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Anselm Kiefer's *Iconoclastic Controversy*

The question of memory, the presence of a past – its reality and possibility – cannot be posed outside of tradition. And yet far from giving the question a fixity, such a location, while accurate, only serves to compound the question's problematic nature. Tradition lacks a specific determination. Tradition can be incorporated within history – it may even be 'history' – nonetheless neither tradition nor history are thereby finally determined and allocated a semantic and heuristic structure. There are further difficulties since memory, tradition, history all encounter the problem of time. Each is unthinkable without time. (This will be true even in the weak sense in that their being thought will always contain within it, either implicitly or explicitly, a temporal dimension). Rather than attempting to give greater specificity to these complex interrelationships in advance, they will be allowed to emerge within a consideration of the interpretative problems posed by Anselm Kiefer's work *Iconoclastic Controversy*.¹

Kiefer's title names the painting. It is a title which is thought to exhibit Kiefer's concern with history. Within his own history the title has been repeated and thus has been thought to name a preoccupation. In addition, of course, the title also names the dilemma at the heart of titles; the arguments within and over the image. The difficulty for interpretation – perhaps also as an interpretation – that emerges even within these opening and tentative deliberations is twofold. The first is the problematic nature of the naming relation. (The relationship between name and named). The second is connected to the first since it stems from that element within any representation, (and therefore within mimesis) that yields the possibility of representation at the same time as calling into question the viability of representation; ie of permanently establishing and fixing the relationship between the representation and the represented. It takes place, of course, within the terms – the conditions of possibility – representation sets for itself. This element is succinctly captured in the following question: Can the painting, *Iconoclastic Controversy* be viewed as a representation of the Iconoclast controversy? If it were to be asked – what is the Iconoclast controversy? (What is named by the term 'Iconoclasm'?) – then the twofold problem, already identified above, would have been merely repeated.

The factual co-ordinates of Iconoclasm are relatively straightforward.² The ban on the production of religious images was brought into existence by Emperor Leo III in 726. It was challenged and altered at the Second Council of Nicaea and finally overturned in 843. The latter part of the period coincided with a struggle for power between Empress Irene and her son Constantine. The ban concerned religious images rather than secular ones. During the period in question painting, engraving and the illustrating of manuscripts were practised; as was the construction of mosaics. Indeed abstraction flourished. While it is always possible to fill out the factual detail of Iconoclasm this would neither address nor answer the question of whether or not it was this 'detail' that was named by the painting's title and

therefore which was represented within the frame. If this state of affairs is the case then the simple recitation of the factual, while providing an adumbration of elements, will, of necessity fail to allow for a significant interpretative approach to the frame. The shadow of images endures. It is possible to go further and suggest that what seems to emerge here is a rift for which there is no obvious bridge insofar as regardless of the quantity of information that was amassed concerning Iconoclasm, it would always fail to form the interpretation. In fact, though perhaps ironically, it is precisely this problem that already informs interpretation since it brings to the fore the question of history, of access to the past and therefore of memory. It is for these reasons that it is essential to return to the difficulties posed by naming and representation. History – understood in this instance as the 'detail' of the past – does not provide any direct access to history as a problem within interpretation and thus as figure within the frame.³ The emergence of naming and representation as problems does not take place in isolation. They are brought into play by the frame and moreover by its name. However it is, as always, more complex. In order to trace this complexity it will be necessary to approach these problems under two different headings. The first is 'Representation Titles' and the second 'Memory History'.

Representation Titles

The question of titles is an element of the larger problem of naming.⁴ However what is demanded and expected of a title is different from the demands and expectations made of name. Nonetheless while the naming relation is more rigorous than the one at work within the title, it is still the case that the title in some sense names. The painting is entitled to a name which then comes to be its title. (The legal and moral aspect of titles and entitlement should not be overlooked). The title designates the frame in at least two senses. Firstly it allows it to be named within any discussion; be that discussion legal, aesthetic, referential or even the opening moves within an interpretation. In this sense the title names the frame; the tableau. It is not, as yet, intended to name what is framed. This will be the second designation. The first is exact. It exemplifies the accuracy demanded by the conventions of citation. (The viability and possibility of the fulfilment of this demand is a separate issue). The question that must be answered is, what takes place in the move from the title as designating the tableau – the painting qua material object – to its designating the painting qua object of interpretation? This shift in register is not a simple redescription of the 'same' entity. The painting as material object involves fixity. Its being is exhausted in and by its objectivity; its 'everydayness'. The object of interpretation will lack exhaustion as it is continually open to reinterpretation. This is why it is preferable to speak of the continual becoming-object of the object of interpretation. It is within this shift – this fundamental change in the nature of the object – that the title as designating the content of the frame needs to be approached.

It is however in relation to the becoming-object that the question of representation and titles becomes more complicated. The reason for this is straightforward. What is at stake here is that if the object of interpretation is the site of interpretation as well as the site of the continual possibility of reinterpretation, then it follows that the title – any title – can always be read as designating the actuality of interpretation in addition to this inherent possibility within any actual interpretation. (Where the actual is defined as the present; ie the locus of the task of interpretation and from which it comes to be enacted).

Now it is clear that the title cannot be thus interpreted within the field of intention – ie in relation both to what is intended for the title as well as to what the title itself intends – it is rather that the interpretation of the title, the interpretation of the frame and the interpretation of the relationship between title and frame, all sanction this reworking of the title's function. The intriguing element here is that while this is a general claim about titles it is also possible to argue that the title *Iconoclastic Controversy*, the content of the frame and the relation between them, inscribe these considerations within the frame of *Iconoclastic Controversy*. In sum therefore beginning to interpret the frame, the painting, *Iconoclastic Controversy*, involves recognising that part of its content is this enacted rethinking of titles. This does not occur in addition to the painting's content but as part of its content; as *it*. (It goes without saying that, at this stage, it is its content thus interpreted). There are important implications of this inscription for an understanding of memory and history. However prior to taking up this task it is vital to plot the way this inscription takes place.

The ostensible issue within Iconoclasm was the worship of images. There is a sense therefore in which this historical moment, even though it is coupled with the division between the Eastern and Western church, and the more general question of power within the Byzantine empire, is also an integral moment within the history of mimesis. (These two moments are not mutually exclusive). The problem raised by the worship of images refers on the one hand to the Judaic and Islamic traditions in which God could not be made present, while on the other it invokes the Platonic argument that a mimetic presentation within both the visual arts and literature, by definition, is always going to be unable to present the 'reality', or 'essential being' of the (*to on, ousia*) of the represented. When the argument to do with the limits of mimesis concerned a trivial example – the 'bridle' in the *Republic* (Book X) – then the significance of the limits lay within mimesis itself and not the example. In the case of God however it is different. Now the example is of central importance.

The problem of the presentation of God has both its origins as well as its conditions of existence in Platonism. When for example Augustine in *The Confessions* (Book XI, VII) poses the question of how God's word can be represented because it takes place at one time and therefore cannot be articulated within the temporality proper to human speech, he is drawing on the distinction established by Plato between the ontology and temporality proper to the 'Forms' and that proper to the domain in which things come into existence and pass away. The problem generated by the Platonic conception of mimesis is that it may lead to the transgression of God. This risk is *both* sustained and generated by mimesis. Understood as a moment within the history of mimesis, Iconoclasm therefore involves, at the very minimum, two significant elements.

The first is that it has to be assumed that what is not present has a fixed reality which by definition cannot be represented as itself, ie presented in itself, and secondly that purported representations of God led the 'faithful' to conflate the image with reality. Once again this is precisely the problem Plato identified

within mimesis. (It informs, for example, the careful consideration in *Republic* Book II and III, of which stories should be told to children). The important element is not God as such but the non-present. For once the presence of Iconoclasm comes to be inscribed with the frame titled *Iconoclastic Controversy* it is then possible to interpret the non-present as history. In addition the presentation of history – the coming to presence of the non-present – would seem to involve a painting that was enacted as memory; ie as an act of remembrance. As with any beginning the specificity of these terms is far from clear. What must be pursued therefore is not simply the relationship between history and memory, but rather a reworking of memory and remembrance such that they could in the end be situated beyond presence. In other words reinscribed in order that they be maintained but not as purveyors of presence.

Memory History

The inscription of the problem of non-presence within the frame indicates that the question at hand concerns how the presence of that non-presence is to be understood. This problem is not reducible to establishing the possibility of a remembrance in which the non-present becomes present. (However, as shall be seen, remembrance brings with it the questions of what is remembered and for whom?) Iconoclasm was a movement that resisted this possibility though it was a resistance formulated within mimesis. The *Iconoclastic Controversy* as a title does not name a problem within mimesis. Rather the past does not emerge out of mimesis, but on the contrary as a problem for mimesis. Therefore the criteria of interpretation cannot themselves be articulated within mimesis. There are wider implications as the painting does, in addition, pose the question of the possibility of history – the coming to presence of the non-present – even of history as the narrative of continuity given the nature of that history.

The frame itself contains a number of important components that can be seen as enacting these considerations. The first is the combination of media, ie photography and paint. It is often assumed that it is the presence of mixed media within the frame that is referred to by the painting's title, or at least that the title questions the 'reliability' of the photograph. On their own it is extremely unlikely that these possibilities could account for the relationship between title and contents, let alone the inscription of the title's dilemma (the dilemma of the title) into the frame itself. The way towards an understanding of the co-presence of both photography and painting is provided firstly by the presence of the palette outlined in black and secondly by the words written in the bottom right corner, *Bilder-Streit*.

The palette figures in a number of Kiefer's paintings. There are at times slight variations. In *Icarus – March Sand*, for example, the palette has a wing. This painting also involves a combination of media. Moreover, its title is written within the field of the painting. Invariably within his work the palette exists in outline only. The palette is at the same time empty and full. This is especially the case in *Iconoclastic Controversy*. It is empty of its specific content and yet is filled by what it outlines. The paradoxical palette is both a part and yet apart. The palette opens a rift within the frame that the painting does not try to heal. It is precisely the presence of the 'a part/apart' that indicates the impossibility of a retrieval or recovery of a past which is no longer present. The present within this paradox becomes the site – the witness – to a continual remembrance. It is however one where remembering demands neither the continuity of narrative nor of tradition. (The temporal dimension that is displaced as well as the one that emerges in its place, pose interpretative questions of considerable importance). The rift, the holding apart, that signifies without mimesis – apart from mimesis and

therefore without a fixed and determined signified (the represented) – is the possibility which while not being contained within Iconoclasm, is nonetheless the risk within mimesis that mimesis itself attempts either to restrict via the introduction of truth or circumvent via what could be called a generalised iconoclasm. It is in this sense that the palette is connected to the words that also stage the argument over images; *Bilder-Streit*.

The frame, the painting *Iconoclastic Controversy* has therefore inscribed within it – ‘within it’ becomes of course ‘as it’ – a questioning, if not a reworking of titles and of representation. The presence of this activity within the frame works to reinforce the rift opened by the palette. Since both suggest that, on one level at least, neither representation, nor mimesis are adequate to the task of providing an interpretation of the painting. Indeed this emerges, in part, as an interpretation of the painting. In other words the problems of interpretation, mimesis etc, are not anterior to the painting but take place within the frame. They do have a specificity. The point is that history, memory, remembrance, etc, do not just happen, they form part of a tradition; a dominant tradition. Contests, even a controversy, that take place within the tradition concern dominance. It is the way in which the tradition has come to dominate, taken in conjunction with the consequences of that dominance, that it becomes essential to house tradition but not within the house of tradition.

In *Iconoclastic Controversy* the presence of the tanks and the wall gathered within the paradoxical palette form a part of

historical continuity and yet are at the same time held apart from it. They thereby signal the necessity that emerges when history, memory and tradition can no longer be thought within representation and mimesis, ie within the very terms that tradition demands that they be thought. In addition what also emerges is time, since the temporality proper to memory and continuity is the temporality of the ordered sequence. A break within that sequence – a rift – can always be healed by memory. Memory is understood as creating a narrative within the temporality of sequential continuity. It is this conception of memory that the painting suggests is no longer possible. Memory is not to be linked to the past. The painting gestures towards a present remembrance; a witness to the rift.

Undertaking this task – present remembrance – is done for the most part within Kiefer’s work by deploying figures and events from ‘history’. However each one works in a particular way such that it calls into question the possibility of its own use as the creator of a true history in which the past comes to be either retrieved or restored. Present remembrance thus opens up the possibility of thinking the temporality of the rift and also of developing a conception of tradition as rift. Tradition and time (though only the time of tradition) now have a determination. It is, of course, one that is not handed down within and as tradition. The determination is the rift. It is in sum the actualisation of the risk within mimesis.

Notes

1 This paper is part of a work-in-progress on the paintings of Anselm Kiefer. It takes up, but does not complete, an interpretation of Kiefer’s work that was begun in *What is Deconstruction?* pages 50-54. The sketch offered here is, as was the earlier one, connected to the philosophy of Deconstruction without being reducible to it. I have retained the ambiguity suggested by the co-presence of the English and German titles: *Iconoclastic Controversy/Bilder-Streit*. See the catalogue, *Anselm Kiefer*, published by The Art Institute of Chicago and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1987.

2 Even this claim, without of course being misleading, is problematic since the primary sources are themselves split between the opposing factions. Even conventional histories are torn between the East and the West. For an overview see E J Martin, *A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy*, SPCK, London, 1930. A general discussion of the arts of the period is provided by David Talbot Rice in *Byzantine Art*, Pelican Books, London, 1954.

3 I have discussed the problem of naming in *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy: a New Theory of Words*, Routledge, London 1989. See in

particular Chapter 6.

4 I am not denying the importance of evidence and the factual content of history. Indeed it is at times essential to have access to such material. A clear example concerns the polemic around the ‘existence’ of the death camps. The two points that emerge here are different. On the one hand it involves the recognition that evidence can never exist *in vacuo* but is deployed and redeployed and thus ordered within the different, and at times, conflicting narratives in which it appears. On the other hand it is significantly more complex. It refers to the problem of representation (and hence mimesis) in the sense that it refers to the problem of understanding what it is that is presented in the present as history. The question is: what form does the presence of the past take? Moreover is it constrained to take a particular form? The question therefore does not concern the ‘that’ of history – its content – but history itself. The point at issue here is whether or not Kiefer’s painting raises these questions from within its content or, more radically, are these questions its content. It is precisely the tension between these two possibilities that will be explored in this paper.