

Selections From My Working Notebooks Including Images, and Quotes From the Writings of Gabriel Vahanian

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"Let us conclude by saying that from the Biblical point of view the demarcation line is not between the sacred and the profane nor between the religious and the secular--let alone between one world view and another, or between theism and atheism...The line is drawn between God and the idol, between the creator and the creature. It is drawn between iconoclasm and idolatry. No worldview--atheistic or theistic--can prevent either self-deification or God's becoming the idol from which man is constantly to be set free in order to become that which his is not, namely, himself rather than God."

Gabriel Vahanian,

No Other God, New York 1966, p. 9

In Vahanian's sense, iconoclasm is accomplished through displacement. Man creates an icon which displaces another, makes a lie of it. The Christian act is essentially that of killing the illusion that man on earth is God.

Christianity, as such, is essentially modernist. Like modernism, it is process-oriented, as opposed to object-oriented. It supports a cult of the new, because to do otherwise would be to relax into idolatry. This new, however, must inherently be a critique of the former, and attain status of the new only by effectively displacing it.

It is the act of freeing through killing that serves as goal (= bring in the term extra-rapid). Visually, a sustained, cinematic metamorphic critique. Frame after frame, shadows and light, and the illusion of movement projected by man in the world.

Thinking of learning to forget our cultural rafts. Afloat on our culture, while wanting to immerse ourselves directly in the water, discarding that raft. But without the raft there is no water. What is this raft, that by noticing, invents the water?

One attempts slowly, log by log, to renew the raft, while still staying afloat, keeping the water. It reminds me of the way a girl might change her clothes, modestly, taking off her shoulder straps, back turned to visitors. She slips on a new dress, covering the potentially naked skin even as she slides the old one out from underneath.

"A faith which has been drained of its iconoclastic vocation can only wallow in words and images that cheat man into idolatry instead of confirming him as an iconoclast.

"Left without a God, the secular search and destroy consists of empty practices: behaviors learned by rote and repeated out of habit. This, then, is art for art's sake. It should not, however, be confused with a truly iconoclastic art, even if that art seems to have previous artwork as its target. It is never, in fact, the appearance of the artwork's byproduct that speaks; but the quality of the artist's gesture and the world that it engages.

Vahanian pronounces the word as iconoclastic only "if it rebels against freezing reality into an image, a cliché, a slogan, or a dogma..." (ibid. p. 43).

Artwork as a process, as fall, as an attempt to create an eschatological existence through displacing the God on earth. Vahanian writes of revelation as **"an occurrence, and not a communication of supernatural knowledge; that is to say, revelation does not mediate a world view, an objective quantification of the word..." (ibid. p. 53).** NOTE: It is not a hermetically concealed occult knowledge which is revealed, but rather a verbal state, an "occurrence." Interpretation, then, is secondary in importance to the sheer weight of the occurrence itself.

When a person sits down to play a piano, the question may arise: what should that person--whose time on earth is finite--play? How can that person decide? And perhaps, sometimes, one can compose in such a way so that the act of playing or composing is the act of asking that question.

Art is the inventing of ways of asking questions. And of course, questions asked will shape what kind of information the artist will receive--although how it shapes it is not always evident. How it shapes it is the subject of further invention evaluation and discourse.

His idea of "songness" is the framework (hidden) of his gesture (his composing a song), an act which forges a god and melts the golden calf (displacement of compositional strategies).

The importance may not be in how well the gesture performs, but rather in the quality of the world which the gesture engages.

To travel through the architecture of one's concepts and experience them physically. But it is too easy to concentrate on the conceptual organizing system as problem, thus focusing closure on concept instead of perceptual tracking of experience.

Vahanian points out that Christianity did not secularize, but desacralized (ibid. p. 8). It did this by debunking its idols, i.e. its God, through an iconic displacement. But **"Secularization, by way of contrast, describes the process through which Christianity has always tended to show itself to be enclosed in its cultural and intellectual expressions and to be domesticated by them." (ibid. p. 18).**

By focusing on a world which does not resonate to God's Word, man's most radical iconoclasm is domesticated. A spatially-located heaven was secularized by science. A literalist interpretation of Genesis suffers the same fate. In this way, fundamentalist explanations simply speed up and make more obvious the death of God. American literalist Christian fundamentalism is the last come-shudder of a virgin who just became a whore.

But pointing out the stupidity of fundamentalist discourses simply belabors the obvious. More important is the act which informs an eschatological existence. (Who took the EH out of eschatological?).

And this act Vahanian places today in the realm of art, not inside the church.

"Theology desacralized the world and spiritualized it: the cost was the secularization of Christianity. As a result, theology has now ceased to be the voice of this protest, the iconoclastic function of the word has been assumed, if not usurped, by secularistic ideologies weaned on the word and, in particular, by literature, the orphan of the orphans of the word." (ibid., p. 45).

"While no word is sacramental except charismatically, what gives meaning to a word is its sacramental power. A word has this sacramental power when an ultimately irreducible reality is spoken of in terms of a measurable empirical phenomenon...But, while a metaphoric word merely determines a relation between measurable phenomena, either subjectively or objectively, by means of a mutual appropriation of their qualities, a sacramental word speaks of what ultimately makes these phenomena and their realities inalienable as well as irreducible." (ibid., p. 37).

The image shows two large, handwritten Chinese characters in black ink on a white background. The characters are '東' (east) and '西' (west), which together form the word '東西' (dōng xī), meaning 'thing' or 'object' in English. The characters are written in a cursive, calligraphic style.

The word above is pronounced "dung syi" in Mandarin Chinese, spoken in a high, sustained pitch.

It translates into English a "thing" or "object." A singularity.

The characters that make up the Chinese word are the characters for east and west. Two directions.

The thing is an absent plurality, without positivity or presence, two directions set next to each other, without conjunction. The thing is neither the sun seen rising through the branches of a tree, nor a bird in a nest.

The things is a delay, a suspension, without physical means of support.

"The word is an icon--not a graven image, and not a static or logical symbol. And the word is an icon only when it is iconoclastic."