

## **Review of ‘Under the Hammer, Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition’ by James Simpson**

An extraordinary book has arrived in the mail. Its title is ‘Under the Hammer, Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition’. Its author is James Simpson, the Donald P. and Katherine B. Loker Professor of English at Harvard University (2004-). He was previously Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at the University of Cambridge (1999-2003). He is a Life Fellow of Girton College and an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. This information is transcribed from the dust cover of the book. However, Dr. Simpson has written something much more than an academic study. He has written an original and, in the best sense of the term, a profoundly speculative book.

The originality of the book reveals itself in its chapter topics. Two chapters are on iconoclasm in the English Reformation tradition. Another is on the role of the same phenomenon in the Enlightenment period. Then a fourth, with a considerable jump in continuity and focus, explores iconoclasm in American modern painting of the mid-twentieth century. The book begins with an introduction considering the Taliban’s destruction of the statues of Buddha at Bamiyan, Afghanistan in 2001 and ends with a brief conclusion. These various chapters were developed as the Clarendon Lectures in Oxford. The book’s originality attaches to the relation of the historical and the modern. However, the full dimension of this originality is revealed in the order that these chapters are presented. Chronology has been overturned. The chapter on modern American painting is presented first, as a kind of foreground, one might say, in accord with the terminology of iconoclasm, as ‘image’, to be followed by the historical as background. Yet it is the background which is the true subject of the book.

The book reveals iconoclasm to be a central phenomenon in the history of western culture. Its title, ‘Under the Hammer’, ironically evokes both the tools of historical image breaking and the modern sale of art at auction. The point is driven home that iconoclasm is not an extreme, aberrational, or even intermittent, occurrence. It is constant, inevitable and fundamental to our culture. It is, in short, psychological. If iconoclasm is central to the Reformation tradition and, by extension, to the Anglo-American tradition, it must also be traced back to the injunction against idols and image worship in the Semitic religions. It has, therefore, been with us from the outset. Can it be surmised that as soon as there is consciousness, then the mechanism of idolatry/iconoclasm necessarily installs itself in the human psyche? Are Socrates and Plato iconoclasts of the Homeric myths? Clearly they are. Perhaps then iconoclasm should be associated with the notion of ‘schism’, a term nowhere employed in the book, not just in association with its usual meaning of religious cleavage, but to throw into relief the separation of subject and object which is the fundamental principle of rational thought. It is in following this line of thought that the profoundly speculative nature of Dr. Simpson’s thesis begins to reveal itself. Some may object that the specificity of discreet concepts is being extended and merged to the point of violation. The import of what Dr. Simpson outlines may be that this is an inevitable consequence, that this is, in fact, the inescapable drive, of iconoclasm. Such implications are deeply disturbing. Iconoclasm, after all, constitutes the destruction of the objects of culture. The accumulation of these objects is the outward manifestation of human identity, of how and who we feel ourselves to be. Does not Dr. Simpson put his finger on the fundamental paradox of modern thought, as it has been developed by such figures as Nietzsche, Bataille and Lacan? The

particularity here is that Dr. Simpson writes inside the Anglo-American Academic tradition, which is systematically hostile to such 'continental' effluvia.

The argument of the book, tracing iconoclasm from the historical to the modern, finds its full force in the central chapter on the Enlightenment, understood as the key period of historical transition between past and present. At the outset, Dr. Simpson states: "In this chapter we shall see, however, that the Enlightenment attitude to art is intimately *responsive* to, and shaped by, iconoclasm. Not only that, but, more interestingly, the Enlightenment is *itself* an iconoclastic movement in three profound ways. (...) In the first place, the scientific Enlightenment exercised a philosophical iconoclasm by describing ideology as false consciousness, an idol that enthralled the naïve and that must be broken. Secondly, the sentimental Enlightenment neutralized the image by placing it in the museum and by calling it Art. And thirdly, Enlightenment taste commodified the image under the market's hammer." The Enlightenment undertook to put behind it the depredations of religious strife and its attendant phenomenon of iconoclasm which had been unleashed by the Reformation. However, iconoclasm had left a deep impression on the human mind. Dr. Simpson points out that Enlightenment thinking proceeded in two fundamental ways to take account of this legacy. First it incorporated the iconoclastic model in what is now popularly called the 'scientific method': "Enlightened scholarship is generated, as Cassirer said about Pierre Bayle, not by the discovery of truth, but, paradoxically, by the discovery, and therefore destruction, of error. (...) Error itself has become the idol". Secondly, it sought to construct a new philosophy based on the power of reason, which finds its most complete expression in the work of Immanuel Kant. Although it may be agreed that the primary focus of Kant's thinking was on Reason and Moral Law, he also found that he could not avoid the role of art in human culture. This acknowledgement gives us the *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Dr. Simpson points out that Kant's central concern here was to separate *form* from *content* because the past had shown that in the latter reposed the passions of idolatry and iconoclasm. Kant is quoted: "For ... the ground of pleasure is made to reside merely in the form of the object for reflection generally, consequently not in any sensation of the object, and without reference, either, to any concept that might have something or other in view". It is in this "something or other" that danger is seen to lurk. Out of this effort to rationally defuse the power of the image, the Enlightenment notion of 'taste' is born. It should be noted that Kant's ideas were taken as model by the influential American art critic Clement Greenberg and this allows Dr. Simpson to lead us by the circuitous path of history to consideration of modern art, about which he has some very interesting things to say.

With Kant, and the Enlightenment's over-riding concern in general with containing religious passion, a new notion of Art is born. Enlightenment aesthetics may be seen as an effort to manage the menacing and disruptive forces of human passion that attach to images. Dr. Simpson writes: "The task of the Enlightenment with regard to the image is to drain the object of power, to delimit the 'work of art', in this sense: to delimit the way art works on us. The space that protects art from the iconoclast's hammer also empties art of what had been its *raison d'être*." Art had to be given its own separate status with clearly defined boundaries separating it from social life. The iconoclasts had taken art out of the churches. Now the Enlightenment would create a specific institution for art, the museum, in which it would enjoy a status of autonomy. The French Louvre is the earliest, and most distinguished, example. Dr. Simpson also remarks that the current 'white box' art galleries of the commercial art world descend from "those utterly

whitewashed churches, of the kind described by Zwingli as beautiful". He further mentions that the connoisseur's 'cabinet' or 'gallery', for the purpose of housing a 'private collection', would also come into vogue at this time. This effort of separation of art from the traditional institutions of belief would even find emphasis in the custom of displaying paintings in frames, which serve to physically separate art from the world. Lastly, art would be subjected to the "homogenizing forces of the market", to play a new and utilitarian social role in economic exchange. With this development, Dr. Simpson argues, the "neutralization" of art was complete.

This brings us to his first chapter on modern American art, towards which the entire argument of the book has been directed. This reflection, we learn, was triggered by an exhibition entitled *Two Decades of American Painting* that the author had seen as a boy of thirteen in 1967 at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia. The work of art that had made the biggest impression on him was *Abstract Painting* by Ad Reinhardt. He writes that, as he struggled to look at "these almost non-images", he realized that: "understanding these paintings was going to be hard work, an austere process of asceticism, whereby we were being challenged to enter a logic of subtraction: near-total subtraction of form, subtraction of colour, subtraction of nature (the painting is perfectly geometrical and symmetrical, 60.25 inches high and wide), subtraction of narrative (this is timeless), and subtraction of depth (these are entirely flat surfaces). We were also being required to bid farewell to the personality of painting, since, as far as I could make out, the industrial precision of these surfaces was resolutely impersonal." The mention of "flat surfaces" should be noted in passing, as Clement Greenberg was to make 'flatness' the touchstone of his theories about 'modernist' painting. In sum, approaching modern American painting from the perspective of what he has defined as "the Anglo-American tradition", Dr. Simpson detects a further extension of iconoclasm there.

It is an intriguing theory and much can be made of it. It may, in fact, fit Ad Reinhardt rather snugly, although it must be pointed out that Reinhardt is not considered by art historians to be representative of the group that has become known as 'Abstract Expressionists'. He is really a marginal figure. One could alternatively look at the *Women* series by Willem de Kooning, the American artist of Dutch extraction, if we want to identify an entirely sincere iconoclastic motivation, the difference however being that, rather than destroy the painting, de Kooning has internalized the iconoclastic reflex in order to make a painting. There are also all those statements by Frank Stella to the effect that "what you see is what you see", together with Judd's insistence on the 'object' status of art and Warhol's subjection of art-making to the industrial process of silk-screening, to reinforce the thesis that iconoclasm in many ways, both explicit and devious, continues in vigor. Indeed, one can perhaps sympathize with Clement Greenberg's rejection, as a good Kantian attached to the separation of taste from the object, of all these latter developments. I would prefer, however, to pursue a different line of inquiry here: namely ask, to what extent can the great artists who are collected as 'Abstract Expressionists' - let me point to just two: Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko - be accurately understood to belong to the 'Anglo-American tradition', with its endorsement of iconoclasm, that is Dr. Simpson's chief concern?

With the entire world descending into global war in the 1940's, just as these artists were elaborating their aesthetic positions, the menace of iconoclasm was everywhere. Hitler apparently ordered his army to raise Paris to the ground when he was forced to pull back in 1944. But we should also be aware that the allies completely effaced Dresden, model city of the

Enlightenment. And then there is the advent of the atomic age with its capacity to liquefy whole populations. Is all this not proof of fundamentally iconoclastic intentions that far outstrip the bounds of traditional warfare? Has not our modernity come to rue Luther's inclusion of 'Revelations' in the biblical canon (he had initially tended towards its exclusion) as a curse upon our civilization? These artists were very aware of the modern predicament. However, they drew support and sustenance from a different cultural tradition, a tradition that was already one hundred and fifty years old at the time, and which we must call 'modern culture'. It was an international culture, with its geographic centre in Paris, and it drew on very different sources from Dr. Simpson's Anglo-American tradition. If we can say that this Anglo-American tradition is grounded in a 'stoic' ethos, the modern culture to which I refer is 'epicurean'. It looks back to Montaigne and before him to Rabelais, a contemporary of Luther and an exponent of his first reform movement. In the formation of modern art, Dr. Simpson is indeed right to insist on the new institution of the museum. By the same token, however, it should be emphasized that the Louvre, as the first great museum, became the repository of the treasures of Italian art that Napoleon brought back from his conquests. It was to this phenomenon of Italian culture that the great artists of the nineteenth century, from Géricault to Cézanne, refer and recommend for study to the artists who come after them. It must surely be said that this modern culture stands resolutely opposed to iconoclasm. Indeed, in contrast, it must further be said that Hitler fully appreciated this and that his larger purpose, in consequence, was to bring about an iconoclastic destruction of modern culture. The origins of all this, as Dr. Simpson fully understands, lie back in Reformation history but it may be necessary to distinguish more closely between the different phases of that tortuous experience. In the religious frame-work of the Reformation, when Calvin, via Knox, was laying the foundations for what Dr. Simpson defines as the Anglo-American tradition, Luther, for his part, was pitched against Calvin and successive reformers. It should not be forgotten that Luther lumped together all these treacherous followers of his reform as 'fanatics', and with good reason. Luther was a monk, steeped in the 'Word'. Calvin, the 'predestinarian', which Luther was not, was a lawyer who preached 'the Word idolatrous'. All the difference is there.

The great American painters who emerged during the late 1940s embraced the modern cultural tradition and grafted it onto American cultural life. As to their outlook on iconoclasm, Barnett Newman, in the latter part of his life, made the following statement: "About twenty five years ago for me painting was dead. Painting was dead in the sense that the situation, the world situation, was such that the whole enterprise as it was being practiced by myself and by my friends and colleagues seemed to be a dead enterprise... I felt the issue in those years was: what can a painter do? The problem of the subject became very clear to me as the crucial thing in painting... What are we going to paint? The old stuff was out. It was no longer meaningful. These things were no longer relevant in a moral crisis." He then went on to discuss his breakthrough, with the famous 'zip' that is found in his mature work: "And in that sense I was emptying the canvas by assuming the thing empty, and suddenly in this particular painting, *Onement*, I realized that I had filled the surface. It was full... I feel that my zip does not divide my paintings. I feel it does the exact opposite. It does not cut the format in half or in whatever parts, but it does the exact opposite: it unites the thing ..." This is hardly the voice of an iconoclast.

As to Rothko, he explicitly addresses the cultural drama of iconoclasm. In a statement, which surely had de Kooning in view, he declared: "I belong to a generation that was preoccupied with the human figure and I studied it. It was with utmost reluctance that I found that it did not meet my needs. Whoever used it, mutilated it. No one could paint the figure as it was and feel that he could produce something that could express the world. I refused to mutilate and had to find another way of expression."

Do these remarks in any way undermine or discredit Dr. Simpson's thesis? I would say not. In fact, on closer consideration, it will be remarked that the author is less examining modern American painting – Pollock and Rothko are not mentioned and Newman only glancingly – than giving an account of how it is 'framed' in the terms of his field of study, namely the 'Anglo American tradition'. This is perhaps best revealed by noticing that when 'flatness' is identified as the cardinal feature of modern painting, it is no more than acceptance of the article of faith laid down by the above mentioned Clement Greenberg. Much has been made of flatness in 'modernist' art criticism. Less often is the following passage by Cézanne quoted or taken into consideration:

*"However, nature for us men, is to be found more in depth than surface, from which comes the necessity of introducing into our vibrations of light, represented by reds and yellows, a sufficient quantity of blueness, in order to sensibly render the effect of air."*

It remains that Dr. Simpson has written an important book. Perhaps 'essay' would be a better term to acknowledge its admirable brevity. In a publishing industry bloated with compendious volumes of commentary on every topic imaginable, he has identified a crucial subject. This is rare. Two other examples which come to mind would be René Girard's writings on mimetic violence and Giorgio Agamben's concept of the 'Homo sacer'. Iconoclasm is a terrible force that will, doubtless, be with us always. In reading 'Under the Hammer' I am reminded of a conversation many years ago with an elderly, now deceased, native of a small French village in the South of France about his war-time experience. He had been conscripted to do forced labor in eastern Germany and was present when the invading Russian army arrived. I remember his account: "They went into all the houses and threw everything out into the street. All the dishes smashed on the pavement. Then they went after the women." In contemporary news, we constantly read about accounts of rape in warfare. Rape and the destruction of images must be seen as related. They both aim to destroy human identity.