

THE MOSES OF MICHELANGELO - (1914)

I may say at once that I am no connoisseur in art, but simply a layman. I have often observed that the subject-matter of works of art has a stronger attraction for me than their formal and technical qualities, though to the artist their value lies first and foremost in these latter. I am unable rightly to appreciate many of the methods used and the effects obtained in art. I state this so as to secure the reader's indulgence for the attempt I propose to make here.

Nevertheless, works of art do exercise a powerful effect on me, especially those of literature and sculpture, less often of painting. This has occasioned me, when I have been contemplating such things, to spend a long time before them trying to apprehend them in my own way, i.e. to explain to myself what their effect is due to. Wherever I cannot do this, as for instance with music, I am almost incapable of obtaining any pleasure. Some rationalistic, or perhaps analytic, turn of mind in me rebels against being moved by a thing without knowing why I am thus affected and what it is that affects me.

This has brought me to recognize the apparently paradoxical fact that precisely some of the grandest and most overwhelming creations of art are still unsolved riddles to our understanding. We admire them, we feel overawed by them, but we are unable to say what they represent to us. I am not sufficiently well-read to know whether this fact has already been remarked upon; possibly, indeed, some writer on aesthetics has discovered that this state of intellectual bewilderment is a necessary condition when a work of art is to achieve its greatest effects. It would be only with the greatest reluctance that I could bring myself to believe in any such necessity.

I do not mean that connoisseurs and lovers of art find no words with which to praise such objects to us. They are eloquent enough, it seems to me. But usually in the presence of a great work of art each says something different from the other; and none of them says anything that solves the problem for the unpretending admirer. In my opinion, what grips us so powerfully can only be the artist's intention, in so far as he has succeeded in expressing it in his work and in getting us to understand it. I realize that this cannot be merely a matter of intellectual comprehension; what he aims at is to awaken in us the same, emotional attitude, the same mental constellation as that which in him produced the impetus to create. But why should the artist's intention not be capable of being communicated and comprehended in words, like any other fact of mental life? Perhaps where great works of art are concerned this would never be possible without the application of psycho-analysis. The product itself after all must admit of such an analysis, if it really is an effective expression of the intentions and emotional activities of the artist. To discover his intention, though, I must first find out the meaning and content of what is represented in his work; I must, in other words, be able to interpret it. It is possible, therefore, that a work of art of this kind needs interpretation, and that until I have accomplished that interpretation I cannot come to know why I have been so powerfully affected. I even venture to hope that the

effect of the work will undergo no diminution after we have succeeded in thus analysing it.

Let us consider Shakespeare's masterpiece, Hamlet, a play, now over three centuries old.¹ I have followed the literature of psycho-analysis closely, and I accept its claim that it was not until the material of the tragedy had been traced back by psycho-analysis to the Oedipus theme that the mystery of its effect was at last explained. But before this was done, what a mass of differing and contradictory interpretative attempts, what a variety of opinions about the hero's character and the dramatist's intentions! Does Shakespeare claim our sympathies on behalf of a sick man, or of an ineffectual weakling, or of an idealist who is merely too good for the real world? And how many of these interpretations leave us cold! - so cold that they do nothing to explain the effect of the play and rather incline us to the view that its magical appeal rests solely upon the impressive thoughts in it and the splendour of its language. And yet, do not those very endeavours speak for the fact that we feel the need of discovering in it some source of power beyond them alone?

¹ Perhaps first performed in 1602.⁷

Another of these inscrutable and wonderful works of art is the marble statue of Moses, by Michelangelo, in the Church of S. Pietro in Vincoli in Rome. As we know, it was only a fragment of the gigantic tomb which the artist was to have erected for the powerful Pope Julius II.¹ It always delights me to read an appreciative sentence about this statue, such as that it is 'the crown of modern sculpture' (Grimm). For no piece of statuary has ever made a stronger impression on me than this. How often have I mounted the steep steps from the unlovely Corso Cavour to the lonely piazza where the deserted church stands, and have essayed to support the angry scorn of the hero's glance! Sometimes I have crept cautiously out of the half-gloom of the interior as though I myself belonged to the mob upon whom his eye is turned - the mob which can hold fast no conviction, which has neither faith nor patience, and which rejoices when it has regained its illusory idols.

But why do I call this statue inscrutable? There is not the slightest doubt that it represents Moses, the Law-giver of the Jews, holding the Tables of the Ten Commandments. That much is certain, but that is all. As recently as 1912 an art critic, Max Sauerlandt, has said, 'No other work of art in the world has been judged so diversely as the Moses with the head of Pan. The mere interpretation of the figure has given rise to completely opposed views. . . .' Basing myself on an essay published only five years ago,² I will first set out the doubts which are associated with this figure of Moses; and it will not be difficult to show that behind them lies concealed all that is most essential and valuable for the comprehension of this work of art.

¹ According to Henry Thode, the statue was made between the years 1512 and 1516.

² Thode (1908).⁸

I

The Moses of Michelangelo is represented as seated; his body faces forward, his head with its mighty beard looks to the left, his right foot rests on the ground and his left leg is raised so that only the toes touch the ground. His right arm links the Tables of the Law with a portion of his beard; his left arm lies in his lap. Were I to give a more detailed description of his attitude, I should have to anticipate what I want to say later on. The descriptions of the figure given by various writers are, by the way, curiously inapt. What has not been understood has been inaccurately perceived or reproduced. Grimm says that the right hand, 'under whose arm the Tables rest, grasps his beard'. So also Lübke: 'Profoundly shaken, he rasps with his right hand his magnificent, flowing beard . . .'; and Springer: 'Moses presses one (the left) hand against his body, and thrusts the other, as though unconsciously, into the mighty locks of his beard.' Justi thinks that the fingers of his (right) hand are playing with his beard, 'as an agitated man nowadays might play with his watch-chain.' Müntz, too, lays stress on this playing with the beard. Thode speaks of the 'calm, firm posture of the right hand upon the Tables resting against his side'. He does not recognize any sign of excitement even in the right hand, as Justi and also Boito do. 'The hand remains grasping his beard, in the position it was in before the Titan turned his head to one side.' Jakob Burckhardt complains that 'the celebrated left arm has no other function in reality than to press his beard to his body'.

If mere descriptions do not agree we shall not be surprised to find a divergence of view as to the meaning of various features of the statue. In my opinion we cannot better characterize the facial expression of Moses than in the words of Thode, who reads in it 'a mixture of wrath, pain and contempt', - 'wrath in his threatening contracted brows, pain in his glance, and contempt in his protruded under-lip and in the down-drawn corners of his mouth'. But other admirers must have seen with other eyes. Thus Dupaty says, 'His august brow seems to be but a transparent veil only half concealing his great mind'.¹ Lübke, on the other hand, declares that 'one would look in vain in that head for an expression of higher intelligence; his down-drawn brow speaks of nothing but a capacity for infinite wrath and an all-compelling energy'. Guillaume (1876) differs still more widely in his interpretation of the expression of the face. He finds no emotion in it 'only a proud simplicity, an inspired dignity, a living faith. The eye of Moses looks into the future, he foresees the lasting survival of his people, the immutability of his law.' Similarly, to Müntz, 'the eyes of Moses rove far beyond the race of men. They are turned towards those mysteries which he alone has descried.' To Steinmann, indeed, this Moses is 'no longer the stern Lawgiver, no longer the terrible enemy of sin, armed with the wrath of Jehovah, but the royal priest, whom age may not approach, beneficent and prophetic, with the reflection of eternity upon his brow, taking his last farewell of his people'.

¹ Quoted by Thode, *ibid.*, 197.9

There have even been some for whom the Moses of Michelangelo had nothing at all to say, and who are honest enough to admit it. Thus a critic in the Quarterly

Revue of 1858: 'There is an absence of meaning in the general conception, which precludes the idea of a self-sufficing whole. . . .' And we are astonished to learn that there are yet others who find nothing to admire in the Moses, but who revolt against it and complain of the brutality of the figure and the animal cast of the head.

Has then the master-hand indeed traced such a vague or ambiguous script in the stone, that so many different readings of it are possible?

Another question, however, arises, which covers the first one. Did Michelangelo intend to create a 'timeless study of character and mood' in this Moses, or did he portray him at a particular moment of his life and, if so, at a highly significant one? The majority of judges have decided in the latter sense and are able to tell us what episode in his life it is which the artist has immortalized in stone. It is the descent from Mount Sinai, where Moses has received the Tables from God, and it is the moment when he perceives that the people have meanwhile made themselves a Golden Calf and are dancing around it and rejoicing. This is the scene upon which his eyes are turned, this is the spectacle which calls out the feelings depicted in his countenance - feelings which in the next instant will launch his great frame into violent action. Michelangelo has chosen this last moment of hesitation, of calm before the storm, for his representation. In the next instant Moses will spring to his feet - his left foot is already raised from the ground - dash the Tables to the earth, and let loose his rage upon his faithless people.

Once more many individual differences of opinion exist among those who support this interpretation.

Burckhardt writes: 'Moses seems to be shown at that moment at which he catches sight of the worship of the Golden Calf, and is springing to his feet. His form is animated by the inception of a mighty movement and the physical strength with which he is endowed causes us to await it with fear and trembling.'

Lübke says: 'It is as if at this moment his flashing eye were perceiving the sin of the worship of the Golden Calf and a mighty inward movement were running through his whole frame. Profoundly shaken, he grasps with his right hand his magnificent, flowing beard, as though to master his actions for one instant longer, only for the explosion of his wrath to burst out with more shattering force the next.'

Springer agrees with this view, but not without mentioning one misgiving, which will engage our attention later in this paper. He says, 'Burning with energy and zeal, it is with difficulty that the hero subdues his inward emotion. . . . We are thus involuntarily reminded of a dramatic situation and are brought to believe that Moses is represented at the moment at which he sees the people of Israel worshipping the Golden Calf and is about to start up in wrath. Such an impression, it is true, is not easy to reconcile with the artist's real intention, since the figure of Moses, like the other five seated figures on the upper part of the Papal tomb, is meant primarily to have a decorative effect. But it testifies very convincingly to the vitality and individuality portrayed in the figure of Moses.'

One or two writers, without actually accepting the Golden Calf theory, do nevertheless agree on its main point, namely, that Moses is just about to spring to his feet and take action.

According to Grimm, 'The form' (of Moses) 'is filled with a majesty, a self-assurance, a feeling that all the thunders of heaven are at his command, and that yet he is holding himself in check before loosing them, waiting to see whether the foes whom he means to annihilate will dare to attack him. He sits there as if on the point of starting to his feet, his proud head carried high on his shoulders; the hand under whose arm the Tables rest grasps his beard, which falls in heavy waves over his breast, his nostrils distended and his lips shaped as though words were trembling upon them.'

Heath Wilson declares that Moses' attention has been excited, and he is about to leap to his feet, but is still hesitating; and that his glance of mingled scorn and indignation is still capable of changing into one of compassion.

Wölfflin speaks of 'inhibited movement'. The cause of this inhibition, he says, lies in the will of the man himself; it is the last moment of self-control before he lets himself go and leaps to his feet.

Justi has gone the furthest of all in his interpretation of the statue as Moses in the act of perceiving the Golden Calf, and he has pointed out details hitherto unobserved in it and worked them into his hypothesis. He directs our attention to the position of the two Tables - an unusual one, for they are about to slip down on to the stone seat. 'He' (Moses) 'might therefore be looking in the direction from which the clamour was coming with an expression of evil foreboding, or it might be the actual sight of the abomination which has dealt him a stunning blow. Quivering with horror and pain he has sunk down.¹ He has sojourned on the mountain forty days and nights and he is weary. A horror, a great turn of fortune, a crime, even happiness itself, can be perceived in a single moment, but not grasped in its essence, its depths or its consequences. For an instant it seems to Moses that his work is destroyed and he despairs utterly of his people. In such moments the inner emotions betray themselves involuntarily in small movements. He lets the Tables slip from his right hand on to the stone seat; they have come to rest on their corner there and are pressed by his forearm against the side of his body. His hand, however, comes in contact with his breast and beard and thus, by the turning of the head to the spectator's right, it draws the beard to the left and breaks the symmetry of that masculine adornment. It looks as though his fingers were playing with his beard as an agitated man nowadays might play with his watch-chain. His left hand is buried in his garment over the lower part of his body - in the Old Testament the viscera are the seat of the emotions - but the left leg is already drawn back and the right put forward; in the next instant he will leap up, his mental energy will be transposed from feeling into action, his right arm will move, the Tables will fall to the ground, and the shameful trespass will be expiated in torrents of blood. . . .' 'This is not yet the moment of tension of an act. Pain of mind still dominates him and almost paralyzes him.'

¹ It should be remarked that the careful arrangement of the mantle over the knees of the sitting figure invalidates this first part of Justi's view. On the contrary, this would lead us to suppose that Moses is represented as sitting there in calm repose until he is startled by some sudden perception.¹

Knapp takes the same view, except that he does not introduce the doubtful point at the beginning of the description, and carries the idea of the slipping Tables further. 'He who just now was alone with his God is distracted by earthly sounds. He hears a noise; the noise of singing and dancing wakes him from his dream; he turns his eyes and his head in the direction of the clamour. In one instant fear, rage and unbridled passion traverse his huge frame. The Tables begin to slip down, and will fall to the ground and break when he leaps to his feet and hurls the angry thunder of his words into the midst of his backsliding people. . . . This is the moment of highest tension which is chosen. . . .' Knapp, therefore, emphasizes the element of preparation for action, and disagrees with the view that what is being represented is an initial inhibition due to an overmastering agitation.

It cannot be denied that there is something extraordinarily attractive about attempts at an interpretation of the kind made by Justi and Knapp. This is because they do not stop short at the general effect of the figure, but are based on separate features in it; these we usually fail to notice, being overcome by the total impression of the statue and as it were paralysed by it. The marked turn of the head and eyes to the left, whereas the body faces forwards, supports the view that the resting Moses has suddenly seen something on that side to rivet his attention. His lifted foot can hardly mean anything else but that he is preparing to spring up;¹ and the very unusual way in which the Tables are held (for they are most sacred objects and are not to be brought into the composition like any ordinary accessory) is fully accounted for if we suppose they have slipped down as a result of the agitation of their bearer and will fall to the ground. According to this view we should believe that the statue represents a special and important moment in the life of Moses, and we should be left in no doubt of what that moment is.

But two remarks of Thode's deprive us of the knowledge we thought to have gained. This critic says that to his eye the Tables are not slipping down but are 'firmly lodged'. He notes the 'calm, firm pose of the right hand upon the resting Tables'. If we look for ourselves we cannot but admit unreservedly that Thode is right. The Tables are firmly placed and in no danger of slipping. Moses' right hand supports them or is supported by them. This does not explain the position in which they are held, it is true, but that position cannot be used in favour of the interpretation of Justi and others.

The second observation is still more final. Thode reminds us that 'this statue was planned as one of six, and is intended to be seated. Both facts contradict the view that Michelangelo meant to record a particular historical moment. For, as regards the first consideration, the plan of representing a row of seated figures as types of human beings - as the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* - excluded a representation of a particular historic episode. And, as regards the second, the representation of a seated posture - a posture necessitated by the artistic

conception of the whole monument - contradicts the nature of that episode, namely, the descent of Moses from Mount Sinai into the camp.'

¹ Although the left foot of the reposeful seated figure of Giuliano in the Medici Chapel is similarly raised from the ground.²

If we accept Thode's objection we shall find that we can add to its weight. The figure of Moses was to have decorated the base of the tomb together with five other statues (or according to a later sketch, with three). Its immediate counterpart was to have been a figure of Paul. One other pair, representing the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* in the shape of Leah and Rachel - standing, it is true - has been executed on the tomb as it still exists in its sadly aborted form. The Moses thus forms part of a whole and we cannot imagine that the figure was meant to arouse an expectation in the spectator that it was on the point of leaping up from its seat and rushing away to create a disturbance on its own account. If the other figures were not also represented as about to take violent action - and it seems very improbable that they were - then it would create a very bad impression for one of them to give us the illusion that it was going to leave its place and its companions, in fact to abandon its role in the general scheme. Such an intention would have a chaotic effect and we could not charge a great artist with it unless the facts drove us to it. A figure in the act of instant departure would be utterly at variance with the state of mind which the tomb is meant to induce in us.

The figure of Moses, therefore, cannot be supposed to be springing to his feet; he must be allowed to remain as he is in sublime repose like the other figures and like the proposed statue of the Pope (which was not, however, executed by Michelangelo himself). But then the statue we see before us cannot be that of a man filled with wrath, of Moses when he came down from Mount Sinai and found his people faithless and threw down the Holy Tables so that they were broken. And, indeed, I can recollect my own disillusionment when, during my first visits to San Pietro in Vincoli, I used to sit down in front of the statue in the expectation that I should now see how it would start up on its raised foot, dash the Tables of the Law to the ground and let fly its wrath. Nothing of the kind happened. Instead, the stone image became more and more transfixed, an almost oppressively solemn calm emanated from it, and I was obliged to realize that something was represented here that could stay without change; that this Moses would remain sitting like this in his wrath for ever.

But if we have to abandon our interpretation of the statue as showing Moses just before his outburst of wrath at the sight of the Golden Calf, we have no alternative but to accept one of the hypotheses which regard it as a study of character. Thode's view seems to be the least arbitrary and to have the closest reference to the meaning of its movements. He says, 'Here, as always, he is concerned with representing a certain type of character. He creates the image of a passionate leader of mankind who, conscious of his divine mission as Lawgiver, meets the uncomprehending opposition of men. The only means of representing a man of action of this kind was to accentuate the power of his will, and this was done by a rendering of movement pervading the whole of his apparent quiet, as we see in the

turn of his head, the tension of his muscles and the position of his left foot. These are the same distinguishing marks that we find again in the *vir activus* of the Medici Chapel in Florence. This general character of the figure is further heightened by laying stress on the conflict which is bound to arise between such a reforming genius and the rest of mankind. Emotions of anger, contempt and pain are typified in him. Without them it would not have been possible to portray the nature of a superman of this kind. Michelangelo has created, not a historical figure, but a character-type, embodying an inexhaustible inner force which tames the recalcitrant world; and he has given a form not only to the Biblical narrative of Moses, but to his own inner experiences, and to his impressions both of the individuality of Julius himself, and also, I believe, of the underlying springs of Savonarola's perpetual conflicts.'

This view may be brought into connection with Knackfuss's remark that the great secret of the effect produced by the Moses lies in the artistic contrast between the inward fire and the outward calm of his bearing.

For myself, I see nothing to object to in Thode's explanation; but I feel the lack of something in it. Perhaps it is the need to discover a closer parallel between the state of mind of the hero as expressed in his attitude, and the contrast above-mentioned between his 'outward' calm and 'inward' emotion.

II

Long before I had any opportunity of hearing about psycho-analysis, I learnt that a Russian art-connoisseur, Ivan Lermolieff,¹ had caused a revolution in the art galleries of Europe by questioning the authorship of many pictures, showing how to distinguish copies from originals with certainty, and constructing hypothetical artists for those works whose former supposed authorship had been discredited. He achieved this by insisting that attention should be diverted from the general impression and main features of a picture, and by laying stress on the significance of minor details, of things like the drawing of the fingernails, of the lobe of an ear, of halos and such unconsidered trifles which the copyist neglects to imitate and yet which every artist executes in his own characteristic way. I was then greatly interested to learn that the Russian pseudonym concealed the identity of an Italian physician called Morelli, who died in 1891 with the rank of Senator of the Kingdom of Italy. It seems to me that his method of inquiry is closely related to the technique of psycho-analysis. It, too, is accustomed to divine secret and concealed things from despised or unnoticed features, from the rubbish-heap, as it were, of our observations.

Now in two places in the figure of Moses there are certain details which have hitherto not only escaped notice but, in fact, have not even been properly described. These are the attitude of his right hand and the position of the two Tables of the Law. We may say that this hand forms a very singular, unnatural link, and one which calls for explanation, between the Tables and the wrathful hero's beard. He has been described as running his fingers through his beard and playing with its locks, while the outer edge of his hand rests on the Tables. But this is

plainly not so. It is worth while examining more closely what those fingers of the right hand are doing, and describing more minutely the mighty beard with which they are in contact.²

¹ His first essays were published in German between 1874 and 1876.

² Cf. the illustration.⁵

We now quite clearly perceive the following things: the thumb of the hand is concealed and the index finger alone is in effective contact with the beard. It is pressed so deeply against the soft masses of hair that they bulge out beyond it both above and below, that is, both towards the head and towards the abdomen. The other three fingers are propped upon the wall of his chest and are bent at the upper joints; they are barely touched by the extreme right-hand lock of the beard which falls past them. They have, as it were, withdrawn from the beard. It is therefore not correct to say that the right hand is playing with the beard or plunged in it; the simple truth is that the index finger is laid over a part of the beard and makes a deep trough in it. It cannot be denied that to press one's beard with one finger is an extraordinary gesture and one not easy to understand.

The much-admired beard of Moses flows from his cheeks, chin and upper lip in a number of waving strands which are kept distinct from one another all the way down. One of the strands on his extreme right, growing from the cheek, falls down to the inward-pressing index finger, by which it is retained. We may assume that it resumes its course between that finger and the concealed thumb. The corresponding strand on his left side falls practically unimpeded far down over his breast. What has received the most unusual treatment is the thick mass of hair on the inside of this latter strand, the part between it and the middle line. It is not suffered to follow the turn of the head to the left; it is forced to roll over loosely and form part of a kind of scroll which lies across and over the strands on the inner right side of the beard. This is because it is held fast by the pressure of the right index finger, although it grows from the left side of the face and is, in fact, the main portion of the whole left side of the beard. Thus, the main mass of the beard is thrown to the right of the figure, whereas the head is sharply turned to the left. At the place where the right index finger is pressed in, a kind of whorl of hairs is formed; strands of hair coming from the left lie over strands coming from the right, both caught in by that despotic finger. It is only beyond this place that the masses of hair, deflected from their course, flow freely once more, and now they fall vertically until their ends are gathered up in Moses' left hand as it lies open on his lap.

I have no illusions as to the clarity of my description, and venture no opinion whether the sculptor really does invite us to solve the riddle of that knot in the beard of his statue. But apart from this, the fact remains that the pressure of the right index finger affects mainly the strands of hair from the left side; and that this oblique hold prevents the beard from accompanying the turn of the head and eyes to the left. Now we may be allowed to ask what this arrangement means and to what motives it owes its existence. If it was indeed considerations of linear and

spatial design which caused the sculptor to draw the downward-streaming wealth of hair across to the right of the figure which is looking to its left, how strangely unsuitable as a means does the pressure of a single finger appear to be! And what man who, for some reason or other, has drawn his beard over to the other side, would take it into his head to hold down the one half across the other by the pressure of one finger? Yet may not these minute particulars mean nothing in reality, and may we not be racking our brains about things which were of no moment to their creator?

But let us proceed on the assumption that even these details have significance. There is a solution which will remove our difficulties and afford a glimpse of a new meaning. If the left side of Moses' beard lies under the pressure of his right finger, we may perhaps take this pose as the last stage of some connection between his right hand and the left half of his beard, a connection which was a much more intimate one at some moment before that chosen for representation. Perhaps his hand had seized his beard with far more energy, had reached across to its left edge, and, in returning to that position in which the statue shows it, had been followed by a part of his beard which now testifies to the movement which has just taken place. The loop of the beard would thus be an indication of the path taken by this hand.

Thus we shall have inferred that there had been a retreating motion of the right hand. This one assumption necessarily brings others with it. In imagination we complete the scene of which this movement, established by the evidence of the beard, is a part; and we are brought back quite naturally to the hypothesis according to which the resting Moses is startled by the clamour of the people and the spectacle of the Golden Calf. He was sitting there calmly, we will suppose, his head with its flowing beard facing forward, and his hand in all probability not near it at all. Suddenly the clamour strikes his ear; he turns his head and eyes in the direction from which the disturbance comes, sees the scene and takes it in. Now wrath and indignation lay hold of him; and he would fain leap up and punish the wrongdoers, annihilate them. His rage, distant as yet from its object, is meanwhile directed in a gesture against his own body. His impatient hand, ready to act, clutches at his beard which has moved with the turn of his head, and presses it between his thumb and palm in the iron grasp of his closing fingers. It is a gesture whose power and vehemence remind us of other creations of Michelangelo's. But now an alteration takes place, as yet we do not know how or why. The hand that had been put forward and had sunk into his beard is hastily withdrawn and unclasped, and the fingers let go their hold; but so deeply have they been plunged in that in their withdrawal they drag a great piece of the left side of the beard across to the right, and this piece remains lodged over the hair of the right under the weight of one finger, the longest and uppermost one of the hand. And this new position, which can only be understood with reference to the former one, is now retained.

It is time now to pause and reflect. We have assumed that the right hand was, to begin with, away from the beard; that then it reached across to the left of the figure in a moment of great emotional tension and seized the beard; and that it was finally

drawn back again, taking a part of the beard with it. We have disposed of this right hand as though we had the free use of it. But may we do this? Is the hand indeed so free? Must it not hold or support the Tables? Are not such mimetic evolutions as these prohibited by its important function? And furthermore, what could have occasioned its withdrawal if the motive which made it leave its original position was such a strong one?

Here are indeed fresh difficulties. It is undeniable that the right hand is responsible for the Tables; and also that we have no motive to account for the withdrawal we have ascribed to it. But what if both difficulties could be solved together, and if then and then only they presented a clear and connected sequence of events? What if it is precisely something which is happening to the Tables that explains the movements of the hand?⁸

If we look at the drawing in Fig. 4 we shall see that the Tables present one or two notable features hitherto not deemed worthy of remark. It has been said that the right hand rests upon the Tables; or again that it supports them. And we can see at once that the two apposed, rectangular tablets stand on one corner. If we look closer we shall notice that the lower edge is a different shape from the upper one, which is obliquely inclined forward.

The upper edge is straight, whereas the lower one has a protuberance like a horn on the part nearest to us, and the Tables touch the stone seat precisely with this protuberance. What can be the meaning of this detail?¹ It can hardly be doubted that this projection is meant to mark the actual top side of the Tables, as regards the writing. It is only the top edge of rectangular tablets of this kind that is curved or notched. Thus we see that the Tables are upside-down. This is a singular way to treat such sacred objects. They are stood on their heads and practically balanced on one corner. What consideration of form could have led Michelangelo to put them in such a position? Or was this detail as well of no importance to the artist?

¹ Which, by the way, is quite incorrectly reproduced in a large plaster cast in the collection of the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts.⁹

We begin to suspect that the Tables too have arrived at their present position as the result of a previous movement; that this movement was a consequence of the change of place of the right hand that we have postulated, and in its turn compelled that hand to make its subsequent retreat. The movements of the hand and of the Tables can be co-ordinated in this way: at first the figure of Moses, while it was still sitting quietly, carried the Tables perpendicularly under its right arm. Its right hand grasped their lower edge and found a hold in the projection on their front part. (The fact that this made them easier to carry sufficiently accounts for the upside-down position in which the Tables were held.) Then came the moment when Moses' calm was broken by the disturbance. He turned his head in its direction, and when he saw the spectacle he lifted his foot preparatory to starting up, let go the Tables with his hand and plunged it to the left and upwards into his beard, as though to turn his violence against his own body. The Tables were now consigned to the pressure of his arm, which had to squeeze them against his side. But this support

was not sufficient and the Tables began to slip in a forward and downward direction. The upper edge, which had been held horizontally, now began to face forwards and downwards; and the lower edge, deprived of its stay, was nearing the stone seat with its front corner. Another instant and the Tables would have pivoted upon this new point of support, have hit the ground with the upper edge foremost, and been shattered to pieces. It is to prevent this that the right hand retreated, let go the beard, a part of which was drawn back with it unintentionally, came against the upper edge of the Tables in time and held them near the hind corner, which had now come uppermost. Thus the singularly constrained air of the whole - beard, hand and tilted Tables - can be traced to that one passionate movement of the hand and its natural consequences. If we wish to reverse the effects of those stormy movements, we must raise the upper front corner of the Tables and push it back, thus lifting their lower front corner (the one with the protuberance) from the stone seat; and then lower the right hand and bring it under the now horizontal lower edge of the Tables.

I have procured from the hand of an artist three drawings to illustrate my meaning. Fig. 3 reproduces the statue as it actually is; Figs. 1 and 2 represent the preceding stages according to my hypothesis - the first that of calm, the second that of highest tension, in which the figure is preparing to spring up and has abandoned its hold of the Tables, so that these are beginning to slip down. Now it is remarkable how the two postures in the imaginary drawings vindicate the incorrect descriptions of earlier writers. Gondivi, a contemporary of Michelangelo's, says: 'Moses, the captain and leader of the Hebrews, is seated in the attitude of a contemplative sage, holding the Tables of the Law under his right arm, and leaning his chin on his left hand(!), as one who is weary and full of care.' No such attitude is to be seen in Michelangelo's statue, but it describes almost exactly the view on which the first drawing is based. Lübke writes, together with other critics: 'Profoundly shaken, he grasps with his right hand his magnificent, flowing beard.' This is incorrect if we look at the reproduction of the actual statue, but it is true of the second sketch (Fig. 2). Justi and Knapp have observed, as we have seen, that the Tables are about to slip down and are in danger of being broken. Thode set them right and showed that the Tables were securely held by the right hand; yet they would have been correct if they had been describing not the statue itself but the middle stage of our reconstructed action. It almost seems as if they had emancipated themselves from the visual image of the statue and had unconsciously begun an analysis of the motive forces behind it, and that that analysis had led them to make the same claim as we have done more consciously and more explicitly.

III

We may now, I believe, permit ourselves to reap the fruits of our endeavours. We have seen how many of those who have felt the influence of this statue have been impelled to interpret it as representing Moses agitated by the spectacle of his people fallen from grace and dancing round an idol. But this interpretation had to be given up, for it made us expect to see him spring up in the next moment, break the Tables and accomplish the work of vengeance. Such a conception, however, would fail to harmonize with the design of making this figure, together with three (or

five) more seated figures, a part of the tomb of Julius II. We may now take up again the abandoned interpretation, for the Moses we have reconstructed will neither leap up nor cast the Tables from him. What we see before us is not the inception of a violent action but the remains of a movement that has already taken place. In his first transport of fury, Moses desired to act, to spring up and take vengeance and forget the Tables; but he has overcome the temptation, and he will now remain seated and still, in his frozen wrath and in his pain mingled with contempt. Nor will he throw away the Tables so that they will break on the stones, for it is on their especial account that he has controlled his anger; it was to preserve them that he kept his passion in check. In giving way to his rage and indignation, he had to neglect the Tables, and the hand which upheld them was withdrawn. They began to slide down and were in danger of being broken. This brought him to himself. He remembered his mission and for its sake renounced an indulgence of his feelings. His hand returned and saved the unsupported Tables before they had actually fallen to the ground. In this attitude he remained immobilized, and in this attitude Michelangelo has portrayed him as the guardian of the tomb.

As our eyes travel down it the figure exhibits three distinct emotional strata. The lines of the face reflect the feelings which have won the ascendancy; the middle of the figure shows the traces of suppressed movement; and the foot still retains the attitude of the projected action. It is as though the controlling influence had proceeded downwards from above. No mention has been made so far of the left arm, and it seems to claim a share in our interpretation. The hand is laid in the lap in a mild gesture and holds as though in a caress the end of the flowing beard. It seems as if it is meant to counteract the violence with which the other hand had misused the beard a few moments ago.

But here it will be objected that after all this is not the Moses of the Bible. For that Moses did actually fall into a fit of rage and did throw away the Tables and break them. This Moses must be a quite different man, a new Moses of the artist's conception; so that Michelangelo must have had the presumption to emend the sacred text and to falsify the character of that holy man. Can we think him capable of a boldness which might almost be said to approach an act of blasphemy?²

The passage in the Holy Scriptures which describes Moses' action at the scene of the Golden Calf is as follows: (Exodus xxxii. 7) 'And the Lord said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves: (8) They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto, and said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. (9) And the Lord said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiff-necked people: (10) Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them; and I will make of thee a great nation. (11) And Moses besought the Lord his God, and said, Lord, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand? . . .

'(14) And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people. (15) And Moses turned, and went down from the mount, and the two tables of the testimony were in his hand: the tables were written on both their sides; on the one side and on the other were they written. (16) And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables. (17) And when Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said unto Moses, There is a noise of war in the camp. (18) And he said, It is not the voice of them that shout for mastery, neither is it the voice of them that cry for being overcome; but the noise of them that sing do I hear. (19) And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount. (20) And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and strawed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it. . . .

'(30) And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses said unto the people, Ye have sinned a great sin: and now I will go up unto the Lord; peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin. (31) And Moses returned unto the Lord, and said, Oh! this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold! (32) Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin-; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written. (33) And the Lord said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book. (34) Therefore now go, lead the people unto the place of which I have spoken unto thee. Behold, mine Angel shall go before thee: nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them. (35) And the Lord plagued the people, because they made the calf which Aaron made.'

It is impossible to read the above passage in the light of modern criticism of the Bible without finding evidence that it has been clumsily put together from various sources. In verse 8 the Lord Himself tells Moses that his people have fallen away and made themselves an idol; and Moses intercedes for the wrongdoers. And yet he speaks to Joshua as though he knew nothing of this (18), and is suddenly aroused to wrath as he sees the scene of the worshipping of the Golden Calf (19). In verse 14 he has already gained a pardon from God for his erring people, yet in verse 31 he returns into the mountains to implore this forgiveness, tells God about his people's sin and is assured of the postponement of the punishment. Verse 35 speaks of a visitation of his people by the Lord about which nothing more is told us; whereas the verses 20-30 describe the punishment which Moses himself dealt out. It is well known that the historical parts of the Bible, dealing with the Exodus, are crowded with still more glaring incongruities and contradictions.

The age of the Renaissance had naturally no such critical attitude towards the text of the Bible, but had to accept it as a consistent whole, with the result that the passage in question was not a very good subject for representation. According to the Scriptures Moses was already instructed about the idolatry of his people and had ranged himself on the side of mildness and forgiveness; nevertheless, when he saw the Golden Calf and the dancing crowd, he was overcome by a sudden frenzy of rage. It would therefore not surprise us to find that the artist, in depicting

the reaction of his hero to that painful surprise, had deviated from the text from inner motives. Moreover, such deviations from the scriptural text on a much slighter pretext were by no means unusual or disallowed to artists. A celebrated picture by Parmigiano possessed by his native town depicts Moses sitting on the top of a mountain and dashing the Tables to the ground, although the Bible expressly says that he broke them 'beneath the mount'. Even the representation of a seated Moses finds no support in the text and seems rather to bear out those critics who maintain that Michelangelo's statue is not meant to record any particular moment in the prophet's life.

More important than his infidelity to the text of the Scriptures is the alteration which Michelangelo has, in our supposition, made in the character of Moses. The Moses of legend and tradition had a hasty temper and was subject to fits of passion. It was in a transport of divine wrath of this kind that he slew an Egyptian who was maltreating an Israelite, and had to flee out of the land into the wilderness; and it was in a similar passion that he broke the Tables of the Law, inscribed by God Himself. Tradition, in recording such a characteristic, is unbiased, and preserves the impression of a great personality who once lived. But Michelangelo has placed a different Moses on the tomb of the Pope, one superior to the historical or traditional Moses. He has modified the theme of the broken Tables; he does not let Moses break them in his wrath, but makes him be influenced by the danger that they will be broken and makes him calm that wrath, or at any rate prevent it from becoming an act. In this way he has added something new and more than human to the figure of Moses; so that the giant frame with its tremendous physical power becomes only a concrete expression of the highest mental achievement that is possible in a man, that of struggling successfully against an inward passion for the sake of a cause to which he has devoted himself.

We have now completed our interpretation of Michelangelo's statue, though it can still be asked what motives prompted the sculptor to select the figure of Moses, and a so greatly altered Moses, as an adornment for the tomb of Julius II. In the opinion of many these motives are to be found in the character of the Pope and in Michelangelo's relations with him. Julius II was akin to Michelangelo in this, that he attempted to realize great and mighty ends, and especially designs on a grand scale. He was a man of action and he had a definite purpose, which was to unite Italy under the Papal supremacy. He desired to bring about single-handed what was not to happen for several centuries, and then only through the conjunction of many alien forces; and he worked alone, with impatience, in the short span of sovereignty allowed him, and used violent means. He could appreciate Michelangelo as a man of his own kind, but he often made him smart under his sudden anger and his utter lack of consideration for others. The artist felt the same violent force of will in himself, and, as the more introspective thinker, may have had a premonition of the failure to which they were both doomed. And so he carved his Moses on the Pope's tomb, not without a reproach against the dead pontiff, as a warning to himself, thus, in self-criticism, rising superior to his own nature.

IV

In 1863 an Englishman, Watkiss Lloyd, devoted a little book to the Moses of Michelangelo. I succeeded in getting hold of this short essay of forty-six pages, and read it with mixed feelings. I once more had an opportunity of experiencing in myself what unworthy and puerile motives enter into our thoughts and acts even in a serious cause. My first feeling was one of regret that the author should have anticipated so much of my thought, which seemed precious to me because it was the result of my own efforts; and it was only in the second instance that I was able to get pleasure from its unexpected confirmation of my opinion. Our views, however, diverge on one very important point.

Lloyd remarks in the first place that the usual descriptions of the figure are incorrect, and that Moses is not in the act of rising¹ - that the right hand is not grasping the beard, but that the index-finger alone is resting upon it.² Lloyd also recognizes, and this is much more important, that the attitude portrayed can only be explained by postulating a foregoing one, which is not represented, and that the drawing of the left lock of the beard across to the right signifies that the right hand and the left side of the beard have at a previous stage been in closer and more natural contact. But he suggests another way of reconstructing the earlier contact which must necessarily be assumed. According to him, it was not the hand which had been plunged into the beard, but the beard which had been where the hand now is. We must, he says, imagine that just before the sudden interruption the head of the statue was turned far round to its right over the hand which, then as now, was holding the Tables of the Law. The pressure (of the Tables) against the palm of the hand caused the fingers to open naturally beneath the flowing locks of the beard, and the sudden turn of the head to the other side resulted in a part of the beard being detained for an instant by the motionless hand and forming the loop of hair which is to be looked on as a mark of the course it has taken - its 'wake', to use Lloyd's own word.

¹ 'But he is not rising or preparing to rise; the bust is fully upright, not thrown forward for the alteration of balance preparatory for such a movement. . . .' (Lloyd, 1863, 10).

² 'Such a description is altogether erroneous; the fillets of the beard are detained by the right hand but they are not held, nor grasped, enclosed or taken hold of. They are even detained but momentarily - momentarily engaged, they are on the point of being free for disengagement' (ibid., 11).

In rejecting the other possibility, that of the right hand having previously been in contact with the left side of the beard, Lloyd has allowed himself to be influenced by a consideration which shows how near he came to our interpretation. He says that it was not possible for the prophet, even in very great agitation, to have put out his hand to draw his beard across to the right. For in that case his fingers would have been in an entirely different position; and, moreover, such a movement would have allowed the Tables to slip down, since they are only supported by the pressure of the right arm - unless, in Moses' endeavour to save them at the last moment, we think of them as being 'clutched by a gesture so awkward that to imagine it is profanation'.

It is easy to see what the writer has overlooked. He has correctly interpreted the anomalies of the beard as indicating a preceding movement, but he has omitted to apply the same explanation to the no less unnatural details in the position of the Tables. He examines only the data connected with the beard and not those connected with the Tables, whose position he assumes to be the original one. In this way he closes the door to a conception like ours which, by examining certain insignificant details, has arrived at an unexpected interpretation of the meaning and aim of the figure as a whole.

But what if both of us have strayed on to a wrong path? What if we have taken too serious and profound a view of details which were nothing to the artist, details which he had introduced quite arbitrarily or for some purely formal reasons with no hidden intention behind? What if we have shared the fate of so many interpreters who have thought they saw quite clearly things which the artist did not intend either consciously or unconsciously? I cannot tell. I cannot say whether it is reasonable to credit Michelangelo - an artist in whose works there is so much thought striving for expression - with such an elementary want of precision, and especially whether this can be assumed in regard to the striking and singular features of the statue under discussion. And finally we may be allowed to point out, in all modesty, that the artist is no less responsible than his interpreters for the obscurity which surrounds his work. In his creations Michelangelo has often enough gone to the utmost limit of what is expressible in art; and perhaps in his statue of Moses he has not completely succeeded, if his purpose was to make the passage of a violent gust of passion visible in the signs left behind it in the ensuing calm.

78

POSTSCRIPT

(1927)

Several years after the publication of my paper on the Moses of Michelangelo, which appeared anonymously in *Imago* in 1914, Dr. Ernest Jones very kindly sent me a copy of the April number of the *Burlington Magazine* of 1921 (Vol. XXXVIII), which could not fail to turn my interest once more to the interpretation of the statue which I had originally suggested. This number contains (pp. 157-66) a short article by H. P. Mitchell on two bronzes of the twelfth century, now in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, which are attributed to an outstanding artist of that day, Nicholas of Verdun. We possess other works by the same hand in Tournay, Arras and Klosterneuburg, near Vienna; his masterpiece is considered to be the Shrine of the Three Kings in Cologne.

One of the two statuettes described by Mitchell, which is just over 9 inches high, is identifiable beyond all doubt as a Moses, because of the two Tables of the Law which he holds in his hand. This Moses, too, is represented as seated, enveloped in a flowing robe. His face is expressive of strong passion, mixed, perhaps, with grief; and his hand grasps his long beard and presses its strands between palm and thumb as in a vice. He is, that is to say, making the very gesture which I

postulated in Fig. 2 of my former paper as a preliminary stage of the attitude into which Michelangelo has cast him.

A glance at the accompanying illustration will show the main difference between the two compositions, which are separated from each other by an interval of more than three centuries. The Moses of the Lorraine artist is holding the Tables by their top edge with his left hand, resting them on his knee. If we were to transfer them to the other side of his body and put them under his right arm we should have established the preliminary posture of Michelangelo's Moses. If my view of the thrusting of the hand into the beard is right, then the Moses of the year 1180 shows us an instant during his storm of feeling, whilst the statue in S. Pietro in Vincoli depicts the calm when the storm is over.

In my opinion this new piece of evidence increases the probability that the interpretation which I attempted in 1914 was a correct one. Perhaps some connoisseur of art will be able to bridge the gulf in time between the Moses of Nicholas of Verdun and the Moses of the Master of the Italian Renaissance by telling us where examples of representations of Moses belonging to the intervening period are to be found.