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Simpson, James. *Under the Hammer: Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xiii, 222. \$45. ISBN-13: 9780199591657.

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In early July 2012, alleged al-Qaida-linked Moslems, who had seized control of the African medieval center of learning, Timbuktu, Mali, along with the rest of northern Mali, destroyed shrines they considered idolatrous and attacked historic and religious landmarks in the city. These fundamentalist hardline attacks on Timbuktu's ancient and medieval mausoleums, mosques, and manuscripts echo a similar assault against England's medieval (read Roman Catholic) culture and heritage of images that occurred between 1538 and 1643. James Simpson's provocative, learned, and elegant little book *Under the Hammer: Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition*, continues from Simpson's earlier work on late medieval iconoclasm and image controversy, *Images, Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and Visual Image* (Oxford University Press, 2002). *Under the Hammer* makes an important correction to the West's misperceptions that condemn others as iconoclasts, i.e. the Taliban who destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001, while ignoring the fact that iconoclasm is a major feature of Anglo-American modernity. Simpson argues further that the iconoclastic urge is always an unfinished business, and as he demonstrates, it reemerges in unexpected forms.

Fundamentalism, as an effort to return to purer origins, informs iconoclastic movements, but as Simpson shows, it is not a return to what we label "medieval" practices. It is rather an attempt to erase that earlier period as a distorted and corrupt descent from the simplicity of the biblical word, while forcing a return to the simple truth, and is in fact a revolutionary attempt at renewal. Jürgen Habermas in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (MIT, 1998) wrote that "As a reaction to an overwhelming push for modernization, fundamentalism is itself a thoroughly modern movement of renewal" (223). Simpson's book confirms this assessment, showing that "iconoclasm is not 'somewhere else'. Instead, it lies buried deep within Western modernity, and especially deep within Anglo-American tradition" (11-12). That this brand of iconoclastic modernism is coupled with intolerance is painfully evident in the most egregious case of Western iconoclasm that Simpson singles out for discussion, the case of England's massive destruction between the 1530s and the 1640s, the longest stretch of iconoclastic fervor that has occurred historically, not just in Europe, but as far as is known, world-wide. After Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, his son Edward VI, informed by his clerical advisers, set out to destroy the medieval iconic symbol system represented in visual form in frescoes, statuary, stained glass, altar pieces, and illuminated books. What was not destroyed, or came out of hiding after the first wave of destruction, was demolished when Oliver Cromwell and his supporters came to power in the following century.

Simpson's beautifully written and illustrated book is divided into four chapters, with an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction begins with the story of the Bamiyan Buddhas to argue that the Taliban's act of destruction, rather than constituting a "medieval" regression, shows they "are in their iconoclasm, at least, Early Moderns; legislated iconoclasm in England for example, was unknown in what came to be called 'medieval' England" (4). From this opening Simpson develops the thesis that "Focus on that century of early modernity [1530-1640] transforms our understanding of two histories, that of Anglo-

American painting, and that of English poetry" (5). The main task of this modernity was to centralize power and to violently repudiate alternative forms of power, earlier made sacred in religious ritual (and images) and lines of authority that led to Rome. Simpson's brilliant assessment of Early Modern iconoclasm links it to the invention of the idea of the "aesthetic" in the Enlightenment, when the museum became the space where the image lost its sacral power to become an object for inquiry and aesthetic appreciation. Rather than examining the invention of the medieval period that transpired in the nineteenth century, he turns to the Enlightenment and to twentieth century abstract art, to prove how crossing over so-called period boundaries can elucidate the recursive nature of Western iconoclasm, and particularly in the Anglo-American tradition.

Chapter 1, "Iconoclasm in Melbourne, Massachusetts, and the Museum of Modern Art," argues that twentieth-century abstract painting, itself an example of the spirituality of *via negativa* is in fact also a continuation of the inevitable iconoclastic drive to erase the image. Chapter 2, "Learn to Die: Late Medieval English Images Before the Law," is an erudite cultural history, what Simpson calls a "cultural etymology" (49). It traces the discourse and fate of the image from the early fifteenth century, in other words, before the Tudor assault, to the end of the sixteenth century, examining the role of the Bible, particularly the new engagement with Deuteronomy and Exodus, by Lydgate, Wyclif, Reginald Pecock and Thomas More, John Bale, the Book of Homilies, and Thomas Hoccleve. Simpson demonstrates that the image was already in a defensive position, long before legislation sought to eradicate it. Chapter 3 "Statues of Liberty: Iconoclasm and Idolatry in the English Revolution" examines seventeenth-century Puritan iconoclasm while singling out John Milton, who begins his epic poem "with a vigorous but knowingly doomed campaign of idol breaking" (108). The campaign against the image is a losing battle, Simpson argues, recalling Edmund Spenser's failure to rout Archimago, the spinner of doubles and deceptions. "Under the Hammer: Iconoclasm and the Enlightenment," Chapter 4, demonstrates something that Simpson had not sought to prove, but it reveals a feature of the book and its methodology from which those who profess to study the Middle Ages can applaud and profit. The chapter explores how the discovery, notion of, or invention of the autonomy of art contributed to a modern brand of iconoclasm in which the power of the image is disciplined and confined to the museum. Here he concludes once more that iconoclasm is a "dynamic part of our own traditions of both literature and the visual arts" (154). Profound study in a so-called pre-modern period makes these kinds of scintillating discoveries possible, but also, breaking out of the narrow confines of particular period studies allows for this kind of intellectual insight. Simpson's conclusion returns to the main argument, that the "history of Liberty turns out, in part, to involve histories of 'idol' destruction" (155). Furthermore, while the museum, a repository to sort, tame, and discipline the image might have repressed it, in fact "it cannot help but replicate the sacral conditions it was designed to repress" (158).

This is a splendid book from which anyone trained in medieval or early modern literature, art history, religious studies, theology, or philosophy, could certainly profit. I have some quibbles on some topics, but it would have been difficult to address them in a book whose claim is "Anglo-American tradition." But the link between Anglo-American tradition, iconoclasm, and modernity does pose a problem in that it implies that while modernity and iconoclasm as Anglo-American are coterminous, it neglects other versions of modernity that are decidedly iconophilic. One thinks of the "modernist" movement to restore the ancient city of Rome and its artifacts that began in 1400 when the study of archeology began in earnest; or of the Vatican Library, a certain sign of modernity, where by the sixteenth century one could find books from China, ancient Egypt, ancient Rome, and Mexico, as well as all the Christian writers of the previous centuries. Both of these developments predate both the iconoclasm of the sixteenth century and the emergence of the museum in Enlightenment England and France. Could there perhaps be competing versions of modernity--some iconoclastic while others are and continue to be

iconophilic? The former is in a constant state of revolution and change, whereas the latter builds on converging cultures of continuity, syncretism, and recycling. It contrasts with an idea of modernity that always starts from scratch with some idea of its pure non-idolatrous and obscured origins and in which the more recent past becomes separate and alien.

Quite by chance, perhaps, Simpson's brilliant and provocative book actually becomes an insight into a profound "absence" in Anglo-American modern culture. It is built on a rupture from a past that is not dead, which has the energy to return, and whose revival requires suppression. The museum and "abstract" art are among the means for emptying the past and its images of their power.