word of God. Ward quotes a Medieval philosopher who pointed out that, "Is not writing only an icon for audible speech? So, this [God's writing on the tablets of the Law] is an icon for the primordial, talking Word" (quoted in Ward 2007: 42). Therefore, to look at the icon is to hear God's voice. Or, we may say that the icon is not the object of seeing but the object of hearing. It is through seeing-hearing the icon that we can reach the understanding and acquisition of the Divine Word in direct perception. It is as Ward has claimed, "a mode of re-cognition in an operation of desire" (39). In this sense, the real value of the icon lies in that "it *does* something, rather than simply *is* something" (40).

Another issue concerns, as Ward indicates, the fact that in these two actions of "sending" there is a sharp difference. In contrast to Abgar's sending an artist to make a portrait of Christ, the image Christ made of himself is to be sent to Abgar. Since no definite pronoun appears in the latter narrative, it is not clear who actually sent the portrait to Abgar—the artist or Christ himself. We will never know the answer. In Ward's view, this might be the deliberate intention of John Damascene. Here we encounter a most interesting and meaningful detail. We know that because of the divine nature of Christ, the artist could not fulfil his mission: to make a portrait of Christ. As a result, Christ himself made one by his own hands. Christ finished a work that was supposed to be finished by an artist. However, we do not know whether it was the artist, or Christ, or someone else who sent the portrait to Abgar. If it is true, then, how can we say that this (the begetting of the portrait) was constituted by Christ, the artist and Abgar, who was both a sponsor and a beholder? Ward answers the question in this way: it is the inability of the artist who is a human being that manifests the divinity of Christ, and Christ's behaviour that manifests the human nature of Christ. In regard to seeing both the self-image and beauty from the other, we may say that the achievement of this icon is that it occurs by the hands of all (including other beholders and readers). More importantly, we see here something similar to the features of textuality: "The authoring is subordinated to the telling" (Ward 2007: 55) As readers, we are told in the story that a portrait was to be sent to the hand of one who desired it. We do not know who this person is. In the same way, the story teller did not intend to explore or express clearly who the giver was because

here the most important point is giving, not the giver. Similarly, the telling of the story is more important than the teller of the story. We know that gift and giving, or being-given, is a critical point in some areas of contemporary Western thought, especially in phenomenology. Jean-Luc Marion explored this issue in a creative way in the second book of his trilogy on theological phenomenology—*Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. Due to the publication of this book and Jacques Derrida's discussion of this book that Marion's thought gained significance in "postmodern" philosophical and theological theories.

In Ward's discussion of the story of Abgar, he refers to Marion's work and comments on his thought. According to Ward, Marion's idea of the relations between icon and idol, look and gaze, are still based on Kant's dualistic view of ontology and phenomenology. Therefore, Marion's account of iconicity shares assumptions of with Kant's account of the sublime and Jean-François Lyotard's explicitly Kantian aesthetics of the "unpresentable." Ward claims that his own theological phenomenology is different in two respects: first, it refuses to discuss the relation between the subject and the object on the basis of Kantian dualism; second, theological phenomenology places more emphasis on both Christ and incarnation rather than isolating one moment in the *oikonomia* of salvation—crucifixion (Ward 2007: 40–41n). Even so, it is obvious that Ward has been inspired and influenced by Marion. In my opinion, although Ward has realized the significance of Marion's theory, the greater part of his discussion is on Marion's early works, and Ward does not pay enough attention to the changes in Marion's thought which appear in his later work.

The starting point of Marion's philosophy and theology is the analysis of the difference between icon and idol. Behind that analysis lies his discussion of the relation between "look" and "gaze." In his early work, *God without Being*, Marion suggested that "'*eidolon*' presupposes the Greek splendor of the visible, whose polychromy gives rise to the polysemy of the divine, whereas '*eikon*,' renewed from the Hebrew by the New Testament and theorized by patristic and Byzantine thought, presents the only and invisible One Divinity" (Marion 1991: 7–8). But this conflict should not be confined within the polemic between so-called "pagan art" and "Christian art"; rather, it should be explored from those aspects that may disclose the differences and relations between these two phenomenologies. What deserves our further attention is that, for Marion, icon and idol are not two completely different or contradictory opposites: "The icon and the idol determine two manners of being for beings, not two classes of beings" (Marion 1991: 8). Besides, it is because of the interactive impact of these two "arts" upon each that we are able to establish a kind of relation between the visible and the invisible. As a result, the phenomenon can be presented and meaning can also be begotten. If we say that the idol provides a kind of image for our vision to look at, then this look could be our own mirror, whereas the icon constructs a kind of calling through the invisible, enabling us to realize the existence of the other in our response to that call. In the simplest sense, we might say that, in Marion's view, the idol is the gaze that can be reduced to "self," while the icon is the speech of the other and cannot be reduced.

Here again we need to discuss further the issue of the art of painting. Although Marion notes several times that the question of the icon should not be confined

within the boundaries of Christian art, the question of idol and icon should not be limited within the controversy between idol and icon in Western church history either. It has gone far beyond the differences between pagan art and Christian art. Marion himself used paintings as examples in his works, and indeed wrote an important book that can be described as concerning “art theory”—*The Crossing of the Visible*. While Marion explains his view of the relation between painting and phenomenology in the preface to the book, what is more interesting, however, is a paragraph in the “Preface to the Chinese Translation.” Marion summarizes briefly the major content and ideas of the book, and then raises some questions concerning whether his ideas can be effective in a Chinese context:

A directly related issue does not lie in whatever role those concepts originating from theology and Christianity might play (for instance should we insist on the opposition between idol and icon?) but primarily in the relation between the visible and invisible itself. This relation has a general role in western art (including American abstract art)—but does it have the same effect in Chinese painting? For instance, in Chinese painting, should we insist that the significance of perspective (geometric perspective) is to make use of the invisible? Can we include in the topic perspective, and the interlacing of various gazes? What sort of function should we impute to the role of *l'écriture* left on the picture? Does calligraphy prescribe painting, so that the latter is controlled by *l'écriture* in a certain sense? Or, in the opposite case, if we think of *l'écriture* in the name of calligraphy—is painting re-encompassing *l'écriture*? Or, is the alternative more probable, that these questions are not just coming from westerners' views of art, even if in Chinese painting the visual effect itself never held a central status? (Marion 2010: 13)

We do not have time to discuss in detail the related issues in Chinese painting. However, to ask these questions will undoubtedly promote Chinese scholars' thinking on the art of painting. If the issue of perspective and the relation of Chinese characters to calligraphy and painting are not new topics, the issue concerning gaze and the relation between the visible and invisible has never been seriously reflected or discussed in Chinese theories of painting (in Chinese art theory there is much discussion of form and meaning but these have completely different implications).

Now let us return to Marion's philosophical and theological reflection on icons. If we say that in *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, by proposing and explaining the nature of being given, the structure of calling and responding put forward by Martin Heidegger has been explored and uniquely interpreted, then in the last of Marion's trilogy, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, by explaining and creatively applying the concept of “face” raised by Emmanuel Levinas, Marion's thought on the icon obviously turned from image to voice. There, “face” has gone beyond Levinas' ethical sphere, becoming a “call” in a wider sense. And thus he enters into an infinite hermeneutics through our “responses.” In the end, in this infinite hermeneutics, the waiting of face and the waiting of God are united as one, and the hearing of the other's voice is reduced to the hearing of God's voice. Thus, not only Marion's early theory on the idol and icon is re-interpreted, but the so-called theological turn of French phenomenology is accomplished.

Concerning the “face,” Marion first of all points out that the “I” as the subject cannot constitute the “face” as an objective phenomenon because “face” pre-exists “I.” As an event, face works on me or to me. Besides, “this happens in reverse so that my look is submerged, in a counter-intentional manner” (Marion 2002: 113). Second, unlike the physical flesh, the face cannot be phenomenized by senses or by look. It is because when I look at the face of the other, my vision will be directed to the eyes of that face, or to be more exact, to the pupils of the eyes in that face, where there is nothing to be looked at, nor objects that can be constituted by intentionality. “Thus, in the face of the other person we see precisely the point at which all visible spectacle happens to be impossible, where there is nothing to see, where intuition can give nothing [of the] visible” (Marion 2002: 115). If this is true, the problem is that if the face could not provide anything to be seen, why we still need to look at it? Why not give up the effort of looking for a phenomenon there? Marion believes that we should not hastily do so because even though face has not been reduced to an object, even though the face does not allow itself to be grasped by intentional purpose, it can still provide something for us.

In his book, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Levinas points out that if the face could provide anything for us, it would be because the face shows itself in a very unique way, namely “the face speaks” (1969, 66). Besides, when the face speaks, it matters not what it speaks but that it is speaking. In other words, with the face, as expression, the “first content of expression is the expression itself” (1969, 51). On this matter, Marion offers further clarification. First, “To speak is not necessarily the same here as making use of the physical word and the material sounds that it emits. ... Thus the word is played first in the listening and in the silence of the sense [meaning]. In this way the face speaks in silence” (Marion 2002, 116). In other words, only when we are in the mode of listening can the face speak, even if it is a silent speech. Second, when the face speaks, the reason that the beholder turns the look into listening is because here stands a counter-look: in the eyes and in the void of pupils the look escapes my look and envisages my look in return, face-to-face or at my looking. Marion suggests that “it sees me first, because it takes the initiative.” The look, gaze, or even the intent watching of the face compels us not to look but to turn to listen. In this moment, a genuine structure of calling and responding or a genuine relation of questioning and answering can be established. In order to explain this point clearly, Marion offers a unique interpretation of one of the Ten Commandments—“Thou shalt not kill,” an example also used by Levinas in his discussion of the “face.” For Marion, the existence of the face or the possibility of the existence of the face lies in my promise to the other person that I must not kill. This is not just an ethical question but also a phenomenological question. If I kill the other person, his or her face would disappear immediately and be congealed into a simple object. More importantly, in this situation, the relation between the “I” and the “face” will end, because “the face in its injunction obliges me to situate myself in relation to it” (Marion 2002, 117). Therefore, the injunction—Thou shalt not kill—first of all is exercised *as* an injunction, independently of its contents. People can use other injunctions to replace it insofar as they are as strong as this one. The critical point is whether these injunctions can send out a call or an appeal to those who can hear them, even though these injunctions are silent calls or voiceless

appeals. After all, the face “must appear under the form, not of an object spectacle, but of a call” (Marion 2002, 118). Here lies the difference between icon and idol: the former is a call as the object to be heard, and the latter is a spectacle as the object to be seen. In this way, Marion turns back to his idea of the icon and tries to redefine Levinas’s concept of face. For Marion, “The face ... accomplishes the phenomenological operation of the call more, perhaps, than any other phenomenon (saturated or not) That is why what imposes its call must be defined not only as the other person of ethics (Levinas), but more radically as the icon. The icon gives itself to be seen in that it makes me hear [understand] its call” (Marion 2002: 118–19). Similar to the icon, the face is invisible (concerning its non-objectification and conceptualization), but it can still work with the beholders. What is more, as icon, the accomplishment of the phenomenality of the face never consists in making itself seen but in its being heard (understood). Here Marion emphasizes the word “respect.” Although the root of this word, *spectare*, shows that it is related to attracting sight and attention, fundamentally speaking, the appearance of respect is “because I feel myself called and held at a distance by the weight of an invisible look, by its silent appeal. *To respect* is also understood as the counter-concept of *to look at*” (Marion 2002, 119). In this sense, we may say that to respect is to hear, or vice versa, to hear is to respect. This reminds us of a phrase favored by Martin Heidegger, “*Denken ist Danken*,” to think is to thank (Heidegger 1969, 144).

An unavoidable question is what we can hear from the face of the other? Marion’s answer is that the face that speaks does not express finite or concrete contents. “The expression of the face expresses an infinity of meanings. This infinity is marked first in the fact that the features and movements of face, even accompanied by explicative words, cannot be translated into a concept or a finite proposition” (Marion 2002, 119–20). This not only works on me because the experience of the other is definitely outside me, and even for others, this experience is also too complicated and mixed, constantly changing. Therefore, in a strict sense, face itself may be unclear about what it speaks. This leads to another question, “Must the face that envisages me remain an unintelligible phenomenon, because without signification?” (Marion 2002, 122). To this question, Marion’s answer is “No,” which should not surprise us. The key point is that if the face does not contain the significance of being conceptualized, this is not because of the shortage of meaning but because of the excess of meaning. Here is the uniqueness of Marion’s phenomenology. On the one hand, the speech of the face as an infinite stream begetting meaning will never be reduced to a concept. On the other hand, the “I” who receive the other from the outside, at a distance of alterity, is constantly renewed. Therefore, the communication with the face of the other is not to discover what the face wants to express, what its expression means or what it exactly wants to say, but to envisage the face that cannot express a concrete meaning; anticipating something that can replace it may endow that face with a meaning or significance. This replacement is called the “event” by Marion. Thus, “what a face expresses is recognized in what happens to it—the act or the event that happens to it and that contradicts or confirms the spoken word or the silent expression.” This is why Marion believes that “To envisage a face requires less to see it than to wait for it, to wait for its accomplishment, the terminal act, the passage to effectivity” (Marion 2002, 119). For that “I,” the accomplishment of the

face is to evoke a call that can be heard by me. But this does not mean that the face in the end will give a definite and specific meaning, but to say that I am put or located in a position to hear and interpret this expression without end. More importantly, even when one is at the end of one's life, even at the moment when the face of the other is disappearing, one cannot guarantee that the face will disclose its ultimate meaning. Therefore, Christian theology prudently and decently postpones this last judgment to the Last Judgment, leaving it to God. But, we must remember that "while we are unable to accomplish this judgment, the duty to pursue its hermeneutic without end remains to our finitude." On the one hand, even when the other person dies and his/her face disappears, the hermeneutic does not end. Rather, "it is starting from the instant of his or her death that the work of mourning begins and, indissolubly, of memory" (Marion 2002, 123). On the other hand, even after I have disappeared, the hermeneutic of that face will not end because that face also belongs to the public, and other hermeneutics, including those contradictory to mine, remain existent. In any case, there will always be speech and a hermeneutic between the two face-to-face opposites. For this "I," the infinite hermeneutic means a responding without end, which is based upon a hearing without end.

Now we can see clearly that even though look and gaze have always been the major concern in Marion's phenomenology, speech and hearing have now caught his attention. Elsewhere in his later works, we find a similar emphasis. For instance, in his article "The Voice without Name: Homage to Levinas," Marion observes:

The mode of givenness of the face is determined by Levinas without ambiguity—it gives itself in the mode of the appeal: "It is precisely in this call to my responsibility by the face which assigns me, which commands me, which calls me; it is in this placing into question that the Other is my neighbor." ... Formally, one might say that phenomenality thus passes from vision to speech, or from a vision which sees, produced by the ego, to speech which is heard, which is to say, received by the ego. One should not underestimate the importance of this turn, since the intervention of hearing in the place and instead of vision breaks with the metaphysical primacy of the gaze (Marion 2000, 226).

In fact, in Marion's thought, whether it is called philosophy or theology, the turn from the phenomenology of vision to the phenomenology of voice, from the face of God to the voice of God, appears clearly. Besides, if we treat the theological turn of phenomenology as a continuous movement, such a turn already began with Levinas, was made more specific in the arguments of Michel Henri and Jean-Louis Chretien, and is accomplished by Marion's comprehensive explication. Marion's trend has been noticed by, among others, David Tracy. After summarizing the three developing stages of Marion's thought—re-reading Descartes, a phenomenology of theological language, a new phenomenology of saturated phenomena—Tracy points out:

I suggest that the next step for Marion is not to return to a phenomenology of strictly theological language (Dionysius, St. Thomas, Augustine, Luther, et al.), but first spend more phenomenological time on the original revelation itself, as witnessed in the Scriptures, insofar as Scripture both informs and transforms

all later theologies. Hence, my final proposal: once scriptural revelation is more fully described, a phenomenology of the voice will become at least as necessary as any phenomenology of the visible—face or icon. No one can see the face of God and live, as Exodus insists. But the voice of God—for Moses, even for Job in the whirlwind, is always there. And in the New Testament, the fact that the Word becomes flesh also means that, in Jesus the Christ, the voice becomes face. A phenomenology and hermeneutics—of voice and face in the God-man, Jesus the Christ—remains the principal task of any fully Christian theology (Tracy 2007, 64).

Bibliography

- Belting, Hans. 1994. *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Images before the Era of Art*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Geng Youzhuang. 2008. "Aesthetic Theology, or, Theological Aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthassar." *Journal for the Study of Christian Culture*, no. 20: 26.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1968. *What Is Called Thinking?* Translated by Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray. New York: Harper & Row.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lings. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. 1991. *God without Being: Hors-texte*. Translated by Thomas A. Carlson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 2000. "The Voice without Name: Homage to Levinas." In *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. Edited by Jeffrey Bloechl. New York: Fordham University Press.
- 2002. *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*. Translated by Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud. New York: Fordham University Press.
- 2010. *The Crossing of the Visible*. Translated by Zhang Jianhua. Taipei: Chinese Christian Literature Council.
- Tracy, David. 2007. "Jean-Luc Marion: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Theology." In *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*. Edited by Kevin Hart. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Ward, Graham. 2003. "The Beauty of God." In *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty*. Edited by John Milbank, Graham Ward and Edith Wyschogrod. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)