

"The Moses of Michelangelo":

A Matter of Solutions

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*For a number of objective and subjective reasons Freud was overwhelmed by Michelangelo's statue of Moses. Freud's essay on the subject, unique for its being nearly completely devoid of psychoanalytic theses, ironically evinces a return of the repressed, and more generally is notable for four reasons: 1) it relies on the overdetermined and erroneous choice of a biblical passage as an explanatory basis; 2) it is evidentiary in pointing to autobiographical motives informing Freud's interpretative change from his initial identification with the idolatrous Hebrews to one with a condemnatory yet self-controlled Moses; 3) it forms part of a documentary history that shows Freud's extremely limited aptitude for immediate aesthetic enjoyment; 4) it stands on its own right as an appreciable aesthetic object.*

*As a contribution to psychoanalytic literature, my exposition casts new light on an array of variously interrelated issues, including: Freud's biography; his overdetermined, selective reading of the Bible; the warping effect of his subjectivity on his observation and theorization; his missed opportunity to revise the theory of sublimation; my reinterpretation of Michelangelo's Moses; the self-imposed constraints historically crippling Freud's aesthetic enjoyment; and finally, the literary artistry detectable in the German text of his essay.*

It is fitting to begin with a brief historical and descriptive introduction to the statue of Moses, the centerpiece in the tomb of Pope Julius II. Michelangelo's choice of centerpiece was anything but accidental, for in the Italian Renaissance the recurrent reference to Moses as a prefiguration of papal power and sacred authority reached its zenith during the reign of Julius II (Stinger, 1985, pp. 209ff.). The pope himself, who commissioned his tomb in 1505, died in 1513 and was entombed in St. Peter's Basilica, whereas Michelangelo's Moses and monumental complex eventually was placed in another Roman church, St. Peter in Chains. Over a span of four decades Michelangelo drew up six different plans in all for the tomb. Originally, there were to be forty-three statues; the plan for the second tier of the tomb included Moses and St. Paul, who exemplified for the Florentine neoplatonists the perfect synthesis of action and spiritual vision.

After changes both in reduction and enlargement of a free-standing monument to a wall-tomb, the finished project has only seven statues, including Moses, one of the few sculptures that Michelangelo ever finished. Driven by a variety of factors which eventuated in a considerable reduction of his first monumental projects, Michelangelo felt forced to lower his Moses from a corner of the second tier to the middle recess in the first, a lowering which brought him decidedly closer to the viewer's level (more about this later). In his imposing presence and newly accorded centrality, Moses is seated, just under eight feet high, and looks off to the left. Opposed to its prior, relatively minor

importance, the statue of Moses, now dominated the monumental complex. Occupying the central niche, Moses is surrounded by Active Life or Leah and Contemplative Life or Rachel, the two wives of Jacob.

At this point, a number of questions urge themselves upon us. What happens when there was a meeting of figures that held a decisive position both in history at large and in Freud's life in particular? Quite simply: implosion and explosion, a black hole and galaxy of meaning. In our reflections about the statue, how might we be helped by iconographic considerations? In addition, what might an examination of Freud's essay contribute, however varying, to our understanding of Freud's life, to evaluating the subjectivity in his observation and theorization, to the complex problem of translating and reading Freud, to aesthetics, and to so-called applied psychoanalysis?

Rather than continue our line of questioning, let us switch to a declarative mode and further our story by serially outlining its grandiose cast, its dual scenes, its subject, and its superlative qualities. The outline shows nothing less than the makings of an epic drama:

#### I) The Grandiose Cast

Michelangelo. He is unparalleled in world history for having produced masterpieces in the four art forms of painting, architecture, sculpture, and poetry. No other Italian artist except Michelangelo, one is poetically tempted to say, should have been memorialized by that Latin epitaph honoring Raphael in the Roman Pantheon: "Ille est hic Raphael timuit quo sospite vinci/Rerum magna parens et morienti mori (Here lies the great Raphael by whom nature, the great parent of things, feared to be conquered when he was alive and feared to die when he was dying" (my translation).

Julius II. Besides being a fearless military leader on the battlefield and striving singlehandedly to unite Italy under papal rule, Julius II "left a record unequalled since antiquity as a patron of the arts. He brought Michelangelo, Raphael, and Bramante to the papal court. He was boundless in energy, tempestuous in outburst, and fearless in leading his troops on the battlefield" (Liebert, 1983, pp., 125-126).

Moses. The man Moses "created the Jews. . . set the Jewish people free. . . gave them their laws and founded their religion. . . . this first Messiah " (Freud, 1939, pp. 7, 89, and 106; cf. also Spero, 2001, p. 446).

Freud. "If I am Moses, then you [Jung] are Joshua and will take possession of the promised land of psychiatry" (Freud, 1973, pp. 196-197). Truly, Moses as an object of multiple identifications tormented Freud throughout his life "like an unladen ghost" (Freud, 1939, p. 103).

## 2) The Scenes: the Capital Cities of Vienna and Rome

"My longing for Rome. . . is deeply neurotic"; my first visit to Rome "was overwhelming for me. . . a high point of my life" (Freud's letters of Dec. 3, 1897 and Sept. 19, 1901 to Fliess).

## 3) The Purported Subject of the Story: Michelangelo's Statue of Moses for the Tomb of Julius II in Rome

## 4) Superlative Qualities of the Story

Alongside Michelangelo's own belief that Moses was his most important work, we encounter other claims for its singularity:

--"No piece of statuary has ever made a stronger impression on me" (Freud, 1914, p. 213).

--"No work of art in the world has been subjected to such contradictory judgments"(thesis of the art critic Max Sauerlandt,cited by Freud,1914,p.213).

--"The crown of modern sculpture"(thesis of the art critic Hermann Grimm,cited by Freud,1914,p.213).

--"It would be a mistake to underrate the force of tradition in his [Freud's] choice of Michelangelo's Moses.If there is any work of art that the cultured Jews of Central Europe adopted,it is this vision of the Hebrew leader" (Gombrich,1966,p.33).

--The first project for the tomb surpassed in beauty and conception all the ancient tombs of imperial Rome;the project as such,glorifying more than a single pope,was planned to be the most important tomb in Christendom and also "a triumphal monument to the very principal of Christianity" (Tolnay,1975,pp.69 and 77).

--"The Moses achieves a monumentality that surpasses any other single sculpture by Michelangelo" (Liebert, 1983,p.206).

--Michelangelo's statue of Moses features "probably the most spectacular beard in the history of human imagination" (F.Hartt,1994,p.457).

And now for yet another kind of distinctiveness in our story. Contrasting with its superlative-ridden subject,Freud's own essay about the Moses stands as his least psychoanalytic piece of writing.Just once does Freud allude to the unconscious (p.236)<sup>1</sup> and his only mention of conflict (p.221)is a citation from another author,a crucial feature typifying Freud's essay and highlighting its conceptual thinness. How strange that now Freud never alluded to sublimation,repression, regression,or to his new narcissistic theory that he

was writing up at the time! And how strange that Freud never refers to his cherished thesis of infantile sexuality (which Jung recently rejected) or to bisexuality (which Fliess theoretically promoted). Neither does Freud ever mention women, let alone mothers. The upshot is that we have before us a skewed male text about mastery, rebellious infidelity, narcissistic rage, and aggression.

Freud cinematographically carried out his examination and reconstruction of the statue's immediate past history, as if now he were more impressed by the artful presence of Michelangelo's titanic intensity than by Leonardo da Vinci's subdued handling of conflict. Despite his reading some eighteen biographies of Michelangelo (Harsch, 1994, p. 143), Freud now stressed the created art object and thus steered far away from his previous study of how Leonardo da Vinci's life influenced his art. For another thing, while containing spots of the most lyrical, personal statements that he ever wrote, Freud also doubted his interpretive conclusions about Michelangelo's Moses more than about any other art work he analyzed. And yet, despite its many deficiencies, there is much to be discovered in Freud's essay, and to that task we presently turn, but not before a word about the organization of the pages ahead.

The logical progression guiding my exposition is as follows: the appropriately longest Section One examines the intrinsic value of Freud's interpretation of Moses; in a shift of focus, Section Two interprets Freud himself and the projection of his personal history into his sculptural appreciation; continuing the focus on the person of Freud, Section Three vets

his capacity for aesthetic enjoyment; and taking the next step forward, Section Four analyzes the value Freud's own essay as an art object in itself.

### I. Iconography and Freud's Quarrying the Statue for Meaning

In order to find Michelangelo's intention in creating Moses, Freud set about studying its "meaning and content" (p.212). Freud grounded the rationale for his procedure by underlining the similarity between textual and sculptural artifacts. Hence he asked whether Michelangelo had indeed "written (geschrieben) such a vague and ambiguous script in the stone, that so many different readings of it are possible" (p.215; the italicized word replaces Strachey's unsatisfactory "traced," which does not specify the scriptive and therefore lexical meaning). Pursuing the same line of thought, Freud believed that Michelangelo's intention was «capable of being communicated and comprehended in words, like any other fact of mental life" (p.212). With a further step, Freud concluded that Michelangelo intended in the figure of Moses "to make a concrete expression of the highest achievement that is possible in man, that of struggling against an inward passion for the sake of a cause to which he has devoted himself" (p.233).

At this point, Freud underscored his quest of Michelangelo's intention, but never qualified it as unconscious. And for good reason. It would be extremely difficult to argue for the probability, let alone certainty, that throughout the years Michelangelo was unaware of his sculpting a self-controlled Moses. In this regard we should note that when analyzing Michelangelo's artistic

creation, Freud envisioned Moses' all-decisive self-control as a deliberate act of his will: rather than completely yielding to his wrath which was already making the Tablets slip, Moses "remembered his mission and for its sake renounced an indulgence of his feelings" (p.230, my italics). And in referring to Michelangelo's sculpted moral message to the Pope, Freud even pointed to the artist's heightened awareness, during which, by virtue of self-criticism, he rose "superior to his own nature" (p.234).

It is crucial to observe Freud's nuanced usage when he compared his "more consciously" executed analysis with the one carried out «unconsciously» (in Strachey's translation) by other critics (193/229). Actually, however, Freud wrote «unwissentlich» (unwittingly).<sup>2</sup> Only at the end of his essay does Freud permit himself to use the word "unconsciously" in a psychoanalytic sense for the first and only time (we disregard Freud's previous citation of a nineteenth-century German art critic who used the term "unconscious" [176/214] in a pre-psychoanalytic way). Perhaps, said Freud, Michelangelo "did not intend either consciously or unconsciously" what other critics and Freud himself attributed to him. Freud then partly went on the offensive. On one hand, he timidly raises the possibility of a basic want of precision on Michelangelo's part. On the other hand, Freud raised the issue of what is inherently inexpressible. Equally important, Freud thus anticipated his own communicative frustration as an analytic writer before the inescapable distortions imposed not only by language (1920, p.60) and but even by the larger units of exposition (1916-17, p.379; 1923, p.48; 1939, p.104).

On the whole, Freud stresses Michelangelo's conscious control. In his uppermost aim of ascertaining Michelangelo's intention, Freud was

theoretically at the antipodes of the critical position represented by the poet-critic Charles Simic (2000,p.52),who cautioned:"The more original the poet,the wider the gap between his intentions and his inventions." In the final analysis,it was in the light of his own tendentious interpretation, however,that Freud weighed the possibility of Michelangelo's expressive limitations (p.236).At the end, Freud skewed the battlefield.Only within the limits of his particular interpretation did Freud fully recognize Michelangelo's artistic success.

Another aspect of Freud's focus on the conscious is that he saw Michelangelo's Moses as tied to a particular historical moment:after descending Mount Sinai (pp.216, 220) where God gave him the ten commandments,Moses reacted with horror at his followers worshipping a golden calf.Freud concluded that Michelangelo created "not the inception of a violent action but the remains of a movement that has already taken place." Attempting to leave no stone unturned,Freud focused on the vestigial action manifest in the position of Moses' right hand and the position of the Tablets.Freud's cinematic reconstruction of the action consisted of three phases.In the first, simple phase Moses is calmly seated and facing forward.The second phase,representing Moses' highest state of tension,consists of a series of successive postures:he hears a clamor,turns his head to the left and spies his unfaithful followers adoring the Golden Calf; angered thereupon and ready to spring up and annihilate the unfaithful,he moves his left foot back,and,as if to turn violence against his own body,he seizes his beard with his right hand;in doing so,he almost lets the Tables fall to their destruction.In the last phase,represented by the actual statue,in order

to check the Tables'fall Moses undoes the grasp of his beard with the result that the index finger of his right hand holds several strands of the left side of his beard;the mild gesture of the left hand,holding as in a caress the end of the flowing beard,counteracts the violence of the right hand clutching the beard "a few moments ago."

In Freud's lights,although the Biblical narrative lacks some coherence,<sup>3</sup> Moses represents his first descent from Mount Sinai as described in the thirty-second chapter of Exodus,the second book of the Pentateuch or Torah.At the same time,Freud also notes that Michelangelo did not slavishly follow the traditional account of Moses: his seated position goes countering the biblical narrative,Michelangelo's Moses is seated,not standing,and he restrains rather than externalizes his anger.<sup>4</sup> On the latter point, Freud insists that any conception of Moses as springing to action would clash with the general monumental scheme (pp.219-220;see also Freud's unpublished letter of Jan. 24,1915,to Hermann Struck— Archives,Freud Museum,London).

Before proceeding to various objections made of Freud's position,I should like to make the claim that Freud stopped short at arriving at a major breakthrough in the theory of sublimation,perhaps because he did yet see the independence of the aggressive drive and the possibility of its being subject to sublimation.It was only after nearly a lifetime of linking sublimation exclusively with the sexual drive that Freud came to recognize that the aggressive drive itself could be sublimated.It was precisely that theoretical innovation which he announced to Marie Bonaparte (letter of May 27,1937,Jones,1957,pp.464-465).But in the earlier time which concerns us,Freud pictured one part of Moses turning violence against his own body (p.228),another and apparently

much larger part remaining forever in «frozen wrath,»(p.229);and simultaneously,Moses was figured to check an outward expression of his anger and thereby self-sacrificing for a higher good and arriving at the greatest human achievement(p.233).We should remark here that Freud makes no explicit mention of neutralization or transformation of psychic energy.For another thing,he implicitly suggests a deflection of aggressive strivings onto a new object,yet he implies no such deflection for a change in aim.Moses' supposed endorsement of a superceding,sovereign social aim seems to come ab ovo, without any indication of redirected aggressive tendencies as such.

And now onto the critics whose objections Freud's interpretation rest on four bases:

1) the Biblical source of his interpretation.

In the earlier commentaries by Wolbasht and Lichtenberg (1961) and by Bremer (1967),the objection was made that Michelangelo had in mind not the first descent from Mount Sinai described in Exodus 32:19-20 and 33:7-35;on that first occasion,after receiving the tablets written on by God,Moses descended Mount Sinai,only to break those inscribed tablets in a wrathful response to seeing his followers adoring the Golden Calf.

Frommel (2002) highlights the fact that the right arm and forearm engaged in securing the tablets are relaxed and that Moses' right hand so casually holds the tablets make short of Freud's interpretation,i.e.,that just shortly before was Moses caught up in a violent movement of about to smash them. I can make one personal contribution to the present discussion of perspective. In January,2002,I had the privilege of going inside the guardrail

and inspecting the Moses statues close up. I noticed that although the left knee is flexed, the left ankle is not tense, thereby undercutting Freud's interpretation of Moses as checking his violent upward movement. Even more radically disputing Freud's proposed reconstruction as unnecessary, Armour (1993, p. 31) offers that the figure of Moses could not possibly stand up from this supposed position as can be verified by anyone who cares in a simple experiment to reproduce the pose.

The aforementioned matters lead us into a simple conclusion. Pace Freud, the sculpture referred to other biblical passages which deal with Moses' carrying two blank tablets when he made his second ascent on the Mount and, according to historical retrospective, became horn-headed.

## 2) the story of the horns and their weighty implications.

Compared with Freud's casual, unelaborated mention that Moses had horns (p. 213), critical scholarship has accorded them substantial attention, especially as they give further evidence for Freud's biblical error. Although the Hebrew text for Exodus 34:29 says that as a result of seeing God, "the face of Moses sent forth beams," Jerome in his Vulgate biblical translation, confronted by the Hebrew word krn which could mean either beams of light or horns, opted for the latter, and so contained the translation: "the face of Moses was horned (cornuta)." This Vulgate version was the only one available to Michelangelo, and indeed its depiction of a horn-headed or pan-headed Moses held sway throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Given the sequence in the biblical narrative, the argument runs, since Moses had not yet seen God when he made his first descent from Mount Sinai and scornfully witnessed the idolatry of his followers (Exodus

32:19-20),he could not be horned,and thus Freud's grand interpretation based on the second descent overlooked a fundamental chronological element in iconography.

In a groundbreaking study of Moses and its blank tablets,Macmillan and Swales (2003,p.94)<sup>5</sup> locate part of their solution in chapters 33 and 34 of Exodus,thus in opposition to Freud's restricted use of the thirty-second which dramatized only the wrathfully broken,inscribed tablets.After explaining that the acquisition of horns occurred upon seeing the Lord during the second ascent on Mount Sinai,the authors add (p.94):«The second ascent,and only it,allows an interpretation of the statue consistent with the blank tablets Moses has under its arm,its horns,its sitting position,[and] its emotions it seems to express.»<sup>6</sup> Abiding by the blankness of the tables in Moses,Macmillan and Swales (p.82) specify that Michelangelo wanted to represent a time during the second ascent when the second tablets were not yet inscribed; that desired time was precisely the moment when Moses glimpsed at the Lord and became glorified with horns,an unprecedented in history.<sup>7</sup>

The inclusive thesis of Macmillan and Swales clarifies so much,but their reliance on Bremer's study calls for an important and consequential correction. Bremer (1966,p.70) gratuitously presumes that during his second ascent,the glorified Moses «follows the passing of the Lord with his right head and eyes— naturally the Lord is passing from the right to the left,as do all good (!) omens and signs» (in another misconception of laterality, Bremer,p.66,has the bible saying that the right hand of the Lord stretched over Moses;but the Greek text of the Septuagint that I own says simply hand,not right hand).

Would Michelangelo ignore the symbolic implications of the Lord going to the left and being there the target of a divine vision? In classical, medieval and Renaissance culture, the right side was associated with goodness, activity, and masculinity, and the left with evil, passivity, and femininity and homosexuality. One need only think of the Latin sinister, meaning left or bad, perverse; the French gauche, meaning left or awkward; and the English right with its positive resonances. Some words for left in classical Greek are also significant: laios, euônumos (literally, of good reputation) and aristeros (literally, the comparative adjective better, whence the etymology of aristocracy). Euônumos and aristeros are marvelous specimens of euphemism. We might recall that Oedipus's father, Laius (the English spelling for Laios), kidnapped the young Chrysippos and brought him to Thebes as his catamite.

It is quite to the point that in Michelangelo's other famous statue, David, the hero faces left, just before the battle with Goliath; in the Sistine Chapel's Last Judgment, the damned go to Christ's left and the saved to the right; a poem by Michelangelo symbolically treated the two sides of the body (Tolnay, 1975, pp. 12, 85, 200-201). Pertinently, that whereas Moses' right hand rests upon the lawful Tablets, his left hand nearest his viscera; in biblical lore, the viscera (in biblical Greek, splanchnon) were considered to be the center of emotions, much as the heart is frequently thought of today.

In light of the above indications, I offer that what Michelangelo wanted to present during the second ascent on Mount Sinai was some time after Moses' glorification. Selecting such a time frame, Michelangelo avoided rigid binarity between good and bad but rather chose to show a complementarity

between a divine contemplation and active life with its positive and negative potential. Accordingly, in a majestically dignified composure yet still under the effects of his awesome experience, the figured Moses looks to the left; he is resolute about carrying out his weighty commission and at the same time mindful about the uncertainty of what awaits him down below among his unpredictable and formerly idolatrous people. Meanwhile, expressive of his sudden new concern, his body reacted somewhat, drawing back the left foot but with no further ado. Seen in this way, the Moses ties in well with the upward-looking statue of Rachel or contemplative life on his right, and on his left the downward-looking Leah or active life. The distinctiveness of these lateral elements is further bore out by Forcellino's observation (2005, p.311) that the right horn of Moses looks up whereas the left one is relatively inclined. My admittedly partial interpretation of Moses' post-visionary state and his redirected focus receives more support from the general insistence of art historian Rosenthal (pp.545,546) that the biblical hero is not ecstatic and in a state of divine frenzy.<sup>8</sup>

c) historical complexity of the viewer's perspective.

As has already been mentioned, the statue designated for the second tier was moved down to the lower one. In agreement with the earlier placement of Moses, Panofsky contends that if the work were not removed from its predestined place on the second tier of the tomb, it would have never been linked with the angry scene of the Golden Calf (Panofsky, 1939, p.193 and fn.). The art historian Earl Rosenthal (1951) agreed that the statue was destined for the second story and said that although it was mainly carved between 1513

and 1516, its final placement «was an act of despair after forty years of frustration.»

In his pivotal article, Rosenthal tells of the universal praise of the statue until the end of the seventeenth century when French critics objected to its many disproportions. Shedding light on perspectival considerations, Rosenthal brings in intriguing historical data about how the genial Michelangelo worked: having «the compass in his eyes and not in his hands,» Michelangelo sculpted the large statue as it lay in a horizontal position. Rosenthal used a plaster cast of Moses and conveniently placed it at the respective height designated for the original Moses, and he then photographed it from a worm's ground-level. As a result of the adjusted perspective, Rosenthal found the following: the anatomical disproportions disappear; the overall contours gain in unity and vitality; and the historical moment of wrath and incipient activity give way to composure and dignity; the turbulent beard no longer stands out and now enhances rather than stands apart from the face; and the tables, far from being precariously held, are rather securely tucked under the right arm.<sup>9</sup>

During the restoration of Moses from December 1998 to 2002, many unexpected findings were made, including the significant modifications in the final years between 1542 and 1545 (cf. Frommel, 2002; Grubrich-Simitis, 2004, e.g., 7-8, 112-113). In his biography just recently published, Michelangelo: una vita inquieta (2005), the chief restorer Antonio Forcellino relates with expected intimacy and in matchless detail (pp. 307-314) how Michelangelo worked on the Moses and made creative modifications over time. As Forcellino stressed (p. 312), the adjustments Michelangelo had to make when he moved Moses down from its large space on the second tier to the

containment of the recess on the first tier, produced »un'impressione d'inquietudine» (an impression of restlessness).

d)the interpretative relationship between Moses and the other statues in the monument.

Trying, as Freud did, to trace Michelangelo's intentionality about Moses would optimally have to involve contending with the number of plans for the impressive symmetrical ensemble overall iconographic program, beginning in 1505 and ending with its completion in 1545 (thus embracing Michelangelo's evolution from the painting of the Sistine Chapel from 1508 to 1512, and the painting of the Last Judgment from 1536 to 1541). Indeed, throughout the years Michelangelo had shifting multiple creative intentions about the Moses and its overall iconographic program. Countless factors variously affecting interpretation include the complex effects of all-around lighting,<sup>10</sup> the height, angle, the recessiveness or forwardness of Moses' placement;<sup>11</sup> the changed direction of the head; and the cumulative effect of those physical bedeviled variables on the perception of the statue's proportions, the relative prominence and harmony of its parts, the muscular tensility, and the interpretation of the represented emotions.

We would also ask whether Michelangelo's intentions become ambivalent or contradictory insofar as the form of the statue, even if not completely finished, could no longer be ideally adapted to the drastic changes within the entire architectural design program. Many have tried--to cite an isolated example--to understand the Moses in relation to the various Slaves, especially the Rebellious and the voluptuous Dying Slave (both now in the Louvre). Michelangelo worked on from 1513 to 1516, let later removed them from

the final project. To begin with, Slaves is a misnomer, for they are really prigioni, captives or prisoners; and the Dying Captive is not dying but struggling in his sleep to free himself from his dream (Tolnay, 1975, p.83). It is not surprising that the two completed Captives have been interpreted so differently (e.g., Panosky, 1939, pp.194-197; Tolnay, 1975, pp.78-79; Armour, 1994, pp.45ff.).

In face of the remaining bewildering indeterminacy and intentionality, which intention or intentions can be said to have endured? And which one or ones ended up as primary? And as ambivalent? The simplification of Freud's investigative orientation cannot be stressed enough. The biblical source text, the horns, and numerous historical and other factors put aside, art specialists have underscored Freud's neglect of a host of iconographical complexities and the plastic tradition of representation and expressive gestures (e.g., Spector, 1970; Janson, 1974; Verspohl, 1991). But rather than be stymied by such a daunting circumstance, let us summon up the mettle to go farther afield and pursue even what is against the grain. Hewing deeper into Freud's essay will enable us to track the vein of his persistent interpretive doubts.

## 2. The Hounding Effects of Moses in Freud's Personal History: Freud as Quarry

What is a cynic? A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing (Oscar Wilde, Lady Windermere's Fan, Act III).

Those who are in quest of the truth should start by doubting well (bene dubitare). (Thomas Aquinas, Metaphysicorum Aristotelis: Expositio, Book 3, Section 3, Par. 339 (my italics and translation from the Latin)).

Whereas Freud's focus on physical perspective was a cardinal theme in the previous section, the present one deals with temporal perspective, or more exactly, the different projection of Freud's internal perspective over the course of time. An examination of Freud's visits to the Moses in Rome and a scrutiny of his subsequent reflections shed much needed light on Freud's interpretive self-doubts that stand unequalled among his responses to works of art. Far from a trivial coincidence, the artwork under discussion was exhibited in Rome, a city of taboo for Freud. In this respect we recall his oft-cited avowals: "My longing for Rome. . . is deeply neurotic"; my first visit to Rome "was overwhelming for me. . . a high point of my life (Freud, 1985, pp. 285-449)

. . . .The wish to go to Rome had become in my dreamlife a cloak and symbol for a number of other passionate wishes" (Freud, 1900,pp.196-197).

Among his various visits to the seven-hilled city,<sup>12</sup> Freud elected to study the Moses statue in 1901, 1912,and 1913.<sup>13</sup> Accompanied by his brother Alexander in 1901,Freud stayed in Rome for twelve days.He wrote home to Martha that while he was looking for something else he suddenly came upon the statue of Moses by virtue of a misunderstanding (Freud,2002b,p.142).<sup>14</sup> About that and subsequent experiences, Freud tells us:

How often have I mounted the steep steps from the unlovely Corso Cavour to the lonely piazza where the deserted church stands,and have essayed to support the angry scorn of the hero's glance.Sometimes I have crept cautiously out of the half-gloom of the interior as though I myself belonged to the mob [Gesinde] upon which the eye is turned—the mob which can hold fast no conviction,which has neither faith nor patience,and which rejoices when it has regained its illusory idols (p.213).

Marthe Robert wrote incisively about those aforementioned lines:"Freud, ordinarily so little expansive about things intimate, exposes himself here to the public without the least necessity,or more exactly,because of an imperious psychical necessity driving him to make the most incredible of admissions:at 58 years of age,he comports himself before the stone image as only a child would be excused to do" (1974,pp. 238-239,my translation).So strong was Freud's "extraordinary, almost hallucinatory" experience (Yerushalmi (1991,p.76) that he felt disillusioned (p.220) when Moses would stay put.

Freud's quasi-hallucinatory fear of the Moses is traceable to several causes. As an apostate abandoning the religion of his ancestors, he was terrified before his pious father Jacob-Moses<sup>15</sup> -an intense feeling not far different from his derealization on the Acropolis in 1901 and the related guilt for having surpassed his father (Freud, 1936). Freud also believed that his nephew John and his brother Julius determined «what is neurotic, but also what is intense, in all my friendships»; it is not surprising that Freud claimed to have had reacted to the birth of younger Julius with hostility and jealousy, and the death of that younger sibling left him with a germ of self-reproach (Freud, 1985, p. 268). In the Pope Julius-Moses link, Freud would see his seventeen-months younger brother Julius, who died at the age of seven months, yet significantly, Freud had not been able to recall the name of a poet called none other than Julius Mosen (letter of August 2, 1898, to Fliess; cited by Sprueill, 1985, 479fn.).

In Jones's opinion (1955, p. 365) Freud also saw in the angry Moses both the glare of Brücke's critical eyes and the rejecting Fliess, who discarded Freud's efforts at reconciliation in 1901. Pertinently, Fliess was born in the same year as Julius (Schur, 1972, p. 271). On top of all that, the sculptured Moses that replaced Fliess served as an externalized object- and self-representation of Freud's refashioned analytic identity and ideals (Blum, 1991). In Freud's persistent fascination with the statue, his quest for a paternal ideal, along with all its narcissistic reaffirmations, prevails over maternally oriented preoedipal explanations (cf. Goldsmith, 1992, and Schmidbauer, 1999, p. 90).

Jones does not furnish other explanations which are found elsewhere both in his biography and in Freud's letters to Fliess. Confiding to Fliess his

overall reaction to Rome, Freud said that although he found modern Rome likable and was overawed by the Rome of antiquity, he could neither enjoy the Christian one nor appreciate the misery of Christians despite their redemptive belief: "I found it difficult to tolerate the lie concerning man's redemption, which raises its head to high heaven—for I could not cast off the thought of my own misery and all the other misery I know about" (Freud, 1985, p. 449).

The above commentary leads me to adduce a hitherto overlooked cause for the impact of Freud's misery on his subjective interpretation of the Moses statue. I postulate that Freud was condemning himself for deciding professionally to leave the highroad and enter into the world of political shennanigans. Freud felt that he was held back as a university Dozent, and as the famous Viennese surgeon Bilroth declared, "A Dozent who is not advanced to professorship carries a dagger in his heart» (Eissler, 2001, p. 492). Thus, feeling financially destitute and in need of the professorial advancement that he had sought over four years, Freud decided to use "pull" and had recourse to someone he personally did not like, the very ambitious, vain and authoritarian Exner, his former teacher (Jones, 1953, p. 45). Exner, it needs be known, succeeded the deceased Brücke as Chair of Physiology and was the official representative of the College of Professors at the Ministry of Education.

Here's the way Freud described his regrettable undertaking to Fliess in 1901:

When I came back from Rome. . . I found my practice had almost melted away. . . So I made up my mind to break with strict virtue and take appropriate steps, as other humans do

[Gesindel !]. One must look somewhere for one's salvation, and I chose the title as my savior. For four whole years I had not put in a single word about it, but now I called on my old teacher, Exner. Only after I had really roused him by a few disparaging remarks about the activity of the ministry's high officials did he let fall something obscure about personal influences being at work against me with His Excellency, and he advised me to seek a personal counterinfluence (Freud, 1985, p. 456).

Also for his purposes, Freud accepted the assistance of two of his female patients. Frau Ferstel, the one still in treatment, applied pressure on her aunt to relinquish a painting by Böcklin and donate it to a national gallery; the donation, a tactic that "bribes our powers of criticism (Freud, 1905b, p. 132)," paid off and Freud received the professorship. Even many years later in a letter to Ferenczi, Freud had unsettling memories about the incident:

The necessity to seek the patronage of a university is—I remember—less a matter of indifference, but it is perhaps really worth the effort, if one can achieve something without making too great concessions to the rabble [Gesindel]. I had to do it too. . . even now I gnash my teeth at the recollection (Freud, 1993b, letter of October 12, 1913, p. 513).

As Eissler (1976, p. 349) said, Freud never fully forgave himself for his tactic. And it is no wonder that, anticipating his base action, the Goldener Sigi

felt like one of the mob whose adoration of the Golden Calf incurred Moses' wrathful condemnation.

We skip to September 15-27, 1912,<sup>16</sup> the time of Freud's second stay in Rome and his intense encounter with Michelangelo's statue (Freud, 1993b, p. 159). On September 25, his antepenultimate day of touring, Freud wrote to Martha: "Everyday I pay a visit to Moses in S. Pietro in Vincoli, on whom I may perhaps write a few words" (letter of September 25, Freud, 1960, p. 302). It was probable on that visit that Freud brought with him Gsell Fels' Rome und die Compagna, a guidebook published in its seventh edition in the same year. Freud "marked in blue crayon the section of the Moses statue, incidentally the only marking in the entire book. Here Gsell Fels stresses the fact (which was to be a key point in Freud's argument) that Michelangelo has depicted not an outburst of wrath but a moment of self-restraint" (Molnar, 1992b, p. 289). Curiously, Freud never acknowledged in print any indebtedness to Fels.

It was during Freud's two-week stay in Rome that he changed his previous interpretation about a Moses unleashing his rage. If Michelangelo deviated from the biblical text for «inner motives» (p. 232), inner motives also influenced Freud's first interpretation of the statue and also his later change. Thus, even though Freud was gnashing his teeth in 1913 over his early ethical capitulation, other and stronger experiences brought about a radical change in his identificatory relationship to Michelangelo's masterpiece.

In his Roman touring, Freud bore with him the lessons of his revered master Charcot, who "used to look again and again at the things he did not understand, to deepen his impression of them day by day, till suddenly an

understanding of them dawned on him"(Freud,1893,p.12). What Freud began to look at again and again in 1912 was no ordinary object.As he later reflected:"My relationship to this work [the essay on Moses] is something like that to a love child.Every day. . . I stood in the church in front of the statue, studying it,measuring and drawing it until there dawned on me that understanding which in the essay I only dared to express anonymously" (Weiss,1970, p.74).<sup>17</sup>

The mindset that Freud brought to Rome in 1912 was far different from the gloom of anticipated political submissiveness that had marked his first visit to Rome in 1901.Like the primal oedipal father,Freud had to contend with his rebellious analytic sons.No longer the underdog in his struggles,Freud was nevertheless still preoccupied,partly by the defections of Stekel and Adler,and mostly by Jung who had bearded him and tried to smash the analytic tablets. The exchange of correspondence between Freud and Jones on July 30 and August 1,1912 shows them setting about to found the establishment of a Secret Committee which would operate behind the scenes and in which Freud would enjoy full power over the International Psychoanalytic Association. Unlike both the historical and artistic Moses who heroically took a public stand,Freud chose to hide behind anonymity,like the anonymous Secret Committee.<sup>18</sup> In short,the iconophilic and iconoclastic Freud had grounds both to identify with Moses and to fear his wrath.

Freud's object relation with a terrifying father was succeeded or mixed with a paternal identification. By projecting his ego ideal into the figured Moses,Freud came to a self-comforting interpretation.Freud conceived of a

Moses who does not drop the Tablets and who likewise symbolizes the avoidance of paternal punishment (Watkins, 1951). More to the point: Freud progressed from worshipping the Golden Calf and thereby transgressing the law of the Tablets to preserving the law. Much as he wanted to express his anger, he chose rather the higher aim of protecting the Tablets of Psychoanalysis.

Let us for an instant turn from Freud's professional ideals to their overdriven, contaminating effect on his essay. Fixated on wrath that was either directly feared or variously managed, Freud's essayistic interpretation distorted the Scriptures on two accounts. He erroneously singled out the applicability of the Moses' wrathful-dominated first descent from Mount Sinai, and he ruled out Moses' second ascent and the experience of divine vision and rapture. Clearly Freud felt more at ease with Moses' wrath and self-protection toward his fellows than with his divine ecstasy—a forerunner of Freud's ridicule of oceanic feeling? In conjunction with his double distortion of a biblically written medium, Freud misconstrued the sculptural medium, a misconstrual further compounded by an extended projection of his wrath-based interpretation beyond the artwork and onto its sculptor and then onto the sculptor's relationship with Julius II (pp.233-234).

And now to resume our chronicle: in the months following his return from Rome in 1912, Freud remained concerned about the accuracy of his new interpretation;<sup>19</sup> accordingly he requested photographs and a drawing of the statue from Jones who was visiting the Eternal City.<sup>20</sup> Freud fluctuated between identifying himself with Moses whom he perceived as wrathful or as self-controlling: «According to my mood, I would sooner compare myself with

the historical Moses than with the one by Michelangelo » (letter of October 17, 1912, Freud, 1993b, p.411).

And then in November, 1912, an event occurred which played a critical part in Freud's interpretation of Michelangelo's statue. During a minor psychoanalytic meeting in Munich, Freud's anger toward Jung reached a new level. Freud objected that his name was not mentioned by Jung and Riklin in their psychoanalytic articles published in Swiss journals. Even more dramatically, Freud and Jung disagreed about the historical significance of Amenhotep IV, who was known for founding monotheism and for his rebellious erasing of his father's name from all monuments throughout Egypt. Whereas Jung underlined Amenhotep's contribution to religion, Freud gave more weight to the Egyptian's filial revolt. In the midst of that heated discussion, Freud fainted, an act which Freud later interpreted as a residue against his successful death wishes against his younger brother Julius (letter of December 9, 1912, to Ferenczi, Freud, 1993, p.440). The fact that Freud redirected his anger towards Jung onto himself comprises another autobiographical element heralding Freud's interpretation about Moses' self-directed anger. Through an identification with Moses, Freud was also advocating a self-mastery over externalized violence in the service of preserving the ideals of his own psychoanalytic covenant.

In 1913 Freud returned to Rome and stayed there from September 7 to 25. His postcard of September 13 indicates that he still did not visit the Moses, but on the 21st, he confided that the material he had asked Jones to send him about the statue was giving him second thoughts (Freud, 1993a, p.227). The ensuing months constituted the conflictual peak between

Freud and Jung and hearkened back to the previous defections of Adler and Stekel. Like Moses, Freud experienced "the conflict which is bound to arise between such a reforming genius and the rest of mankind" (p.221). In that the German expression «Hörner tragen» (literally, to wear horns) means to be a cuckold, one may wonder whether the Moses statue reminded Freud in a larger sense that he was betrayed by his male disciples in a violation of their common science. It is highly revelatory that the father of the psychoanalytic primal horde identified their common science as a «Dame» (lady--letter of Feb.2,1910 to Jung, Freud,1974,p.321).

Not surprisingly, there was an autobiographical cast to the essay which Freud wrote over the Christmas holidays, finishing it perhaps on the symbolically significant day of January 1,1913 (Freud,1993a,p.252). Even when Freud was writing the essay, however, his lingering doubts about its thesis made him settle on anonymous publication. And so, in writing to Ferenczi about his vehement objections during his most recent Christmas visit, Freud in a miffed tone still insisted upon sticking to his plan of anonymity (letter of January 3,1914, Freud,1993b,p.529). Neither could the pressure of the whole Committee change Freud's mind about publishing the essay anonymously. With his expository doubts continuing into early February, Freud requested two artists to do illustrations of the statue which would confirm his interpretation: "The ones [illustrations] by Fraülein Wolf," Freud lamented to Ferenczi, "are unsatisfactory . . . . My doubts have not been overcome, and I will certainly hold up publication if an illustrator doesn't support them effectively, convince me

first,so to speak" (Freud,1993b,p.538). "I prefer to be cautious,"Freud concluded (1993a,p.26l).

Matters speeded up.Although Freud received gratifying illustrations from Max Pollak,he was still questioning the soundness of his essay to Ferenczi.Freud then decided to settle its fate in not less than a week later at a consultative meeting in his home:"On Friday, the 20th of the month,at my place,there will be an official Moses evening,at which the fate of this experimental piece is supposed to be decided (Heller, Rank,Sachs,Pollak,the artist who has delivered very good drawings to me)"(Freud,1993b,p.540). Alas,the consultation was not probative,an outcome causing Freud once more to lament to Ferenczi:"The Moses evening ended without any real result.I wanted to hear a proper objection from the artist,but I couldn't get it out of him.It will probably come into being anyway"(Freud,1993b, p.543; see also p.544).

The essay finally came out in March,1914,despite Freud's doubts (Freud,1993a,p.269).<sup>21</sup> The shrewd Abraham mockingly protested Freud's anonymous authorship:"Do you not think that the lion's paw will be recognized all the same ?" (letter of April 4,1914,Freud,2002a).Putnam also recognized the distinctive paw (Hale,1971,p.174),and maybe other easily arrived at the same conclusion.

Whatever the ineffectiveness of Freud's anonymity, his reasons for it are more important. Responding to Abraham he listed three reasons: "The Moses is anonymous partly as a pleasantry, partly out of shame at the obvious amateurishness which it is hard to avoid in the Imago papers,and finally because my doubts about the findings are stronger than usual and I

publish it only as a result of editorial pressure" (letter of April 6, 1914, Freud, 2002a, p. 228). Of further relevance is Freud's confession, in the draft of his essay, that his study is "not, strictly speaking, a psychoanalytic contribution" (Grubrich-Simitis, 1993, p. 224). Freud took the edge off that denigration in his published essay: "this paper does not, strictly speaking, conform to the conditions under which contributions are accepted for publication in this Journal" (p. 211). But to Putnam, Freud gave another, more weighty reason: "I do not publicly acknowledge having written it [the Moses essay] because in this exceptional instance, it does not deal with sexuality" (Hale, 1971, p. 174).

Freud continued to doubt his findings well on afterwards. During the 1920s, for example, while expressing his wish to collaborate on a book about Woodrow Wilson, Freud confided to William Bullitt that "he was dissatisfied by his studies of Leonardo da Vinci and of

the Moses statue by Michelangelo because he had been obliged to draw large conclusions from few facts" (Freud and Bullitt, 1966, p. vi). Despite his misgivings, in 1924, Freud signed his name to his essay. As he pregnantly explained to a colleague, he was legitimizing his so-called "love child" (Weiss, 1970, p. 74).

All in all, Freud could not escape the fate of his affective disposition and the return of the repressed that influenced both his observations and resultant judgements. In his highly invested investigation, he semantically chipped away at the statue and found in it his own dream. This fulfillment of his wishes, he continued to feel, did not have the solidity of stone. In parallel to three phases of movement he found in the statue, Freud depicted to his

moving among three different interpretive positions. With the aid of a whimsical idiom, we may conclude that in his prolonged, quixotic, and non-psychoanalytic quest to pin down the unpinnable, Freud ran the risk of losing his marbles.

### 3. Freud's Aesthetic Stance:

#### Pleasure Reservatus and Interruptus

Led on by the historical account of Freud's unassured interpretation, we now arrive at the correspondent problem concerning Freud's enjoyment of the statue. Critics have previously overlooked that problem in Freud's account of his own distinctive emotional reaction. His often quoted account of his emotional reaction to art in general and to Michelangelo's masterpiece in particular seems straightforward enough. Here is Freud:

Works of art do exercise a powerful effect  
 [eine starke Wirkung] on me, especially those of literature and  
 sculpture, less often of painting. This has occasioned me, when I  
 have been contemplating such things, to spend a long time  
 before them trying to apprehend them in my own way, i.e. to  
 explain to myself what their effect is due to [wodurch sie  
 wirken]. Wherever I cannot do this, as for instance with music, I  
 am almost incapable of obtaining any pleasure  
 [genussunfähig]. Some rationalistic, or perhaps analytic, turn of

mind in me rebels against being moved by a thing without knowing why I am thus affected and what it is that affects me . . . .We admire them [overwhelming works of art],we feel overawed by them,but we are unable to say what they represent to us (p.211).

In sum,a spontaneous or *laissez-aller* attitude does not characterize Freud's own affective experience.Although initially he experiences powerful affects attached to admiration and being overwhelmed as well as overawed,he is «almost incapable of obtaining any pleasure»--his enjoyment is decidedly a delayed,conditional experience.<sup>22</sup>

According to Freud's account,his foremost reactions arise from the artist's realization of his "intention" [Absicht]:we are to re-experience the emotional state which produced in the artist the driving force to create.Yet until Freud discovers and understands that intention (but they were multiple and changed over the years and throughout Michelangelo's final sculpting !) as effectively revealed in the artwork's meaning and content,he cannot know why he was subjected to such a "powerful impression" [gewaltigen Eindruck],and as such, he cannot hardly enjoy the work.Hopefully, Freud puts in,his analysis will not decrease the powerful impression [Eindruck].

Let us recall that Freud links up his imminent interpretation of the Moses with his analysis of Hamlet (Freud,1900,264-266).There,however,besides interpreting «the deepest layer of impulses in the mind of the creative writer,» Freud «translated into conscious terms what was bound to remain unconscious in Hamlet's mind» (Freud,1900, 265,266).In contrast,the thrust of Freud's analysis of the

sculpture assumes Michelangelo's conscious emendation of «the historical or traditional Moses» (p.233). Then too, in a single remark reserved for the end, Freud wonders whether his interpretation agreed with the artist's intended consciously or unconsciously (p.236). Thereby Freud implicitly leaves it open as to whether his artistic enjoyment depends on his detection of Michelangelo's conscious intentions.

There is more. The salient implications of Freud's reaction to Michelangelo's Moses have not been considered by numerous analysts who have written on the Moses essay and "Creative Writers and Daydreaming" (cf. Person et al., 1995). Most notably, the sequence of Freud's affective reaction to the Moses statue goes diametrically against the wished-for sequence that he attributed to artists, albeit literary artists. That is to say, in curtailing immediate grand enjoyment affordable by the Moses statue, Freud is simultaneously warding off the seductive forepleasure or initial bribery created by the purely formal or aesthetic yield of pleasure, such as he had earlier proposed (Freud, 1908). Shades of the fate of the 1890s seduction theory: *mutatis mutandis*, unlike his patients, Freud rebels against being affected by seduction, real or fantasied! In his desired reaction to Michelangelo's Moses, Freud makes an abrupt about-face toward his previous analysis of the function of artistic form. In reversing the sequence of its effect, he must now first understand the work's content and meaning; an aesthetic response must not be a forepleasure but an analytically induced "postpleasure."

Addressing his interpretive strategy towards Moses in a letter to a contemporary artist, Freud revealingly confessed: "I am well aware of the

cardinal weakness of this work of mine. It lies in the attempt to assess the artist in a rational<sup>23</sup> way as though he were a scholar or technician, whereas he is actually a being of a special kind, exalted, autocratic, villainous, and at times rather incomprehensible" (letter of November 7, 1914 to Hermann Struck, Freud, 1960, pp. 312-313). And in a private comment about artists at the time, Freud further complained: "Meaning is but little with these men, all they care about is line, shape, agreement of contours. They are given up to the Lustprinzip" (Freud, 1993a, p. 261). Thus the technical side of the artist remains incomprehensible to Freud, and that incomprehensibility would be compounded by any incomprehensibility encountered by Freud in the content and would accordingly decrease his enjoyment of the sculpture.

We should pause to clarify. Let it be said that Freud's comprehension of form with Lustprinzip pales beside his prior conviction that a lack of form in his own writing indicates an «insufficient mastery of the material» (Freud, 1985, p. 374). Freud's identification of form also pales beside the fecund conception of form not as discontinuous but as continuous with meaning—form as its subtlest elaboration. Freud's restrictive identification of form also pales beside the true artist's experience with form by which he both perceives reality and reflects upon reality. Let it be said finally that the artist's dedication to form does not automatically signify that he thereby is given to Lustprinzip, to immediate rather than delayed instinctual gratification. Form is part and parcel of the creative act (and its due appreciation) from beginning to end (cf. also Kuspit, 2000). We need only think of Flaubert laboring for ten days over eight lines in Madame Bovary; of Tolstoy making fifty drafts to describe Maslova's eyes in the novel Resurrection; and of Robert Frost working from early evening

to early morning on a final line for a poem, only to conclude that he would just repeat the previous line. In brief, a genuine understanding of artistic form must attend to its engagement with the Reality Principle.

Contrasting with Freud's delayed reserve in enjoying Michelangelo's statue was the quality of his reaction to reading commentaries about it. Freud had no problem with an immediate reaction in his reading about the statue. Far from it. He tells us quite freely that it always "delights him" (freue mich, 174/213) to read a eulogy about Michelangelo's statue; in such a non-competitive mood, Freud could enjoy other critics' superlative appreciation of their mutual object of admiration. But issues of mastery and rivalry began to undercut Freud's pleasure when he found his ideas to be anticipated by another critic, such as by Watkiss Lloyd's book. Reporting how he read that book, Freud first regretted about being anticipated and only afterwards was he able to "delight" (mich . . . freuen, 199/234) in realizing the confirmation of his theories. So much, then, for Freud's vicarious enjoyment in the praise of Michelangelo's overpowering masterpiece; so much for Freud's postponed enjoyment arising from the confirmation of his interpretive mastery.

In light of our investigation up to this point, a paramount question becomes ever more urgent: how can we better understand Freud's own declaration that he was incapable of rightly appreciating many of the effects obtained in art (p. 211)? To answer, let us begin with the three-fold evolution of Freud's reaction to the statue as related in his essay and elsewhere. In the first phase, beginning in 1901, Freud «often» sat down and imagined himself as the object of Moses' scorn, only to be disillusioned that the animated statue did not move (pp. 213 and 220). Also in 1901, Freud convincingly wrote to his wife: «I

have come to understand the meaning of the statue by contemplating Michelangelo's intention» (Jones, 1955,p.365).That first phase of Freud's reaction purportedly continued partly during his visits in 1912.In this next phase—which dominates the essay's elaboration— Freud reinterpreted Michelangelo's prevailing intention to represent primarily a self-mastered Moses who restrained himself from carrying out his wrath.In this second phase,Freud does not tell us his difficulties with delight,which,we must keep in mind,depended on his first ascertaining the artist's intention.Rather,indicative of the second phase,the overwhelming thrust of his essay replaces his initial, self-disturbing interpretation by a transcendent,self-assuring one.

In his third interpretive phase,revealed only in the last paragraph of his essay,Freud wonders whether his interpretive efforts are at fault<sup>24</sup> or whether the cause for interpretive uncertainty is to be laid at Michelangelo's door.How large looms Freud's affectivity in this third interpretive phase? Freud's terminal retraction of his certainty is what it is—an afterthought,an expression of modesty,conventional or otherwise,that in its twenty some lines does not counterbalance the dominant orientation in the essay that he has discovered Michelangelo's intention and thus has been able to enjoy the artist's masterpiece.To be sure, the indeterminacy of Freud's conclusion as a rhetorical flourish is increased when we realize Freud's discursive practice in his other writings.Often,that is, after a series of strong assertions,Freud will conclude with a «perhaps,» thus a mollification to engage the reader into acceptance;or then again,after a series of qualified propositions,Freud will unexpectedly proceed to an unqualified conclusion.

On previous pages I have depicted the dizzying course of Freud's overarching uncertainties about the statue: he expressed doubts from the end of 1912, to 1913, 1914, and then in the 1920s.<sup>25</sup> We ask, what kind of aesthetic pleasure might the statue have given Freud as he combined his memories of Rome with subsequently looking at his photographs of the statue? What kind of minimal enjoyment might Freud have had, since he made its comprehension an indispensable precondition of his fully enjoying it? Where in Freud's landscape, we wistfully ask, have all the flowers gone? Readily answered, the history of Freud's affective struggle with the Moses is one of irresolution, of enjoyment reservatus and interruptus.

#### 4. Freud's Own Art Object: Verbal Sculpting in "The Moses of Michelangelo"

Our investigation of Freud's relation to the Moses brings us before a startling paradox. Despite the limited range of Freud's aesthetic response and his somewhat rambling as well as repetitive aspects of an ingenious commentary, his essay possesses its own artistry and thus stands apart as an art object in its own right. For example, Freud applies as a unifying device common corporeal references to a variety of entities. In this light the German reader especially enjoys, amidst the essay's saturating references to the sculpted Moses' hands, eyes, and head, the other body references to Freud himself as writer, to us as readers, and to the quasi-corporealized Tables. Hence Freud speaks of a commentary "at hand" (175/213); of the need

to more carefully "fix in our eye" the statue (ins Auge zu fassen,186/224);of breaking our "head" into trying to understand (187/226); and of the Tables (like Moses himself!!!) having a "head" with a protuberance resembling a "horn" (190/226).

On another score,in order to collapse artistically the distance between the lexical items of his essay,Freud resorts to imagistic echoing:

Some of the grandest and most overwhelming creations have remained dark [dunke] to our understanding (173/211). .

.sometimes I crept out of the half-gloom [halbdunke] out of the interior (175/213).

Another of Freud's unifying strategies is to quasi-animate the statue,thereby dramatically lessening the distance between ourselves and it:

The figure of Moses,therefore,cannot be supposed to be springing to his feet;he must be allowed to remain as he is in sublime repose

. . . . But this [wrong] interpretation had to be given up,for it made us to see him spring up in the next moment. . . .[according to our new interpretation] he will now remain seated and still,in his frozen wrath (pp.220 and 229).

Such collapsing techniques,we should mind,are in keeping with a thrust throughout Freud's theory at large to subvert the mutually exclusionary divisions of binary thought,e.g.,inner/outer,self/ object, normal/abnormal.

Freud is also apt to create a mimesis between the backward movement of Moses' hand and the retrogressive push of phantasy:

We shall have inferred that there had been a backward motion (Rückbewegung) of the right hand. . . .our phantasy freely and easily leads us back (zurück) to the notion. . . [of] a resting Moses (I88/244).

An even greater mimesis creates a seamless transition between what the sculpted Moses is doing and what effect it has on Freud. The repeated descriptions of Moses grasping (griegen) his beard form a counterpoint with Freud himself being affected or seized (erfassen) by the statue as well as by his aim to make the statue's effect understandable or mentally graspable (begreifen). For another instance, in the following illustrative excerpt about aesthetic effects, Freud reveals that he goes about

trying to apprehend (erfassen) them in my own way, i.e., to explain (begreiflich) to myself what their effect is due to. . . . Some rationalistic, or perhaps analytic, turn of mind in me rebels against being moved (ergriffen) by a thing without knowing why I am thus affected and what it is that affects (ergreift) me (I72/211).

The English translation eliminates the resonant effects of the synonymous fassen and greifen and their cognates.

Freud's artistic strategies with distance appear most forcefully in his collapsing the distance between himself and his readership. From the outset, he proceeds to lower the resistance of his readers and to maintain mastery over them by identifying himself as a layman in the fields of both art and psychoanalysis. More specifically, Freud announces that he is not a connoisseur of art (Kunstkenner, I72/211) nor does he count among the

enthusiasts of art (Enthusiasten,173/212- cf.Strachey's inaccurate "lover of art). In this regard it is worth mentioning that Freud uses the same strategy of denial in 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming"(1908), whose two opening words are "We laymen" (he then goes on in the essay to show his own artistic brilliance,thus demonstrating how the creative writer tones down his egoism by formalistic means;this sleight-of-hand brilliance escaped every one of the commentators who published in the IPA booklet devoted to Freud's essay-- Person et al.,1995).A related but pervasive and more powerful aspect of Freud's rhetorical art concerns his mastering object relations through his use of pronouns. With sheer deftness,Freud uses "I/my" or the editorial "we";but quite often Freud will interweave the editorial "we" with a "we" in which he identifies himself with the reader.This pronominal manoeuver constitutes a rapprochement/individuation dynamic affecting the object relations in Freud's text.An upshot is that our boundaries as flattered readers are loosened and that we unwittingly further lessen our resistances to Freud's theses.

Specimens of Freud's pronominal craft abound, starting from the essay's introductory paragraphs.There Freud spells out a peculiar trait in his character which could potentially alienate him from his spontaneously art-loving readership.He exclaims that when a work of art powerfully affects him,the condition of his subsequent enjoyment depends on his analytic ability to explain to himself the origin of that powerful effect: "Wherever I cannot do this,as for instance,with music,I am almost incapable of obtaining any pleasure" (p.211). Then Freud quickly adds:"In my opinion,what grips us so powerfully can only be the artist's intention,in so far as he has succeeded in expressing it in his work and in getting us to understand it"(p.212,my

italics). The effect of this verbal nimbleness is due to its suddenness and not due to ambiguity, for the "we/our" evidently embraces Freud and the reader. And before we have time to realize it, Freud's pronominal tactics in conveying his experience have countered our potential alienation and made us co-sharers in the investigation which he wants to appear to be less idiosyncratic.

In Chapter One, Freud's use of the first person pronoun for himself contrasts with his use of "we/our" to designate himself and the reader. Freud relates:

Were I to give a more detailed description of his [Moses'] attitude, I should have to anticipate what I want to say later on. . . . If mere descriptions do not agree we shall not be surprised to find a divergence of view as to the meaning of various meanings of a statue. In my opinion we cannot better characterize the facial expression. . . (p.214).

As we read on in the Chapter, we appreciate how Freud, steering clear of a deadening after-the-fact account of his findings, engages in a processive description. What is more, we feel increasingly as participants when Freud traces the steps of observations and ensuing interpretation that he has us make with him:

[The critic] Justi directs our attention to the position of the Two Tables. . . . But two remarks of Thode's deprive us of the knowledge we thought to have gained. . . . If we look for ourselves we cannot but admit unreservedly that Thode is right .

. . .If we accept Thode's objection we shall find that we can add to it (pp.217,219,220).

Chapters Two and Three continue to combine a demarcated self-reference with the pronominal union of author and reader in the same thought processes:

Long before I had any opportunity of hearing psychoanalysis, I learnt that a Russian art-connoisseur, Ivan Lermontieff, had caused a revolution in the art galleries of Europe . . .we now quite clearly perceive the following things. . . But let us proceed. . . Thus we shall have inferred . . . .In imagination we complete the [inferred] scene of which this movement. . . is a part. . . . We have assumed (pp.222,224,225).

The complexity of pronominal reference culminates in the fourth chapter. After an initially described worry about his findings being anticipated by Lloyd, Freud goes back to «I» and to the editorial "our," which excludes the reader:

I succeeded in getting hold of this short essay . . . I was able to get pleasure from its unexpected confirmation of my opinion. Our views, diverge on one very important point (p.234).

Next, Freud quickly replaces the editorial first person plural by one that joins us with him:

We must, he[Lloyd] says, imagine that just before the sudden interruption. . . Lloyd has allowed himself to be influenced by a consideration which shows how near he came to our

interpretation. . . he closes the door to a conception like ours  
(p.235).

In continuing the disagreement with Lloyd in the final paragraph, Freud begins with a "both of us" that refers only to Lloyd and Freud himself, and not the reader: "But what if both of us [Lloyd and I] have strayed on to a wrong path?" Immediately after posing the question, Freud uses "we" to refer to interpreters of the statue, which ambiguously may continue to refer to Lloyd himself and himself, or just to himself in an editorial sense, or to both himself and us the readers. Indeed, we cannot help feeling included, given Freud's previous inclusion of us in the acts of observation and reconstruction. In their overshadowing reach, the final uses of "we," let us note, despite being interrupted by Freud's plainly self-referential "I," somewhat ambiguously shift back and forth to separate the author from the reader.

What if we have taken too serious and profound a view of details which were nothing to the artist. . . ? What if we have shared the fate of so many interpreters who have thought they saw quite clearly things which the artist did not intend either consciously or unconsciously? I cannot tell. I cannot say. . . . And finally we may be allowed to point out, in all modesty, that the artist is no less responsible than his interpreters for the obscurity which surrounds his work (p.236).

Such use of a free-floating pronoun and fictionalization of object relations that ingratiates the reader with Freud, although an anathema in scientific and historical writing,<sup>26</sup> contribute saliently to Freud's expository strategy in his

Moses' essay (I cannot stress enough, that this unappreciated strategic device, often obliterated in translations, pervades Freud's corpus).

In brief, throughout the essay and culminating in the final paragraph, we are caught up in the movement of a pronominal dance of now separation, now rapprochement, and then a whirling confusion between the two. It is as if, by engaging us as partners in his sustained pronominal choreography, Freud has us experience a particular effect of jokes, namely, "a small yield of pleasure from the mere activity, untrammelled by needs, of our mental apparatus" (Freud, 1905, p. 179, my italics).

Our examination to the complex nature of Freud's essay would not be complete if we did not attend to the changed nature of his composition upon leaving his pen. After his self-questioning conclusion to the essay, Freud has to decide whether to publish it. Like his controlled Moses, he carries out a self-criticism at the end of his essay, but whereas Moses rose above his nature and checked himself from wrathful action, Freud lacked ultimate self-restraint. Moses retained the tablets but Freud did not retain his text. Falling short of his heroic model, Freud elects to publish his speculative findings. Anonymous authorship perhaps mitigates but does not negate the transgressive act of offering his possible illusions to be believed by the "mob." In sum, Freud's essayistic attempt to analyze the statue is partly a submerged autobiography that culminates in an acting out, a publishing out.

#### Finishing Touches

An interdisciplinary history of psychoanalysis would take into consideration the repressed reading of Freud's texts. To be well-rounded, that

undertaking also necessitates—as my essay has proved, if anything at all—a clinical reading. It follows that the investigating critic must not exclude the history of Freud's own repression, which he once pertinently defined as a «failure of translation» (Freud, 1985, p. 208). Psychodynamically understood, translation has a meaning which includes the movement of unconscious material into the conscious sphere. It follows that the uncovering of repression is equatable with the discovery of a psychically untranslated text. Reflection on such a discovery prompts us to look anew at the thesis of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin that words carry with them the places where they have been. Accordingly, in this essay I have endeavored to map out the residence and itinerary of Freud's many words as well as their diverse reverberations, heard and not heard.

More than resolution, irony and irresolution hover about Freud's essay. The development of Freud's personal reaction to the Moses, from a filial infidelity and fear to a paternal self-control, influenced the change in his interpretation of the statue, yet distinctive features of his published interpretation willy-nilly placed him close to Jung. And so, after charging that Jung theoretically attempted to deprive psychoanalysis of its identification with the libidinal, Freud followed suit by publishing an essay that lacked not only authorial identification but also a libidinal content. By writing an essentially non-psychoanalytic essay whose immediate historical backdrop was ironically none other than the break with Jung, did not Freud also resemble the filial apostates who distressed the biblical Moses? In addition, by stressing the ego and surface analysis, did not Freud resemble Adler whom he criticized for the same reasons (Fuller, 1970)?

The preoccupying force of Freud's doubt indeed did not prevent him from publishing his interpretation. But his concluding doubts do not counterbalance the fact that his essay went on to be a textual idol revered by his psychoanalytic readership. And herein lies another story. In his compromise solution to publish his essay anonymously, he resembled and did not resemble another medical doctor, Morelli, who also published under a pseudonym his very writings which strove to establish the genuine authorship of many works of art.

We know that some readers, even without Morelli's continental-famed expertise, could have recognized the signs of the "lion's paw" on Freud's anonymous essay. At any event, when his collected works were finally being published in 1924, as we know, Freud avowed his paternity and legitimized his so-called love-child. Shortly before his avowal of textual paternity, however, Freud experienced the first signs of life-threatening cancer (Jones, 1957, p. 89; cf. also p. 97). Thus the ever-widening story of gigantic figures and their submission, revolt, self-castration and self-empowerment. On one side, we met with the efforts of Freud that remain momentous in bringing us back to what he was, did, and tried to do. On the other side, the Moses of Michelangelo, for time unending the sublime marmoreal achievement of a man whose manifold genius was itself monumental.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Henceforth in my main text, any page number without an accompanying date will automatically indicate that I am citing Freud's essay on Michelangelo's Moses. In the case that there are two sets of numbers separated by a slash, the first number will refer to Freud's essay on Michelangelo in the Gesammelte Werke, and the second to the English translation in the Standard Edition.

<sup>2</sup>The German term Freud uses is "unwissentlich" (G.W., 10:193), the critics' descriptive unknowing whose preconscious quality Freud compares with his more conscious procedure. Franzen (1992) exaggerates Freud's exploration of unconscious meanings in the Moses.

<sup>3</sup>As Alter (2004, p.9) pithily declared in his exegetical volume which has rapidly become a classic :Each of the first five books of the Hebrew Testament «is not strictly a book but rather an accretion of sundry traditions, shot through with disjunctions and contradictions, and

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accumulated in an uneven editorial process over several centuries.»

<sup>4</sup> Freud's account of Moses' affectivity finds some echo in Romain Rolland's later reaction to the statue (H.& M.Vermorel,1993c,p.98).

<sup>5</sup> The two authors makes an incisive examination of the primary data,attempt to carry out a exhaustive study of all secondary literature,and in effect write up a lengthy article which will be indispensable for all future scholarship on Moses; my account greatly complements theirs.While agreeing in large part with their criticism of psychoanalytic literature on Michelangelo's statue,I do not share their general objections to a psychoanalytic approach.

<sup>6</sup> In Michelangelo's time,a horned Moses typically indicated a Moses in the later stages of his life (Armour,1993, p.38fn.).Verspohl (1991,pp.158 ff.)showed with many examples that in the Renaissance the difference was neatly kept between the Moses of the First Tables and the radiant one of the Second Tables; such difference dramatized Rosselli's fresco in the Sistine Chapel which Michelangelo could see for years before he resumed working on Moses in 1513.

<sup>7</sup> I should mention here the short,thoughtful book by Grubrich-Simitis (2004) that sensitively places the Moses essay in the context of Freud's whole life.

<sup>8</sup> For other interpretations of Moses' second visit to the Mount,see Arbour,1993,p.40 and Verspohl,1991,p.76.

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<sup>9</sup> See also Liebert (1983,) and Hibbard,1974).Hartt (1994,p.457) urges the contemporary visitor to view the statue from a corrective,crouching position;Hartt adds that seen thusly,Moses «looks outward,not in anger,but in prophetic inspiration.»

Apart from verticality,another perspectival issue has to do with the angle from which Moses should be seen. Panofsky favors a frontal view ;Rosenthal holds that that one is secondary whereas the statue was designed for a primary view off to the the statue's left.Such spatiality has no exact counterpart in psychoanalytic treatment where analytic empathy has to do with the patient's temporally rooted internal life and object relations. Given that lack of a clinical counterpart to a primary lateral perspective that is demanded by many kinds of art objects,from sculpture and architecture to painting, one should accept the possibility of a «non-applicable» psychoanalysis.Such a notion should central to what is miscalled applied psychoanalysis. That titular misnomer contains an imperialistically tinged note in that the unidirectionality of « applied » psychoanalysis as opposed to the democratic, dual directionality of «co-IMPLIED psychoanalysis and its modest openness to its history being enlightened by other disciplines,such as anthropology,economics,and linguistics.For example,in my book review of the six-volume Kondordanz to the Gesammelte Werke (Mahony,1996) I indicated that publication will linguistically enable a morphological and phonetic

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analysis of Freud's work and will furnish greater insights into his genius.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. esp. Frommel (2002) and Echinger-Maurach, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Rosenthal remarked that the statue, placed deep in a niche, was moved permanently forward in 1816 to allow for the making of its first plaster cast.

<sup>12</sup> That Freud had a neurotic reaction to a city with its famed seven hills might not be dismissed as merely fortuitous. Some of his dreams specifically linked seven to a prediction of death and the effort of his "seven" internal organs to usher his life to an end. As well, Freud repeatedly divided his life into seven-year cycles. Related unconscious determinants might have influenced the very organization of his writing. The careful reader will note that the seven-chaptered or seven-sectioned organization of Interpretation of Dreams, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," "The Question of Lay Analysis," the New Introductory Lectures, and "The Unconscious," the best of the metapsychological essays. The Introductory Lectures number twenty-eight, thus a multiple of seven; Freud's personally favorite of all his writings, Book Four of Totem and Taboo, has seven parts; the first two of the Three Essays on Sexuality each has seven sections. In "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," the very fact that the final "seventh and eighth sections in no way belong together makes the heptadic organization in the final holograph all the more significant in terms of

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Freud's unending numerological superstition, which was inscribed in the very composition of an essay about interminable analysis, thus making the essay a piece of enactive discourse that demonstrates itself" (Mahony, 1989, p.72). But to return to our starting point: is it merely fortuitous, in the symbolic geography of Freud's travels, that he saw the seven-hilled Rome seven times in his life?

<sup>13</sup>Contrary to the evidence Jones gives elsewhere in his biography, Jones slipped into saying that Freud visited Rome only twice (1955, p.19).

<sup>14</sup>This data comes from Freud's postcard of September 6, 1901, sent to Martha.

<sup>15</sup>Bakan (1958) points that when Freud cites Exodus 32 to elucidate the statue of Moses, he defensively omitted verses 21-29 which refer to the destruction of the Golden Calf and the murder of the apostates by the sons of Levi.

<sup>16</sup>Tögel's Berggasse-Pompeiji und Zurück (1989) is the definitive book on Freud's travels. Yet Tögel errs (p.156) in stating that Freud's 1912 visit to Rome lasted until September 25 instead of September 27; in his letter to Martha on Wednesday, Sept. 25, Freud wrote that he was waiting for Ferenczi's return from Naples on the 27<sup>th</sup> in order to leave for Udine in northern Italy.

<sup>17</sup>Critics have innocently often quoted the following sentence from Freud's letter to Weiss: "Every day for three lonely weeks in September of 1913 I stood in the

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church in front of the statue." Actually Freud was referring to his scrutiny of the statue in 1912. At no time ever did Freud remain in Rome three weeks. To repeat, in 1912, his stay was in Rome was nearly two weeks—from Sept. 15 to Sept. 27. The postcard addressed to Martha on Sept. 25 refers to Freud's seeing the Moses "every day." Extant evidence, as I shall cite shortly, nullifies any claim that Freud saw the Moses daily, but we know for sure that he saw it at least once.

<sup>18</sup> Ironically, Freud said that he was influenced by the detecting methods of a so-called Russian art connoisseur named Ivan Lermolieff who in reality was Dr. Morelli, an Italian physician. Freud too tried to hide his identity; both of them were self-concealed while specializing in methods of detection. Ironically, Freud's own efforts to publish anonymously would not, as Abraham (Freud 2000a) said, be fooled, for the kind of lion's paw was evident.

<sup>19</sup> From this point on in this section of my essay, my account of Freud's doubts about the statue complements for the most part Macmillan and Swales' recital (2003) which furnish other details, starting in 1912 and ending in 1927. Their examination of relevant primary and secondary sources concerning Freud and the statue is exemplary, and indeed indispensable for any adequate study of the subject.

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<sup>20</sup>Gay (1988,p.315) concludes that in 1912 Freud brought back a plaster cast of the Moses. For his conclusion Gay relies on Freud's letter of Nov.3,1912 to Ferenczi (Freud 1993b),but that ambiguous letter leaves it open as to whether the plaster cast Freud refers to is "here" in his apartment or here elsewhere in Vienna.Actually,in the previous letter of October 27 to Ferenczi,Freud declared that he was seeking admittance to the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts which had a plaster cast of Moses.

<sup>21</sup>Freud had commissioned a series of four illustrations to be made that would support his interpretation of the finished statue and two of Moses' previous hypothetical body postures. It is a wonder that Freud included the illustrations in his essay,given their unsatisfactory nature.In Figure 1,we cannot agree to Moses' calmness as represented by the immobility of his two legs and by the careful arrangement of the mantle over them(p.217fn.). Figure 2 ill represents the series of successive postures which Freud imagined for his reconstructed second phase.Let it be said that there is a lack of concordance among the angles and proportions of Moses' hands and beard as presented in Figure 3 and Figure 4,intended as a closeup of the upper half of Figure Three (cf.also Grubrich-Simitis,1994,p.73).Among the notable formal features to be noted are the overflowing beard and mantle over the knees,and the similar angles created by the

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horns, the knees, and the outstretched fingers on each hand.

<sup>22</sup> Freud pertinently lacks clarity on this matter. He speaks of the initial powerful, forceful effects and impressions of art (eine starke Wirkung. . .so gewaltigen Eindruck, 172,174/211,212) but also writes that what grips us so powerfully (uns so mächtig packt,173/212) can only be the artist's intention expressed in the work and understood by us.

<sup>23</sup> In Binswanger's opinion, the Moses essay highlighted the pull in Freud's mind between the rational and the Romantic (see his letter of February 15, 1925 to Freud (Freud, 1992a, pp.200-201)).

<sup>24</sup> Freud was haunted by Moses and by doubts overshadowing that haunting. Continuing the self-doubts of whatever scope that concluded the Michelangelo essay were the self-doubts beginning his Moses and Monotheism essay years later (Freud, 1939, pp.17 and 31).

<sup>25</sup> Macmillan and Swales (2003, p.62) refer to Freud's express doubt in the French translation of his Moses essay that appeared in the Revue française de la psychanalyse in 1927. On another score, the two authors (pp.62-66) undercut the grounds for Freud's claim in his Postscript (S.E.13:237-238) that an earlier twelfth-century statue of Moses could justify his interpretative position.

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, the bible of English usage, Fowler's A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (1965, pp. 482 and 689).

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