Originary Iconoclasm: *The Logic of Sparagmos*

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The prohibition of "graven images" in the Jewish scriptures seems to have no precedent in the ancient world. Surrounded by polytheistic religions populated with a multitude of religious images, the ancient Hebrews somehow divined that the one true God could not be figured, and that images were antithetical to his worship. It's true, of course, and significant, that every known culture has taboos regarding representations qua representations, often but not exclusively iconic figures.(1) But only the Hebrews derived a prohibition on images from the recognition that God is both singular and essentially spiritual, hence resistant to material representation.(2) In the ancient world, images were connected to the divine, either as the privileged route to god's presence, both dangerous and desirable; or as forbidden temptations to idolatry, the worship of "false gods," however defined. While the Hebrews, in principle, rejected the sacrality of images, they found them dangerous enough so as to make their destruction imperative. The paradox of the Jewish prohibition is that it is radically singular and at the same time based on shared, nigh universal assumptions about the relationship between images and the divine. This paradox raises the question of whether the emergence of Jewish iconoclasm is simply a matter of historical contingency or whether it constitutes an anthropological insight into the originary composition of material figures in human culture.(3)

If iconoclasm were limited to the Jews, we might well conjecture that it is of only narrow historical significance. But Islam and Christianity have both incorporated the iconoclastic imperative in various ways. Medieval Christianity, of course, was full of imagery, but the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy exposed latent tensions which erupted again during the Protestant Reformation, when reformers revived a strict interpretation of the biblical second commandment.(4) It's tempting to see the Protestant critique of religious images as merely a way to discredit Catholicism, but reformers could have chosen other grounds on which to challenge the Catholic Church. Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere, Protestant iconoclasm had wide implications outside of religious practice, influencing the evolution of secular drama and art.(5) The importance of the Reformation for the emergence of

modernity is well-known: the assault on traditional religious authorities could not be narrowly limited, as reformers might have desired, and soon led into a larger critique of faith as such. The attack on idolatry was formative for the modern world.

Aside from the historical issues I've mentioned, the inherent difficulty of iconoclasm is the distinction between true worship and false worship or idolatry, a distinction unique to biblical monotheism. This judgment is what justifies the destruction of the icon or idol. During the Reformation, Christians of all persuasions agreed that the distinction between true and false worship was valid: the conflict was about where to draw the line between legitimate and illegitimate uses of images.

What I want to do here is to take a fresh look at iconoclasm by tracing its history from a Generative-Anthropological perspective, beginning with the originary scene.(6) In performing an originary derivation, we begin with a preliminary, minimal description of the phenomenon that requires explanation. In the case of iconoclasm, we observe the physical destruction of a figural object with pretensions to sacrality. On the originary scene, we find a close analog to iconoclastic destruction with the *sparagmos*, by which the sacred object is torn apart and then physically obliterated by consumption.(7) The question now becomes, what is the logic of the sparagmos, its function and purpose, and how does the sparagmos develop into what we observe during historical times?

First of all, we need to clarify the status of the central object on the originary scene. René Girard, in his originary hypothesis, claims that the body of the scapegoat victim is the first signifier from which all others derive (*Things Hidden* 102-3). Eric Gans, however, whom I follow in this analysis, insists that the central object is not a signifier, but rather the referent of the signifiers exchanged by the humans on the periphery of the scene.(8) The sign's function is precisely to be exchanged. But now we encounter a difficulty, because the objects destroyed by historical iconoclasm were often signifiers, figural representations of sacred persons or objects, or indexical tokens, such as the supposed bones or clothes of saints. How can we derive the destruction of signifiers from the destruction of a signified? This difference does not invalidate our originary analysis. What the targets of iconoclasm share is figurality, that is, significant form, as well as the pretension of sacrality. Furthermore, as Saussure has argued, signifier and signified are two sides of the same piece of paper, which is the sign (852-3). And while we can see that their relationship is conventional, on the originary scene, it would appear to be necessary, a connection which would give the sign its power. The central object's figural significance is inseparable from its re-presentation, and so its relationship to the signifier is not accidental but rather intrinsic (more on this below). After the originary event, humans create iconic figurations of the central object, religious artworks which are themselves centralized. This is a significant development but not immediately relevant to our originary analysis.

As per Gans's hypothesis, the import of the originary sign is the interdiction of the desired

object to appropriation and consumption. If the object is truly taboo, we may ask, then why is it so quickly torn apart and consumed? What is the attitude of the human participants to the central object? The sacred inspires fear for the literally awe-full danger which its incarnations seem to emanate. The sacred object is too powerful and wonderful to appropriate; the originary sign is an act of worship. But the central object also inspires resentment for the same reasons; its centrality partakes of the scandal of the sacred; it arbitrarily forbids what is most desirable, inspiring alienation as well as wonder. The sacred is ambivalent, and our attitude toward it is contradictory.

Gans writes,

At the origin, the sparagmos occurs once the sign has appropriated for its peripheral enunciators the formal closure of the central figure, so that it is no longer necessary for this closure to subsist in itself. As it comes to appear superfluous, the figure's figurality becomes vulnerable to the resentment it generates and open to the defiguration of the sparagmos. (SP 155)What is "the formal closure of the central figure" which is "appropriated for its peripheral enunciators" by means of the sign? The "central figure" finds closure when it is "closed" to consumption and formally distinguished from the rest of the world. This closure is "appropriated" in the sense of being understood, finding functional achievement of its purpose, and the meaning internalized.

But why should the central object's form or "figurality" inspire resentment, instead of simply its central, forbidden status? From an etic or anthropological perspective, what makes the central object sacred is the desires and resentments of the periphery, as mediated by the sign. So indeed the object's central, public status is highly relevant. The mediation of the periphery is foundational for the problem of idolatry. This becomes especially apparent in later history when a crafted, iconic representation of a sacred figure is centralized, such that its mediated status (i.e., created by another human) is made obvious to the spectator. But on the originary scene, the sacred object's figurality is inseparable from its centrality. For the nascent humans, form and significance are one thing, and their sensuous perception focuses on form. Figurality becomes scandalous when it appears "superfluous," that is, arbitrary and exclusive.

To put this issue another way, the problem here is that while it is the human signifier, as interdiction, that creates the resentment motivating the sparagmos, it is the figure of the sacred central object that suffers violence.(9) As I've suggested, however, for the first humans, the connection of signifier to signified was not arbitrary, as we understand it today. They are tied ostensively, that is, magically, together. And their attention is to the signified, which is primary in their understanding as the origin of significance. To them, the object forbids itself, and their signs are a mimetic confirmation. The originary humans are focused on the central object, whose form appears divinely significant. So when the *interdiction* begins to appear arbitrary and superfluous, then it is the *figure* of the slain animal which

becomes an object of resentment, rather than the individuals on the periphery who were ultimately responsible for forbidding its appropriation. The resentment that motivates the sparagmos is overdetermined because mediated, more or less unconsciously. The sparagmos is deliberate, but not fully coherent in intention.

At the same time, the sparagmos is a cultural act, by which I mean that it is free and conscious, not merely an instinctual discharge of aggression or an irrepressible desire for consumption.(10) There is a cognitive dimension to sparagmos. And while the sparagmos is motivated by resentment and desire, there is an "epistemology of resentment," as Gans has always maintained. The resentment of the peripheral humans leads eventually to the recognition that the central object is inadequate "to bear the full weight of significance" (Gans, SP 105), and it is this recognition that qualifies the sparagmos as iconoclastic, that is, directed to the figural *pretense* of sacrality.

But, at the same time, on the originary scene, their resentment is not so much critical as it is envious of the figure's exclusive power. The sparagmos is not purely destructive in intention but equally filled with a profound yearning to appropriate the appetitive object's figural power. Contrary to Girard, the originary hypothesis claims that the central object (probably a large food animal) is already divinized when torn apart and consumed. They destroy their object of worship because they desire to incorporate and command its sacred power, its "mana," in Melanesian terms.(11) The primary motivation of the sparagmos is to eat the incarnation of the sacred, appropriate its power, and achieve the freedom of god from rivalry. From a modern perspective, we might say they commit a category error in attributing sacrality to a material figure. But only through a long history culminating in the Mosaic Revelation do humans learn that sacrality is essentially "spiritual."

The sparagmos is really only potentially iconoclastic, when it is directed to the demystification of the central figure's pretense to sacrality. But at our origin, I argue, the sparagmos is more accurately described as idolatrous in that it attributes magical power to the figure of the central object. Scholars have often observed that the iconoclast seemingly shares the assumption of the idolater that the idol is powerful; else why would the iconoclast be so concerned with its destruction? But the destruction of a sacred figure motivated by *envy* of its figural power is not properly iconoclastic but rather idolatrous, even if such an act sometimes poses as iconoclasm.

On the originary scene we find two distinct postures toward the sacred: initially, the humans submit themselves, collectively, in fear and trembling, to the sacred center, deferring their desire and resentment; but in the second movement, they attempt to appropriate that power for themselves, purging desire and resentment at the expense of the central figure. Most religions manage to incorporate both these postures in various ways; but the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition attempt to distinguish them as religion and magic. The distinction here corresponds to that between high and popular culture in the arts, or production and

consumption in economics.

As I mentioned before, the sparagmos implies that the central object has become inadequate to the strict pretension of sacrality given by the sign—otherwise, the humans would hardly dare to consume it. But it's really not until after the sparagmos, in the period of reflection which follows, that this knowledge becomes explicit. Through ritual enactment and cultural memory of the originary event, this reflection is developed in various directions. Gans follows Girard in attributing great importance to post-sparagmos reflection. Girard, of course, places the origin of culture at this moment, but for Gans it provides for a crucial deepening of the import of the originary sign.(12)

The surprise of the sparagmos is that the central figure, by means of the sign, is retained in the memory, the private scene of representation, despite its physical destruction, and while this could be a pleasant surprise, it is also disturbing: the one we "killed" has returned after death. The attempt to obliterate the central object actually fails, and this has several important consequences.

Remember that the sparagmos opposes and disrupts the peace created by the sign. Although the sparagmos takes place within the horizon of culture, its violence poses an apparent threat to the existence of the new communal order, and Gans suggests that this violation of the sign's interdiction is the origin of evil, in which all individuals present participate (*SP* 134).

Humans feel guilty for destroying the worldly incarnation of the sacred, giving rise to moral reflection. The sparagmos poses a problem for reflection because it suggests that the initial deferral of violence has led only to further violence, calling into question the viability of the nascent human order (*SP* 134). Gans argues that such reflection leads on the one hand to Greek political philosophy, which critiques the sacrificial violence of the scene's periphery and theorizes "deritualized models of [political] organization" (*SP* 135). The ancient Hebrews, on the other hand, focus on the scenic center as the problem: "The second, 'Hebraic,' path is the iconoclastic critique of the esthetic or idolatrous element of the sacred exemplified by the Mosaic revelation" (Gans, *SP* 135).

After the sparagmos, the physical scene is empty while the sign is retained in the memory, thus revealing the "being" of the central locus, the transcendence of god. The originary humans attribute "being" to the central locus of the virtual scene simply because it persists. The scenic center, an element of the virtual structure of the scene, is independent of any worldly incarnation, and this insight is the basis of religion. Gans writes,

> The originary category of the sacred cannot differentiate between the central object and the being of the locus it occupies; religion proper begins when the feast is over, the object has disappeared, and the sign remains in the memory

> along with the image of the referent. (*SP* 140)

The sparagmos is revelatory of the distinction between the enduring being of the central locus and any particular content, thus allowing for new subjects of representation.

This distinction is central to iconoclasm, but it's not yet clear why religion and the esthetic should enter into conflict, as they do in the Mosaic revelation. What is "the esthetic or idolatrous element of the sacred" (Gans, *SP*135) on the originary scene, to which iconoclasm is opposed?

Gans defines "esthetic experience . . . within the originary scene as the oscillation between the contemplation of the sign representing the central object and the contemplation of the object as referred to by the sign" (*OT*117). The temporality of this experience allows for the metaphorical "drowning" of the spectator's resentment. The time of aesthetic deferral offers pleasures which substitute for appropriation. Aesthetic reception is fundamentally directed to the sensual form of the sign rather than simply its referential function; thus, Gans writes, "the first sign . . . must have been judged to be beautiful" (*OT* 119). (I don't think that Gans means that the originary humans had any developed concept of the "beautiful," but rather that we find the *germ* of the concept of the beautiful, as the experience of pleasing or significant form.) The aesthetic provides relief from resentment through our attention to the form of the sign and its relationship to the signified, whether real or imaginary.

Insofar as a sign has form, it has an aesthetic dimension, and so we can view any sign in aesthetic terms if we so choose. The aesthetic is properly understood as a mode of attention.

Our analysis so far suggests that the aesthetic is ethical in function, deferring violence. So what makes our attention to the sign "idolatrous," and what exactly constitutes idolatry? I suggested earlier that attributing supernatural power to figural objects constitutes a form of idolatry. Both the aesthetic and idolatry attribute power to sensuous form. Several Greek and Roman philosophers, including Heraclitus and Xenophanes, ridicule those who treat statues as possessing supernatural power, a critique made independently of monotheism (Janowitz 244-6). Along with the ancient Greek philosophers, other ancient religions were also arriving at the notion of god's transcendence, but without any concept of idolatry.(13) In the strict sense, idolatry exists only in opposition to biblical monotheism. At the same time, we must also recognize that the aesthetic is not distinguished from the sacred on the originary scene; this is properly an insight of monotheism and the Mosaic revelation. Gans notes, "The religious imagination is not immediately aware of the radical nature of this distinction" between the aesthetic and religion (*SP* 137). I think this is an understatement, since ritual practice throughout history relies quite heavily on figural images and carvings. Monotheistic religions, however, insist that images and figures, if permissible at all, are only supplemental for worship. (The distinction between the supplemental use of images and the idolatrous use, *dulia* and *latria*, becomes a key issue of controversy in Christian history.)

Gans clarifies,

> The biblical polemic against idolatry should not lead us to believe that the idol worshipper really believes that the physical object *is* the divinity. The divinity incarnates itself in the object, but its being remains separate from its incarnation, as ritual sacrifice demonstrates. (*SP* 137, my emphasis)

In other words, while the religious imagination doesn't immediately recognize the *radical* nature of the distinction between the material-aesthetic and the spiritual-religious, the distinction is in fact implicit in religious practice as such, even practices that the Jewish prophets call idolatry. I agree with Gans, but I would add that this is a fine point, since so much religion and magic invoke the power of material signs and images. The biblical polemic, within limits, makes a valid point. Furthermore, many cult objects, such as swords and rings, were understood to possess supernatural power which was inseparable from the physical object. The originary sparagmos, and the ritual sacrifice which follows, involve the attempt to share communally the power of the sacred by means of material figures.

Monotheism, in Gans's argument, derives not just from the singular origin of religion, but also from a concept of the deity as essentially transcendent, a concept which is widely accepted today, and, as Gans notes, is implicit even in polytheistic religious practice. The so-called idolater doesn't imagine that destroying the figural representation of a god would destroy the god (although the god might well be offended). The anthropological truth of the critique of idolatry is that the virtual "being" of the central locus and any concrete object which occupies that locus are simply two different things; moreover, they belong to two different *classes* of being: material and spiritual. We might think that the spiritual is merely subjective and therefore ephemeral, but its freedom from materiality makes it in fact indestructible. The spiritual, perhaps counterintuitively, proves to be more enduring, not to say eternal.

In anthropological terms, the "spiritual" in this context refers to existence on the internal scene of representation, but also to the virtual structure of the scene and its ethical function, which consists of human *relationships* rather than concrete objects. From the perspective of the iconoclast, any concrete figures detract from our attention to and memory of the one true God. The idolater attributes magical powers to a god or power which supposedly inhabits such figures, and the aesthete devotes himself to the beauty of such figures, both at the expense of true worship.

Summing up thus far, one of our central questions was why the hostility of the first humans should have been directed specifically to the figurality of the primal sacred object, a slain animal. Our analysis suggests, first, that at our origin, sacrality itself is understood in figural terms. Sacrality is first attributed to desirable objects, which generally have visual form.

The second problem with figural objects is that they monopolize the public, scenic center, provoking our resentment and prohibiting our consumption of them. Later, through post-sparagmatic reflection, humans come to realize that the occupation of the central locus by any concrete figure is at least potentially incompatible with a recognition of the spiritual being of the central locus.

In our originary analysis, perhaps surprisingly, idolatry and iconoclasm can be said to spring from the same event, but they are distinguished by motivation. Moreover, the critique of idolatry is largely a product of post-sparagmos reflection; whether this critique results in the actual destruction of sacred figures is a historical question, as are the results of such destruction. The act of iconoclasm is ambiguous, since it seems to express a fear of sacred figures, a fear which may inadvertently align the iconoclast with the idolater.

Not only religion but also idolatry and magic are originary phenomena. Idolatry, on the model of the sparagmos, can be defined as attributing magical power to figural objects or representations, followed by the attempt to appropriate that power by the possession of such figures. The idolater is fixated on the material form of the sign at the expense of its spiritual content. In the post-sparagmos reflection, leading to the Mosaic revelation, even the aesthetic attention to figures can be considered idolatrous if such attention is given at the expense of true worship.

Our analysis also suggests that the problem of idolatry is tied up with language itself as a figural medium. The form of the primal signifier provokes resentment and finally proves inadequate to justify its veneration. By the logic of our hypothesis, then, any and all signs are subject to the iconoclastic critique, insofar as significance is what social scientists call a "human construct"—human and not divine or objective.

The other problem with signs is that any particular sign is exclusive and more or less fixed by its utterance, while deferral is an ongoing process: dynamic, dialogic, and "spiritual." In the post-modern age, for example, as the result of our iconoclastic heritage, instead of submitting ourselves to a public, artistic masterpiece, we might prefer to exchange our individual creations with each other on blogs or forums for sharing, like a poetry slam. The democratic form of a poetry slam is a solution to the same underlying problem of idolatry; the monopoly of the public center.

I agree with Gans that on the synchronic level the aesthetic is incompatible with strict monotheism. They are integrated, however, by means of the *process* of sparagmos, which despite appearances follows a strict logic, as Gans has described. We should remember that the revelation of God's unfigurable being on the originary scene is essentially dialectical. It doesn't come through meditation or speculation, but by the physical destruction of the central object—a process which is necessarily figural. The physical destruction of figurality can well be figured. Strictly speaking, the sparagmos is necessary to reveal the spiritual

being of the center. So, by the same token, the figure of the central object is also necessary. The status of the sacred figure is ambiguous: on the one hand, necessary, by means of its destruction, for the revelation of truth; but on the other hand, antithetical to the truth which is revealed, which concerns its incompatibility with non-figural being. Once this revelation has been made, then it might seem that there is no need to repeat it; hence the biblical prohibition of graven images.

But worship of the invisible God presents certain problems; if we restrict ourselves to intellectual concepts rather than concrete figures and ritual action, monotheism risks becoming a rather austere doctrine limited to an intellectual elite, certainly the case with negative theology today. And even the name of God has form, and therefore, in a sense, figurality; hence the prohibition on the spoken pronunciation of God's name in later Judaism. But Judaism has various ritual means which are in fact very effective for preserving itself as monotheistic religion, while adhering to the prohibition on graven images. And Christianity has various means for getting around this prohibition.

From Christian times until the present we find that art is vulnerable to the iconoclastic critique of figurality; and it responds, I argue, by becoming iconoclastic itself, on the model of the sparagmos. In other words, art can be internally dialectical: anticipating, and thus protecting itself from our resentments by incorporating them within itself. Art that negates its own images or form is legitimatized on this basis. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant associates the sublime with the biblical second commandment (135), and Longinus found the biblical account of creation, attributed to Moses, to be sublime (102). Considered aesthetically, the crucifixion of Christ can be considered the paradigm of art that is derived ultimately from the sparagmos—an image antithetical to conventional notions of beauty.(14) As the passion narrative suggests, the problem for such art is avoiding the sacrificial. Girard points out rightly that the passion narrative is essentially anti-sacrificial, making Christ's sufferings not merited or "fated," but rather the results of sinful men. The passion narrative thus opposes itself to the traditional tragic or mythic narrative, exemplified by Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, in which the suffering of the protagonist is fated and thus justified in this sense. An art that avoids the sacrificial thus avoids one traditional means of aesthetic pleasure, catharsis—although there are other forms of aesthetic pleasure. The passion narrative opposes traditional aesthetic reception, asking for repentance rather than giving aesthetic pleasure.

The sparagmos is the model for iconoclasm, but it is also the model for sacrifice and popular, sacrificial modes of art. The key difference is that iconoclastic art is self-conscious and negates itself rather than simply purging resentment by means of a convenient scapegoat. Such art can provide material for moral reflection, and it also leads into an intellectual aesthetic of difficulty.

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Notes

1. On the widespread taboos regarding images, see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*; and Jack Goody, *Representations and Contradictions*. (back)

2. See Jan Assman for a persuasive account of the unique nature of biblical or “revolutionary” monotheism. (back)

3. To clarify, I use the words “figure” and “figural” as they are used in art history, to refer to “visually-recognizable forms” (Frazier, “Figure/figurative”). (back)

4. For the history of Reformation iconoclasm, see Margaret Aston, Carlos Eire, Michael O’Connell, and John Phillips. (back)

5. See “*The Winter’s Tale* and Antitheatricalism” by Peter Goldman. (back)

6. For a brief introduction to Generative Anthropology and the hypothetical “originary scene,” see “Why Generative Anthropology?” by Peter Goldman. (back)

7. Eric Gans included the “sparagmos” in the Originary Hypothesis in his 1997 book *Signs of Paradox*. (back)

8. For Gans’s argument on this point, see his *The Origin of Language*, pp. 1-67. (back)

9. In Girardian terms, an arbitrarily-chosen central figure suffers the sacrificial, cathartic violence of the periphery; the central object is “blamed” and hence suffers the violence which originates with humans. The problem with the Girardian scenario is that, while it provides a useful description of scapegoating, it doesn’t explain the origin of language. What distinguishes human scapegoating behavior from similar animal phenomena is precisely that it is mediated by a sign which designates the victim. To avoid the circularity of the Girardian hypothesis, we need to motivate the sign in other terms, as Gans does in his Originary Hypothesis. The characterization of the sparagmos as the origin of the sacrificial is correct but must be qualified by a recognition of its essentially cultural nature. On the morality of the sparagmos as a “necessary evil,” see Andrew Bartlett. (back)

10. See Gans, *Signs of Paradox*, p. 143. (back)

11. Robertson Smith, in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, interprets the famous (perhaps mythical) Arabian camel sacrifice in similar terms (338-9), as does Jane Ellen Harrison in her account of the ancient Greek *omophagia* or *sparagmos*, which draws on Robertson: see Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion,* pp. 485-7. (back)

12. The relevant texts here are Girard’s *Things Hidden* and Gans’s *Signs of Paradox*. (back)

13. See Assman on the distinction between “evolutionary monotheism” and “revolutionary monotheism.” (back)

14. On a related note, the incarnation is also highly relevant to the development of Western art. See Andrew McKenna on “Art and Incarnation,” a reading of Western art history in terms of Jewish iconoclasm and Christian incarnation. (back)