

CHAPTER 4

IDOLATRY

NIETZSCHE, BLAKE, POUSSIN

What is an essay on idolatry, an issue that would seem to belong properly to religion doing in a book about race? As I have been arguing, religion (or more precisely, the sacred) often becomes the dominant parameter of racial difference, especially for the so-called religions of the book that define the other as a heathen—savage and bestial, sexually hyperactive, and driven by a pagan obsession with images and idols. A key part of the icon of race, in other words, is its tendency to motivate passion and extreme forms of violence. When race becomes an idol, it demands human sacrifice, murder, and genocide. Ethnic cleansing, justified by the imputation of idolatry, is the washing machine of racial purity. I have mentioned in passing the fetishism of race, its tendency to produce an obsession with the body and the private parts, the totemism of race and its function in reinforcing collective solidarity and community, and regulating reproductive relations with other tribes. But idolatry is clearly the most virulent form of iconic power and affect. Idols are images to kill and die for. They provide the objects in which holy war and race war converge. What precisely is an idol? The following pages attempt to provide an answer by moving across the disciplinary lines of art history, religion, media, and visual culture in order to track the interplay of idolatry and its inevitable counterpart, iconoclasm.

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Idolatry and its evil twin, iconoclasm, are much in the news these days. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that the current

Holy War on Terror is just the latest engagement in a religious conflict that dates back beyond the Middle Ages and the Christian Crusades in the Middle East, one that centrally concerned itself with the idols worshipped by one's enemies, and with the imperative to smash those idols once and for all. Although one should be skeptical about reductive ideological scenarios like Samuel Huntington's notorious "clash of civilizations" thesis, it seems undeniable that this theory has manifested itself in the actual foreign policies of great powers such as the United States and its allies, and in the rhetoric of Islamic fundamentalism in its calls to jihad against the West. The fact that an idea is grounded in paranoid fantasy, prejudice, and ignorance has never been a compelling objection to its implementation in practice. The Taliban did not hesitate to carry out the destruction of the harmless Bamiyan Buddhas,¹ and al-Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Center was clearly aimed at an iconic monument that they regarded as a symbol of Western idolatry. The War on Terror, on the other hand, was at first called a "crusade" by the president who declared it, and it has been explained by some of his minions in the military as a war against the idolatrous religion of Islam.² Among the most striking features of the hatred of idols, then, is the fact that it is shared as a fundamental doctrine by all three great "religions of the book," Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, where it is encoded in the second commandment, prohibiting the making of all graven images of any living thing. This commandment launches the age-old *paragone* between words and images, the law of the symbolic and the lawless imaginary that persists in numerous cultural forms to this day.

Among those cultural forms is art history, the discipline that would seem by professional necessity to have an account of idols and idolatry and that is centrally concerned with the relation of words and images. Whether regarded as a history of artistic objects or of images more generally, art history is the field that

might be expected to have a powerful account of idolatry. But the topic is generally regarded as more properly the business of religion, theology, anthropology, and perhaps philosophy. By the time idols get to art history, they have become art, which is to say, aestheticized, denatured, deracinated, neutered. Of course, many art historians know this, and I could invoke the work of David Freedberg and Hans Belting on the nature of “images before the era of art,”³ and the more specific work by scholars such as Michael Camille (*The Gothic Idol*),⁴ Tom Cummins (studies of the Inca idol known as the Waca), and many others who have attempted to work backward, as it were, from the history of art toward something more comprehensive: let’s call it an iconology. And let’s understand iconology as the study of (among other things) the clash between the logos and the icon, the law and the image, which is inscribed in the heart of art history.

We will return to these disciplinary issues presently in a discussion of Poussin’s paintings of two scenes of idolatry and the ways that art history has danced around the question of word and image in these paintings. As Richard Neer has noted, these discussions have been paradigmatic for the entire discipline and its ambivalence about the actual material objects that are so central to it.⁵ But before we take up these matters, I want to approach the topic through a fundamental reconsideration of the very concept of idolatry. What better place to begin than by reading the second commandment word for word:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I The Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those

who love Me and keep My Commandments. (Exodus 20:4–5, King James Version).

The condemnation of idolatry as the ultimate evil is encoded in this statute with such ferocious militancy that it is fair to say it is clearly the most important commandment of them all, as it occupies the central place in defining sins against God as opposed to sins against other human beings such as murder, lying, stealing or adultery. It is difficult to overlook the fact that it supersedes, for instance, the commandment against murder, which as Walter Benjamin wryly puts it, is merely a “guideline,” not an absolute prohibition.⁶

Because idolatry is such a central concept for all the adversaries in the current global conflict, it seems worthwhile to attempt a critical and historical analysis of its main features. What is an idol? What is idolatry? And what underlies the iconoclastic practices that invariably seem to accompany it? The simplest definition of an idol is “an image of a god.” But that definition leaves open a host of other questions: Is the god represented by the image a supreme deity who governs the whole world? Or is it a local “genius of the place” or the tribe or nation? Is the god immanent in the image and its material support? Or is the god merely represented by the image while the god dwells elsewhere? What is the relation of this god to other gods? Is it tolerant toward other gods, or is it jealous and determined to exterminate its rivals? Above all, what motivates the vehement language of the second commandment? Why is its condemnation so emphatic, its judgments so absolute? Does it not seem that there is some kind of surplus in the very concept of idolatry, a moral panic that seems completely in excess of legitimate concerns about objects called “graven images” and their possible abuse? And does not the passionate intensity of the iconoclastic encounter with idolatry remind us of Jean-Paul Sartre’s diagnosis of anti-Semitism

(and racism more generally) as a *passion* rather than a concept? Could this be why “idolatry” is a word that mainly appears in the discourse of iconoclasm, a militant monotheism obsessed with its own claims to universality and purity?

When we move to investigate the moral questions surrounding idolatry, the concept seems to spin completely out of control. Idolatry is associated with everything from adultery to superstition to metaphysical error. It is linked with materialism, hedonism, fornication, black magic and sorcery, demonology, bestiality, fascist führer cults, Roman emperors, and divination. This bewildering array of evils ultimately resolves itself into two basic varieties that frequently intermix: the first is the condemnation of idolatry as error, as stupidity, as false and deluded belief; the second is the darker judgment that the idolater actually *knows* the idol is a vain, empty thing but continues to cynically exploit it for the purposes of power or pleasure. This is the perverse, sinful crime of idolatry. Thus, there are two kinds of idolaters—knaves and fools—and obviously, considerable overlap and cooperation between the two kinds.

Much of the theological discussion of idolatry focuses on fine points of doctrine and subtle distinctions between idolatry as the worship of the wrong god or of the right god in the wrong way.⁷ The difference between heretics or apostates within the nonidolatrous community and unbelievers who live altogether outside that community is obviously a critical distinction. But there is a more straightforward approach to the problem of idolatry, what might be called an “operational” or functional point of view. The key, then, is not to focus on what idolaters believe or on what iconoclasts believe that idolaters believe but on what idolaters *do* and what is done to them by iconoclasts, who by definition must disapprove of the wicked, stupid idolaters. Sometimes the question of belief converges with that of

actions and practices. For instance, iconoclasts tend to believe that, in addition to their wrong-headed beliefs, idolaters commit unspeakable acts such as cannibalism and human sacrifice. This “secondary belief” (i.e., a belief about the beliefs of other people) then justifies equally unspeakable acts of violence against the idolaters.⁸ Not only can and must they be killed, but their women and children may be massacred as an expression of the just vengeance of the one true God. There is thus a kind of fearful symmetry between the terrible things idolaters are supposed to do and what may be done to them in the name of divine justice. Idolaters who worship “brutes,” for instance, such as the Golden Calf, are thought to have become brutes themselves and therefore may be exterminated without ethical qualms. Inter-marriage with idolaters is strictly forbidden as “whoring after strange gods” and the pollution of racial purity. The idolater is thus the racial other and enemy, and iconoclasm becomes a mandate for both racial and religious warfare.

Another key to thinking pragmatically about idolatry is to ask not just *how* they live (which is presumed to be sinful) but *where* they live. Idolatry is deeply connected to the question of place and landscape, territorial imperatives dictated by local deities who declare that certain tracts of land are not only sacred but uniquely promised to them. Indeed, one could write the history of biblical idolatry and iconoclasm as a set of territorial war stories—wars fought over places and possession of land. As Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit put it in their book, *Idolatry*, “the ban on idolatry is an attempt to dictate exclusivity, to map the unique territory of the one God.”⁹ This becomes clearest when one considers the practical enforcement of the ban on images, which involves destroying the sacred sites of the native inhabitants, “leveling their high places and destroying their graven images and idols.”¹⁰ The link between territoriality and idolatry becomes even more explicit when it is invoked as an insuperable objection to any

negotiations or treaties. To make a deal with an idolater, especially about land, is to fall into idolatry oneself. The only politics possible between the iconoclast and the idolater is total war.¹¹

Idols, then, might be described as condensations of radical evil in images that must be destroyed, along with those who believe in them, by any means necessary. There is no idolatry without an iconoclasm to label it as such because idolaters almost never call themselves by that name. They may worship Baal or Dagon or Caesar or money, but they do not consider it idolatry to do so; it is rather a normal form of piety within the idolatrous community. On the side of the iconoclasts, the idolater is generally perceived as beyond redemption. Either the idolater is a traitor to the true God (thus the metaphor of adultery and “whoring after strange gods”) or he has been brought up in a false, heathen faith from which he will have to be “liberated”—one way or another.

Iconoclasm betrays a kind of fearful symmetry, then, mirroring its own stereotype of idolatry in its emphasis on human sacrifice and terrorism, the latter understood as violence against the innocent, and the staging of spectacular acts of symbolic violence and cruelty. The iconoclastic stereotype of the idolater, of course, is that he is already sacrificing his children and other innocent victims to his idol. This is a crime so deep that the iconoclast feels compelled to exterminate the idolaters—not just to kill their priests and kings, but all their followers and offspring as well.¹² The Amalekites, for instance, are enemies of Israel so vicious and unredeemable that they must be wiped out. And the emphasis on the cursing of idolaters for numerous generations is, implicitly, a program for genocide. It is not enough to kill the idolater; the children must go as well, either as potential idolaters or as “collateral damage.”

All these barbaric practices might be thought of as merely the past of idolatry, relics of ancient, primitive times when magic and superstition reigned. A moment’s reflection reveals that this

discourse has persisted throughout the modern era, from the Renaissance and from Bacon's "four idols" of the marketplace (the theater, the cave, and the tribe) to the evolution of a Marxist critique of ideology and fetishism that builds on the rhetoric of iconoclasm. This latter critique is focused on commodity fetishism and what I have elsewhere called the "ideolatry" of market capitalism.¹³ One of the strangest features of iconoclasm is its gradual sublimation into more subtle strategies of critique, skepticism, and negative dialectics: Clement Greenberg's kitsch and Adorno's culture industry are producers of idols for the new philistines of mass culture. The endpoint of this process is probably Jean Baudrillard's "evil demon of images," where the Marxian rhetoric rejoins with religion and veers off toward nihilism. But Marx had made fun of the "critical critics" who free us from images, phantoms, and false ideas already in his diatribes against the Young Hegelians.

The greatest break and the most profound critique of idolatry and iconoclasm is Nietzsche's late work, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Nietzsche turns iconoclasm upside down and against its own roots of authority in the law. The only thing the iconoclastic Zarathustra smashes are the tablets of the law: "Break, break, you lovers of knowledge, the old tablets. . . . Break the old tablets of the never gay," inscribed with prohibitions against sensuous pleasure by the pious killjoys who "slander the world" and tell men "thou must not desire."¹⁴ The only law Nietzsche will tolerate is a positive "thou shalt": he enjoins us "to write anew upon new tablets the word 'noble.'"¹⁵ He criticizes the Manichean moralism of the priestly lawgivers who divide the world into good and evil:

O my brothers, who represents the greatest danger for all of man's future? Is it not the good and the just? Inasmuch as they say and feel in their hearts, "We already know what is good and

just, and we have it too; woe unto those who still seek here!" And whatever harm the evil may do, the harm done by the good is the most harmful harm. . . . The good *must* be Pharisees—they have no choice. The good *must* crucify him who invents his own virtue. . . . The *creator* they hate most: he breaks tablets and old values. . . . They crucify him who writes new values on new tablets.¹⁶

Zarathustra also seems to intuit the connection between the old law of good and evil and the imperative to territorial conquest and "promised lands." He equates the breaking of "the tablets of the good" with the renunciation of "fatherlands," urging his followers to be "seafarers" in search of "man's future . . . our *children's land!*"¹⁷

So far as I know, Nietzsche never explicitly mentions the second commandment, but it becomes the unspoken center of his great text of 1888, *Twilight of the Idols*. This volume can easily be mistaken for a rather conventional iconoclastic critique. Its promise to "philosophise with a hammer" and its opening "declaration of war" against "not just idols of the age, but eternal idols" may sound like a continuation of the traditional iconoclastic treatment of idolatrous "ideas," like Bacon's critique of "idols of the mind" or the Young Hegelians' war against "phantoms of the brain."¹⁸ But Nietzsche turns the tables on *both* the ancient and modern iconoclasts and the second commandment by renouncing the very idea of image destruction at the outset. The eternal idols are not to be smashed but to be "touched with a hammer as with a tuning fork." They are not to be destroyed but "sounded" with a delicate, precise touch that reveals their hollowness (one recalls the biblical phrase "sounding brass") and perhaps even retunes or plays a tune upon them. Nietzsche's war against the eternal idols is a strangely nonviolent practice, a giddy form of "recreation, a spot of sunshine, a leap sideways into the idleness of the psychologist."¹⁹

The idolatry-iconoclasm complex has always presented a dilemma for visual artists who by professional necessity seem inevitably to be involved in violating the second commandment. Vasari opens his *Lives of the Artists* with an elaborate set of apologies for the visual arts, noting that God himself is a creator of images, architect of the universe and a sculptor who breathes life into his fabricated creatures. He dismisses the inconvenient case of the Golden Calf and the massacre of “thousands of the false Israelites who had committed this idolatry” by arguing that “the sin consisted in adoring idols and not in making them,” a rather stark evasion of the plain language of the second commandment, which says “thou shalt not *make*” any graven images of any thing.²⁰

The artist who comes closest to carrying out Nietzsche’s inversion and transvaluation of the idolatry-iconoclasm complex is William Blake, who anticipates by almost a century the reversal of values contemplated in *Twilight of the Idols*. Blake famously inverts the moral valences of pious, passive Angels and energetic Devils in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), and he consistently links the figure of the Old Testament law-giver with his rationalist Enlightenment offspring in the figure of Urizen, depicted as a patriarchal figure dividing and measuring the universe or as a reclusive hermit hiding in his cave behind the twin tablets of the law.

Like Nietzsche, however, Blake is not engaged in a simple reversal of a Manichean opposition of good and evil but employs a more subtle strategy, rather like Nietzsche’s notion of “touching” the idols with a “hammer” or “tuning fork.” Blake’s most compelling image of this process is a plate from his illuminated epic poem *Milton*, which shows Los the artist-as-sculptor engaged in a radically ambiguous act of creation *and* destruction. We can, on the one hand, read this as an image of Los molding the figure of Jehovah out of the mud on a riverbank,



Figure C4.1. William Blake *Milton*, 1804–10: Los creating/destroying Jehovah. (Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

as if we were witnessing Adam creating God out of clay. Or, on the other hand, we can read this as an iconoclastic act, the artist pulling down the idolatrous statue of the father-god. The image condenses the making and breaking of idols into one perfectly equivocal synthesis of creative activity, a visual counterpart to Nietzsche's acoustical tactic of hammering the idols without breaking them. Blake's portrayal of a musical chorus on the horizon above this scene suggests that he too is "sounding" the idol, not with a tuning fork, but with the bare hands of the sculptor. As a child of the Enlightenment, Blake understood very well that all the idols, totems, and fetishes of premodern, primitive polytheistic societies were the alienated product of human hands and human minds:

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, and nations, and whatever their enlarg'd and numerous senses could perceive. . . . Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects; thus began Priesthood.²¹

In light of this genealogy of religion, which could very well have been written by Giambattista Vico, the development of monotheism is not so much a radical break with pagan idolatry as it is a logical development of its tendency to underwrite the consolidation of political power with absolute religious mandates. It is important to remember that Jahweh begins as a mountain god, probably volcanic as he is "hidden in clouds" and speaks "in thunder and in fire." The figure of the invisible, transcendent lawgiver whose most important law is a ban on image making of any kind is the perfect allegory for an imperial colonizing project that aims to eradicate all the images, idols, and material markers of the territorial claims of indigenous inhabitants. The fearsome

figure of Baal, we should remember, is simply a Semitic version of what the Romans called the “genius loci,” or genius of the place—the god of the oasis that indicates the proprietary claims of the nomadic tribe that returns to it every year.²² Dagon, the god of the Philistines, is characteristically portrayed as an agricultural god associated with the harvest of grain. The veiling or hiding of the god in a temple or cave is simply the first step toward rendering him (and he is almost always male) metaphysically invisible and unrepresentable. As Edmund Burke noted in his *Enquiry into . . . the Sublime and the Beautiful*,

Despotic governments . . . keep their chief as much as may be from the public eye. The policy has been the same in many cases of religion. Almost all heathen temples were dark. Even in the barbarous temples of the Americans at this day, they keep their idol in a dark part of the hut, which is consecrated to his worship.²³

Kant simply carries Burke’s observation to its logical conclusion when he argues that “there is no sublimer passage in the Jewish law than the command, ‘Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything which is in heaven or in the earth or under the earth.’” For Kant, the secret to the “enthusiasm” of both Judaism and “Mohammedanism” is their “abstraction” and refusal of imagery, together with their claim to absolute moral superiority over heathens and idolaters.²⁴

I want to consider two scenes of idolatry and iconoclasm by an artist whose work would seem to be radically antithetical to the antinomian tendencies of Blake and Nietzsche. The work of Nicholas Poussin, as Richard Neer has argued in his recent article on the painter, is deeply concerned with issues of idolatry and iconoclasm. But the depth of this concern would seem to be expressed, if I follow Neer’s argument, by Poussin’s determination to remain firmly committed to an orthodox moral condemnation of idolatry in all its forms, while at the same time

remaining loyal to the most powerful claims of the visual arts as expressed in classical sculpture. One could put this as a paradox: How does a painter endorse iconoclasm and condemn idolatry at the same time as he deploys all the visual, graphic resources of a thoroughly pagan, idolatrous culture?

Neer takes Poussin's problem not merely as the case of an individual artist but as the central problem of art history as a discipline. As he notes, Poussin scholarship has made him "the most literary of painters," assuming that "to know a picture's literary source is to know the essential thing about it. . . . One gets the impression that he is studied more in the library than the museum."²⁵ When scholars have broken away from this textually dominated mode of interpretation to identify "visual sources," the usual conclusion is that Poussin's numerous citations of classical imagery are "strictly meaningless." This "bifurcation" of Poussin into the camps of word and image "is in fact exemplary." According to Neer, "it is, in germ, what separates 'the two art histories,' the museum and the academy; the study of Poussin is the grain of sand in which to see a whole disciplinary world."²⁶ It is as if the *paragone* of word and image that was launched by the second commandment has penetrated into the very heart of the discipline that is supposed to devote itself to the visual arts, confronting it with a version of Poussin's own dilemma: How does one attend to the meaning of an image without reducing it to the mere shadow of a textual source? How does one remain faithful to the claim of the image without becoming an idolater and descending into the abyss of meaninglessness?

Ultimately, I want to propose a third alternative to Neer's division of the resources of art history into the "library" and the "museum." The alternative, unsurprisingly, is the *world* and the larger sphere of verbal and visual culture within which paintings, like all other works of art, inevitably function, and perhaps

not merely as what Neer calls “useful evidence in . . . a cultural history” but as *events and interventions* in that history.²⁷ But this is to get slightly ahead of myself. Let’s turn to the paintings.

Two of Poussin’s most famous treatments of the theme of idolatry are *The Adoration of the Golden Calf* (1633–36), now in the National Gallery in London, and *The Plague at Ashdod* (1630–1), now in the Louvre. Together, the paintings provide a panorama of the fundamental themes of idolatry and iconoclasm. The *Calf* shows the moment of idolatrous ritual and celebration as the Israelites dance around the Calf with the artist, Aaron, who gestures toward it to urge his countrymen (and beholders of the painting) to contemplate his creation. In the darkness of the background on the left, we see Moses descending from Mount Sinai, preparing to smash the stone tablets of the law in fury over the terrible sin of the Israelites. In *Ashdod*, by contrast, we see the terrible punishment for idolatry as the panicked Philistines realize they have been stricken by the plague. In the darkness of the left background (see Figure C4.3) we see the fallen idol of Dagon with its severed head and hands and behind it, the Ark of the Covenant (which the Philistines have seized as a trophy after defeating the Israelites in battle). In the story of the plague (1 Samuel 5:1–7), the Philistines bring the Ark into the Temple of Dagon, and during the night it magically overturns the statue of the Philistine’s god and mutilates it.

Neer makes a convincing argument that from Poussin’s point of view, and thus from the dominant disciplinary perspective of art history, the principle subject matter of *Ashdod* is *not* the foreground tableau of the plague but the background vignette of the Ark destroying the idol.

The evidence: the contemporary testimony of Joachim Sandrart and Poussin’s own title for the painting, *The Miracle of the Ark in the Temple of Dagon*. This argument, depending



Figure C4.2. Nicholas Poussin, *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*, 1633–36. (Copyright National Gallery, London/Art Resource, New York.)

on verbal evidence, goes directly against what Neer calls the “visual prominence” of the plague narrative, which would seem to undermine his insistence elsewhere in the essay that visual and pictorial elements should be primary.²⁸ But for Neer, Poussin is a painter whose work is governed by signs and citations that point toward an invisible and unrepresentable foundation. Like the motif of the Ark itself that hides the tablets of the law, like the hidden God on Mount Sinai, Poussin’s painting encrypts a meaning that is not evident to the eye but only to the connoisseur who is able to reverse the significance of “visual prominence” and see that the primary subject of the painting is “the hiddenness of the divine.” “The miracle in the temple is the Second Commandment in action: a battle between statue and sign, ending in the literal destruction of the former” with



Figure C4.3. Nicholas Poussin, *The Plague at Ashdod*, 1630–1. (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.)

the plague as merely its outward manifestation.²⁹ The failure of a beholder to see the plague as a merely secondary consequence or allegorical shadow of the real event in the painting is thus made equivalent to the error of the idolatrous Philistines who also mistake the outward image for the true meaning: “The failure of the literal-minded Philistines to ‘read’ the plague correctly . . . thus amounts to seeing only the Aspect of the plague” rather than the true “Perspective” in which the events and their depiction are to be understood.³⁰

Neer convincingly shows that Poussin intended his painting to be an allegorical “machine” that generates a series of “rigidly antithetical” oppositions (which turn out to be reversible as well): Ark versus the “brutish” idol, imitation versus copy; signification over depiction; Poussin versus the “bestial” Caravaggio.

Poussin is doing everything possible to avoid falling into mere copying, mere naturalism or realism. He had an “abhorrence of reproduction, verging on mimetophobia.”³¹ He must constantly remind us that his scenes are staged and are based in a kind of citational parade of classical figures. The dead mother with her babies starving at her breast is probably a citation of Saint Matthew that ironically undercuts the realism of its source in Caravaggio. The hidden truth of the painting, however, is *literal*. It is a straightforward *istoria* that shows a mutilated idol and an impassive Ark. Like most of Poussin’s painting, it is dominated by textualizing practices if not by textual sources, planting subtle clues and citations of previous pictures that will be recognized by the learned viewer. To take the “foreground group” literally, then, and not see it as a “citational structure” but for “the story it happens to tell” is to miss the point of the painting.³² This foreground group is “the *allegory of the symbol of the narrative*,” a phrasing, as Neer concedes, that is “otiose in a way the picture is not.”³³

I think Neer has given us the most comprehensive professional reading of this painting we could ask for. As art history his interpretation is unimpeachable, and as iconology it is incredibly subtle and deft. My trouble begins with his moving of Poussin’s theory into the sphere of ethics, where a certain way of reading the painting is reinforced as the morally responsible, and even the “pious” way of relating to the picture as a sign or symptom of Poussin’s intentions. There is something subtly coercive about this move, and I want to resist it in the name of the painting itself and perhaps in the name of that “meaninglessness” that scholars like Louis Marin have proposed. In other words, I want to ask “The Plague” (or is it “The Miracle”) of Ashdod what *it* wants from the beholder, rather than what Poussin wants.³⁴ Because the painting outlives Poussin and participates in what Neer calls a kind of “natural history” (as

opposed to its iconological meaning), this means an unleashing of the painting from its own historical “horizon” of possible meanings and allowing it to become anachronistic.

And this might be the place to admit that my entire response to this painting is radically anachronistic. I cannot take my eyes off the foreground group. I cannot help sharing in the Philistine gaze that believes this scene is portraying a human reality, an appalling catastrophe that is being reproduced in a kind of stately, static tableau, which is the only thing that makes it bearable to behold. Like William Kentridge’s drawings of the atrocities of apartheid or Art Spiegelman’s translation of the Holocaust into an animal fable, Poussin shows us a highly mediated scene of disaster, of a wrathful judgment that is striking down a city and a people in an act of terror that does not discriminate between the guilty and the innocent. The center of this perception is, of course, the most prominent image in the painting, the dead mother with her starving infants at her breast. Neer sees her as a citation to the martyred Saint Matthew; I cannot see her without being reminded of a contemporary image that dawned on the world at the same moment of the writing of this text. This is the image that emerged from Gaza during the Israeli invasion of January 2009 of “four small children huddling next to their dead mothers, too weak to stand up.”³⁵

The image of the dead mother with her infants, living or dead, has been an icon of total war, genocide, and ethnic cleansing at least since Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, in which he describes a painting by Aristide of Thebes, the first Greek painter to show *ethe*, or soul and the emotions. Pliny describes a painting representing “the capture of a town, showing an infant creeping to the breast of its mother who is dying of a wound.”³⁶ This motif, also employed by Raphael in the *Morbetto*, where Poussin doubtless saw it, is echoed today in scenes such as the massacre of Italian villagers by the Nazis in Spike Lee’s film

Miracle at St. Anna and in news photographs such as the one by Palestinian photographer Mahmud Hams, taken in the Gaza City morgue during an Israeli incursion.³⁷ These scenes of the slaughter of innocents by military force or divine intervention have a deep history, then, as an emblem of terror and its Aristotelian companion, pity. The racist subtext of the second commandment, the threat to “visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third or fourth generation” is shown with unmistakable clarity.

The unbearable pathos of this kind of scene is rendered visible by Poussin in the reaction of the prominent figure at the left of the picture’s center, who recoils in horror and refuses to look. In some sense we may see this figure as an allegory of the art historian who refuses to see this central tableau as the primary subject



Figure C4.4. Film still from *Miracle at St. Anna*, directed by Spike Lee, 2008.

and insists on turning away, his attention directed first toward the rat (the immediate material cause of the plague) at the base of the Temple of Dagon and ultimately toward the Ark of the Covenant (the “final cause,” as it were) in the background. It is as if the sight of the image, like the plague itself, might have an infectious character, a point that is reinforced by the gesture of the man reaching down to touch the still-living infant while he covers his face to block the smell of the dead mother.³⁸

Of course, there is a point of view from which this scene is, like Poussin’s, merely an allegory of divine justice in action. The Palestinians, as we have recently learned from a leading Israeli rabbi, are “Amalekites” who deserve the disasters that are being visited on them by an overwhelmingly superior military power that has God on its side.³⁹ The Hamas movement in Gaza is a terrorist organization that seeks the destruction of Israel. If terrible things such as civilian casualties occur, then it is the fault of Hamas, which unscrupulously uses civilians as



Figure C4.5. Dead Palestinian mother and children, Gaza City morgue. (Photo by Mahmud Hams.)

“human shields.” (The fact that the fighters of Hamas actually live among and are related by blood and marriage to many of the people of Gaza does not excuse them from the responsibility to stand up and fight courageously in the open where they can be mowed down by the vastly superior firepower of the Israeli army. Instead, they are understood to be hiding away like cowards in their homes, schools, mosques, government buildings, and community centers while their women and children are massacred around them.) And if there have been injustices on the Israeli side, they will be “investigated properly, once such a complaint is received formally, within the constraints of current military operations.”⁴⁰ Justice and the law are being and will be served, if only we have the ability to put this shocking picture in perspective.

Nothing I have said invalidates Neer’s interpretation of Poussin’s painting. I think that it probably reflects, for better or worse, what Poussin thought about his subject, what he thought was expected of him, and what his audience would have understood.⁴¹ My argument is that there is another, quite contrary perspective on the painting, one in which an “aspect” is not merely an appearance but, as Wittgenstein would have put it, the “dawning” of a new way of thinking about its subject matter and its handling.⁴² This is the anachronism that disrupts the doctrine or *doxa* of the painting and calls into question the ethical discipline and piety that it encourages. I would argue further that this sort of anachronistic seeing is inevitable with images, which are open to the world and to history in a way that deconstructs their legibility and certainty. In short, I am on the side of Derrida’s abyss and Louis Marin’s “meaninglessness” in Neer’s argument, not Montaigne’s well-grounded faith in the invisible lawgiver. I am also on the side of Foucault’s insistence, in his famous reading of *Las Meninas*, that we must “pretend not to know” who the figures are in the painting; we

must forego the comfort of the “proper name” and the learned citation, and confine ourselves to the “visible fact,” described with “a gray, anonymous language” that will help the painting “little by little” to “release its illuminations.”⁴³

What happens if we follow this procedure with the Golden Calf? What would it mean to see this painting through the eyes of Blake and Nietzsche? Does the painting not threaten to be a transvaluation of the idol it is supposed to be condemning? Could Poussin’s painting, without his quite knowing it, be *sounding* the idol not with a hammer or tuning fork but a paintbrush? The Calf is gloriously painted and sculpted; it is a wonder, and the festive dance around it is a celebration of pagan pleasure.⁴⁴ But up in the dark clouds is the angry patriarch, breaking the tablets of the law. Nietzsche’s pious killjoy and Blake’s Nobodaddy converge in Poussin’s Moses.

Of course, this is all wrong as art history. As iconology or anthropology, however, it may have some traction. The great French sociologist Émile Durkheim would have instantly recognized the Calf as a totem animal and would have rejected the category of the idol for the ideological (and racist) fiction that it is.⁴⁵ It is important to note that totemism and fetishism play a distinguished role in disciplines such as anthropology and psychoanalysis; idolatry, as a still-potent polemical notion, has rarely been put to technical use by a human science. The difference between totemism and idolatry is not merely a matter of perception but of an entire field of social relations surrounding the object in question. It is the difference between, on the one hand, a sense of tribal or racial belonging (often coupled with a mandate for intermarriage with members of another totemic clan in the practice known as exogamy) and on the other a passionate hatred of the other, a prohibition on intermarriage and a mandate to conquest and the destruction of sacred images.⁴⁶ Totemism is to idolatry, in short, as race is to racism.

So let's consider Poussin's calf as a totemic image (totems are generally plant or animal images), a figure of the self-conscious projection of a community's self-love on a common symbol. Let's look at it through the eyes of Durkheim, Nietzsche, and Blake, as Poussin's attempt to "sound" the idol with his paintbrush rather than destroy it. It is important that in the story, the Israelites have *asked* for this Calf. They have demanded that Aaron, the artist in residence, make an idol "to go before them" as a symbol of their tribal identity. "God is Society" is Durkheim's famous formulation of the concept.⁴⁷ One could actually think of this as a kind of democratic emblem, at least partly because it seems to have been a random, chance image, flung out from the fire. As Aaron tells Moses: "I cast the gold into the fire and this Calf came out" (Exodus 32:24).

What if that was Zarathustra up on the mountain, smashing the law and joining in the fun? What if the dark clouds are Blake's Nobodaddy "farting and belching and coughing" in his cave on the mountaintop? Could it be that Poussin was (like Blake's Milton) a true poet-painter, and of the devil's party without knowing it?