

***Moses and Monotheism as History.***  
**Reading Freud through de Certeau, Barthes and the *Annales* school**

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**Abstract**

*Across Psychoanalysis, Jewish Studies and History, rarely has a single essay raised a debate comparable to the one triggered by Freud's last book *Moses and Monotheism*. The aim of this paper is to explore it once more from the perspective of the rhetoric of the historical discourse. In the first part we will make use of Michel de Certeau's and Roland Barthes' works on the writing of history in order to examine its relation to historiography. We will try to show how Freud undermined the very bases of the discipline questioning its scientific and more positivist character (rather than being questioned by it) and pointing toward trajectories that will be fully undertaken only at a later time. In the second part we will analyze the affinities and the echoes between Freud's methodology and the historiographical revolution accomplished by the French School of the *Annales* in those same years, outlining a pattern of transformation of the discipline prefigured and explored, in their own way, by both Freud and the French historians.*

**Freud: Master of Historical Suspicion**  
**Freud a Historian? Of What Kind of History?**  
**Between Historical Fiction and Fictional History**  
**Freud's Discourse**  
**The *Annales* School: a Parallel Movement?**  
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**Freud and History: Who Questions Whom?**

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*As we can see, simply from looking at its structure and without having to invoke the substance of its content, historical discourse is in its essence a form of ideological elaboration, or to put it more precisely, an imaginary elaboration [...].*

Roland Barthes – The Discourse of History

### **Freud: Master of Historical Suspicion**

Among the many things that sanctioned the beginning of the twentieth century we have certainly to include the birth of Psychoanalysis. The new science imposed itself on the public scene as that new space where a promise of salvation could be finally stated in secular terms. Psychoanalysis appeared, in the wake of those religions and ideologies that came before it, as a narrative of redemption that could free the individual from itself. Alongside with such a metahistorical – maybe theological – task, Freud created a set of tools and perspectives that we still use today. His insights changed our very way of thinking and perceiving the world and what happens to us, and therefore reality itself. In a famous work, Paul Ricoeur tried to look at him under a new light: along with Marx and Nietzsche, the French philosopher referred to Freud as a *master of suspicion*. Postulating the existence of other layers beneath our conscious selves, Freud contributed indeed to that movement that was pointing at highlighting the deeper structures of reality. The suspicion he cast over the (literally) *self*-reliant *Belle Epoque* Europe brought about significant upheavals into the very understanding of the surrounding world. Ricoeur points out that the hidden element through which Freud reshuffled our perception casting suspicion onto the previous certainties is the unconscious. In this, we agree, without reservation. However, from a certain point of view, this understanding limits Freud's revolutionary thinking to this, cutting out all those other kinds of disruptive insights that revolve only marginally around Freud's more properly psychoanalytical work and that go far beyond the sole realm of individual consciousness.

The argument we will try to put forward here is that Ricoeur was right, but to a greater extent than he believed. The turmoil Freud triggered into previous ways of thinking will be thus explored from different angles: we will focus on his last

published work – *Moses and Monotheism*<sup>1</sup> – and look at the Freud that emerges from it as a historian in order to see what this might entail for historiography itself.

A disclaimer is due in approaching this work. *Moses and Monotheism*, as we are soon going to see, is a text composed of multiple layers, an outcome of tormented writing and with a troubled publishing history. Therefore, it constitutes a powerful prism to investigate a wide range of aspects connected to Freud's last years. Notwithstanding an initial scarce fortune and a skeptical critical reception after being published, Freud's *Moses* became increasingly popular among scholars, witnessing a real explosion of interest around the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Extensive readings of *Moses* triggered a fertile dialectical relationship between this book and Freud's biography: the book is continuously reinterpreted through new insights on its author's life and, *vice versa*, new understandings of Freud's life are reached through new readings of this text. We are not going to tackle here the main debates displayed upon and through the *Moses* book, for which we refer to the many studies already available.<sup>3</sup> Nor we

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (London: Hogarth Press, 1939). The original German version appeared in 1939 with the title *Der Mann Moses und die Monotheistische Religion*. Although Jones' translation, more literal and probably closer to the author's spirit, was reviewed and approved by Freud himself, the version included in the *Standard Edition* has been retranslated under the editorship of James Strachey.

<sup>2</sup> Ruthless are the attacks moved to Freud by Trude Weiss Rosmarin and Abraham Shalom Yahuda, both important biblical scholars. The latter even begged him not to publish the book. See Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work. The Last Phase 1919-1939*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 250, 396; Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, (New York – London: Norton, 1988), 645-6.

<sup>3</sup> We are pointing here, for instance, to the important discussions of Freud's own Jewishness (Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Marthe Robert, Peter Gay) and of the ties of this work to the rise of anti-Semitism (Sander L. Gilman, Daniel Boyarin), to the attempt to position it within previous streams and traditions (Jan Assmann), to the endeavor to "psychoanalyze the psychoanalyst" (Ilse Grubrich-Simitis), to the evaluation of the contribution of this essay to psychoanalytic theory in general (Richard J. Bernstein, Cathy Caruth) and to the investigation on the actual truthfulness of Freud's historical claims (Pier Cesare Bori). Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terrible and Intermittent*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Marthe Robert, *From Oedipus to Moses: Freud's Jewish Identity*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1976); Peter Gay, *A Godless Jew: Freud, Atheism, and the Making of Psychoanalysis*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Sander L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, "Freud Study of Moses

are going to attempt a deepening of the several biographical accounts of the father of Psychoanalysis.<sup>4</sup> Most of the riddles posed by the *Moses* book have been framed as questions on Freud's own reasons to write, on the causes of his insecurity and on the background of its production. Inverting such a perspective, our goal is rather that of casting a gaze on the odd feeling caused in the *reader* of *Moses and Monotheism*.<sup>5</sup> In the first part, therefore, we are going to analyze the most (post)modern aspects and implicit suggestions of this text in light of Michel de Certeau's and Roland Barthes' works on the writing of history and on the historical narrative. After a brief exploration of his peculiar way of addressing the past, we will argue that Freud, exposing maybe to an excessive extent various inner principles of historiography, makes inescapable some considerations echoing the outcome of the postmodern debate on the historical practice. Then, in the second part of the paper, there will be an attempt to compare the peculiar method adopted by Freud in *Moses* to some coeval historiographical discourses, exploring the efforts to face theoretically some of the aporetic aspects of the writing of history identified by Freud.

To reread Freud's writings through the lenses of authors who wrote more than thirty years later and from a very different context (such as France in the '60s and '70s) might appear as an anachronistic venture. Yet, it might be useful to

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as a Daydream: a biographical essay," in *Early Freud and Late Freud: Reading Anew Studies on Hysteria and Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Philip Slotkin (London – New York: Routledge, 1997 [1991]); Richard J. Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Pier Cesare Bori, *È una storia vera: le tesi storiche dell'Uomo Mosè e la religione monoteistica di Sigmund Freud*, (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Aside from Jones' first important comprehensive study and Gay's well-known biographical work, an updated and balanced portray of Freud is offered by Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Freud in his time and ours*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press, 2016). Quite unconventional, and original, is the volume of Adam Philips, *Becoming Freud: The Making of a Psychoanalyst*, (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2014). For an external (and critical) appraisal on the general role of psychoanalysis in early twentieth century Europe, its promise of salvation and its relation to other modern "grand narratives" see Ernest Gellner, *The Psychoanalytic Movement: The Cunning of Unreason*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003 [1985]).

<sup>5</sup> This is why there will be almost no reference to Freud's Vienna, to the rise of Nazism and its threat to Psychoanalysis or to the author's inner tribulations in giving birth to the *Moses* book, all of which we believe are indispensable elements to reach a full understanding of Freud's last production but lie outside of the focus of this work. Good accounts can be found in the volumes mentioned in the footnotes above or, for as much as it concerns Vienna, in the well known Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna*, (New York: Random House, 1981).

decentralize a gaze often focused on other aspects of this work. Both Barthes and de Certeau, with different timings, took part in a debate on the nature, the modes and the techniques of historiography arisen between structuralism and post-structuralism and later subsumed by the so-called postmodern reflection. These discussions shook and reshaped historiography and the writing of history to an unprecedented extent and, in a sense, let the discipline escape some previous naivety. The French debate, to which other important voices took part as Paul Ricoeur himself or Michel Foucault, was at some point overshadowed in the English-speaking world by the publication of Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973), the arise of the so-called linguistic turn and the quarrel of narrativism.<sup>6</sup> A new historiographical consciousness supposedly derived from these discussions, fostering and informing – for good or ill – the profile of many historical approaches born and developed thereafter.<sup>7</sup> Often, as it will be seen, de Certeau and Barthes seem to address a kind of historiography and a type of historian which are not fully understandable without delving into their context and grasping the polemical tone they adopt. What is, then, the reason for retaining such terms of the discussion? We are not interested in praising Freud as a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, as a focus on his “historical narrative” might too easily lead to do, on the contrary, we would like to adopt that point of view and those analytical tools in order to examine the sense of oddity that Freud's *Moses* book still provokes today. In a sense, we believe that the historian targeted by the two authors never totally vanished, and maybe, inasmuch as he “still creeps” into contemporary ways of writing – and conceiving – history, the awkwardness we stumble upon reading *Moses and Monotheism* is due to him.

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<sup>6</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (Baltimore – London: John Hopkins University Press, 1973). Franklin R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic. A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language*, (Boston – London – The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983). For a criticism of White's theory of history (and of the general intellectual wave he embodied at some point), see Carlo Ginzburg, “Just One Witness,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,”* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, in marking the distance of *Microhistory* from White's and Ankersmit's radical skepticism, Carlo Ginzburg implicitly acknowledges to owe to that discussion the “definite awareness that all the phases through which research unfolds are *constructed* and not *given*: the identification of the object and its importance; the elaboration of the categories through which it is analyzed; the criteria of proof; the stylistic and narrative forms by which the results are transmitted to the reader.” Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive*, trans. Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012 [2006]), 212.

Freud's *Moses* book is many books together: it is a quest for the origins of religions, it is a text concerning psychoanalysis, it is an answer to (or an internalization of) anti-Semitism, and maybe it is also a book about history and historiography. Here, we will try to focus on this last hypothesis, attempting – in light of the insights given us by these and parallel debates – to trace a historiographical phenomenology of Freud's last masterpiece.

### Freud a Historian? Of What Kind of History?

The first question we should ask before delving into our subject concerns the degree to which we are allowed to actually consider Freud a historian. We would like here to deal with this issue in particular for the *Moses* book, rather than in general for Freud. Proper investigations have been made concerning the latter and comprehensive overviews for an understanding of the value of Psychoanalysis for historians are already available.<sup>8</sup> Yet, this question in the case of the *Moses* becomes more difficult. As a first move into the topic it is useful to understand the problems that would arise (and that have been raised) in doing so.

*Moses and Monotheism* is a problematic work by countless aspects. On a first concrete level, as Edward Said reminds us, “[*Moses and Monotheism*] is a composite of several texts, numerous intentions, different periods,”<sup>9</sup> and therefore – he adds – it represents a paradigmatic example of *late style*: a work written by the author apparently more for himself rather than for some future

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, Peter Gay's *Freud for historians* advocates for the possibility of including Psychoanalysis into the toolbox of historiography. Although his effort aims at getting the two disciplines closer and more familiar to each other, he strengthens the difference between them. Imagining a fortress made up by “six concentric rings of intellectual fortifications mobilized against the Freudian assault” and the “historian [who] nervously awaits the invader” (4), throughout his work Gay accompanies Freud and Psychoanalysis in breaking into each one of them, showing its usefulness and its compatibility with history. Psychoanalysis – this is his conclusion – “should enrich, without disturbing” (210) history as many other disciplines. No matter how much we can agree with his general exhortations and specific remarks, we would like to suggest (and work with) a different idea of Freud's work: neither an invader army nor a toolbox, but a doubt germ, that comes from inside rather than from outside. Inviting them to cooperate, Gay actually sanctions the difference and the distance between history and what Freud does, differently, we aim at showing the analogies and the porosity between the two. Peter Gay, *Freud For Historians*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Edward W. Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, (New York: Verso, 2004), 27 ff.

readers in which, instead of reconciling himself and his lifelong work in a recapitulatory text, he chooses to bristle and to provoke for one last time. Michel de Certeau, in a sense, foreran such a view stating that *Moses* cannot be seen as an organic work, but only as “a discourse of fragments.”<sup>10</sup> In such a confusion – in which many got caught by ending up in seeking more Freud’s own reasons to write than his results – what can be said of *Moses and Monotheism* as a historiographical work?

At first sight, the *Moses* book really seems a collage of thoughts, erudition, and speculations. The central *clarification* [*Aufklärung*] Freud is attempting at seems to resolve itself, rather than in an unravelment of the questioned issue, in a continuous correction, in a polished self-justification, in a step-to-step elucidation and in an explanation of his own method: a *meta*-clarification. The crux at stake that originates such impression is exactly the feeling that, if we are to consider *Moses* a historical work, there is an overwhelming predominance of speculative thinking and inductive reasoning at the expense of *proofs*, *sources* and *documents*, the traditional basic touchstones through which the writing of history is possible.

One of the main representative figures of this debate is certainly Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. In his famous work on Freud’s text, he saw a discontinuity between *Moses* and his previous *Totem and Taboo*<sup>11</sup> articulated exactly on the problem of historicity. If in the latter, he says, “the pivotal event it presupposes [the murder of the primeval father] does not really take place in historical time” but in the “dreamtime of mankind,” what happens in the former is radically different. Indeed, in *Moses* there is an actual historiographical attitude that according to Yerushalmi is proved by the “historian’s insistent demand for historical proofs.” What Freud is trying to do – he goes on – aims at “corroborat[ing] a

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<sup>10</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988 [1975]), 311.

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (London – New York: Routledge, 2001 [1913]). Yerushalmi is obviously referring to its fourth chapter, called “The Return of Totemism in Childhood,” where Freud first presents his theory on the origins of civilization tracing the arise of the incest taboo in the murder of the primeval father by the brothers’ horde (which he takes up from Darwin). The law of exogamy, seen by Freud as pivotal in all human societies, would have derived then from the brothers’ sense of guilt and their consequential “deferred obedience” to the killed parent. *Ibid.*, 166 ff.

psychoanalytically derived truth with historical facts.”<sup>12</sup> De Certeau, from a different perspective, highlighted how

Too great a lack of scholarly credibility keeps him from publishing the work. Freud needs historical proofs, not in order to be convinced – he is already convinced enough without them – but in order to arm the “weakness” of his myth before producing it on foreign ground, in the field of history.<sup>13</sup>

De Certeau’s interpretation does not go as far in this direction as for example does Richard Bernstein, who similarly stresses the mythical and fantastic aspects of *Moses’* story.<sup>14</sup> What is suggested by de Certeau, one of the authors that tried to face such a question more completely, is that such a fragmentary nature does not mirror a *failure* in the writing of history, but exactly the opposite: the polysemy of what he sees as a “vocal text” points to a way of doing history in which the past stops to be objectified and severed from the present. In *The Writing of History*, indeed, one of de Certeau’s major goals is to analyze the dynamics of power beneath the writing of history. He starts his text with an account on how the historian’s relation with the past and with the dead can be represented as what it might be called a “unilateral intimacy.” The past is objectified, studied and anatomized in the same manner in which modern medicine treats its object-bodies. Yet, “[t]hese ghosts” – remarks de Certeau speaking about the dead – “find access through *writing* on the condition that they remain *forever silent*.”<sup>15</sup> The past is made accessible *through* its silence. The kind of cleavage that occurs between the *utterer* and the *uttered* of history, between the present and the past, is the fracture the historian seeks in order to create the very possibility of an identity, and it is rooted precisely in his “*decision* to become different.”<sup>16</sup> The Otherness embodied by the past is not just *sought* by a historian-adventurer, but it is created as *radically different*. Such a division inevitably generates historicist perspectives, where the absence of something

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<sup>12</sup> Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses*, 21. A similar opinion is held by Pier Cesare Bori and David Meghnagi. See Pier Cesare Bori, “Una pagina inedita di Freud: la premessa al romanzo storico su Mosè,” in *L’estasi del profeta ed altri saggi tra ebraismo e cristianesimo*, (Bologna: il Mulino, 1989 [1979]), 256; David Meghnagi, *Il padre e la legge: Freud e l’ebraismo*, (Venice: Marsilio, 1997 [1992]), 104.

<sup>13</sup> De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 310.

<sup>14</sup> Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, 64-74.

<sup>15</sup> De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

shared between the self and the other, between the present and the past, undermines any hypothesis of continuity.

In this respect, Freud's work appears as something *exceptional*, literally, in the sense that it constitutes an *exception*. It is not by chance if de Certeau chooses exactly this awkward text to speak of the production of history. Freud's complexity (in both the positive and the negative meaning of the word) yields to a kind of historiography absolutely different from the operation just described. De Certeau locates Freud at the edge of the very history he analyzes. However, he cannot be interpreted as simply the umpteenth *Aufklärer*-concealer of a clearer past, as the producer of a new narrative to be imposed upon his forerunners' ones. The polyphony of *Moses* constitutes, according to de Certeau, exactly that characteristic able to qualify Freud's work as something disruptive. The fragmentary nature, the "*late-styleness*" of this text does not allow the very possibility of a historical referent whereas this is understood as a dead body: in other words, de Certeau notices the disappearance of the *res gestae* in the very articulation of the *historia rerum gestarum*.

We see in the conclusions drawn by de Certeau along this interpretative line the echo in the realm of history of what Said read more recently in the terms of the political. In his lecture *Freud and the Non-European*, maybe in a slightly stretched and reductive reading of Freud's text, Said seizes a similar outcome as its most important teaching. Through the application of his *contrapuntal* method, Said juxtaposes *Moses* to other voices making the contrast emerge clearly. First, he highlights, against Yerushalmi's simplistic reading of a positive "Jewish Jewishness," the complex and unresolved model of identity paradigmatically outlined in the very figure of the man Moses. In Said's view, Yerushalmi jumps too hastily to conclusions about what has been "historically Jewish" and what has not. "Freud himself doesn't actually reach [these conclusions] because [...] the actual Jewishness that derives from Moses is a far from open-and-shut matter, and is in fact extremely problematic."<sup>17</sup> Yerushalmi appears then to him "far more anxious than Freud to scrape away all traces of monotheism from Egypt," characterizing therefore the new monotheistic

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<sup>17</sup> Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, 32. The polemic between Yerushalmi and Said went on also by other means. After the Freud Museum chose to publish Said's lecture, Yerushalmi, who was among its main financial supporters, called the museum complaining and asking if they were aware that Said was recently portrayed throwing stones against Israeli soldiers. See Michael Molnar, "Le Freud de Yosef," in *L'histoire et la mémoire de l'histoire: Hommage à Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, ed. Sylvie-Anne Goldberg (Paris: Albin Michel, 2012), 159-60.

religion as something distinctly Jewish.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, Said compares Freud's work to Israel's attempt to consolidate an official Israeli-Jewish identity through the archaeological effort to find material proofs of a Jewish presence in Palestine.<sup>19</sup> To the contrary, "in excavating the archeology of Jewish identity, Freud insisted that it did not begin with itself but, rather, with other identities (Egyptian and Arabian) which his demonstration in *Moses and Monotheism* goes a great distance to discover, and thus to restore to scrutiny."<sup>20</sup> The breakage postulated by de Certeau in the first pages of his work, in Freud, is then mended. Or better, internalized in the very subject of historiography. To quote at length directly his words:

An oxymoron puts together two contradictory poles, the Jew and the Egyptian. But it thus interiorizes the division that until then had been a "distinction" in respect to others. [...] For Freud, this break is always internal, cleaving the subject himself. It annihilates the self-identity that had been acquired through the elimination of a "remainder." And since the question is posed in terms of a historical foundation, this annihilation must be inscribed at the origin, namely, in the murder of Moses. Identity is not one, but two. *One and the other*. In the beginning, there is the plural. Such is the principle of writing, of analysis (which is division, decomposition), and of history.<sup>21</sup>

The consequence of this is twofold and contradictory, and it sends us back to our initial question. On the one hand Freud's move appears to stage a rupture with the historiographical attitude described by de Certeau. *There is an interruption of the interruption*. The past is no longer objectified in a dead body to handle and inspect and examine and measure. It becomes part of us: "the Freudian fiction does not lend itself to this spatial distinction of historiography in which

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<sup>18</sup> Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, 33. Another interesting reflection about Yerushalmi's attitude toward Freud's Jewishness is offered by Jacques Derrida. In *Archive Fever*, first published in 1995, Derrida describes the father-like behavior of Yerushalmi recalling his son (Freud) to some Jewish identity. This happens especially in the last chapter of his book, entitled "Monologue with Freud," where he uses the pronoun "we" speaking of the them as Jews, and "because he is dead and thus incapable of responding, Freud can only acquiesce. He cannot refuse this community at once proposed and imposed. He can only say 'yes' to this covenant." Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press 1998 [1995]), 41.

<sup>19</sup> Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, 43 ff.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>21</sup> De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 314.

the subject of knowledge is given a place, the ‘present’, separate from the site of his or her object, which in turn would be defined as ‘past’. *Here, past and present are moving in the same polyvalent space.*”<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Freud still thinks on such a terrain, maybe even suggesting a new way of doing history. “The word remains – ‘history’ or ‘Moses’ – but the thing is split, and its fragments come and go in a general rearrangement, reiterating the ‘de-fiction’ generating fiction.”<sup>23</sup>

### Between Historical Fiction and Fictional History

De Certeau defines *Moses*, in reason of its peculiar character, a work that could not avoid to be “situated [but] at the intersection of history and fiction.”<sup>24</sup> But what does it mean to be at such an intersection? And most importantly, what did it mean for Freud himself to write history in such a way? In 1934, in the preface of the first draft of *Moses*, never included in the final version of the book and published for the first time only in 1979, Freud showed to be already perfectly conscious of the hybrid nature of his work:

As the sexual union of horse and donkey produces two different hybrids, the mule and the hinny, so the mixture of historical writing and fiction gives rise to different products which, under the common designated condition of “historical novel,” sometimes want to be appreciated as history, sometimes as novel. For some of them deal with people and events that are historically familiar and whose characteristics they aim to reproduce faithfully. They derive their interest, in fact, from history, but their intent is that of the novel; they want to affect the emotions. Others among these literary creations function in quite the opposite way. They do not hesitate to invent persons and even events in order to describe the special character of a period, but first and foremost they aspire to historical truth despite the admitted fiction. Others even manage to a large extent in reconciling the demands of artistic creations with those of historical fidelity. How much fiction, contrary to the intentions of the historian, still creeps into his presentation, requires little further comment.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 312. Italics added.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>25</sup> Freud quoted (and translated) in Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, “Freud on the ‘Historical Novel’”: From the Manuscript Draft (1934) of *Moses and Monotheism*,” *International Journal of Psycho-*

Freud is trying here to distance himself and his work from three of the many forms the mixture of a historical novel can generate: first, a novel that makes use of history as its prime material; second, accounts that aim at reaching the *historical truth* despite, and through, their fictional elements. The third might raise some questions: what does it mean to *reconcile the demands of artistic creations with those of historical fidelity*? The movement can be understood in both directions. If when Freud is speaking of “demands of artistic creation” he is referring to an aesthetic criteria, this third case could be referring to the attempt of fitting some *harmony* into the work of history, or of *finding* this harmony in the actual *res gestae*. It is the shift of history toward fiction. On the other hand, if we read differently this expression we might stress more the element of the *creation*. Along this interpretation, what Freud is dismissing is exactly one of the common receptions of his *Moses*, that of being a *fictional creation*. It does not really matter if such a creation actually aims at the representation of the past or not. “[C]ontrary to the intentions of the historian,” he goes on, fiction still *creeps* into his work. It is the shift of fiction toward history.

To explain why then he wanted to adopt this caption, Freud himself overtly admits the great difficulty of his task: the absence of any reliable *source*. To overcome this problem

one undertakes to treat each possibility in the text as a clue, and to fill the gap between one fragment and another according to the law, so to speak, of least resistance, that is – to give preference to the assumption that has the greatest probability. That which one can obtain by means of this technique can also be called a kind of “historical novel,” since it has no proven reality, or only an unconfirmable one, for even the greatest probability does not necessarily correspond to the truth.<sup>26</sup>

Proceeding by imagining, by agreeing upon the highest probability [*Wahrscheinlich*] and relying on it to move forward, it is a mode of investigation of the unknown more often associated with biblical scholarship than with

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*Analysis* 70 (1989): 375-95, 379. Yerushalmi is aware of Bori’s previous published study on the same manuscript, which he mentions. See Bori, “Una pagina inedita di Freud,” 245 ff. Also Grubrich-Simitis had the chance to work extensively on the original document, cf. Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, *Back to Freud’s Texts: Making Silent Documents Speak*, trans. Philip Slotkin (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1996), 93-203.

<sup>26</sup> Yerushalmi, “Freud on the ‘Historical Novel,’” 379.

historiography. To which extent, then, is Freud doing something different from that? Are his assertions, after all, something else than biblical *conjectures*? Pier Cesare Bori, one of the first scholars who had the chance to study the preface original manuscript, taking into account the biblical scholarship known and read by Freud, observes that the latter actually mastered the works of several great scholars of the Bible of his time, many of whom are indeed quoted and mentioned within the three essays.<sup>27</sup> However – he continues – Freud seems to be familiar biblical exegesis but not to “practice” it. Bori points out three orders of reasons: first, he doesn’t feel confident enough in using those analytical tools; second, he is quite skeptical toward the apologetic attitude underlying the writings of many of such authors; third, he is impatient to find in Moses’ story a *historical confirmation* of the general schema outlined in *Totem and Taboo*. Therefore, despite the abundance and recurrence of the mosaic theme in biblical literature (and its great influence on him), Freud turns much more willingly to ethnography rather than to theology.<sup>28</sup> In light of these remarks, *Moses and Monotheism* can hardly be understood as a work of biblical scholarship, no matter how much the shared attitude toward conjecture could link it to that tradition.<sup>29</sup> Bori concludes that the reason Freud dismissed the preface from the published version of the book had to do with this: he wanted to produce a *purely historical study* [*rein historische Studie*].<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bori believes that Freud restrained himself from quoting too much and too extensively from these sources because that would have compromised the agility of the essay-form. Considering Freud’s effort, and his anxiety, to find more proofs and new confirmations, we can hardly agree with this remark. Pier Cesare Bori, “Il Mosè di Freud: per una prima valutazione storico-critica” [1976], in *L’estasi del profeta*, 192.

<sup>28</sup> Pier Cesare Bori, “Materiale storico-religioso nella biblioteca di Sigmund Freud: alcuni rilievi sul catalogo” [1975], in *L’estasi del profeta*, 228.

<sup>29</sup> See also Bori, “Il Mosè di Freud,” 192. Within the *Moses* book, Freud himself is also very clear on this point. We quote him at length: “No probability, however seductive, can protect us from error; even if all parts of a problem seem to fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, one has to remember that the probable need not necessarily be the truth and the truth not always probable. And, lastly, *it is not attractive to be classed with the scholastics and talmudists who are satisfied to exercise their ingenuity unconcerned how far removed their conclusions may be from the truth*” [italics added]. Freud, *Moses*, 29-30. On Freud’s relation with the Bible see also Grubrich-Simitis, “Freud Study of Moses as a Daydream,” 85-6; Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Bori, “Una pagina inedita di Freud,” 258. Of the same mind is Grubrich-Simitis who, perusing the book and the original manuscripts, concludes too that at the end “Freud acted more like a conventional historian than a creative writer.” Grubrich-Simitis, *Back to Freud’s Texts*, 194.

In the quoted passage of the 1934 preface Freud seems to seize some of the most recent perspectives reached by the field of historiography.<sup>31</sup> There is no qualitative difference, indeed, between *filling the gaps* in the way Freud reluctantly feels constrained to do and the modern conception of the *historical imagination* underlying the production of *any* historical text. In a sense, the historian's position is that of the puzzle player: he wants to observe the entire picture but before he needs to connect all the pieces. Some pieces miss, and the best he can do is to *imagine* what the contribution of the image on those pieces to the whole picture could have been. "The line between inference and imagination is normally and regularly crossed by the historian. The act of historical re-creation means picturing the linkage possibilities in the past. The peculiar form that the picturing of links takes is the figurative narrative."<sup>32</sup>

The flaw of *Moses*, from this point of view, does not appear anymore that of being a *speculation* in opposition of a *solid work* relying on *solid sources*. If on the one hand we do give credit to Yerushalmi's remark on Freud's apprehension to find historical sources, on the other hand also those actual sources, secondary ones, that Freud was aware of and did not mention or rely on are meaningful. Jan Assmann, trying to articulate an image of that *paradigm of memory* that preceded modern historiography, highlights how the amount of materials precisely about Moses and Egypt was already quite considerable at Freud's time. Moreover, it is worth noting how part of this material pointed to the same arguments Freud was making. Quoting Assmann: "[t]he Classical sources agree that circumcision originated with Egyptians and Ethiopians."<sup>33</sup> Despite "[h]e knew of the Greek and Latin sources which described Moses as an Egyptian, [...] he never mentions them in his book."<sup>34</sup> To stay within the metaphor adopted above, Freud consciously chose not to cast into the empty spots of the picture puzzle pieces coming from a different set, or that could have actually *qualitatively* changed the nature of his operation. He consciously aimed at a scientific paradigm.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> We shall notice that, even if the preface is left unpublished and the draft rewritten and reworked, such a mode of proceeding "still creeps into his presentation." More than that, often some statements seem to have been even boldened in the published text. See Grubrich-Simitis, "Freud Study of Moses as a Daydream," 101-103.

<sup>32</sup> Art. *Historical imagination*, in *Routledge Companion to Historical Studies*, ed. Alan Munslow (London: Routledge 2000), 124.

<sup>33</sup> Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 154.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>35</sup> To introduce the puzzle metaphor [*Zusammenlegspiel*] it is actually Freud himself. Freud, *Moses*, 30.

To be clear, the core of our argument is not that Freud was doing history, but on the contrary that the actual practice of doing history is not that far from what Freud did. Both de Certeau and our analysis of Freud's filling the gaps as an act of historical imagination point at what he himself somehow foresaw already, and chose not to tell to avoid confusion and misunderstandings: the intrinsic connection between the novel-form and the history-form. Ahead of its time, this insight impressively portends some later attempts to look at the historical text from such a perspective whose language and theoretical horizon, of course, were not there yet.

De Certeau's discussion led us in the direction of a complete reformulation of the very concept of historiographical work. To properly understand the spirit of this move it is important to locate such an attempt in the context that gave birth to it. *The Writing of History* has been published in France for the first time in 1975 and belongs, as we said, to that broad set of works attempting, in the wake of structuralism and post-structuralism, to *rethink* history. De Certeau's reflection concerns the historian's task, precisely, the *writing of history*, the aspects of its production. On the other side of the historical text we find the reader of history, whose encounter with the historical text does not consist in its *production*, but rather in the interpretation and the reception of its narrative. What kind of history are we then able to read in *Moses and Monotheism* from the point of view of the *historical narrative*?

### Freud's Discourse

Another author who contributed to the same endeavor to rethink history, even if on a different level of analysis, is certainly Roland Barthes. In *The Discourse of History*, originally published in 1967, he boldly argued that the very constitutive structures of the historical narrative resemble those of classic fiction.<sup>36</sup> Today, in retrospect, we can better understand the value of this text as that of a provocation. Nevertheless, whether it meant to stretch the perspective or not, it lends us an important lens to compare Freud's awkward creature to what we actually think of when we speak of a historical work, and therefore to measure its possible distance from it. More than that, if we keep understanding *Moses and*

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<sup>36</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Discourse of History," in *Comparative Criticism: A yearbook*, 3, ed. E. S. Shaffer, trans. Stephen Bann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981 [1967]).

*Monotheism* as a work at the crossroad between history and fiction, a work that from a certain point of view contributes to bridge the conceptual gap between the two, *Moses* and Barthes' piece appear to be aiming at the same order of arguments.

Barthes' overtly admitted purpose is to attempt a *linguistic description of discourse*. In this perspective, his first move is to borrow from Roman Jakobson the concept of *shifters* to explore the continuous "transition from the utterance itself to the act of uttering"<sup>37</sup> and *vice versa*. Shifters are those explicit signs that allow the reader to see how and where the discourse is actually organized. It is unnecessary to highlight the astonishing amount of mechanisms of this kind in Freud's *Moses*, in which the reader is accompanied throughout all the author's choices, all his doubts and his attempts. In his work, Barthes tries to decompose the facade of absolute exactitude that shines from the historian's text. With Freud this seems to become superfluous. *Moses and Monotheism* is indeed often defined as *redundant*,<sup>38</sup> but it is worth distinguishing two aspects of such a characteristic. On the one hand, to be sure, there is a redundancy in the *content*: the story outlined throughout the text is relentlessly repeated, resumed, summarized, abridged, sketched and schematized, along with the plot already elaborated in *Totem and Taboo*. Maliciously, we might even observe that it looks like an attempt to make the reader (as himself) familiarize with it and naturalize it. On the other hand, more importantly here, there is a certain redundancy of the *form*.<sup>39</sup> What disturbs in *Moses* is Freud's incessant coming back on the issues of method. A certain "invasiveness" of the author in his text – an annoying one – can be perceived beyond the several prefaces and introductory remarks spread all over it. What actually bothers are all the notes of method underlined by Freud himself, his explicitations, his admissions. A first critique of *Moses* can be found within the book itself.<sup>40</sup> In Barthes' own terms, what is overwhelming, and what contributes substantially to the feeling of redundancy that most of the readers have, are the endless *shifters* between the utterance – the

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> This is the main characteristic of that "oddly flawed structure" we are told of in Grubrich-Simitis, "Freud Study of Moses as a Daydream," 101-3. See also Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Regardless of the content, many scholars are struck specifically by this anomaly of the *form*, especially in consideration of Freud's normal textual "harmonious structure." Grubrich-Simitis, "Freud Study of Moses as a Daydream," 55-6.

<sup>40</sup> Part of Freud's hesitation in publishing the book, after all, derives from the fact that he himself recognizes how it "could not stand up to his own criticism." See Grubrich-Simitis, *Back to Freud's Texts*, 196; Bori, "Il Mosè di Freud," 181.

actual story – and the act of uttering: those places, copious and vast, in which the author insists on his own speaking, and through which he organizes the narration of the story. For instance, consider the several times Freud seems to choose to block himself – and the reader – from proceeding, just to begin again enthusiastically the page after.<sup>41</sup>

Barthes' argument is that the usual reluctance of the author from appearing directly into his discourse consists in a "systematic deficiency of any form of sign referring to the sender of the historical message." The issue is raised by the fact that "history seems to be telling itself all on its own."<sup>42</sup> The substitution operated in such a case is that – writes Barthes – of the "emotional persona" with an "objective persona." Freud is not acting any swap of this kind. The author emerging as a function of the text, to stay within Barthes' terminology, is not an objective speaker, a scientist deprived of feelings. The very beginning of the first essay – "To deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons is not a deed to be undertaken light-heartedly – especially by one belonging to that people" – suggests a personal involvement in the topic, not just because of the *heart* necessary to put forward such an argument, but also, and especially, because Freud himself is speaking as a Jew.<sup>43</sup> The fact that in the next sentence he pretends to overcome such ties does nothing but corroborate our thesis: instead of omitting and concealing the mechanisms underlying the historiographical production (in this case, the *placement* of the author), he constantly puts forward disturbing contrasts, revealing what is usually kept implicit. The usual disappearance of the "author behind the work" in *Moses* does not occur at all. To the contrary, the author seems to be this cumbersome presence within the text, dealing not just with the matter of history but also with his relation with it and with his construction of the discourse.<sup>44</sup>

Barthes' work offers some other important chances for reflection. Passing from analyzing the act of uttering to the very utterance, Barthes tries to decompose it

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<sup>41</sup> Notably at the end of the first two essays. Freud, *Moses*, 25, 85. Both Barthes and Jakobson are actually focused on a restricted kind of shifters, say, more specifically *linguistic* ones. For instance, Barthes discusses very precise and nodal elements of the discourse as "here is" or "there is." Differently, we adopted here a broader notion of the concept: what we might call *discursive shifters*.

<sup>42</sup> Barthes, "The Discourse of History," II.

<sup>43</sup> Freud, *Moses*, II.

<sup>44</sup> We believe Freud when he admits that he has "not been able to efface the traces of the unusual way in which this book came to be written." *Ibid.*, 164.

in elementary units. The historical utterance – he states – “involves both ‘existents’ and ‘occurrents’, that is beings or entities, and their predicates.”<sup>45</sup> Then he explores those mechanisms that according to him are functional to reinforce the very strength of the historical utterance. For instance, to pick an example within the very *Moses*, the way in which *naming* “the advance in spirituality” makes us thinking of a necessary referent for this formula. We can struggle to understand what its meaning may be, but a distinctive conceptual space is already allocated to it. Barthes affirms that one of the inherent features of the discourse of history is its “radical censorship”: “the status of historical discourse is uniformly assertive [...] we recount what has been, not what has not been, or what has been uncertain.”<sup>46</sup> Keeping this remark in mind, Freud’s *Moses* appears once more as an exceptional text. In other words, what happens into a historical text is that *what has been* systematically predominates over *what has not been* and *what could have been*, operating in this way a repression. To the contrary, the entirety of Freud’s work is based on a *hypothesis*. It doesn’t rely on sources or documents (as we have seen, these are sought only subsequently), the “feet of clay”<sup>47</sup> of *Moses* imply that all the three essays are ascribable to the category of the *what could have been*. Both the occurrents and, even more boldly, the existents are only supposed to be there. Both the entities and the predicates of his history are only *hypothetical*. Freud does not operate the usual historical censorship, for it is in fact Freud himself who gives the very terrain for the skepticism and the feeling of suspicion that his work leaves in the reader. If normally “no one is there to take responsibility for the utterance,” Freud does instead reclaim this responsibility explicitly and repeatedly.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Barthes, “The Discourse of History,” 12.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>47</sup> As Freud himself defines the initial surmise. Freud, *Moses*, 29.

<sup>48</sup> In his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, written some twenty years before the *Moses* book, Freud shows to harbor already a peculiar perspective on historiography that engages our attention. Speaking of Alexander the Great – Freud writes – “[a historian] could refer you to the reports given by ancient writers [...] He could put reproductions before you of coins and statues of the king which have survived and he could hand round to you a photograph of the Pompeian mosaic of the battle of Issus. Strictly speaking, however, all these documents only prove that earlier generations already believed in Alexander’s existence and in the reality of his deeds, and your criticism might start afresh at that point.” The reason why, still, there would be scarce doubts about his very existence – he goes on – is due to the absence of any “conceivable motive for assuring you of the reality of something [the historian] himself did not think real, and secondly, [to the fact] that all the available history books describe the events in approximately similar terms.” Honesty, plausibility and conformity then, nothing more to assure the value of truth to a historiographical account. Sigmund Freud, “Introductory Lectures on Psycho-

In the last part of the section of his article focused on the analysis of the utterance, Barthes implicitly – but not too much – suggests an *identity* out-and-out of what up to this point could have been considered a simple *analogy* between the historical narrative and fiction. He tries to explore the use made by the historian of specific narrative mechanisms as metaphors, syllogisms and functions. The latter concept is drawn by Vladimir Propp's narratology, and it refers to those plot structures repeatedly occurring in every fictional narrative. Barthes argues that the historian's discourse, exactly as in a tale or in a myth, systematically encapsulates its matter subject in preexisting schemas of developments: precise *functions*. In this respect, Freud's work seems absolutely interesting on two levels. On the one hand, it is worth noting how an important part of Freud's theoretical production consisted exactly in *formulating* new and particular schemas and consolidating them throughout his work. In a sense, the psychoanalytic patterns and models he thinks through can be seen exactly as such. Furthermore, one of the disturbing element of *Moses* are exactly the continuous and redundant and strenuous and clumsy attempts to *apply* these patterns to a "blank history." It is sufficient to think, for instance, of the plot outlined more than twenty years before in *Totem and Taboo*, how it is constantly recalled and trot out and how all his "difficulties" generally derive precisely from the attempt to see in the story he is exploring, or discovering, or constructing, figures and patterns previously identified.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, Freud himself articulates his narration dealing exactly with schemas of this kind (aside from those traced by himself). Freud *thinks* through these schemas, but he also *sees* them. It is worth recalling how the first essay, the first of the two *clay feet* of the iron statue, analyzes the story of Moses in light of the work written in 1909 by Otto Rank. The latter, in a study that from this point of view reminds us of Propp's *Morphology of the Tale*, outlines that set of similarities shared by popular myths and national narratives that Freud will

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Analysis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1981 [1961]), 15:18-19.

<sup>49</sup> See for instance his programmatic intent declared in the second prefatory note: "That conviction [the correctness of his conclusions] I acquired a quarter of a century ago, when I wrote my book on *Totem and Taboo* (in 1912), and it has only become stronger since. From then on I have never doubted that religious phenomena are to be understood only on the model of the neurotic symptoms of the individual, which are so familiar to us, as a return of long forgotten important happenings in the primaeval history of the human family, that they owe their obsessive character to that very origin and therefore derive their effect on mankind from the historical truth they contain." Freud, *Moses*, 94.

contrast with the knowledge we have of the peculiar case of Moses. Freud's move is precisely to break down that prototypical grid. He decomposes it to look *beneath* it, to look at what *could have* generated Moses' oddity. We can say that there is a double movement: Freud shows a striking consciousness of the mechanisms of historiography, both in the moment of its reception and in the moment of its production, but at the same time he relapses into the constraints and the blindness of these very mechanisms.

In the third section of his article Barthes explores the problem of signification. His argument is that history differs from chronologies and annals because, while the latter are "pure, unstructured series of notations,"<sup>50</sup> the former consists precisely in the act of *signification* of these chronologies. Barthes boldly states:

The historian is not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers; that is to say, he organizes them with the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningless series.<sup>51</sup>

If the chronologies are actually lacking of meaning is quite questionable, but what strikes here is that Freud is doing completely without them. We don't find any "pure chronology" beneath Freud's history. The signification the historian ordinarily operates on these naked series assumes here the shape of a leap into the void. What, according to Barthes, is usually a collection and a correlation of signifiers, in Freud is transformed in the completely artificial creation of the elements to signify. Moreover, the argument usually put forward against Freud on the level of the sources, the documents, the *facts*, gets weaker. Indeed, the gist of what the historian does is not about the gathering of such concrete elements, but exactly about what is done by Freud too, and with a clarity that disturbs precisely in reason of its artificiality. Again, the nearing we are suggesting here is not that of *Freud to history*, but the opposite: that of *history to Freud*. We can imagine both history and what Freud does in his *Moses* as an *armor*: in the latter case what is missing is the knight inside the shell, but the very nature of the armor, its disposition and the quality of the iron don't change.

Nietzsche probably better conveys where Barthes is pointing at when he states "[t]here are no facts in themselves. It is always necessary to begin by introducing

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<sup>50</sup> Barthes, "The Discourse of History," 15.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

a meaning in order that there can be a fact.”<sup>52</sup> Standing in the same position, Barthes insists in this direction affirming that the *fact* does actually exist only in the space of language.<sup>53</sup> However, he notices, the problem underlying the most common understanding of any historical narrative is exactly that such fact-as-a-linguistic-object is perceived as a fact-of-the-real-world. To adopt a terminology that Semiotics is more familiar with, the misunderstanding relies on the confusion between the *signified* and the *referent*. What the discourse offers to us is only a *historia rerum gestarum*, but its reader commonly believes to receive the actual *res gestae*. Remarking his distance from the Saussurian tradition (which does not take in consideration an external referent), Barthes is arguing here that the dynamic signifier/signified stays all within the discourse, and it never comes out of it. To the contrary, the past is neither on one nor on the other side of the discourse, it is a referent external to it. In this perspective, the historical text loses most of its ties with “the past as it really was,” becoming a phenomenon entirely belonging to the sole realm of the discourse itself.

The question Barthes answers immediately after is the question that spontaneously arises if one frames the problem of the discourse of history in such a way: *what is, then, the mechanism that makes us take the signified for “real”?*

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<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche quoted in Barthes, “The Discourse of History,” 16.

<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche’s work was well known by Freud, who actually took it into account precisely while working on the *Moses* book. It is also in reason of the “continual exchange with Zweig over Nietzsche” that – Yerushalmi tells us – “in the very midst of writing this draft [of 1934], Freud was also preoccupied with the nature of the historical novel, with ‘poetic license versus historical truth’.” Yerushalmi, “Freud on the ‘Historical Novel’,” 378. Another interesting link between Nietzsche and Freud is outlined by Michel Foucault. In a famous intervention, the French philosopher – in a parallel movement to Ricoeur’s one – couples Freud, Nietzsche and Marx, the three “masters of suspicion,” also as the three thinkers that posed the conditions for modern hermeneutics. In the thought of all of them – writes Foucault – “interpretation has at last become an infinite task.” In particular, while in Freud “psychoanalysis never ceases to deploy itself without ever being able to complete itself,” Nietzsche seems to understand philosophy as “a kind of philology continually in suspension, a philology without an end, always further unrolled, a philology that would never be absolutely fixed.” Even more interestingly in concern of our topic, Foucault argues that this infiniteness is due to the absence of a primary *interpretandum*: “There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, for after all everything is already interpretation, each sign is in itself not the thing that offers itself to interpretation but an interpretation of other signs.” Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1998 [1964]), 2:274-5. Once more, then, Freud’s text appears to be exploding and to produce an unsettling conflict: if on the one hand Freud’s obstinate quest for some kind of origins is clear (see below for a discussion of this point), on the other hand these origins are hardly *facts* but rather, in turn, interpretations.

Barthes coins here a concept on which he will come back in other works: the *reality effect* [*effet de réel*].<sup>54</sup> An effect of “reality” is induced in the reader through the whole set of devices characterizing the historical text. “Our civilization” – says Barthes – “has a taste for the realistic effect,” as we can see by the development of many genres as the documentary literature or the private diary. Such a mechanism induces the reader to fall in the confusion mentioned above: that between the signified and the referent of the discourse. But “[h]istorical discourse does not follow the real, it can do no more than signify the real, constantly repeating that *it happened*.”<sup>55</sup>

The repercussions of this way of understanding history on Freud’s *Moses* are enormous. It is worth summing up what we have seen juxtaposing Barthes’ insights to Freud’s work. First, we have seen the particular and extensive way in which Freud directly organizes and intervenes into his discourse, namely his use of discourse *shifters*. Such an attitude distances Freud from the historian’s attempt to disappear behind his text letting “history speak by itself.” Freud seems in this respect to make explicit several of the most fundamental structural devices of the historical discourse. Second, he boldly moves on the terrain of history undermining its basic conventions: the entities and the predicates (*existents* and *occurrents*) are assumed as *hypothetical*, literally, fruits of a hypothesis. Moreover, of this nature it seems to be, consequently, the whole edifice built on such premises. What appears therefore weaker is exactly the “radical censorship” that allows the affirmative character of the historical text. Next, we have explored and analyzed the complex relation Freud has with his text and with its narrative “bricks.” On the one hand there is an unscrupulous insertion of *a priori* formulated schemas, on the other hand we see a remarkable consciousness of such a mechanism and the capacity to dig into it.<sup>56</sup> Lastly, we noticed how Freud does without the conventional (infra)structures of signification: chronologies and annals. If in *Totem and Taboo* this choice yields to an inscription of the described events into a mysterious ancestral time whose very duration is uncertain, *Moses* seems to be slightly more grounded and anchored to a few

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<sup>54</sup> A year later, in 1968, Barthes will focus specifically on this notion in Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989 [1968]). For a critical appraisal see Franklin R. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology. The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 125 ff.

<sup>55</sup> Barthes, “The Discourse of History,” 17.

<sup>56</sup> The uncanny relies in the unexpected order of the two different moves: it is in the beginning of the book, indeed, that Freud shows to master consciously the devices he is going to use, apparently more naively, later in the text.

touchstones. Still, the very material subdued to signification changes nature, becoming itself a product of the historian's narrative and hypothetical-speculative thinking.

What emerges from this analysis is, as we already hinted, that the gap between history and Freud's *Moses* is much shorter than usually acknowledged, but the latter didn't move, it is history itself to be much less *history* than one could have expected. In other words, the impossibility not to see how Freud writes his history *a priori* shall not make us doubting of his method or his results. This is not the point. To the contrary, the richness of his work lays precisely in the extent to which he *facilitates* our gaze on history and on how historiography moves along his same trail, but *in incognito*. What truly seems to be missing in *Moses and Monotheism*, as many authors after all noticed obsessively, is *reality*. That is, in Barthes' terms, the *reality effect* on the level of the discourse. Intervening to such an extent in his own building, being so self-reflective, showing now naively and then consciously the very terrain of encounter between history and fiction, doing away with the conventional facade of the historian, Freud subtracts himself from conditions necessary to produce the reality effect. His narrative does not convince. It seems to have to do more with a dream than with an archive. At the same time, Freud's work offers us the very means to outline its critique, showing the disquieting dynamics of the writing of history itself.

What in *Moses* leaves us disappointed, what bothers us, it is not related to the fact that this book does not satisfy what we believed to be the most important historiographical requirements: the problem is that history itself is shown as naked in the artificiality of such requirements. History itself does no longer satisfy what we believed to be its disciplinary demands. Freud – consciously or not – unearths in this text some profound logics of the writing of history, casting suspicion onto what we believed to be its very limit.

### **The *Annales* School: a Parallel Movement?**

So far we have analyzed the relation of dialectical and reciprocal unconcealment taking place between Freud's *Moses* and what historiography turns out to be in light of Barthes' and de Certeau's insights. In a sense, we can interpret what emerges reading Freud through discourse analysis as a shadow of *suspicion* cast onto an understanding of the writing of history as a positivist science devoid of

any authorial constructed element, onto the tacit assumptions on which the historical narrative is founded. But additional angles must be explored. Freud imbued with uncertainty a discipline which at the time was relatively very young and in the midst of continuous and radical revolutions. Yet, Freud did not unsettle historiography as a solitary hero: on the contrary, his intellectual operation is to be analyzed in relation to its context. The connections, echoes and assonances that lead our gaze elsewhere must be retraced and followed. What was happening at Freud's time within historiography itself?

*The Discourse of History* ends prefiguring and alluding to a change in the realm of historiography occurring around the time in which Barthes was writing. After finishing to describe “[h]istory’s refusal to assume the real as signified,” he specifies that this attitude is rooted in the very consolidation of historiography as a discipline that characterized its development throughout the nineteenth century. The paradox – he writes – assumed its perverse form then:

Narrative structure, which was originally developed within the cauldron of fiction (in myths and the first epics) becomes at once the sign and the proof of reality. In this connection, we can also understand how the relative lack of prominence (if not complete disappearance) of narration in the historical science of the present day, which seeks to talk of structures and not of chronologies, implies much more than a mere change in schools of thought. Historical narration is dying because the sign of History from now on is no longer the real, but the intelligible.<sup>57</sup>

Stephen Bann, the author of the first English translation of this text, read this last remark as a sign of how Barthes “had himself been attentive to the theoretical innovations of the *Annales* school, who had already defined a historical approach denying the primacy of the event, and by the same token drawn attention to the conventional nature of classic strategies of narration.”<sup>58</sup> Bann is right: as hinted also by the suggested shift from *chronologies* to *structures*, the reference is to them. It is not a coincidence that the *Annales* school is said to have accomplished the most important revolution in the field of history of the last century. Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, the two founders of the *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* began to write their most important works in the mid 1920s, while Freud committed himself to the writing of *Moses and Monotheism* soon after. If

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<sup>57</sup> Barthes, “The Discourse of History,” 18.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen Bann, “Introduction: Barthes’ discourse,” in *Comparative Criticism*, 4.

our insights on Freud are right, what is the relation between these two essentially concurrent radical changes of perspective on historiography?<sup>59</sup>

First, we have to be aware that speaking of the *Annales* in general terms is quite problematic. The official date of birth of the composite group we call *Annales* school coincides with the foundation of the homonymous journal in 1929 by Febvre and Bloch. Since then, at least three generations succeeded one each other along a movement of progressive institutionalization and diversification: after a first phase of “guerrilla action against traditional history, political history and the history of events,”<sup>60</sup> the group and its journal embodied in the postwar period the heart of the French academic establishment. Lastly, after 1968, the group started to suffer a gradual fragmentation that threatened the very possibility of speaking any longer of a single school. To analyze the ruptures this movement provoked into the previous disciplinary panorama a good path might be that of a comparison between the approaches of Freud and of the *Annales* school along two axes: the changes occurred in the representation of the *historical subject* and in the very notion of *time*. Our argument is twofold: on the one hand, if we assume Freud as a historian we are to notice a particular and important convergence of trajectories regarding these themes; on the other hand, some of the oddities that in Freud appear untenable and point to the aporetic structure of the writing of history in the *Annales* are explicitly framed and tackled on a theoretical level.

### The Psychologization of the Historical Subject(s)

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<sup>59</sup> We will focus on the attempt to trace some theoretical connections, aware of the fact that few others would likely prove to be significant. Indeed, despite Freud’s personal ties to France, his work there and his closeness to some important French intellectuals, several authors complain the extreme slowness for Psychoanalysis to penetrate and affirm itself in France. “Freudianism” became a real trend within the French academic environment only some thirty years after Freud’s death. See for instance Stuart Hughes, *The Obstructed Path: French Social Thought in the Years of Desperation 1930-1960*, (New Brunswick – London: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 9-10; Roudinesco, *Freud in his time and ours*, 202. Sherry Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics: Freud’s French Revolution*, (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 5 ff.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-1989*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 2.

To grasp the revolutionary repercussions of the innovations introduced by the *Annales* school, and maybe most importantly to avoid the disposal of Freud as a-historical too hastily, it is crucial not to look at their coeval historiography with today's eyes. History has always been an important field of knowledge in the Western tradition. Yet, its conceptualization in the terms we currently understand it is quite recent, and it is hardly traceable beyond the Early Modern period. The consolidation of historiography as an academic discipline, moreover, occurred during a time even closer to us, taking place mostly in the nineteenth century. The very context within which history arose – and its space, Europe – can easily explain why its focus on political history and on the history of the nation state has been so largely hegemonic up to the twentieth century. As Burke notices, “the narrative of political and military events, presented as the story of the great deeds of great men [...] was first seriously challenged during the Enlightenment,” with the emergence of the so called “history of society.”<sup>61</sup> The movement toward something different from the simple narrative of the state, found an articulation in the most known historians of the time, as Gibbon, Michelet, Ranke (who, despite his disciples turned back on it, was not interested solely in political history) or, soon after, Marx, but it did not replace the most spread attitude. Burke concludes then that even if “it is inexact to think of the established professional historians of the period as exclusively concerned with the narrative of political events [...] All the same, historians were still perceived by the social scientists in precisely this way.”<sup>62</sup> One of the most important ruptures represented by the *Annales* lies in the very articulation of a shared space for history and social sciences: the *Annales* opened or, more exactly, sanctioned the opening of history to new fields such as economics, sociology, anthropology, geography and psychology.

Hence, the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* became the laboratory of a whole new set of *histories*, of perspectives and gazes on the past. Among the most interesting developments we undoubtedly have to include what has been called *histoire des mentalités*, that is the study, inaugurated by Bloch in *The Royal Touch*, of *collective representations*: those shared *illusions*, those *beliefs* and those consequential *behaviors* that characterize entire populations within certain periods of time.<sup>63</sup> Drawing considerably from Frazer's *Golden Bough*, Bloch investigated the common medieval belief in miraculously healing

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>63</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans E. J. Anderson (New York: Routledge, 2015 [1924]).

properties of the king's body. A few years later, his friend and colleague Lucien Febvre followed him on the opened path of historical psychology publishing a book on Martin Luther and his famous work on Rabelais *The Problem Of Unbelief In The Sixteenth Century*, in which he explored the very inconceivability of atheism at that time.<sup>64</sup>

The roots of this new kind of historical approach are to be sought into coeval anthropology or, to be precise, around the French school of ethnology. According to Burke, if the concept of “collective representation” is drawn from Durkheim, the term “mentality” probably derives from the work on the “primitive mentality” written by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in 1922.<sup>65</sup> Apparently, what is outlined through these two concepts does not seem, then, to recall any of the more properly psychoanalytical works already circulating at the time. Of such an opinion is for example Peter Gay when he states that, after all, the concept of “mentality” seems to be nothing more for the historians around the *Annales* group than a way to give a perfunctory form to the “potent irrationalities” of the past without “troubling themselves to trace back these states into their roots in the unconscious mind.” For this reason “[t]he worlds of the historian and of the psychoanalyst remain worlds apart.”<sup>66</sup> A different perspective is offered by André Burguière, who states that

The notion of mentalities does not have the sole aim of linking intellectual history and the history of ideas to social history in order to rescue them from the idealism of *Kulturgeschichte*. Mentalities have to do with both the unconscious and habitual forms of mental life and with reflective forms, with emotions and with representations.<sup>67</sup>

From this standpoint, Burguière acknowledges precisely the existence of that kind of “digging” denied by Gay. At one with Burke on the possibility to credit Lévy-Bruhl for the authorship of the concept that the historians of the *Annales* brought into the field of history, he observes that

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<sup>64</sup> Lucien Febvre, *Martin Luther: A Destiny*, trans. Roberts Tapley (New York: Dutton, 1929) and *The problem of unbelief in the sixteenth century: the religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). They were first published, respectively, in 1928 and 1942.

<sup>65</sup> Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, 18.

<sup>66</sup> Gay, *Freud For Historians*, 119.

<sup>67</sup> André Burguière, *The Annales School: An Intellectual History*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 101-102.

[Lévy-Bruhl's] concept of primitive mentality has been criticized for expressing the West's superiority complex. In assimilating the traditional cultures most remote from the Western model to the childhood of humanity, it supposedly served as a scientific alibi for colonialism. But the potentially destabilizing aspect of such a concept for a fixist, a historical view of rationality and of the structures of consciousness has been underestimated. In fact, it is precisely the idea of a rational consciousness transcending the world and history that lies at the foundation of the West's superiority complex, its universalist ambition, and its claim to rule the world.<sup>68</sup>

The move of the *Annales*, under this light, assumes a meaning totally different from the one hypothesized by Gay. Instead of representing a hasty way to account for the irrationality of the past, it seems, in its telling movement from ethnology to history, precisely to bridge the gap between the West and the Rest. The irrational does not inhabit only the mind of the primitive, of this Other who, despite living in our present, seems to belong to another order of time. The irrational belongs also to *our* history and *our* time, it inhabits our own mind. In this case history does not seem to represent a science of the Other, but to the contrary the science of the self. Despite both the disciplines belong to the realm of what have been called *heterologies*, we cannot yet take for granted such a transposition in the 1920s: to analyze early modern Europe with the tools adopted to study the *far* Other was not something that could be done with levity. It represents the postulation of a continuity.<sup>69</sup> According to the interpretation given by Burguière, the *Annales* appear to be introducing in the temporal space of the West an element unsettling the very idea of "rational consciousness." On the one hand, one can grasp here a challenge to the European rationality of the self paralleling all Freud's work. From another perspective, this is an attempt, from some points of view, familiar to those who read in the Freud of *Civilization and its Discontents* and of *Totem and Taboo* a similar abridgment of the gap between our society and the Other: not a banishment of neurotics and babies in a world, a time and a space apart, but the inclusion of the

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>69</sup> The adoption of such a perspective to investigate the recent past should not be equated with the evolutionist paradigm predominant in 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropology, which assimilated the "savage mind" to previous stages of human development in order to trace an evolutionary pattern. That's not the goal, nor the language or the mindset of the *Annales* are of this kind.

primitive in our own ones.<sup>70</sup> On the side of the *Annales*, clear signs of a common trajectory, for instance, are visible in “Bloch’s approach [which] privileged the manifestations of a collective unconscious that structure society and are incarnated in institutions or habits before coming to govern individual attitudes.”<sup>71</sup>

To sum up, what occurs in Bloch and Febvre is a *psychologization of the subject of history* on different layers, not all belonging to the realm of rational consciousness. Of course, nobody is claiming that history suddenly became psychological: history has always been, partly, attentive to the psychology of its protagonists. The rupture is constituted by the fact that to this protagonists’ mind is given a psychological *depth*. The psychological inquiry of the men of the past is moved from the analysis of their *rationalities* to the investigation of their *irrationalities*. This constitutes a break also from that historical-biographical literary tradition entirely focused on the description of the inner reasons beneath the decisions of some great figure of the past assuming it as a complete rational actor, as who was writing. Despite the fact that the biographical form is chosen repeatedly by Febvre, these are never biographies in the traditional sense.<sup>72</sup> “None of these books takes the form of a real biography, but in choosing as its observation post the coherence of an individual trajectory, each seeks to reconstitute the mental universe of an age.”<sup>73</sup> Analogously, Freud’s goal – as stated in the 1934 preface – is to “gain knowledge of the person of Moses.” However, we perfectly know that it is a second purpose, the solution of the problem “which can only be specified later on,”<sup>74</sup> that prevails in the end and that few scholars would refuse to embrace as the main aim of *Moses and Monotheism*.

The problem that arises spontaneously at this point has been a topic of crucial interest both for the *Annales* and for Freud: it is the question of the relation

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<sup>70</sup> The telling subtitle (as well as original title) of *Totem and Taboo* is self-explanatory: “Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics.”

<sup>71</sup> Burguière, *The Annales School*, 56. On the consequences of the adoption of the concept of mentality and its ambiguous nature of being alternatively an *explicans* and an *explicandum* see also Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006 [2000]), 191, 198-200.

<sup>72</sup> In addition to the already mentioned works on Luther and Rebelais, is to be considered *Around The Heptameron: Sacred Love, Profane Love* (1944), centered on the figure of Marguerite de Navarre.

<sup>73</sup> Burguière, *The Annales School*, 57.

<sup>74</sup> Yerushalmi, “Freud on the ‘Historical Novel’,” 379.

between the individual and the group. The psychologization we mentioned, indeed, could be operated either on the Great Man or on the crowds. As we know, the crux of the shift from the individual to the group is one of the main “difficulties” overtly admitted and faced by Freud in his *Moses*: the gap between the two realms represents the most insurmountable obstacle for the resolute accomplishment of his analysis.<sup>75</sup> We should distinguish two aspects of this issue: on the one hand Freud is moving, keeping the lenses of psychoanalysis on his eyes, from the field of the individual to that of the group; on the other hand, more importantly and problematically, Freud tackles the question of the dynamics of this group through time and generations. The discussed analogy seems then to be twofold: there is an analogy between the individual and the group dynamics and there is an analogy – a different one – between the group dynamics *through time* and the individual lifetime. The first shift does not seem to be new, already in 1921 Freud tried to deal with this problem in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. It is not by chance that Freud’s insight in this text, at least in respect to his predecessors, is to consider the mass as a congregation of individuals. The psychic mechanisms of each of them remain basically unaltered. The mass is no longer that awkward agent animated by a collective soul as described by Gustave Le Bon, what intervenes is a particular configuration of the desires of its components in their relation with the figure of the leader.<sup>76</sup> The problematization of the analogy between the individual and the group is avoided through the adoption of this perspective. To the contrary, in *Moses* the problem reemerges: the mass is no longer simply a sum of the individuals’ psyches. There are peculiar dynamics inherent to it as, above all, the transmission of some memory traces through different generations. The mass in *Moses* is taken in consideration *as a mass*. Moses is not killed by a single individual, but by the Jewish *people*, exactly as the Jewish *people* will forget and then go through the aftermath of such a traumatic experience.<sup>77</sup>

The reason for which Freud is venturing this path is his need to explain a collective and intergenerational dynamic of *latency* in the group. To delve into

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<sup>75</sup> Freud, *Moses*, 149 ff.

<sup>76</sup> Precisely, what actually characterizes them as a mass is said to be their common assumption of the same external object as ego ideal, normally, a leader as it could have been Moses. See Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1949 [1921]), 80. Cf. also the chapter “The Group and the Primal Horde,” *Ibid.*, 90 ff.

<sup>77</sup> We can succinctly formulate Freud’s analogy like this: the mass is considered as such not because it works *as a sum* of individuals, but because it works *as a single* individual. Cf. Freud, *Moses*, 116 ff.

the interpretation of Freud's position and to establish whether we are facing or not a form of lamarckism lies outside of our scope here. What is relevant is that, despite what he declares in the original draft (that his immediate goal is to "gain knowledge of the person of Moses"), there is scarcely trace of a psychoanalytic gaze upon the biblical prophet. It is not Moses the one who is psychoanalyzed in *Moses and Monotheism*. Despite the title, it is not him the subject of the historical narration, at least not in the terms of a psychoanalytical history. The Jews are. Similarly, to carry on Freud's own juxtaposition, in *Totem and Taboo* Freud works on the brothers' mind, and the very death of the primeval father only opens the possibility of a psychoanalytical investigation. Despite the stress on the *Great Man*, it is the group which is posed under observation in *Moses*.<sup>78</sup>

In this respect, *Moses and Monotheism* seems to be a work more pertinent to *historical psychology* than to *psychological history*. To quote Lewis Spitz describing the two modalities of American Psychohistory, *Moses* "involve[d] a study of the psychology of people who are not great men, the psychology of groups."<sup>79</sup> There is a radical discontinuity, then, from those other works as the attempts to psychoanalyze either the dead Leonardo Da Vinci or the living Woodrow Wilson. Since the *Moses of Michelangelo*, aside from all what has been said about Freud's relation with his father and with Judaism, or about his very opinion on *Moses*, what changes is the very object studied: no longer the individual but the group, the people. The focus on the movements of Moses' hands yields to the narrative of the man Moses as (just) the *conditio* for what has to be said later about a collective group.

Still, the collective psyche cannot be faced without starting from the individual. Not specifically Moses, but *any* individual. More than that, any *contemporary* individual. Freud begins therefore his chapter "The Analogy" exploring a sequence of patients' cases useful to outline the characteristics of the schema to

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<sup>78</sup> Similar observations have been made in *Heterologies* by Michel de Certeau, who entitled one of its chapters "The Anti-Individualist Biography." There he writes: "the innovation of Freudianism consists in its use of biography as a means of destroying the individualism posited by a modern and contemporary psychology. With this tool, it undermines the postulate of liberal and bourgeois society. It undoes it. It substitutes another history in returning, as we have seen, to the system of tragedy." Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000 [1986]), 24.

<sup>79</sup> Lewis W. Spitz, "Psychohistory and History: The Case of *Young Man Luther*," in *Psychohistory and Religion*, ed. Roger A. Johnson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977 [1973]), 59.

apply to his historical study. What concerns us more here is the particular *direction* of this move.<sup>80</sup>

With the publication of *French Rural History* in 1931 Marc Bloch made famous the so called “regressive method,” drawn, in turn, from the work of the nineteenth century historian F. W. Maitland. Bloch argued the necessity to “read history backward,” to proceed logically, then, “from the known to the unknown.”<sup>81</sup> Bloch was here attacking what Simiand called some decades before the “Idol of Origins.”<sup>82</sup> In *The Historian’s Craft* he explains that the danger of the “obsession with origins” lies on the ambiguity of the term: sometimes “origins” are understood as “beginning,” other times as “causes.” The problem arises when these two meanings are overlapped, and the origins of something are assumed to be a “beginning which explains. Worse still, a beginning which is a complete explanation.”<sup>83</sup> To the contrary, Bloch stresses the necessity to look more at the contemporaneity of the facts rather than at their ancestral roots. After all, he says quoting a proverb, “[m]en resemble their times more than they do their fathers.”<sup>84</sup>

Without taking any stand in regard to Bloch’s position, it is useful to assume its viewpoint in order to explore an additional layer of *Moses*. In this respect, Freud’s move resembles the kind of case we have seen above: a jarring contrast that results both in an untenable position and in a revealing and telling clarification. On the one hand, Freud tries to read his story exactly through what we can interpret as an explanatory “origin”: the plot of the killing of the father outlined in *Totem and Taboo* and proposed again here. The seriousness of the issue becomes clear when one realizes that such a plot does not serve just for a “passive” reading of Moses’ and the Jews’ sequence of events. The tale of the father gets transformed into a pattern for the formulation of inferences, of the very hypothesis *Moses* is nourished with and based on. From this point of view, Freud epitomizes precisely the risks lying behind the idol of origins.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Freud, *Moses*, 116 ff., 126.

<sup>81</sup> Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, 23.

<sup>82</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage Books, 1953 [1949]), 29.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>85</sup> Interestingly enough, Bloch makes a concession of legitimacy precisely to religious history, where causes and beginning might actually coincide. See Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, 31.

On the other hand, as we were saying, the access point to (both the shaping of the horde's story and) the study of the mass psyche in *Moses and Monotheism* is Freud's contemporary's mind. Psychoanalysis, therefore, emerges as that place of production of the knowledge necessary to retrace the past back from the present.<sup>86</sup> As in Bloch, from the known to the unknown. Richard Bernstein suggested a reading on the same tone:

There is a *double* temporal perspective that runs throughout the *Moses* study. The rhetorical structure of the book, and Freud's historical narrative about the Egyptian origins of Moses, lead us to think that Freud is giving us an account of the character of the Jewish people by appealing to what happened in the past. But this explanatory narrative is itself constructed primarily on the basis of our *present* psychoanalytical understanding of the dynamics of the human psyche.<sup>87</sup>

Bernstein perfectly grasps the ultimate conclusion one can draw: that the doubleness of the movement, to a certain extent, is illusory. Indeed, *Totem and Taboo's* plot too is formulated through and on the basis of such psychoanalytic procedure. Consequentially, the very "origin" is actually rooted in what we might call a psychoanalytic truth. However, what strikes in regard to our discussion is once again Freud's capacity to juxtapose in disturbing mixtures mechanisms and functions proper of history, showing them under a new and revealing light. Freud puts forward here, presenting both as untenable, a "regressive" and a "progressive" method of facing the past. What remains is the sum of the inconsistencies underlying beneath any *a priori* way of doing history.<sup>88</sup> In both cases we see what Bernstein correctly identifies as a *projection*.<sup>89</sup> That is to say, returning to Barthes, the projection of an actual *referent*.

Again, Freud is outlining he himself the very terrain that makes possible (and unavoidable) to attack him. He makes *too explicit* what usually passes unnoticed.

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<sup>86</sup> A viewpoint, this, from which Freud's *Moses* appear in firm contrast with Pater Schmidt's attempts to investigate the *origin* of monotheism and of the idea of God.

<sup>87</sup> Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, 71.

<sup>88</sup> This does not exclude a certain dialectic between the schema and its application, as Bernstein himself highlights a few pages later.

<sup>89</sup> "[Freud] is projecting what allegedly happened in the past – 'the historical truth' – on the basis of our understanding of the dynamical conflicts of the human psyche." Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, 72.

On the one hand, Freud first articulates the *problem* of the shift from the psychology of the individual to that of the mass, framing with precision the existing obstacles; then, he clumsily overcomes the hurdles through dubious, inconsistent and quite questionable devices.<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, the very nature of historical research is problematized in the evidently stretched and inappropriate attempts to undertake it from resolute angles. The unsuitableness of the effort to “grasp the past” both from the perspective of the present and from an explanation through the origins is masterly – as much as naively – displayed. Moving along the same axis of the *Annales* scholars, Freud seems to be demanding a raise of consciousness, an awareness about the very elements that make his work so much questionable. In this sense, Freud is offering us the conditions of the critique punctually moved to him.

### Conflicting Temporalities

In the wake of these last remarks, we shall go back to Barthes’ conclusions in order to suggest a further terrain of investigation of Freud’s work. Barthes, as we said, seems to sympathize with the *Annales*’ shift of focus from the narrative to the understanding of the structures of history. Freud, especially considering the third essay, seems to move in a similar direction. Given the *feet of clay* as the premises, is then possible for him to explore (and shape) the many details of the *iron statue*: namely, the temporal dynamics of religions, peoples and collective mentalities. What this move seems to imply in both cases is no less than a *disarticulation of historical time*.

What in the 1960s evolved into a variant of structuralism out-and-out, consisted originally in an attempt to challenge the so called *histoire événementielle*, the kind of history perceived as hegemonic within what Burke names the “Old Historiographical Regime,” and its restricted focus on the dimension of the *event* with the consequential adoption of a certain style of narrative. The way out from this “old kind of history,” to reverse Febvre’s famous catchword, is sought and found along many different trajectories: the most successful has probably been the one articulated in theoretical terms by Fernand Braudel in *The Mediterranean*. In this book the French historian tried to give an account of the

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<sup>90</sup> We are of course referring primarily to Freud’s peculiar form of psycho-Lamarckism and the idea that some “memory traces” could be transmitted and inherited between different generations. Freud, *Moses*, 151 ff.

Mediterranean area during the age of Philip II. In fact, he adopted a wider periodization starting at the end the fifteenth and ending at the beginning of the sixteenth century. On this line, one of its major achievement has been the capacity to consider *time* and *space* in unprecedented ways.<sup>91</sup> Braudel theorizes a distinction among different orders of historical time destined to survive for many years. He identifies three different dimensions: first, the level of the *event*, “the scale not of man, but of individual men.”<sup>92</sup> Braudel defines such a layer as “surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs.” To dive deeper into these tides he theorizes the level of *conjunctures* and the famous *longue durée*. The former takes into account the long-term dynamics of cultures and civilization (this is, for instance the time scale of the *mentalities*), while the latter refers to the “history whose passage is almost imperceptible [...] in which all change is slow, [the] history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles.”<sup>93</sup> Braudel speaks in this case of the “geographical time” of man in his relationship with the environment. In 1950, one year after the first edition of *The Mediterranean*, in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France Braudel insists on his position:

[...] social time does not flow at one even rate, but goes at a thousand different paces, swift or slow, which bear almost no relation to the day-to-day rhythm of a chronicle or of traditional history. Thus I believe in the reality of a particularly slow-paced history of civilization, a history of their depths, of the characteristics of their structures and layout.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Indeed, another interesting trajectory, particularly for a comparison with Freud, concerns the attempt to rethink *space*. Within the *Annales* school, progressively, a new way to understand and to *signify* space affirmed itself. In this respect, a hypothetical third section of our analysis could have been focused on Freud’s own movement in this direction. As stressed by different angles, among others, by Jan Assmann, Sander Gilman and Edward Said, in Freud’s way of representing and talking about space and geography, in his discourse, a postcolonial-like mindset seems to be prefigured and portended by many points of view through specific forms of signification. Suspicion would have been instilled here in the realm of the relation between the self and the Other from the perspective of a pre-Second World War Europe disposing only of a pre-postcolonial perspective on certain kinds of problems.

<sup>92</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean And The Mediterranean World In The Age Of Philip II*, II vols, trans. Siân Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996 [1966]), 1:21. A first and shorter version of the book appeared already in 1949.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:20.

<sup>94</sup> Fernand Braudel, “The Situation of History in 1950,” in *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982 [1950]), 12.

We are not interested here in analyzing further Braudel's distinction.<sup>95</sup> He researched and wrote within a framework aiming at reaching a new understanding of social and material history and their "slow," almost motionless time. Yet, one of Braudel's most important legacies today, if we disregard the specific *content*, lies in the more general *form* of his move: here too, a *disarticulation of time in different and multidimensional temporalities*.<sup>96</sup>

Indeed, Freud seems to be having a conversation with the efforts of history to remodel itself. Our argument, again, is that Braudel succeeded in lucidly theorizing what Freud naively showed in *Moses and Monotheism*, advocating for a programmatic change in the very perspective that Freud revealed as aporetic and obsolete. At the end of his majestic work, Braudel highlights and, in a sense, acknowledges to those who criticized him, that with such a widening of scale, in dealing with structures and conjunctures, "the role of the individual and the event necessarily dwindles."<sup>97</sup> Apparently, *Moses* seems to inhabit a totally different level, facing precisely the facts concerning the man, the *individual* man Moses. The first and the second book in particular seem to fully belong to the *histoire événementielle*: Moses, his birth, his adoption, the exodus from Egypt, his murder, Qadesh etc. all undoubtedly touch only the kind of temporality pertinent to the *event*. However, we have to recall the problem "which [could]

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<sup>95</sup> A broader discussion of Braudel's tripartition and its critical reception can be found in Traian Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm*, (Ithaca – London: Cornell University Press, 1976), especially chap. 4.

<sup>96</sup> As many other thinkers of his time, Braudel is strongly influenced by the production of Henri Bergson. The latter, criticizing the idea of time spread by physics and the natural sciences as something quantifiable, homogeneous and composed of standard, discrete and measurable units, insisted on its subjective aspect. It has been Bergson the first to oppose to the idea of time understood as such the notion of *durée*, meant to highlight the varying dimension of *lived* and *experienced* time. Universal time, made by countless but countable fragments is substituted then by a new multiplicity of "durations" whose length and nature are determined by the psychic and emotional constellation of the subject. It is from this philosophical disarticulation of the concept of time itself and from this change of scale that we must look at Braudel's historiographical novelty. Cf. Gérard Noiriel, "Comment on récrit l'histoire. Les usages du temps dans les *Écrits sur l'histoire* de Fernand Braudel," *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 25 (2002): 57-81. Braudel himself will make explicit appeal to the "[philosopher's] attention to the subjective element internal to the concept of time" in order to understand his tripartition. Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, "History and the Social Sciences: The *Longue Durée*," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 32/2 (2009): 171-203, 198. The article was originally published in 1958, and it probably represents Braudel's most complete formulation of the concept.

<sup>97</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 2:1242.

only be specified later on” mentioned in the first draft of 1934. In the same year, Freud wrote to Arnold Zweig:

Faced with the new persecutions, one asks oneself again how the Jews have come to be what they are and why they have attracted this undying hatred. I soon discovered the formula: Moses created the Jews.<sup>98</sup>

Throughout *Moses and Monotheism* Freud tries to answer to this question (that is to say, to argue for his answer): this is the stated purpose at the origins of the writing of this text. Yet, Freud’s slogan might mislead: what does it mean that the *man Moses* created the Jews? Assmann masterly grasps the aporia noticing how, “[n]ormally, one would conceive of the ‘creation of a nation’ as a typical process of ‘longue durée.’” To the contrary, Freud seems to be outlining it as a punctual event, inscribed in the decision of the individual Moses.

Freud’s radical method of historical personification compresses a process of centuries into the figure of “the great man.” Freud’s construction of Moses as the creator of his nation goes against all historical probability. No nation has ever been created. [...] Freud was aware of the problem and provided an interesting answer. It was not the “living” or the “historical Moses” alone to whom he attributed the creation of the Jewish nation, but the living and the dead, the historical, the repressed, and the remembered Moses taken together. The return of the repressed was also for Freud a process of “longue durée.”<sup>99</sup>

Assmann identifies in the psychoanalytical figure of the return of the repressed, pivotal in the general economy of Freud’s text, the very mechanism that allows the shift from the history of the event to the history of long-term structures and dynamics. Once more, it will not be judged here whether Assmann is right or not. What is relevant with respect to our topic is that the very architecture of *Moses and Monotheism* consists of a juxtaposition, a combination that manifests itself in a strident and unsettling contrast.

Scholars have often highlighted, from many different viewpoints, the discontinuity between the first two essays and the third one. The pattern that we have seen discussing Freud’s book through Barthes’ reflection on the historical

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<sup>98</sup> Freud to Zweig, May 30, 1934, quoted in Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 12.

<sup>99</sup> Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 164.

narrative, and that emerged again in the attempt to compare Freud's own way of psychologizing the historical subject, seems here to appear once more. The fracture between the two first essays and the last one does not run only along the many lines that have been so regularly put forward. It is rooted also in a difference of *scale*: the *micro* and the *macro* of historical investigation are pulled together in an unsettling bond. Freud juxtaposes the *event* and the *structure*, two different levels of history, *grasping* a question without being able to *articulate* it. On the one hand he displays to our eyes the "littleness of the man" – paradoxically – exactly giving to him an extraordinary, exaggerated importance, regardless of whether this Great Man influences the course of events (or structures) through his *being alive* or through his *being dead*. On the other hand the level of the structure is filled with a kind of substance whose very complexity exemplifies the difficulties inherent to any attempt of outlining the structure's content.<sup>100</sup>

### Freud and History: Who Questions Whom?

In this paper we explored from different angles the problems and the opportunities deriving from considering Freud as a historian. We looked at the *Moses* book as a source, as we said, of *suspicion*. The reader who faces *Moses and Monotheism* for the first time and without the help of scholarly literature has to tackle a feeling of annoyance: something in a certain order is unsettled, teased. What we tried to do here is to anatomize such feeling, trying to grasp the trajectories of such aversion and to retrace it to the doubts suggested – more or less overtly – in Freud's text. In the first part we have seen essentially how Freud, exposing to an excessive extent the way history is written, instills a radical doubt on the practice and the relation to historical truth of historiography, which turns out not to be qualitatively different (least of all *superior*) from what Freud does in his study. Making too clear, too present, too perceivable the inner mechanisms of the writing of history that usually remain hidden under the blanket of narrative, Freud does away with the *reality effect*. And, in fact, *Moses* seems everything but real.

In the second part of the paper we examined Freud's work in relation to the case of the *Annales* school as an attempt to undress history and revolutionize it more, say, from within. We looked at how important changes occurred in the way to

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<sup>100</sup> Cf. Braudel, "The *Longue Durée*," 178.

treat the historical subject and the very idea of time and scale underlying historical writing. Again, many of Freud's moves seem to be displaying into a concrete text, and thus showing with a dazzling clarity, several issues that in the *Annales* will be framed and faced theoretically. In this respect, we noticed how the very *terrain* of the critique usually given to Freud's book is articulated and made possible, offered, by Freud himself. Thus, we ask: who is questioning whom? Are some supposed essential tenets of history really undermining Freud's work or is it the latter who is questioning the former? What results disturbing, in conclusion, might be precisely Freud's *lightness* in doing so, an attitude that is unbearable for the reader, historian or not, who feels compelled to reply, to answer, to speak.

Edward Said, defending important classics from any sort of chrono-centric attack, identifies among them a category of works endowed – he says – with an *antinomian force*. He is not speaking of those texts which, allegedly, manifest and radiate some transcendental, universal and a-temporal values, but to the contrary of those works that, embodying so deeply precisely the values and the perspectives of their own time, or slightly casting our sight a little further, or – we add – inoculating *uncertainty, disturb and suspicion, “demand a response”* from their future readers. Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* belongs without any doubt to this kind of undying works.

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**How to quote this article:**

Nethanel Treves, “*Moses and Monotheism* as history. Reading Freud through de Certau, Barthes and the *Annales* school,” in *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC*, n. 12 December 2017

*url:* [www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=397](http://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=397)