INTRODUCTION

JOSH ELLENBOGEN AND AARON TUGENDHAFT

When the inhabitants of ancient Mesopotamia made a new cult-statue for one of their temples, that object would first undergo an elaborate ceremony. This *mīs pî* or "mouth-washing" ritual consisted of numerous stages, over the course of which the object underwent a radical metamorphosis—it became the kind of thing one might appropriately treat as a god.[1] A crucial moment in the ritual occurred when the artisans flung into a river the tools that they had used to make the cult-object. Following this act, the artisans held out their hands so that a priest could symbolically chop them off with a wooden sword. As the artisans, each of whom had just completed fashioning the object, extended their hands they would ritually chant: "I did not make it; I swear I did not make it; I did not make it; I swear I did not make it."

This claim has its counterpoint in the polemic of the anonymous Hebrew prophet whom we know as "Second Isaiah," an Israelite exile living in Babylonia.[2] As a witness to Mesopotamian cultic practice and as one familiar with the thinking to which it corresponded, the prophet gleefully insisted, in order to discredit the Mesopotamian cult-object, on the fact of its human manufacture: "The makers of idols all work to no purpose. . . . They are craftsmen, they are merely human" (Isa. 44:9, 11). What appeared to his Mesopotamian neighbors as a god was, to the Israelite prophet, simply a work of human hands. This indictment of the cult-object has provided a basis for discourse on "idolatry" ever since.[3]

The phrase *idol anxiety* likely brings to mind a figure like Second Isaiah and his abhorrence of Mesopotamian cultic practice. In this introduction, however, we want to suggest that anxiety over idols may in fact reside beyond the confines of the biblical tradition. As we believe the *mīs pî* ceremony reveals, the very cultures that biblical polemic often casts as "idolatrous" themselves had a notion of "idol"—in the sense of an object that could not achieve its cultic task—and therefore devised an elaborate system of rituals to prevent such a failure.

This situation calls into question the classic dichotomy of cultures, on the one hand, that recognize the problem of idolatry but refrain from engaging in the practice and, on the other, of ones that engage in it without recognizing it as problematic. We want to suggest that the anxiety that objects can become idols is far more ubiquitous, even if certain cultures do not possess the terminology to frame the issue as such. An object's collapse into the category of "idol" marks a form of breakdown that can be understood on a culture's own terms. Recognizing a particular culture's expression of anxiety can function as a guide to how that culture defines success and failure with regard to religious objects. From such a perspective, it is not only Second Isaiah who has a notion of idol, while his Mesopotamian hosts are oblivious to such a "failed object." As the care taken in the *mīs pî* to ensure success exemplifies, the Mesopotamians well knew how an object could fail. As they themselves put it, without undergoing the ritual process "the image does not smell incense, eat food and drink water."[4] It remains a dumb thing, rather than achieving the purpose of being a god. By contrast, and crucially, when it does succeed as a god it is not, at least by the definition we propose in this introduction, an idol.

Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, in their book *Idolatry*, define their project as "principally a conceptual analysis of idolatry as it is seen by its opponents. . . . It is an attempt to understand a phenomenon through the way it defines the 'enemy.'"[5] They recognize that traditional discourse on idolatry has been "polemical and hostile," aimed at "the other."[6] Since their work focuses on Jewish sources, "the other" at issue here is the polytheist or pagan (they use the terms interchangeably) "other" of monotheism. These two scholars focus on how the monotheistic portrayal of paganism as idolatry constitutes an act of "self-definition through its idea of what is excluded."[7] To this interpretation, idolatry marks an anxiety, but always one that is aimed outward—against a group that is other.[8] In contrast to Halbertal and Margalit, we want to turn

attention to how anxiety over idolatry can arise within groups themselves. Moving beyond "idolatry" as a polemical accusation, such an approach allows us to reorient our inquiry to the forms of anxiety that shadow the human interaction with things and the divine, and the various strategies that given groups have developed for overcoming these anxieties.

This situation points to one of the broadest goals of the present introduction. The category of the idol turns on the selection of certain interactions with objects as dangerous and others as desirable. Which interactions appear threatening and which appear suitable correlate to a larger set of issues: the understandings of representation, likeness, being, and making that given cultures develop.[9] Rather than aiming artificially to fix the character of idols as a specific class of thing, we want to highlight some of the variables that can play a role in any culture's specific negotiation of success and failure in its religious use of objects.[10] In order to do so, we propose tracking the basic conceptual categories and forms of interaction that emerge as significant in the Mesopotamian *mīs pî* ritual, comparing them to other historical manifestations of idol anxiety. The result will be a kind of "grammar of the idol," a guide to the variables that must be considered when attempting to interpret a culture's approach to the use of objects in religious contexts.[11] Furthermore, because the idol engages with the categories of representation, likeness, being, and making that govern all human interactions with objects, a broader heuristic purpose for such a grammar presents itself. Attention to the anxieties surrounding idolatry can provide insight into the ways, in particular times and places, human beings have negotiated their relationship with objects more generally.[12]

Before proceeding with our grammar, it may be useful to say something more about the term *idolatry* itself, with its long and complicated history. Given the polysemous nature of the term, we need to clarify what we primarily do and do not have in mind when we talk about idols in this introductory discussion. That the word *idolatry* fuses a Hebrew concern with Greek terminology provides an immediate indicator of the problems involved here. As might be expected, the fit between the Hebrew and the Greek is not precise. The term idolatry itself derives from two Greek words: *eidōlon* ("image") and *latria* ("worship"). Biblical Hebrew lacks any term meaning "worship of images," and no single term that clearly corresponds to the Greek *eidōlon*. The Jews who produced the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, used the word *eidōlon* to translate various Hebrew terms. Some of these Hebrew

words (e.g., *pesel, tzelem*) approximate the root meaning of the Greek *eidōlon* fairly closely, and do not possess any negative connotation when taken on their own—they simply mean "image" or "likeness." Other terms rendered in the Greek by *eidōlon*, however, make matters more complex. For example, the Hebrew word *elohim*, translated by *eidōlois* at 1 Kings 11:8, literally means "gods." Similarly, the *eidōlois* of the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 32:21 corresponds to the Hebrew term *hevel*, whose literal meaning is "vapor" or "breath," and figuratively can mean "insubstantiality," "worthlessness" or "vanity" (as in the famous opening of Ecclesiastes). By translating such varying Hebrew terms with this one Greek word, the Septuagint collapses distinctions between images, divinity, and lack of truth or substantiality. When the compound word *eidōlolatria* appears in the Pauline letters—that is, after the composition of the Hebrew biblical books and their translation into Greek—it is glossed as "fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness" (Col. 3:5). Clearly, then, the term has already taken on vastly broader connotations than its etymological basis would suggest.[13]

A univocal meaning for the terms *idol* and *idolatry* is impossible on the basis of such divergent data. Accordingly, one will find a variety of approaches to these concepts in the pages of the present anthology. As editors, we have not tried to impose a consistent definition of idolatry on our contributors. In this introduction, however, we focus on the idol as a material thing and on the concerns that surround human interaction with it.[14] The grammar of the idol that we propose, therefore, proceeds as follows. Using primarily the *mīs pî* ritual and related Mesopotamian practices, we will consider the following five determinants of the idol: the question of making, the concept of likeness, the representational or presentational status of objects, understandings of human power, and the immanent or transcendent character of the divine.

Today, we know the Mesopotamian *mīs pî* or "mouth-washing" ritual from a series of cuneiform tablets dating to the first millennium B.C.E., though the ceremony itself probably first appeared in older epochs. The most extensive manuscripts come from Nineveh and Babylon. These texts allow for a reconstruction of the *mīs pî* as a ceremony consisting of ten or eleven phases, over the course of which the new cult-statue leaves the workshop and is inducted into the temple. The first day of the ritual begins with preparations in the city, countryside, and temple, followed by purification rites and an incantation in the workshop. The procession then moves to the river, into which the artificers of the object throw their tools. Then follows another incantation,

and an appeal for the image's brothers, the other gods, to count it among them. The first day comes to an end when the celebrants take the image from the riverbank to the orchard, where they place it facing the sunrise. On the second day, the ritual resumes with further offerings and incantations in the orchard. At this point, the moment comes with which our discussion started: the artisans declare that they did not make the object and the priests symbolically chop off their hands. Following more incantations, the procession marches to the temple gate and then, after yet another series of incantations, to the sanctuary niche. The priest then leads the object to take its seat, the celebrants recite two more incantations and prepare a last offering. The *mīs pî* then concludes.

Through this ceremony the inhabitants of Mesopotamia convey their need to confront the question of making as a central concern in using a statue to attain contact with the divine. If making a thing is tantamount to possessing power over it, then forgetfulness regarding a thing's genesis can prove transformative of its nature. By the logic of this rite, casting the tools into the river upon completing the image returned them to the gods of craftsmanship, and so established those gods as the actual makers of the cult-statue. The act of ritually severing the artisans' hands with a wooden sword graphically reiterates this idea. Such a deed buttresses the claim that the cult-statue was not humanly made, but rather, as a god, was born to the gods in heaven. By this displacement of genesis and agency, the thing was divested of the human manufacture that would have rendered its worship unacceptable.

A similar denial of human manufacture operates in many cultural traditions, although the particular form that it takes varies widely.[15] The Mesopotamian ritual, for example, does have certain parallels with the later Christian idea of the *acheiropoiēton*—a work "not made by human hands." Veronica's veil comprises the most famous example of this latter tradition. Folk etymology derives the female saint's name from the Latin word *vera*, meaning "true," and the Greek *eikon*, another word for "image." The tradition tells of how Veronica supplied Christ with her veil to wipe his brow as he was carrying his cross to Golgotha, and how the image of his face became miraculously impressed upon it. The resulting "true image" of Christ achieved its accuracy because it came into being without the mediation of a human hand. As Gilbert Dagron has summarized: "In order for the icon to live the painter and the painter's art must disappear—or at least they cannot serve as active intermediaries, but only passive instruments in the elaboration of the image."[16]

This elimination of mediation centers on the idea that direct contact between signifier and signified ensures an image's accuracy. Human artistry is evacuated from the image in order to guarantee that that image is a perfect likeness. In this respect, the Christian denial of manufacture differs markedly from the Mesopotamian one. The tradition of the "true image" introduces a concern with accurate likeness to the divine—a concern that this tradition links to the problem of making—that plays no part in the *mīs pî* ritual. Whatever else we might say of the object as it issues from the *mīs pî,* we cannot call the object a likeness of the divine. It is the divine.

Nonetheless, even if we cannot say that a Christian species of likeness makes up a valid concern in the Mesopotamian context, the concept likeness has other applications to the Mesopotamian cult-object. This point becomes more apparent in a text related to those that describe the *mīs pî* ceremony, although the text treats a separate matter.[17] In the thirty-first year of the reign of the ninth-century B.C.E. Babylonian king Nabû-apla-iddina, the monarch made a decision to restore the image of the god Shamash. The Suteans had destroyed the original image some two centuries before. Between the period of the cult-object's destruction and its restoration, worshippers had used a sun-disk as a replacement for the missing image. Strikingly, the stone tablet that describes these events indicates that restoration of the cult-object required access to the destroyed original so that it could serve as a model. The text begins by relating how "a relief of (Shamash's) image, an impression of baked clay—his figure and insignia—was discovered on the opposite side of the Euphrates, on the West Bank." On the basis of this model, the king ordered the priest Nabû-nadin-shumi to fashion a new image, a task the priest accomplished "through the craft of Ea" and other gods. The king then had the *mīs pî* ritual performed upon the restored image.[18] That deciding to refashion the image of the god required, as a warrant, the discovery of a previous model indicates that the question of likeness does have application in a Mesopotamian context. In order for it to become an object of worship, the cult-image had to look a certain way, and even to resemble a particular original. Yet the god Shamash does not himself provide the original, at least if we understand that word in terms of a freestanding antecedent on which artificers must model their copy. Rather, a previously existing image plays this role.[19]

Putting matters this way has the advantage of making a related group of questions pressing. Above all, it demands we consider carefully the issue of antecedence, which one might also view in terms of the presentational or repre-

sentational status of the cult-object. This matter has the broadest importance, since it directly impinges on two of the other primary variables in our grammar of the idol: the nature of human power and the immanence or transcendence of the divine. In the case of the Mesopotamian tradition, we cannot really speak of the cult-object that issues from the *mīs pî* ritual as merely a way to refer to or represent a divine antecedent. The cult-object makes the deity present. At a functional level, the object itself serves as the divine original for worshippers, and so the whole question of representation is problematic in relationship to it. This becomes clear, for example, when we turn to a case documented in the Amarna letters. In the fourteenth century B.C.E., Egypt ruled the city of Qatna, a part of the same Akkadian culture to which the later Babylonian king Nabû-appla-iddina belonged. The Hittites raided the city of Qatna, stealing the cult-object for the god Shimigi (the Hurrian equivalent of Shamash) from its temple. When Akizzi, the mayor of Qatna, wrote to Akhenaten in Egypt to explain the situation, he spoke of the theft of Shimigi, not of a statue of Shimigi: "The Hittite king has taken Shimigi, the god of my father."[20] Since the cult-object does not simply represent Shimigi but has an "equality of essence" with the god, or "manifests" the god, or constitutes "the real presence" of the god, to steal the cult-object Shimigi, on one level, is to steal Shimigi.[21]

Of course, even if the Mesopotamians mean the cult-object itself to establish the presence of the divine, we cannot say that the cult-object ever became fully coterminous with the divine. The king Nabû-apla-iddina, in the previous story of remaking a destroyed image of Shamash, could undertake such a refashioning precisely because the destruction of the Shamash image had not actually entailed the destruction of Shamash. The text in fact states that the king has the ritual performed on the cult-object Shamash "before Shamash."[22] Since Shamash comprises the audience of the *mīs pî*, we cannot say that the cult-object Shamash simply is Shamash. At one and the same time, Shamash is the cult-object of the *mīs pî* and a separately existing entity that stands at a distance from the *mīs pî*, one that that can watch over the rite and the object it consecrates.

Such distance between the cult-object and divine presence only grows accentuated in other, quite different traditions. Here, the suitability of a mediating thing's relation to the divine turns on establishing and stabilizing its referentiality, its capacity to represent a divine that must always remain external to it. The defense of images that St. John of Damascus (d. 749) undertook centered, in part, on the claim that the mediating thing could be

confined to the referential.[23] It would not itself become the recipient of veneration but would abet the veneration of a deity that stood fully apart from it. The continued power that the Christian tradition wields in this regard enforces ways of thinking that often make it difficult to grasp alien practices, such as the *mīs pî* ceremony. Nonetheless, what makes for a proper or improper use of a cult-object depends on the presentational or representational duty with which the users of an object task it. Just as securing the proper status of the cult-object in relation to making becomes a vital matter, so does establishing the suitable status of the object in regard to its representational or presentational duties.

This issue actually correlates to the matter of human power. In general, where a given cultural tradition asks the object to make the divine present, the fear that haunts the use of cult-objects does not concern the weakness or inadequacy of humanity's productive power. Rather, the anxiety turns on the fear that humanity's powers are in reality too great. Therefore, actualizing these productive powers in the absence of divine authorization appears as a dangerous pretension in mortals, an unseemly competition with the gods. To avoid this peril, it becomes necessary to establish some check on the potentially dangerous overflow of human power. Rebuilding the image of Shamash required a divine warrant; the *mīs pî* ritual denied that humanity's dangerous power had played any part in making the cult-object. If traditions that aim for presence are anxious about the unseemly overflow of human power, however, those that prioritize representation most often worry about the limitations of human ability.

Where representation becomes the object's primary purpose, and where limitations on humanity's ability successfully to represent become a paramount concern, anxieties often cluster around the referent of the made object. For example, in such a system, the divine that one means to signify can simply be beyond visual depiction, and so the object that seeks visually to refer to it itself becomes perilous. Such cases would correspond to the ineffable deity of negative theology. If the thing one seeks to represent does not have such a nature that its visual depiction is simply absurd, however, then the question of accuracy in depiction can arise. The Incarnation in Christianity, for instance, had a decisive effect on establishing accuracy as a central category for evaluating images, as expressed poignantly by John of Damascus: "Of old, God the incorporeal and formless was never depicted, but now that God has been seen in the flesh and has associated with humankind, I depict what I have seen

of God."[24] When God became flesh and matter, the status of the fleshly and material underwent a general transformation, with the broadest ramifications for questions of image making.[25] God now became a referent capable of being represented. Such cases make clear how issues of presentation and representation must be considered in relation to how they correspond to concerns over the adequacy or inadequacy of humanity's productive capacities.

At the same time, it is easy to see how the questions of divine immanence and transcendence comprise powerful variables within the above schema. Whether the divine stands in the role of a transcendent creator, in the sense that it manufactured a material world of which it is not a part, or whether it exists in the same universe as men and material things, holds implications for what forms of human manufacture will appear as particularly threatening. This statement holds true not only for objects that might seek to represent the divine but also for those objects that represent the mundane. In those cases where a transcendent creator is posited, for example, questions can arise regarding any attempt at making a likeness of the material objects that that creator had first brought into being. Such an act can cast human maker and divine maker into parallel—and possibly competitive—roles with each other. This idea comes to the fore in the biblical Decalogue in Exodus, especially if we consider the prohibition of images in light of the commandment to observe the Sabbath. By specifying that "graven images" depict those things "in the heavens, on earth, and in the sea" (Exod. 20:4), the image prohibition concerns itself precisely with those things that are not God, that is, with likenesses of the works of Creation. The later commandment that establishes the Sabbath reiterates this idea, which reads: "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them" (Exod. 20:11). The repetition of language makes the issue clear: humanity cannot make likenesses of the things that God created during the six days of creation. God as Creator is distinct from the things He has created. Though not yet articulated as "transcendence," the problem that this philosophical notion comes to address is already present *in nuce*. The issue at play in the biblical prohibition of images, therefore, is distinct from the question of producing a likeness *of* the creator, although the form any such likeness might take would also be decisively shaped by the immanent or transcendent status of the divine.

All attempts to articulate the relationships between the human, the divine, and the things that mediate between them will have to take into account the

kinds of variables that we have sketched out in this introduction. Such an approach allows for idolatry to be treated as a locus of concern rather than a polemical accusation. Attunement to cultural anxieties over idolatry provides an opening through which one can better appreciate the forms of negotiation and set of solutions brought to bear in any particular case. We have touched on only very few examples in this introduction. Many more are taken up by the contributors to this volume, to whom we would now like to turn our attention.

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This introductory discussion has privileged the question of how human beings understand the things of the world, and how they comport themselves in relation to them. In taking this approach, it finds inspiration in Jean-Luc Marion's insight that "the idol does not indicate . . . a particular being or even class of beings. [The] idol indicate[s] a manner of being for beings, or at least for some of them."[26] Marion's position, one of the most important treatments of the idol that exists in the literature, is itself famously rooted in a particular and original treatment of Heidegger. Out of a desire fully to exploit the vantage that Heidegger's work opens, we have chosen to bring together a large number of works that specifically attempt to develop Heideggerian accounts of the idol. Over a third of the essays contained in this volume, in fact, proceed from Heidegger's work in one way or another. The notion of failure, for example, that we ourselves employ in the above originates in Heidegger.[27] Further, aside from Marion's essay in this collection, the contributions of David Summers, Daniel Doneson, and Daniel Silver all provide accounts that respond to and expand upon Heidegger's thought. This is not to say that all these contributions develop Heidegger's thought toward the same endpoint; by connecting our definition of the idol to Heidegger's notion of breakdown, for example, the argument of our introduction moves in a different direction than Marion's notion of the idol as a "first visible."[28]

Furthermore, since the themes we have identified as central to understanding the idol—how human beings construe making, representation versus presentation, the nature of human power, and so on—clearly can be approached from various perspectives, we have decided to bring together voices from several disciplines. This allows the anthology to explore how the question of the idol plays out in distinct realms. History of religion, philosophy, literary criticism, art history, and musicology make up some of the main fields from which we draw our contributors. Additionally, because many of the ob-

jects historically associated with idols now go by the name of art, and because more and more scholarly voices seek to bring discussions of the idol to their treatments of art objects, we have looked in particular for essays that treat art objects in light of the idol. Many of these essays, such as those of W. J. T. Mitchell, Rachael DeLue, and Rose Subotnik, do so by developing studies of particular artworks. Other essays, such as that of Jim Elkins, engage in a more purely theoretical discussion of the stakes at play in taking an originally religious concern and applying it to modern artworks.

The essays in this anthology fall into three sections, beginning with what might best be called its historical section. The essays of Jan Assmann, Marc Fumaroli, and Mika Natif comprise this part of the book, since they bear upon the main religious traditions that have historically discussed idolatry: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. While these three essays address the conceptual questions we have already raised, they also develop different aspects of the question of idolatry. Assmann's essay on the Old Testament, for example, centrally concerns itself with what it could mean to have a visible support for the worship of a nonvisible God. It significantly expands on this question, however, by raising an issue of paramount significance to discussions of idolatry, that of medium. Although Assmann integrates the question of medium into other contexts, such as the transition from monolatry to monotheism and the politics implicit in the development, his account puts particular weight on the image/text distinction and its theological import. To Assmann, the Old Testament's concern over establishing proper media for relating to the divine sees to it that "where Images are, Torah shall be," so that "images must disappear in order to make room for the word."

Assmann argues that "images idolize the world and blind the eyes from being able to look beyond the world and focus on the creator," so that, "instead of establishing contact, images block communication with God." Such a position treats idolatry as largely a problem of seeing, so that the attention of worshippers is arrested on the material thing that should only serve as a vehicle for attaining contact with the divine. While this treatment has broad parallels with many of the essays that appear in this anthology, above all W. J. T. Mitchell's piece, it also establishes links with other essays in the historical section, particularly Marc Fumaroli's essay on Christianity. Fumaroli's account, like Assmann's, argues that the error of idolatry in the Old Testament is one of gazing, in which worshippers do not look through the material thing meant to provide contact with God, but instead "stop . . . on the object itself."

Here, "the crime is in the orientation of the gaze that abusively transforms a work of art into an idol." For Fumaroli, Christianity develops Judaism's privileging of the gaze, ultimately "subjectiviz[ing] the notion of the idol" in a full and comprehensive way. For this reason, because images lose any intrinsically idolatrous dimension, "holy images will be able to enter into Christian worship in broad daylight," a situation that has the capacity to "make unheard of images flourish, animated by two sorts of life, the life of bodies and that of souls." By this formulation, Fumaroli means to encapsulate the trajectory of artistic development that finally culminates in the Renaissance, and so his essay aims to carve out a way of understanding the tradition of Christian religious art most broadly.

A very different, but equally significant, approach to the same group of questions appears in Mika Natif's essay on Islam. Natif's essay, which attempts a fundamental reconceptualizaton of Islam's attitude toward images, first provides an overview of actual imagistic practices in Islam through time. She demonstrates that Islam's attitudes toward image making were a good deal more ambivalent than they are often claimed to have been. While an overview of this kind has its own conceptual import, the true analytic thrust of Natif's piece emerges in her question: "Was resentment of images ever due to strictly religious problems?" For Natif, the emergence in the ninth century of a religious discourse that aimed at the rigorous prohibition of figural representation was the fruit of "a sociopolitical power struggle, and not a religious or spiritual one." While Assmann's piece indicates the importance of political questions in anxiety over idolatry, Natif gives greater weight to this issue, in particular considering tensions between the caliphs and the ulema (religious scholars) in the emergence of Islam's famous ban on images. By this means, she does nothing less than provide a new way of considering the question of idolatry as it functioned in one of the three main religious discourses on the subject.

Natif's essay also carefully considers how the sociopolitical tensions it examines, along with the influence of Aristotelian philosophy, established particular techniques by which Muslim artists chose to render bodies, depicting them as "flat, almost transparent, without the forms of muscles, while *dīv*s are shown with heavy bodies, with muscles, hair, and genitalia." For this reason, Natif's essay serves as a transition to the anthology's next section, which focuses on the production and analysis of actual art objects, and includes essays by W. J. T. Mitchell, Rachael Ziady DeLue, David Summers, Rose Rosengard Subotnik, James Elkins, and Jean-Luc Marion. By highlighting how, in Natif's

argument, certain strategies of representation became religiously safe, we do not mean to suggest that particular visual, technical, or aesthetic forms are automatically immune to anxiety over idolatry, any more than that particular forms must engender the fear of it. W. J. T. Mitchell, whose essay initiates the section in this volume that focuses on actual artistic practice, has underscored this point in other published work. By emphasizing that *idol* is fundamentally a name for a particular mode of relating to things, Mitchell has shown that "it is therefore important to stress that one and the same object (a golden calf for instance) could function as a totem, fetish, or idol, depending on the social practices and narratives that surround it."[29]

In Mitchell's present essay, he develops these ideas into a case study of a single object. He picks up the specific matter of the Golden Calf, as depicted by the great painter Poussin, in order to articulate an alternative model for discussing Poussin's painting of it, one that Mitchell roots in an unusual reading of Blake and Nietzsche. The particular model to which Mitchell's approach tries to be an alternative is that of conventional art history, a method that emerges as oddly iconoclastic in Mitchell's account. By iconoclastic, Mitchell means primarily ways of approaching images that strive to get past or behind their visual character in order to render them what Mitchell calls "a sign or symptom" of some proper antecedent. Such an approach dovetails with the theological imperative, discerned by Fumaroli, that one's gazing not "stop . . . on the [sacred] object itself," and it constitutes, according to Mitchell, a central drive of art history. Art-historical explanation has recently held that Poussin's work is conventionally pious, in that it consists in "signs and citations that point toward an invisible and unrepresentable foundation." The religious duty of the spectator thus consists in "revers[ing] the significance of 'visual prominence,' and see[ing] that the primary subject of the painting is 'the hiddenness of the divine.'"[30] Insofar as this account requires "relating to the picture as a sign or symptom of Poussin's [own pious] intentions," art history stands in the same relation to Poussin's work as it imagines Poussin did to "visual prominence," striving to yoke it to an extravisual foundation.

In opposition to this reading, Mitchell suggests we see the work through the eyes of Blake and Nietzsche. Mitchell argues that Nietzsche, in *Twilight of the Idols*, turns the tables on the iconoclastic gesture by renouncing the drive to image destruction. As Mitchell notes, Nietzsche holds that "the eternal idols are not to be smashed but to be 'touched with a hammer as with a tuning fork.'" Nietzsche, here, seeks not to smash idols, but instead to "sound" them

"with a delicate, precise touch that reveals their hollowness . . . and perhaps even retunes or plays a tune upon them." In terms of what this perspective means for the Poussin painting, Mitchell suggests we consider the possibility that the work has a more ambiguous relationship to idolatry's founding moment than one of simple iconoclasm, so that Poussin emerges as being of the devil's party without his knowing it: "Could Poussin's painting, without his quite knowing it, be *sounding* the idol with a hammer, tuning fork, or (more precisely) a paintbrush?"

Mitchell's work has set an important part of the program for how scholars think idolatry in relation to art objects. Rachael DeLue takes Mitchell's work in a new direction, using it to analyze contemporary art that confronts racist imagery. She approaches the work of the artists Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles via Mitchell's suggestion that we ask of pictures, understood as a material array of formal and symbolic elements, less what they mean or do, but instead "what they *want*—what claim they make upon us, and how we are to respond."[31] Such a grant of agency to pictures, aside from the general methodological provocation it offers, appears as especially apt in DeLue's treatment, since she seeks to understand how "Walker and Charles make their imagery behave as would things not altogether lifeless and inert." DeLue argues that these artists, who interrogate and appropriate historical racist imagery, make the objects they produce seem animate and alive "by way of an excess of representation that fashions brute matter into a set of qualities associated with life and volition." Via such a representational excess, which DeLue takes to turn on the formal aspects of the works as well as how audiences understand the question of human making, the images of Walker and Charles acquire a dimension that "pushes them toward a category of object relations already vexed and fraught: that of idolatry." Obviously, Walker and Charles do not mean to bring off a worship of vile, racist imagery. But by compelling a viewing of such imagery that approaches veneration, they collapse "the adoration of the idolater and the revulsion of the iconoclast into a single experience." For DeLue, the double bind these works initiate—a painterly iconoclasm that incites viewers to veneration and destruction—encompasses their main purpose, the creation of a space for "deliberative thought, what the extremes of idolatry and iconoclasm refuse to allow."

The next four essays that appear in this anthology's discussion of art objects, although they maintain continuity with the questions this introduction treats, also insert these questions into novel contexts. For some time, David

Summers has been engaged in an independent methodological project meant to establish new ways of addressing art objects, ones that move away from the binary of form and content, and the notion of style as it is typically deployed. Rejecting a notion of "visual arts" to develop one of "spatial arts," a concept that refers to humanity's physical being-in-the-world and the production of social space, Summers's thinking has much in common with that of other contributors to this volume. In particular, his effort to analyze the artifactual shaping of social space owes much to Heidegger's writings on art, and it is vitally concerned with the issue of substitution.[32] What Summers attempts in his contribution to this volume is to situate idolatry relative to his larger project. In an essay that provides its own programmatic treatment of idolatry and iconoclasm, Summers ranges from the Golden Calf to the contemporary art of Nam June Paik, but of particular note is his emphasis on the role of place in how users of objects form relations with them. While contributors to this volume are unanimous about the importance of substitution making the divine present, Summers explores how such substitution is intrinsically related to questions of location. That is, while "presence entails some form of *substitution*," Summers demonstrates that "icons are usually meant to make a presence accessible in a designated place and in response to specified behavior." By taking this position, Summers not only identifies a determinant of how relations with icons are imagined, but helps explain a dimension of idol anxiety that other commentators, from Mitchell to Halbertal and Margalit, have noted.[33] The charge of idolatry often unfolds in relation to territory, carrying the imperative not only to smash icons but to cleanse space. Of the power that images come to exert, we need to ask not just how images may seem to act as agents but what is the place in which they do so.

Rose Subotnik's essay advances the goals of the anthology simply by the nature of its subject-matter. Aware that "it is difficult at first glance to see how a musical performance could become an object of worship," Subotnik formulates an answer by navigating between Adorno and Benjamin. These two figures have a special significance for Subotnik's work in music theory, since their approaches represent the most fully developed models we have for considering popular music, the cultural form she examines from the vantage of idolatry. Adorno himself argues that false values emerge from popular music "like an idol," and his attempt to describe the dynamics of how such music culturally functions makes noticeable use of a religious vocabulary. While Subotnik argues that Benjamin's thoughts on aura also provide a

means to think music via idolatry, she claims that "what neither [Benjamin nor Adorno] offers is an alternative to Marxism as a framework in which to think about the relation of music to idolatry." Subotnik's essay tries to develop such an alternative, above all by privileging the question of collective memory. By providing a common object in relation to which members of a collective can form memories, popular music comes to play a vital role in community-formation, creating a species of bulwark that can stabilize individual life. As Subotnik argues, "In an age that no longer provides religious guarantees of permanence in the cosmos, bulwarks of this kind have a genuine existential value."

James Elkins, for his part, engages with issues of a foundational status for this volume's intellectual presuppositions, as well as larger strands of the contemporary discussion of idols. Elkins begins by noting, rightly we feel, that many of the secular discourses that scholars currently construct around art objects have a provenance in religion. He concerns himself both with the discussion of the sublime and, of special significance to *Idol Anxiety*, iconoclasm. Elkins is at pains to point out that his endeavor is not one of "investigative journalism," an effort to show that contemporary accounts of art objects are really "covert theology." Instead, his piece seeks to establish a conceptual framework in which to consider the stakes of employing originally religious concerns and anxieties, such as those expressed in iconoclasm, as a means to discuss artworks without any apparent concern for religion.[34] Elkins indicates that "the themes around iconoclasm are not limited to religious images, but it is not yet clear when it makes sense to invoke them." In an effort to bring clarity to this matter, Elkins wonders what would happen if texts on artworks, ones that "have no open allegiances to religion or belief, were temporarily reassigned to their original sources in religious and theological writing."

Elkins concludes his essay in this volume by asking why it is that we, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, find concepts such as iconoclasm and its related terms so compelling as a means to discuss art objects. Rooted as it is in his understanding of the idol, Jean-Luc Marion's aesthetics provides one possible response to Elkins's query. Beginning already with his early theological writings, the idol has played a crucial role in Marion's thinking.[35] For Marion, the significance of the idol is rooted in its etymology—*eidōlon*, from the Greek root *eidō*, "to see." As he writes in *God Without Being*, "the fabricated thing becomes an idol, that of a god, only from the moment

when the gaze has decided to fall upon it, has made it the privileged fixed point of is own consideration."[36] In his later phenomenological work, Marion has developed the importance of this category, particularly for aesthetics. "The privileged occurrence of the idol," he writes in *Being Given*, "is obviously the painting."[37] In his contribution for this volume, Marion provides a phenomenological account of the difference between seeing and appearing that expands upon this insight. In effect, Marion develops an aesthetics that brings to bear for the work of art—or what he calls the "aesthetic visible" in its relation to the "common visible"—distinctions that originate in and underlie his earlier work on the idol. Accordingly, Marion's essay provides a valuable example of how the concept of the idol can provide a basis for broader investigations with wide philosophical import.

The last two contributions to this volume continue to develop philosophical approaches to our theme, broadening the discussion that Marion initiates. While Marion builds on arguments from Heidegger's early work, Daniel Doneson takes as his starting point Heidegger's later essay "The Origin of the Work of Art." Doneson situates the problem of the idol within the broader trajectory of Western metaphysics, as Heidegger understood that trajectory. In Doneson's account, designating something an "idol" is itself based in the aesthetic tradition initiated by Plato, a tradition Heidegger claims is unable properly to account for the work of art. Instead, Heidegger says the artwork sets the truth to work. Doneson aims to elucidate this bold and complex claim by fleshing out how the artwork "opens up a world" and "sets forth the earth." After explicating Heidegger's account of such an artwork—not beholden to the idolatry of aesthetics, so to speak—Doneson comes to ask whether today, after "the death of God," artworks can function in an analogous way to such premodern works as the Mesopotamian cult-statue, the Greek temple, or the Christian cathedral. He suggests that the artwork may still be at work, but not as the site at which the beholder can "plug in" to the beyond or "the holy." Rather, the artwork can become a kind of "anti-idol," a site at which we "unplug" from our absorption in the rest of life, so as to expose or reveal "its ex nihilo character to itself from out of itself."

Like Marion and Doneson, Daniel Silver also takes inspiration from Heidegger—this time from the 1929–30 lecture course published as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. Building an analogy with our opening discussion of the *mīs pî* ritual, Silver reads the lecture course as Heidegger's response to the felt collapse of a cultural practice (philosophy) that occurred

in the early twentieth century. Silver dubs Heidegger's pedagogical attempt to awaken a philosophical mood in his students "a kind of latter-day *mīs pî,* one designed not to infuse cult-objects with divine presence but to infuse philosophical practice and settings with 'the mystery' and 'inner terror' necessary to live up to their promise." Heidegger's mood awakening provides a unique form of response to the anxiety of cultural collapse, because its aim is not to manage or minimize the anxiety but rather to find spiritual resources in describing and tuning into it as a mode of engaged, living experience. Silver develops this argument through an explication of Heidegger's treatment of boredom as a "fundamental philosophizing mood." His essay provides an example of how "idol anxiety" may be at play in a place where one might least expect to find it, but also—by the essay's conclusion—it proposes a new way to understand the *mīs pî* itself. Contrasting Heidegger's attunement to moods in human action with standard utilitarian and voluntaristic understandings, Silver argues that whereas to these standard approaches the activity of the *mīs pî* would look like nothing more than conspiracy or reassurance, from the perspective of mood attunement "the ceremony would be designed to tune priests and artisans into the power of a certain mood to open up a way of engaging with their situation." Silver's focus on mood awakening thus provides a rich model for rethinking those forms of human action that have traditionally been labeled as "idolatry."