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Ix
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The God of the economy distributes himself out, exerts himself, makes himself known. Once he has become visible, he declares himself with a face-prosōpon, the term by which the Persons of the Holy Trinity are designated. This is the hypostatic economy of divinity. In connection with the always sought and always impossible meeting between God and humans that characterizes the Old Testament, this is the opening of the historical field: a face-to-face meeting, an exchange of looks henceforth possible, and qualified as enigmatic.

(Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary. Marie-José Mondzain, translated by Rico Franses)

Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem of the biblical Genesis culminating in the Fall of Man. Near its conclusion, a primal act of covering occurs as God takes pity on the humans who now recognize their nudity and sends his son who "clad Their nakedness with skins of beasts." This invention of clothing gestures to a massive philosophical shift: Before the Fall, there is no gap between what things are and what they appear to be. Word and sign coincide. Adam and Eve exist in a state where representation is not yet a problem.

The Fall breaks this correspondence. The body becomes the site of desire and mortality, and with that arises the problem of the image as an unreliable representation of the world—a surface that can deceive and that can be used to manipulate. Shame and the fear of the false image share the same structure: Both are responses to the discovery that appearance and reality can come apart. It is this anxiety that runs through the history of images and ignites the Byzantine conflict over the icon.

The iconoclasts of the 8th and 9th centuries do not simply state that images are false idols. Their argument is that the divine cannot be circumscribed: Any image that claims to represent God necessarily bounds and contains what is by definition infinite and therefore falsifies it. Against this, the defenders of the image introduce the incarnation of God and his economy: God's self-distribution into the world through a human face becomes the only grounds on which representation becomes possible at all. If God became flesh, then the gap between the real and its image is not absolute.

In this sense, Genesis stages a problem that is not only theological but epistemological, namely whether and how the real can be known through appearances at all.

The moral weight of this conflict saturates the history of images and, most intensely, the history of art, which is its primary cultural arena. The figure exists in perpetual tension, suspended between stark realism, idealized beauty, and periodic acts of deconstruction. Marat in his bathtub, Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Cubism, the soft-power disarmament of the figure's danger. Malevich's *Black Square*.

The figure stubbornly persisted in photography and so there is Martha Rosler's diatribe against the meliorist documentary photographs of the 20th century, which she considers as images that offer suffering to a comfortable class. Rosler's iconoclasm is moralist in that it notes the image's inability to affect change, and as a result accuses it of compliance or, worse, aesthetic indulgence.

Contemporary found object sculpture inherits this verdict and replaces the figure with its index: the tool used on or by a body engaged in a semantically legible activity. The body is structurally absent, and this absence presents itself as the ethical position claiming that depicting the body is to risk repeating the violation visited upon it. But since no actual harm is done by depicting a figure, what is operating here is something stronger than ethics: a sacred interdiction, a sense that the use of the icon is always already in the service of power and therefore necessitates iconoclasm—"the breaking of the figure."

From that abundance of folds, which spread out like the fustanella of a whirling dervish, the waist emerges elegant and slender... That mass of rich fabrics serves as a pedestal to the bust and the head, the only important parts, now that nudity is no longer permitted.

(De la mode. Théophile Gautier as quoted in: La Dernière Mode. Stéphane Mallarmé)

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