

Untreatable: The Freudian Act and its Legacy

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Abstract: This essay takes up the problem of unconscious transmission in the Freudian clinic and in Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, exploring the role of the body both in receiving and in transmitting the consequences of an act about which the subject knows nothing. My point of departure is the mechanism of the Pass, which Lacan introduced in 1967 as a means of tracking and accounting for action of the object *a*, the object-cause of desire that animates the analyst's act. The Pass is concerned not primarily with what the *passant* has managed to say about her analysis, but with something that exceeds the signifier, and that therefore passes through the body. This real object, transmitted by an act of the unconscious, is not an object of conscious observation or recording, but instead something that is at once *transmitted* by a body and *received* by a body, depositing itself in the bodies of the two *passeurs* without their knowledge. I argue that this bodily transmission allows us to think about the stakes of political and aesthetic transmission in Freud's two major pieces on Moses.

Keywords: Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, transmission, object *a*, Moses and Monotheism, dream of Irma's injection, "The Moses of Michelangelo"

Jacques Lacan, in his seminar "The Analytic Act," suggests that the patient's act is not something the analyst can know, interpret, or anticipate, but something by which he is "struck" both psychically and in his body, where it leaves its traces or impressions. The act leaves effects in the real; it acts upon the body, and not upon the understanding alone. What "strikes" the analyst in the act—as distinct from the "acting out" that often characterizes the analysand's way of relating to the analyst, for example as an object of love or aggression—is what Lacan calls the object (*a*), the "object-cause of desire" that acts in and through the subject. Like a black hole—which cannot be perceived directly, but is known only by the way it warps space-time—the object of psychoanalysis is an object we know solely by its effects. Because the object-cause of desire is a purely mental object that does not properly speaking "exist," it cannot be perceived, sensed, or known empirically. Instead, it must create a path for itself in the world, through the subject's act.

Lucie Cantin argues that the [tracking of this act should be understood as the essence of the Freudian clinic. "From the moment when Freud first comes up against repetition and the resistance of the symptom in his clinical practice," she writes, he is "forced to acknowledge a beyond of the pleasure principle that acts within the subject."¹ As a result of this discovery the unconscious can no longer be conceived as the site of thoughts that are repressed because they are forbidden or socially

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¹ Cantin 2017, pp. 26-27.

inadmissible. In “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” from 1914, Freud realizes that repetition is in fact the enactment of something that what was unable to be represented. He writes that “the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.”² As a consequence, he adds, “we must treat his illness, not as an event of the past, but as a present-day force.” In the framework of the transference, Freud continues, this still active force *passes to the act*—which explains the often “unavoidable deterioration [of symptoms] during treatment.”³ The unconscious is now conceived as the site where what remains outside of language, unrepresented, continues to be repetitively staged and enacted and to work upon the body. It is this unconscious that interests the analyst, writes Cantin, because “it is the censured, the unnamed, that is the ‘still active force’ at work in the life of the patient, pushing her to act without regard for the wishes of the ego and seeking a path for itself through the symptom or acting-out—no matter what the consequences for the organism or the ego in the social link.”⁴

Given this description, it’s not surprising that we generally think of the act as something bad: a symptom, an impasse, something that may even be violent or destructive to others (as in the *passage à l’acte*). Psychoanalysis is not concerned with controlling this action or getting it to stop, however, but with *freeing what is acting*, allowing it to find another means of expression. One interesting consequence is that the act of desire, whose liberation is the aim of an analysis, is not unrelated to the symptom, to which it might logically seem to be opposed. This proximity, which may seem paradoxical, is what I wish to explore here: not only in the context of the clinic, but in social and political history.

I will begin by exploring the status of this object in relation to the procedure of the Pass, which Lacan introduced in 1967 as a means of communicating and confirming the results of an analysis. In the Pass, the analysand testifies to her own experience, and attempts to transmit something of her relation to the object that causes desire. But while this testimony might bear a superficial resemblance to the genre of the case presentation, which attempts to produce a logical construction accounting for the fantasy at work in the subject’s life, it is also fundamentally different. For unlike a case history, which concerns a third party who is not present, the testimony of the pass is delivered by the subject herself, and thus by the very body with which that testimony is concerned.

The Pass involves the *passant*, the candidate who addresses her

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2 Freud 1958, p. 150.

3 Freud 1958, pp. 151-152.

4 Cantin 2017, p. 28.

request to the School, and two *passeurs*, or witnesses, to whom the *passant* speaks about his analysis. These *passeurs* are in turn responsible for transmitting that testimony to a jury of analysts, who meet as a cartel and formulate a response: either nomination of the *passant* as an Analyst of the School, or no nomination. Yet the Pass is concerned not primarily with what the *passant* has managed to say about her analysis, but with something that exceeds the signifier, and that therefore passes through the body. This real object, transmitted by an act of the unconscious, is what Lacan calls the object *a*. It is not an object of conscious observation or recording, but instead something that is at once *transmitted* by a body and *received* by a body, depositing itself in the bodies of the two *passeurs* without their knowledge. If there is something “scientific” about the Pass, it is not its possible generalization or elucidation of a law. Rather, it is something that is actually not so far removed from the classic standard of falsifiability: the same object must be transmitted by both *passeurs*.

Head Trouble: An Experience of the Pass

I recently served as a *passeur* in such a procedure. As I listened to the *passant* speak about key episodes from her childhood, the repetitions that had marked her life, and the vicissitudes of her analysis, I began to feel increasingly preoccupied, even distracted, by the feeling that the analysis was not complete, that something still needed to be articulated or worked through. A sensation of impatience and even irritation began to overtake me as each of the four sessions came and went. There was too much “filler,” too few key signifiers and experiences, and as a result I began to feel a little oppressed, even annoyed.

There was a gap of six months between the hearing of the testimony and my transmission of that testimony to the cartel of the pass. When the cartel received me, I was asked a single question: “What remains?” Not surprisingly, my memory of those four hours of testimony was foggy at best. When I had more or less run out of things to say, I admitted to feeling disappointed that I didn’t have more to transmit, that the logic of the analysis and the subject’s traversal of its different logical phases was not more in evidence.

While giving my testimony, there were several occasions on which I leaned forward in my chair, my body almost parallel to the ground, and put my head in my hands: an attitude that felt very foreign to me, but which I nevertheless felt strangely compelled to adopt. It wasn’t something I thought about during the testimony, but only afterwards. Leaving the room, I was aware of having assumed this attitude at least three separate times during the testimony, and I wondered what it might mean: whether I was straining to recall some detail that had escaped me, or simply turning away from the eyes that were fixed on me while I spoke.

A few days after delivering my testimony, I had the occasion to talk with the other person who had served as *passeur* for the same individual.

He told me that in the days leading up to his meeting with the cartel, he had been afflicted with extreme dizziness and disorientation, and had arrived to meet the cartel with a terrible headache. Only as he was walking into the room to give his testimony did it occur to him that this head trouble must be precisely the object that he was carrying. As he was telling me this, I suddenly remembered that I too had had a terrible headache that evening: not *before* giving the testimony, as he had, but immediately *afterward*. I now recalled how I had taken my head in my hands during the testimony, and felt certain that something had been acting in me without my knowledge, compelling me to adopt this strange attitude. While I was giving my testimony to the cartel, the thought had in fact briefly passed through my mind that I ought to say something about what Lacan calls the “letters of the body,” the places where the traces of the subject’s encounter with the real had been inscribed in her body. I had been vaguely aware that this had something to do with the head, but couldn’t remember the *passant*’s exact words. I therefore allowed the thought to come and go in silence, almost without being conscious of it.

Somatic symptoms had not played a major role in the life of this individual, but she had described at one point an unsettling psychic experience, a moment of acute dissociation where she found herself in a large social gathering, but was suddenly unable to remember either her own identity or those of her companions. I had touched on this experience briefly during my testimony, describing it as a moment of extreme disorientation. I now remembered that the *passant* had related this experience to the *head*, by means of a formulation peculiar to her. She had also spoken about a certain personality trait, colloquially related to the head, which she had long viewed as a source of anxiety and dread: something that not only interfered with the fulfillment of her professional duties, but potentially disqualified her altogether from doing the work she does. In short, she had always viewed it as a trait to be kept under wraps, carefully controlled and managed, that she had hoped eventually to be cured of. It was this disturbing trait, in fact, that had led her to undertake analysis in the first place. In recent years, however, she testified to having “made her peace” with this trait, and accepting the way it acted in her—even if she couldn’t exactly be thrilled about it.

It now seemed to me that in putting my head in my hands, I was evoking through my body what was not spoken, something of the subject’s own relation to the head: or rather to the object that managed to find expression through it. Inasmuch as it related to a part of her testimony that I hadn’t fully developed, it seemed on one level to be reminding me of something important I had failed to convey. (Recall that I was afflicted by a headache that came *after* giving testimony, as if to stress that I hadn’t yet made my deposit.) At the same time, my head-holding—and especially my violent headache—attested to something having been deposited in my head, something weighing it down that was much more than just a

memory. I take this “something” to be a part of the subject’s experience that remained unsayable: something whose meaning could not be fully known, that resisted mastery, and that therefore acted in her in a way that she couldn’t control.

Another symptom occurred to me a week or two later. In the six months between hearing the *passant*’s testimony and coming before the cartel, I had experienced a sudden spike in blood sugar, serious enough to undergo testing for diabetes. The most conspicuous symptom of a blood sugar imbalance is a feeling of dizziness and mental confusion. It now seemed plausible to me that this transitory symptom, which attested to the malfunctioning or even failure of a regulatory apparatus—not incidentally an apparatus controlling *insulin*, and thus the body’s defense against something indigestible—was itself due to the effects of the *passant*’s testimony on my body. The impatience and even the irritation with which I listened to her words had to do precisely with the feeling that there was something she was not managing to say, something for which there was as yet no signifier.

I believe that this mental confusion or head trouble can be interpreted in at least two different ways. Inasmuch as it conveys the oppressive feeling of being confronted with something that is insufficiently ordered or articulated, it might be understood a resistance to the inadequacy of language, its inability to name or evoke what is at stake in the subject’s experience. From another perspective, though, it can actually be considered as a transmission of the object, which is not supported by speech. This is how I am inclined to read my own gesture of holding my head in my hands while giving testimony: as evidence that something more has been deposited in my head than I am able to say, something that weighs me down in a way that words alone are unable to prop up or sustain. What was unable to find its signifier passed through the letters of the body, taking up residence in my head.

The undesirable trait that the *passant* had linked to the head is clearly a symptom in her life, even a debilitating symptom. Nevertheless, it also gives expression to something more fundamental that the *passant* is no longer inclined to apologize for, that she no longer sees as a trait she should “work on” or try to “manage.” I think this is the meaning of the dizziness, headaches and crashing blood sugar with which the other *passeur* and I were afflicted prior to giving testimony. There is this kind of “storm in the head” that is not at all controllable—that is even, I have to say, extremely unpleasant—but that is obviously tied to who the *passant* is as a subject. She is aware that this object is acting within her in a way she doesn’t control, but she no longer fears that action or tries to make it stop. In fact, she is now certain that it is inseparable from the efficacy of her work, in this case her ability to work with patients as a clinician.

A first hypothesis about the object *a* is that, unlike the symptom, to which it is otherwise closely related, the object is “untreatable.” I take

the term from Willy Apollon, for whom the “untreatable” is the name for what is most fundamental to the subject, the manifestation of an unconscious “quest” from which it will not be derailed.⁵ It exceeds the treatment framework implied by illness, which presumes at the same time the possibility of a cure. “Untreatable” translates the French *intraitable*, which means not “incurable” (as in the case of a disease for which there is no cure), but rather “intractable, inflexible, uncompromising.” It is this untreatable object that Lucie Cantin has in mind when she suggests that the conclusion of the analytic experience articulates the *passant* to what constitutes his or her “signature in the social link,” the mark of the subject in its refusal of all concessions.⁶

The Dirty Syringe, or Freud’s Act

We’ve seen that the procedure of the Pass is concerned with the transmission of an object between bodies, or the capacity of the object in one body to produce effects in another. In the next part of this paper, I want to track this object in the act of one singular body, the body of Sigmund Freud himself. This act is central to the analysis of the “specimen dream” with which Freud opens the *Interpretation of Dreams*, the dream of Irma’s Injection. It shows that this untreatable object is what acts in the analyst, and that there can be no psychoanalysis without it.

It is commonplace to observe that this dream is about the origins of psychoanalysis itself. But in what precise sense? Here I would like to propose that the analysis of this dream can be considered as Freud’s “pass,” his transmission of his own object. It is concerned with the liberation of his act, which previously had been an object of ambivalence and even apprehension.

The dream interrogates a failed act or ethical equivocation on Freud’s part, which is related to the treatment of his hysterical patient, Irma. Freud explains that in the months leading up to the dream,

I had been giving psychoanalytic treatment to a young lady [which] had ended in a partial success; the patient was relieved of her hysterical anxiety but did not lose all of her somatic symptoms. At that time I was not yet quite clear in my mind as to the criteria indicating that a hysterical case history was finally closed, and I proposed a solution to the patient which she seemed unwilling to accept. While we were thus at variance, we had broken off the treatment for the summer vacation.—One day I had a visit from a junior colleague... who had been staying with my patient, Irma, and her family

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5 Apollon 2006.

6 Cantin 2014.

at their country resort. I asked him how he had found her and he answered, ‘She’s better, but not quite well.’ I was conscious that my friend Otto’s words, or the tone in which he spoke them, annoyed me. I fancied I detected a reproof in them, to the effect that I had promised the patient too much... However, my disagreeable impression was not clear to me and I gave no outward sign of it. The same evening I wrote out Irma’s case history, with the idea of giving it to Dr. M....to justify myself.⁷

That night, Freud has the following dream:

A large hall—numerous guests, whom we were receiving.— Among them was Irma. I at once took her on one side, as though to answer her letter and to reproach her for not having accepted my ‘solution’ yet. I said to her: ‘If you still get pains, it’s really only your fault.’ She replied: ‘If you only knew what pains I’ve got now in my throat and stomach and abdomen—it’s choking me’—I was alarmed and looked at her. She looked pale and puffy. I thought to myself that after all I must be missing some organic trouble. I took her to the window and looked down her throat, and she showed signs of recalcitrance, like women with artificial dentures. I thought to myself that there was really no need for her to do that.—She then opened her mouth properly and on the right I found a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modeled on the turbinal bones of the nose.—I at once called in Dr. M., and he repeated the examination and confirmed it....Dr. M. looked quite different from usual; he was very pale, he walked with a limp and his chin was clean-shaven....My friend Otto was now standing beside her as well, and my friend Leopold was percussing her through her bodice and saying: ‘She has a dull area low down on the left.’ He also indicated that a portion of the skin on the left shoulder was infiltrated. (I noticed this, just as he did, in spite of her dress.)...M. said, ‘There’s no doubt it’s an infection, but no matter; dysentery will supervene and the toxin will be eliminated.’ ...We were directly aware, too, of the origin of her infection. Not long before, when she was feeling unwell, my friend Otto had given her an injection of a preparation of propyl, propyls...propionic acid...trimethylamin (and I saw before me the formula for this printed in heavy type)....Injections of that sort ought not to be made so thoughtlessly....And probably the syringe had not been clean.⁸

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7 Freud 1955, pp. 131–32.

8 Freud 1955, 131.

Driving the production of Freud's dream is the question: is he or is he not responsible for the persistence of the patient's symptoms? If it is a hysterical symptom, then why hasn't it been treated by the interpretation? Has he missed an organic illness? What is the source of the infection?

The first part of the dream deals with Freud's vexation at Irma's refusal to accept his "solution," and his attempts to get the hysteric to "open her mouth properly" and tell him what he needs to know. The dream dates from July of 1895, when Freud was involved precisely in getting the hysteric to "open her mouth." This is the year that Freud and Breuer published their *Studies on Hysteria*, in which Freud hypothesizes that the symptom is caused by an unspoken "secret": something the patient doesn't want to say or cannot face up to.⁹ From this perspective, resistance is a matter of the patient not wanting to express the thoughts that are in her mind, refusing to open her mouth and tell what she knows.

The flip side of this attitude is a belief in the treatment of the symptom by knowledge or interpretation, and therefore by the signifier. In the first part of the dream, Freud says to Irma: *'If you still get pains, it's your own fault.'* In his analysis, Freud writes: "It was my view at the time (though I have since recognized it as a wrong one) that my task was fulfilled when I had informed a patient of the hidden meaning of his symptoms: I considered that I was not responsible for whether he accepted the solution or not." This is what Freud will later refer to as "wild psychoanalysis": the assumption that knowledge, the signifier, can treat the symptom; that once the cause of the symptom is revealed, the symptom should disappear.¹⁰ (At the time Freud wrote up this dream analysis, he has already decided that his earlier view was not correct. But at the time he had the dream, he believed it was. It would therefore be interesting to consider whether this dream and the work of analyzing it actually marks the turning point from this "wild psychoanalysis" to another way of working.)¹¹

At this period, Freud is discovering for the first time that the patient is confronted with a real for which there is no name, about which she knows nothing, that is not an object of conscious knowledge. The assumption that the hysteric is to blame for the persistence of her

9 Alternately, he supposes that the hysteria is the result of a childhood sexual trauma, a real event that has been forgotten or repressed. The point then is to call up the memories, to allow them to become conscious.

10 Freud 1957, pp. 221–27.

11 We might be tempted to understand the dream analysis that follows as concerned with the transpositions of the signifier. Freud himself uses the dream to illustrate the mechanisms of the dream-work, or the condensations and displacements by means of which the latent dream thoughts are converted into the manifest content of the dream narrative. But the dream analysis is concerned more fundamentally with the *cause* of dreams, and therefore with an act that cannot be represented, but that manifests as a hole or tear within the fabric of the dream narrative. The preamble shows us how the events of the day before, the "day residues," have triggered the dream. This isn't just a matter of providing its themes or images, however. Instead, the dream interrogates a failed act on Freud's part.

symptoms is thus the "failed act" that gave rise to the dream, which was reactivated by Otto's news concerning Irma. The dream pinpoints what can only be described as an instance of counter-transference on Freud's part, in the form of a refusal of what comes from the unconscious. This part of the dream identifies a hole, a lack, something that escapes knowledge.

What follows is the famous "navel" of the dream¹², which confronts Freud with an unspeakable real that the signifier is unable to represent. When Irma "opens her mouth properly," what emerges is not a word or a discourse, something she might tell him, but terrifying, anxiety-inducing forms that lead to anguishing thoughts of illness and death. In Irma's throat, Freud sees a "big white patch" and "some remarkable curly structures" covered with "extensive whitish grey scabs" that appear to be modeled on the turbinal bones of the nose. Unlike everything else in the dream, this element cannot be related to recent events that have unfolded "in reality," that is, in the reality of the social or professional scene. These scab-covered forms lead Freud to associations that are concerned not with *Irma's* symptoms and their treatment, but with Freud's *own* severe nasal symptoms—the result of his overly zealous experimentation with cocaine. His own symptom is thus projected into the patient's throat, as a defiant limit to the knowable there where he had expected the words that would establish the symptom's causality.

The associations extend to further failed acts on Freud's part, in the form of grave mistakes and errors of judgment in his clinical practice. A few days before the dream, he learned that a woman patient who had used cocaine at his urging had developed an extensive necrosis of the nasal membrane, while a dear friend to whom Freud recommended the same drug died from an overdose following an injection. On another occasion, Freud produced a fatal toxic state by repeatedly prescribing what at the time was regarded as a harmless remedy. "It seemed," Freud writes, "as if I had been collecting all the occasions which I could bring up against myself as evidence of a lack of medical conscientiousness."

The second part of the dream shows Freud turning to medical colleagues for confirmation or guidance, as if unsure whether he ought to approach the case as a doctor, or as a psychoanalyst. Dr. M, a senior colleague to whom Freud regularly turns for advice, is represented as saying: *'There's no doubt it's an infection, but no matter; dysentery will supervene and the toxin will be eliminated.'* The associations lead to cases in which a patient's symptoms were misdiagnosed by doctors ignorant of hysteria. But they also call up occasions when Freud recognized that a patient's symptoms were hysterical, but nevertheless decided not to apply psychoanalytic treatment—much to the detriment of the patient. Both evoke the futile hope of the medical doctor that it might be possible to

12 In a footnote to this passage, Freud writes: "There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown." Freud 1955, p. 135n2.

“eliminate the toxin” after all, to treat hysteria as if it were a disease.

Here we see Freud hesitating between medicine and psychoanalysis, but also between the scientific ideal of the “community of peers”—where others can validate and confirm what he sees—and his own fundamental solitude. The scientific ideal is predicated upon observation, verification, and repeatability. The night before he had the dream, Freud tells us that he sat up late into the night writing Irma’s case history, which he intended to show to Dr. M. “in order to justify himself.” In the dream narrative, we find the words: “*Dr. M. repeated the examination and confirmed it.*” Against this wishful confirmation, the inadequacy of medical knowledge that is exposed by the associations emphasizes the total isolation in which Freud finds himself as the inventor of psychoanalysis. The cause of the hysteric’s symptoms cannot be isolated, observed, or verified experimentally under control conditions. Despite Freud’s efforts the night before to justify himself before Dr. M., the associations show that his senior colleague is not in agreement with the “solution.” Like other doctors, he is “taken in by hysteria” and misdiagnoses his own hysterical patient.¹³ Freud is thus faced by the failure of medical knowledge with respect to the real at work in the symptom.

Freud’s analysis concludes with a final series of associations that are concerned with the source of Irma’s infection, and by extension with symptoms and their causality. The dream narrative ends with the evocation of an unclean syringe, charged with having caused an infection in the patient: “*Injections of that sort ought not to be made so thoughtlessly... And probably the syringe had not been clean.*” In response to this dream element, Freud professes that unlike some of his more careless colleagues, *he* always makes sure that his syringe is clean: as a result, he has never caused a single infiltration. His associations have already undercut this claim, however, by pointing to numerous occasions on which Freud has either killed his patients with injections or induced potentially deadly toxic states: in part by sharing his own passion for cocaine.

On the one hand, it is significant that Freud harmed or killed those patients when he was acting as a doctor, and not as a psychoanalyst. In these instances, the patient’s brush with death is due to the limitations of medical knowledge, rather than to the failings of psychoanalysis. But on the other hand, and more importantly, Freud *as a psychoanalyst* is confronting his patients with death by upholding the work of the symptom. In psychoanalysis, unlike medicine, this isn’t just a matter of professional scrupulousness, of a risk that could be avoided through careful attention to protocol. Instead, the treatment confronts his patients with death at its very core.

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13 “This part of the dream was expressing derision at physicians who are ignorant of hysteria. And, as though to confirm this, a further idea crossed my mind: “Does Dr. M. realize that the symptoms in his patient (Irma’s friend)...have a hysterical basis? Has he spotted this hysteria? Or has he been taken in by it?” Dr. M., he concludes, “was just as little in agreement with my ‘solution’ as Irma herself.”

I see the dirty syringe as a figure of the act, in two senses. First, it figures the failed act or counter-transference. In the associations to the first part of the dream, Freud reproaches Irma for not accepting his “solution,” and tells her that if she still gets pains, it’s her fault. In an instance of “wild psychoanalysis,” Freud imposes on the patient the solution provided by the interpretation, but at the expense of silencing what is at work in the symptom. The German word translated as “solution,” *Lösung*, has two possible meanings, just as it does in English: the solution to a problem, and the solution one injects. It thus relates to the failed act that gave rise to the dream: Freud’s refusal of what is at work in the hysteric’s symptom, whose persistence he attributes to the patient’s lack of ethics. With the image of the unclean syringe, the dream seems to be offering a forceful indictment of this counter-transference on Freud’s part, his attempt to force or inject a solution rather than allowing the analysis to run its course.

Lacan makes such an interpretation in his own commentary of the dream: “In the first phase, then, we see Freud in his chase after Irma, reproaching her for not understanding what he wants to get her to understand. He was carrying on his relationships in exactly the same style as he did in real life, in the style of the passionate quest, too passionate we would say, and it is indeed one of the meanings of the dream to say that formally, since at the end that is what it comes down to—the syringe was dirty, the passion of the analyst, the ambition to succeed, were here too pressing, the counter-transference was itself the obstacle.”¹⁴

Second, however—and here I differ from Lacan—I think we can see the dirty syringe as a figure of the *true act*, the act of desire that makes him Freud: and thus the very act at stake in the procedure of the Pass. That is, the analyst’s desire to know triggers and reactivates the symptom in the patient’s body—and it cannot do otherwise! From this perspective, we can see the “dirty syringe” in a more affirmative light, as essential to the practice of analysis. In contrast with the inadvertently deadly act of the doctor providing lethal treatment, the analyst’s act necessarily confronts the human subject with death.

In professing that “his syringe was always clean,” Freud seems to be disclaiming his own act, and with it his role in triggering the patient’s symptoms. The fear that the syringe might not be clean is the fear of the medical doctor. It corresponds to the ideal of experiments under controlled conditions, where there must be no contamination from the subject. For the doctor, the “dirty syringe” is a failure and a breach of scientific protocol; for the psychoanalyst, it is a necessity. The psychoanalyst *must* infect: he must provoke symptoms in the patient’s body, reactivating a real that she will have a hard time managing. (This “infection” was central to my experience of the pass, in which the passant deposited something

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14 Lacan 1991, p. 164.

in our heads, injected her object into us, and left us to deal with the consequences.) Rather than conscientiously sterilizing his person in order to *avoid* transmitting something, the analyst acts with the object-cause of his own desire, thereby eliciting the work of the drive in the analysand. With the signifier of the “dirty syringe,” therefore, the dream simultaneously indicts a failed act on Freud’s part and offers a figuration of the act that founds psychoanalysis.¹⁵

If the doctors in the dream wonder how to eliminate the toxin, the answer of psychoanalysis is that the toxin cannot be eliminated, because it is inseparable from the subject. If the medical doctors are concerned with the possibility of treating or relieving the symptom, the psychoanalyst is concerned with the *untreatable*.

Willy Apollon says that in the symptom, the unconscious is struggling against something that is good for the individual. This is because the unconscious wants to go further, to go *beyond the pleasure principle*.¹⁶ This “too far” is key, and might even be considered the hallmark of the subject’s act. Far from corresponding to an ideal, the object is something that is manifestly *unacceptable*, both to the subject and to others. In Freud’s case, it is not unrelated to the deaths he has caused. What I love about this dream is that it also lays bare what is somewhat embarrassing about Freud, even for his disciples: namely, the fact that Freud himself is lead “beyond the pleasure principle” by his quest. He pushes his patients too hard, he kills people, he snorts cocaine, and he smokes like a true addict his whole life, a fact that no doubt contributed to the cancer from which he died.

Apollon observes that every analysand is sooner or later confronted with the disquieting realization that “the object of his quest [is at the same time] the object of all his misfortunes. He can neither rid himself of it nor require that it be healed, unless it is by the negation of his very existence as a subject.”¹⁷ Earlier I claimed that the dream analysis could be understood as Freud’s “pass”: not so much because he manages to construct and put into words an unconscious logic, but because he emerges from the dream analysis having accepted what is acting in him, as well as in his patients, rather than fearing or repudiating it. When Freud the dreamer peers into Irma’s throat to find his own symptoms staring back at him, what he encounters is not only his own relation to the untreatable, but more powerfully the agency of his own object within the body of his patient. After the turning point marked by this dream and its analysis, Freud doesn’t hesitate to inject his patients with his “dirty

15 In a response to this paper, Steven Miller asked whether “the act of the analyst, to the extent that its very agency resides in the object, [is] always in some sense a bungled action, whether psychoanalytic praxis is always structurally parapraxis?”

16 Apollon 2016.

17 Apollon 2006, p. 37.

syringe,” to retrigger the symptom or call forth the drive. It is thus the bodies of these patients that attest to the object that acts in Freud.

The Act and its Traces in Human History: Freud’s Moses

If the object figured by this dirty syringe is Freud’s “signature in the social link,” it is also closely related to what inspires resistance and even contempt in so many readers of his work. In the final section of this paper, I would like to suggest that the transmission of such an object, as well as its repression or refusal, is precisely what Freud explores in *Moses and Monotheism*. “How,” Freud asks of Moses, “did one single man come to stamp his people with its definite character and determine its fate for millennia to come?”¹⁸ “Stamp” implies a corporeal impression, a body that receives an imprint, mark, or blow. What, then, is involved in being “stamped” by the act, and how might it shed light on the stakes of the act for those who receive it?

Freud shows the Mosaic transmission to have two components: the doctrine of monotheism inherited from the pharaoh Akhenaton, but also the object of “the man Moses” that finds expression in this project or seeks to impose it, but is not reducible to that project itself: the passion of Moses, his “fire.” The theophany of the “burning bush” could be understood as the legendary figuration of what is at stake in this second transmission. Moses has an encounter with the real that is inscribed on his body in the form of a “radiance” that emanates from his face, which is at once a scar or wound and a sign of election: the mark of the fire that burns but does not consume. This radiance sets him apart from others, and makes his unveiled face unbearable to behold, just like God’s. Lacan, glossing the episode, declares the burning bush to be Moses’s “Thing,” and leaves it at that.¹⁹ Freud, of course, disdains the more “supernatural” elements of the biblical story, and passes over the miraculous fire in silence. But I believe this legendary episode nevertheless figures something that is essential to his reading, namely his attempt to track a transmission that exceeds the symbolic legacy of the Mosaic law. Something is transmitted symbolically, in language, while something else is transmitted “in the real,” by means of the body or the act.

Where, then, do we see the traces of this second transmission? Moses is famously depicted in the Bible as “slow of speech,” which is

18 Freud 1939, p. 136. The German verb translated as “stamp” is *prägen*, which can also mean to “shape, emboss, stamp, coin, mint, strike, imprint, mark, or mould.” It implies the marking or imprinting of a material substrate.

19 “Moses the Midianite seems to pose a problem of his own—I would know whom or what he faced on Sinai and on Horeb. But after all, since he couldn’t bear the brilliance of the face of him who said ‘I am what I am,’ we will simply say at this point that the burning bush was Moses’ Thing, and leave it there.” Lacan 1992, p. 174.

generally taken to mean that he stammers:²⁰ “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exodus 4:10). I take this as a representation of the subject of the act as something other than a subject of discourse, someone who makes an argument or articulates a position. His power is not a rhetorical power. That is the role of the “priests,” the professional interpreters and the builders of party platforms.

Strikingly, then, there is no direct communication between Moses and those who will be “stamped” by his act, the Israelites who are the ultimate depositories of that transmission. Instead, his speech is relayed by an intermediary, his brother Aaron, in a very pass-like transmission. When Moses asks him to send someone else, God says: “What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently.... You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him” (Exodus 4:14-16). Moses does not merely *speak* through Aaron, however, but acts *through his body*, which is charged with actually carrying out the actions attributed to Moses: “The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘When Pharaoh says to you, ‘Perform a wonder,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, and it will become a snake’” (Exodus 7:8).

Aaron transmits something of the act of Moses, that part that becomes the basis of the legendary history. He founds the priesthood, which transmits the ethical program of Moses, the symbolic dimension of his legacy, that part that manages to find its signifier. The function of the priest is to create a symbolic structure charged with assuring and enshrining this transmission, and at the same time to *repress* whatever cannot be transmitted in this manner. One of its most important consequences in religious history is the gradual disappearance of the “real” dimensions of the God of Moses, in favor of a God who “is” the word, who gradually becomes collapsed with speech itself: a process that ultimately culminates in the kind of formulation we find in the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God” (John 1:1). Here we are dealing with an

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20 Compare Freud’s observation in *Moses and Monotheism*: “Another trait imputed to him deserves our special interest. Moses was said to have been “slow of speech”—that is to say, he must have had a speech impediment or inhibition—so that he had to call on Aaron (who is called his brother) for assistance in his supposed discussions with Pharaoh. This again may be historical truth and would serve as a welcome addition to the endeavour to make the picture of this great man live. It may, however, have another and more important significance. The report may, in a slightly distorted way, recall the fact that Moses spoke another language and was not able to communicate with his Semitic Neo-Egyptians without the help of an interpreter—at least not at the beginning of their intercourse.” Freud 1939, pp. 37-38.

Other who is purely symbolic: and thus with the victory of repression, inasmuch as it entails the subordination of the real to the signifier.

Aaron is the one who puts everything into words, who is “eloquent of speech”: but perhaps a little *too* eloquent. For while he transmits something of Moses’s act, we might also understand him as blocking or refusing a part of what Moses transmitted in this very act of translation. In this sense he might offer an analogy for the *passeur* who is not up to the task, who is still too much implicated in the imaginary: of meaning, of the social relation (the demands others make on him) and even of his relation to the Other. It is surely not a coincidence that Aaron himself forges the golden calf at the demand of the Israelites, while Moses is still on the mountain. This particular transmission of Moses’ act and the “stamp” it left on his people is therefore inseparable from its violent repression and repudiation.

Aaron’s founding of the priesthood could in this sense be related to the institutional history of psychoanalysis, which is always at risk of becoming nothing more than a “priesthood” or a church, one that receives the “laws” of Freud’s transmission but not the object that drives him. In the same way, the monotheist doctrine is preserved by the Israelite priests as a program, a set of principles, that remained more or less intact. What is not transmitted by that tradition is the role of Moses himself, the *subject of the act*. Where do we find the traces of *that* transmission?

The Anger of Moses, the Signature of the Act

I believe this is what Freud has in mind when he claims to recognize the traits of the subject, the “man Moses,” in the anger and irascibility that are attributed to him:

The Biblical story itself lends Moses certain features in which one is inclined to believe. It describes him as choleric, hot-tempered—as when in his indignation he kills the brutal overseer who ill-treated a Jewish workman, or when in his resentment at the defection of his people he smashes the tables he has been given on Mount Sinai. Indeed, God himself punished him at long last for a deed of impatience—we are not told what it was. Since such a trait does not lend itself to glorification, it may very well be historical truth. Nor can we reject even the possibility that many character traits the Jews incorporated into their early conception of God when they made him jealous, stern, and implacable were taken essentially from their memory of Moses, for in truth it was not an invisible god, but the man Moses, who had led them out of Egypt.²¹

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21 Freud 1939, p. 37.

I think Freud's point is not just that anger is a *human* trait—one that shows Moses to be a man, and not a myth—but that anger is what I'm calling the "object" of Moses, his "signature in the social link": what compels him to initiate the Exodus and to found a new religion, but more fundamentally what drives him as a subject.²²

The treatment of this anger is central to Freud's reconstruction of the historical "compromise" whose traces he finds in the text of the Bible, in which the monotheist doctrine bestowed on the Israelites by the Egyptian Moses has been merged with an earlier cult dedicated to a fearsome volcano-god. More specifically, anger is the trait by which Freud claims to distinguish the Egyptian Moses from the Midianite priest of the same name, who he finds to be singularly lacking in the qualities needed for a grand undertaking:

Since the Moses people attached such great importance to their experience of the Exodus from Egypt, the deed of freeing them had to be ascribed to Jahve; it had to be adorned with features that proved the terrific grandeur of this volcano-god, such as, for example, the pillar of smoke which changed to one of fire by night, or the storm that parted the waters so that the pursuers were drowned by the returning floods of water. The Exodus and the founding of the new religion were thus brought close together in time, the long interval between them being denied. The bestowal of the Ten Commandments too was said to have taken place, not at Qades, but at the foot of the holy mountain amid the signs of a volcanic eruption.By [this] means a balance, so to speak, was established: Jahve was allowed to extend his reach to Egypt from his mountain in Midia, while the existence and activity of Moses were transferred to Qades and the country east of the Jordan. This is how he became one with the person who later established a religion, the son-in-law of the Midianite Jethro, the man to whom he lent his name Moses. We know nothing personal, however, about this other Moses—he is entirely obscured by the first, the Egyptian Moses—except possibly from clues provided by the contradictions to be found in the Bible and in the characterization of Moses. He is often enough described as masterful, hot-tempered, even violent, and yet it is also said of him that he was the most patient and "meek" of all men. It is clear that the latter qualities would have been of no use to the Egyptian Moses who planned such great and difficult

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22 "Probably they did not find it easy to separate the image of the man Moses from that of his God, and their instinct was right in this, since Moses might very well have incorporated into the character of his God some of his own traits, such as his irascibility and implacability." Freud 1939, pp. 140-141.

projects for his people. Perhaps they belonged to the other, the Midianite."²³

Anger and irascibility are not merely character traits or capacities, therefore, but the signature of the subject. Subsequent generations will attribute these traits to God himself, ascribing them to this Other whose act transforms the world.

It would be interesting to consider whether the two Moses figures of Freud's reconstruction are not so much distinct historical actors (the Egyptian and the Midianite), but rather representations of *two different dimensions of the subject's act*, symbolic and real: the part that can be assimilated to social or religious ideals, and the part that fails to find any such representation, but that nevertheless "strikes" or "stamps" its recipient. The act of the "angry" Moses is the one the tradition is ultimately unable to absorb and must therefore repress, first through its deification and displacement, and second through its repudiation and censorship. This is how Freud reads the biblical account of Moses angrily breaking the tables of the law, when he descends from the mountain to see his rebellious people worshipping the idol they have created in his absence (Exodus 32:19-20). This anger is directed first against the Israelites, who in their idolatry have shown themselves to be unworthy of the covenant with this invisible God. But inasmuch as the first object of his destructive wrath is not the golden calf, but the tablets of the law themselves, it is hard not to read that anger as an indictment not merely of idols and idol-worship, but of the inadequacy of those words themselves, or the way in which the object-cause of desire exceeds and overwhelms the framework of the signifier or law.

This extra-legal or even *illegal* dimension of Moses' act is precisely what the Israelites will repudiate and suppress. In Freud's reading, the destruction of the tablets cannot be attributed to "the man Moses" and his real legacy. Instead, he reads the biblical text as more or less akin to a dream: a text that offers only a distorted representation of a reality that it serves above all to repress: in this case, the peoples' condemnation of Moses and criminalization of his act. For Freud, the smashing of the tablets of the law must be understood symbolically: "*he* has broken the law," Moses himself is made guilty of the crime (57-58). If anger and irascibility convey the inevitable violence of the act, its way of forcing into the world something that is without precedent, then the illegality of the act is one way of depicting this: *the true actor is always a lawbreaker*. In what Freud calls "a case of acting instead of remembering,"²⁴ this criminalization of the act is what leads the Israelites to eventually repeat the primal murder on the person of Moses himself.

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23 Freud 1939, p. 48

24 Freud 1939, p. 113.

The biblical narrative further distorts and effaces this event by having God punish Moses for an act of infidelity, in a way that illustrates very well the tension between the signifier and the act. The Book of Numbers recounts that Moses was not permitted to enter the promised land with the Israelites because of a display of impatience that occurred at Meribah in the last year of the desert pilgrimage, when Moses brought water out of a rock to quench the peoples' thirst. Although God had commanded Moses to *speak* to the rock, he instead *struck it* twice with his staff, which was construed as displaying a lack of deference to the LORD.²⁵ I want to highlight here the opposition between speaking and "striking": if the first expresses a kind of fidelity to the signifier, the second is an act that can be understood both as an indictment of and as a compensation for the failings of the signifier. While this "deed of impatience," this sin, is a defiance of the *word* of God, it is at the same time a true act. Because of this rebellion, Moses is not allowed to enter the holy land (Numbers 27). After he dies he will be buried without a sepulchre, as if to stress that there is no signifier, no symbolic locus, for the subject of the act, whose place will be effaced from Jewish history.

Struck by the Act: Paul's Wound

The object of Moses' transmission must be distinguished both from the idealized hero of legend and from the ethical doctrine of monotheism; it cannot be found in a text, in an archeological artifact, or even in an oral tradition. It can be identified only by the traces it leaves in the bodies of those it "stamps," traces that Freud ultimately locates in the apostle Paul. Paul retains in his unconscious what entire generations have managed to repress: the truth of the primal murder, and its repetition on the person of Moses.

It would be interesting to consider whether Paul really is the *passeur* in whose body, more than in his testimony, Freud finds the traces of the act or object of Moses: not in its symbolic dimension, or even in its repudiation, but in its extra-legal, "real" dimension.

For Freud, Paul is important because he raises the repression surrounding the primal murder, which was repeated on Moses:

It seems that a growing feeling of guiltiness had seized the Jewish people...as a precursor of the return of the repressed

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²⁵The LORD said to Moses, "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink." So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence, just as he commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them" (Numbers 20-7-12).

material.... Paul, a Roman Jew from Tarsus, seized upon this feeling of guilt and correctly traced it back to its primeval source. This he called original sin; it was a crime against God that could be expiated only through death. Death had come into the world through original sin. In reality this crime, deserving of death, had been the murder of the Father who later was deified. The murderous deed itself, however, was not remembered; in its place stood the phantasy of expiation, and that is why this phantasy could be welcomed in the form of a gospel of salvation (evangel). A Son of God, innocent himself, had sacrificed himself, and had thereby taken over the guilt of the word. It had to be a Son, for the sin had been murder of the Father.... The essence of [this gospel] seems to be Paul's own contribution. He was a man with a gift for religion, in the truest sense of the phrase. *Dark traces of the past lay in his soul, ready to break through into the regions of consciousness.*²⁶

But how should we understand this thesis, which Freud puts forward without any development? How exactly does Paul transmit what was repressed, and how does that transmission differ from what I have called the "symbolic" transmission, including those distortions and transpositions that allow a certain repressed to be reconstructed?

Although Freud provides no guidance here, I am tempted to look to the famous seventh chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, where he bemoans the sinfulness that is revived and enflamed by the prohibition:

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? *We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells in me.*

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then,

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²⁶Freud 1939, pp. 109-110.

I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Romans 7, my emphases)

Paul characterizes sin as something that dwells within the body, in the flesh. In context, of course, he is referring to the sin of covetousness, the illicit desire for the neighbor's wife. Reading with Freud, however, we might understand this passage as referring not only to fleshly or carnal desires, but to something inscribed in the body, that "dwells in its members." Paul speaks of the agency of sin as a kind of unconscious agency, something acting in the body that he does not understand, does not want, and cannot control. Under the name of "sin," therefore, Paul really discovers the *unconscious itself*—a force at work *in the body*, "in the flesh," that pushes us to act in ways that are unmotivated and unwilling. Perhaps it is precisely this insight that expresses in distorted form Paul's knowledge that Moses was murdered by the Israelites, a knowledge that Freud stresses is entirely unconscious.

But there is also a strange tension here. The "law of sin," at work in his members, pushes Paul to "do the thing [he] hates." This implies that the unwilling act is a source of horror for Paul, something he might wish to control in himself so as to better "serve the law of God with [his] mind." In other words, we could understand him as calling out for repression, bemoaning the extent to which he is unable to bring the unconscious to heel, to make it "serve his mind." Considered from this point of view, the problem with the law might be that it's *not strong enough*, not able to curb these unwelcome impulses.

This interpretation is directly contradicted by the first part of the chapter, however, where Paul claims that the very law that commands him *not* to sin, *not* to covet, actually "gives an opportunity" to sin, which uses the commandment to "deceive" him: "I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'" I think we can hear in these words an indictment of *repression itself*, inasmuch as the effect of repression is to efface unconscious desire by offering up a substitute for it. In this sense it not only criminalizes desire, but fundamentally falsifies the nature of desire by making it desire for *this*, or desire for *that* (the neighbor's donkey, the neighbor's wife). It directs desire to a specific object, binding it to an object that was never wanted. In so doing, it also compromises desire itself, inasmuch as desire is never "desire for."

In other words, Paul's key insight is that the subject, the subject of the act, can only be a "criminal" with respect to the law. Prior to his conversion, Paul was himself a zealous enforcer of the Jewish law, which he applied mercilessly to the members of the Jesus-cult. On the road to Damascus, Paul is interpellated by a disembodied voice that is supposed to have cried out, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" After this experience he will no longer "persecute" Jesus with the Jewish law—with the threat of repression?—but will declare his fidelity to this real in the

form of a truth that is "beyond" the law. In other words, he reintroduces as essential the dimension of the real, and with it the act.

We generally think of Paul as displacing or even undermining the Mosaic legacy. Freud himself concludes that "Paul, by developing the Jewish religion further, became its destroyer." Paul emerges from this conversion experience to launch his polemic against the written law, to which he opposes the "living law" of faith. But that "destruction" of the law can also be heard in another way, as a liberation of the act.

As counter-intuitive as it may seem, I wonder now whether Paul's insight about the impossibility of fulfilling the law might be precisely what he "receives" from Moses. In this reading, Paul would represent not only the overturning or destruction of the Jewish tradition, but a certain development or continuation of the "quest" of Moses: that part that cannot be reconciled with the symbolic transmission. Like Moses, Paul encounters his god "in the real," in the form of the Voice that waylays him on the road to Damascus, in a kind of repetition of Moses' own experience. There is something of the burning bush in this encounter, not least because it results in "blinding," and so in the loss—however temporary, in this case—of the imaginary.

Paul, as *passeur*, transmits something very different than Aaron the High Priest. Slavoj Žižek distinguishes the priest or priestess from the saint on the ground that the former has a purely symbolic function, while the latter has a real function.²⁷ That real function invariably engages the *body*, in the form of the wound or stigmata the saint receives. I wonder whether it might be precisely the *blindness* of Paul—which is his wound, his letter—that transmits something of the real that passes through the testimony of Moses. If so, it might suggest that Paul is blinded not by what *he* sees on the road to Damascus (he sees nothing, but hears a voice), but by what *Moses* sees: the blinding fire of the burning bush, and thus the insistence of a real for which there is no name.

Anger Restrained: The Moses of Michelangelo

I want to conclude by returning to the anger of Moses, whose significance for Freud is heightened by his other, earlier text on Moses, an appraisal of the sculpture of Moses that Michelangelo created to adorn the tomb of Pope Julius II. In Freud's analysis, the subject of this sculpture is precisely the anger of Moses. In and of itself, of course, this interpretation is hardly surprising. In fact, Freud shows that previous commentators of the work are virtually unanimous in viewing the sculpture as a representation of the moment when Moses, having turned his head to see his faithless people engaged in idolatry, is just about to spring to his feet in anger and shatter the tables of the law. This view cannot be reconciled with the way Michelangelo has sculpted the body of the prophet, however,

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²⁷ Žižek 1989, pp. 116–17.

which Freud shows to have been described incorrectly by almost every scholar of the work—precisely because they have allowed their perceptions of the statue to be unduly influenced by the text of the Bible. To the contrary, Freud stresses how thoroughly Michelangelo’s depiction of Moses has departed from the biblical narrative. Instead of representing the moment *before* Moses smashes the tablets in his rage, Freud claims that the sculpture shows us what he calls an apocryphal Moses at the moment *after* he has overcome the urge to act upon his anger:

Michelangelo has placed a different Moses on the tomb of the Pope, one superior to the historical or traditional Moses. He has modified the theme of the broken Tables; he does not let Moses break them in his wrath, but makes him be influenced by the danger that they will be broken and makes him calm that wrath, or at any rate prevent it from becoming an act. In this way he has added something new and more than human to the figure of Moses; so that the giant frame with its tremendous physical power becomes only a concrete expression of the highest mental achievement that is possible in a man, that of struggling successfully against an inward passion for the sake of a cause to which he has devoted himself.²⁸

Steven Miller underscores that “for Freud, Moses does not overcome his anger—on the contrary—but only the impulse to act upon it. Accordingly, it is this restraint, what Mallarmé calls *action restreinte*, that becomes the very matter of Michelangelo’s sculpture, inseparable from its weight and physical stature, inseparable from the very decision to make this object the occasion for a sculpture rather than a painting or a poem.”²⁹

Freud describes how he himself was forced to modify his interpretation of the sculpture over the course of repeated visits to its site: “I can recollect my own disillusionment when...I used to sit down in front of the statue in the expectation that I should now see how it would start up on its raised foot, dash the Tables of the Law to the ground and let fly its wrath. Nothing of the kind happened. Instead, the stone image became more and more transfixed, an almost oppressively solemn calm emanated from it, and I was obliged to realize that something was represented here that could stay without change; that *this Moses would remain like this in his wrath forever*.”³⁰ This “forever” makes anger into a passion that is not reactive, but immanent and virtual: a wrath that will never be or dissipated or spent.

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28 Freud 1997, p. 145.

29 Miller 2016.

30 Freud 1997, p. 132. My emphases.

If this anger is the “object” of Moses, as I have suggested here, then it makes perfect sense that it would become the occasion for what Miller describes as “a mute form.” For sculpture, the art form for which Freud professes in this essay to have the greatest personal affinity, is concerned—perhaps more than any other—with the bodily transmission of the unsayable, of something that cannot be put into words. Indeed, Freud marvels at how often Michelangelo, in his sculpted creations, has “gone to the utmost limit of what is expressible in art,”³¹ precisely by refusing to subordinate the body to a narrative. Freud’s analysis is itself remarkable in being based solely upon the body: the sculpted body of Moses, but also the act that animates the body of Michelangelo himself as he carves its form.³²

The anger of Moses as Miller reads it might even illuminate something inherent to the position of the analyst. For as Freud’s dream demonstrates so well, there is “something intransigent and contestatory in the position of the analyst, perhaps even in his body of the analyst, something that forces the limits of the signifier, that is akin to anger.”³³ The analyst’s act has less in common with the explosive anger of the biblical Moses, however, than with the “restrained anger” of Michelangelo’s sculpted figure, which is a *revealing* rather than a destructive passion. Hannah Arendt, in her essay on Lessing from *Men in Dark Times*, finds anger to be an inherently political passion: “The Greek doctrine of passions...counted anger...among the pleasant emotions but reckoned hope along with fear among the evils....In hope, the soul overleaps reality, as in fear it shrinks back from it. But anger, and above all Lessing’s kind of anger, reveals and exposes the world.”³⁴ If we were to alter this account of anger in a psychoanalytic direction, Miller wonders, might we conclude that it is the passion that reveals and exposes the object?

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31 Freud 1997, p. 148.

32 Freud cites the following passage from Thode (1908), which accords quite well with his reading: “He creates the image of a passionate leader of mankind who, conscious of his divine mission as Lawgiver, meets the uncomprehending opposition of men. *The only means of representing a man of action of this kind was to accentuate the power of his will*, and this was done by a rending of movement pervading the whole of his apparent quiet, as we see in the turn of his head, the tension of his muscles and the position of his left foot....This general character of the figure is further heightened by laying stress on the conflict which is bound to arise between such a reforming genius and the rest of mankind. Emotions of anger, contempt and pain are typified in him. Without them it would not have been possible to portray the nature of a superman of this kind. *Michelangelo has created, not a historical figure, but a character-type, embodying an inexhaustible inner force which tames the recalcitrant world*; and he has given a form not only to the Biblical narrative of Moses, but to *his own inner experiences*.” Cited by Freud 1997, pp. 132-133.

33 Miller.

34 Cited by Miller.

Propping the Arm of Moses: The Community of the Pass

Maurice Blanchot, in a wonderful but little-known text, emphasizes the “weariness” of Moses, his extreme embodiment, which he finds to be encapsulated in the narrative of the Israelites’ war with Amalek (Exodus 17):

he is shown to be faltering, a poor speaker (heavy of mouth), weary to the point of ruining his own health by the excessive services he does for others.... He is weary too, when Amalek wages war on the Hebrews, just when they had barely left slavery in Egypt and are a motley band...made up mainly of women and children....Moses is not a warrior chief. Yet he is positioned on the top of a hill, as is the case with generals. But he has to be helped when he gives out apparently simple instructions: he holds up his hand to point to the sky and the Hebrews prevail—but precisely his hands are heavy and he has to be aided in order to carry out this gesture—otherwise his arm will fall to his side..., and Amalek wins the day.³⁵

In this evocation of the “heavy hands” of Moses, and the “aid” provided by those who help to hold them up, I am reminded of the procedure of the pass with which I began. I prop up the object of the *passant* by putting my—or rather *her*—heavy head in my hands, just as Moses, in his founding act, props up the object of Akhenaton’s desire. Finally, the act of Michelangelo’s body, in sculpting the marble, allows us to “see” the object of Moses, his restrained anger, by transmitting something not relayed by the biblical text or by religious tradition.³⁶ These acts of transmission would be impossible were it not for the aid provided by those who help to support—to bear and to prop up—that object that weighs the body down, hampers and oppresses it, but that also allows it to act in the world so that desire may prevail.

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35 Blanchot 1995, p. 322.

36 Blanchot asks, “is Moses a mediator? He is mediator to his people, and organizes it into a community and rages against it when it falters. Yet the people do not recognize themselves in him: ‘We did not know,’ the Hebrews tell Aaron, his own brother, ‘who it was leading us’” (Ibid, 322). They are led not by “someone,” someone they could recognize, but by “something.” This observation might apply to Freud, as well. He isn’t the leader of a movement in the sense that he is someone we could “recognize” or identify with; indeed, he isn’t “someone” at all, but a “something.” It is the object in Freud, the object that acts through him, that gives rise to psychoanalysis.

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