

## Demanding the Impossible: Desire and Social Change

*T*he traditional pessimism of psychoanalysis with respect to social change is well known. Even from its greatest innovators, we are used to a kind of jaded critique of social reform or political engagement as enthusiasm, wish-fulfillment, or worse: Freud's dismissal of Marxism as a delusional worldview<sup>1</sup> or Lacan's telling the student militants of May '68 that "what you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master: you will get one" (*Other* 207). Both judgments point to the imaginary character of most social and political projects, or their tendency to aid and abet the idealization and wish fulfillment that are the hallmarks of the ego's repression of the subject of the unconscious: a subject that appears only as a rupture in the world and that has no social dimension. While such a critique is undeniably justified from many points of view, an unfortunate side effect is a refusal among psychoanalysts and psychoanalytically informed critics to consider the social and political spheres as sites where the subject (and not merely the ego) intervenes, sites that may be transformed by subjective desire.

At the same time, psychoanalysis does not always live up to its own standards where respect of the subject is concerned. Lacan complains

of the displacement or erasure of Freud's invention of psychoanalysis—a psychoanalysis centered on the experience of the subject and the transformative potential of desire—by a supportive psychotherapy centered on the ego and its accommodation to the world. He accuses the practitioners of ego psychology not only of limiting themselves to the concerns of the obsessional neurotic but of themselves behaving neurotically in repressing the subject of the unconscious and the radical challenge it presents to the ego (*Écrits* 237–68). One form this repression takes is the imposition of structures like the Oedipus complex as generic theoretical paradigms, or the tendency to “diagnose” the subject rather than listening to his or her speech. The result is that the analytic maneuver tends to become mired in the same impasses as the group psychology: an investment in the ego to the exclusion of the subject, and an appeal to interpersonal relationships to facilitate repression. For Lacan, analysis has to be about something other than accommodation to the world, successful adaptation, or integration. His “return to Freud” is a return not merely to the conceptual or methodological foundations of psychoanalysis but to its cause: the desire of Freud, the desire that founded the practice of psychoanalysis and without which it could not have been born.

The question I would like to consider here is: what is the relationship between desire and social change? In thinking about this article I was inspired by the recent work of Peter Hallward, which is concerned with the role of will or determination in changing the world. Hallward calls for a “dialectical voluntarism” that would affirm the “practical primacy of will,” condensed in the adage that “Where there’s a will there’s a way” (“What’s” 154). He frames his project with a reference to the charge famously leveled at philosophy by Karl Marx: “[P]hilosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” But while broadly Marxist in inspiration, his work departs from most materialist approaches to social change in foregrounding the experience of the willing subject rather than broad social and historical dynamics. In this context, he discusses a number of historical figures whose examples have galvanized popular movements, and the slogans that condense their exemplarity: “What would Jesus do?” in the context of the liberation theologies so influential in Latin America; but also, “What would Mao do?”; “What would Robespierre do?” and so forth (“Matters”). In these examples, I was intrigued by the tension between the individual act and the people who bear witness to it, or the notion that the ethical stance or subjective position of an individual might incite a change of position in other people.

Of course, these examples instantly raise all kinds of questions and objections relative to what Freud called the group psychology, in which the leader, through identification, is called upon to function as an ideal ego for each member of the group. Freud emphasizes that identification can never be a foundation for real willing, because it works to repress castration by making some Other responsible for guaranteeing the ego. The same is true of ideals and values, no matter how lofty.

Yet I would not want to dismiss the interest of these examples on that basis or deny their significance as forces for change. In underscoring the function of the leader, founder, or model, Hallward is interested not in the role of the ideal in soliciting identification, but in the force of will and the voluntarist dimension of change. His examples are all the more provocative in that they include not only the great leaders who have given their names to religious and political movements but individuals working in relative obscurity whose apparently very modest acts have unexpectedly brought about important social transformations: a man whose decision to clear room for a soccer field in a poor slum in Port-au-Prince led to a mass mobilization of young people who reclaimed their neighborhood from the multinational corporations that had set up business there, or a doctor working in the poor highlands of Haiti (Harvard epidemiologist Paul Farmer) who decides to give his patients the most expensive and complex treatment for drug-resistant tuberculosis, despite its unfeasibility, on the grounds that a human life is worth as much in Haiti as it is in the developed world.<sup>2</sup> The larger question these examples raise is whether the subjective stance of one person can initiate broad change or inspire collective action by means other than the group psychology: in other words, not by appealing to a particular set of values or ideals, or by cementing the group through identification or libidinal cathexes, or by offering some kind of external or even transcendental foundation for the ego, but by foregrounding the experience of the willing subject.

The present essay takes inspiration from this project. But I propose to take a more psychoanalytic approach to the problem by considering the individual act not principally as an instance of will or determination, but for the way it lays bare the stakes of desire. What distinguishes desire from determination or will? Fundamentally, it raises the question of where this determination or resolve originates, of what within us is determined or willing. One can be determined to live a good or a moral or a selfless life, and yet this determination often fails inasmuch as it is fundamentally in conflict with an unconscious position, which it attempts to repress or

control. Desire, on the other hand, supposes the subject of the unconscious: it is not sustained by identification with something “outside” the subject that would allow it to repress the drives or facilitate its refusal to know anything about the unconscious. When Lacan offers as a formulation of the ethics of psychoanalysis the imperative not to give up on one’s desire—*ne pas céder sur son désir*—he suggests that desire is what admits of no compromise or concession, and that it therefore always bears some relation to death (*Ethics* 319).

Desire is thus immediately in tension with any notion of a collectivity or group; there may be collective ideals, but there is nothing like a collective desire. Nonetheless, desire differs from a private passion or enthusiasm in being negotiated in public. Whence the fundamental link between desire and sublimation: desire gives rise to a new object, an object that did not exist before, that intervenes in the world so as to transform it. But this also means that desire is structurally without object, and thus invariably concerned with an impossible object: it is not a striving toward some object that is in the world, even a principle or ideal. When Hallward links the question of will or determination to the imperative to change the world—to change the *whole world* and to change it *absolutely* and not simply to modify or improve the world<sup>5</sup>—he makes clear that this determination could never be reduced merely to the resolute pursuit of a specific goal, but must instead be understood as the quest for an impossible. Whenever the impossible as such is at stake (and not simply as an impossibility that would be veiled or repressed by a sense of hope or possibility), it is a question of desire. (I am reminded of the slogan of May ’68: “Be objective, demand the impossible.”) Desire is uncompromising, because it takes no account of what is practical, capable of gaining acceptance, or likely to please; it is fidelity to an impossible cause of desire, not fidelity to a constituency.

Willy Apollon writes that “psychoanalysis is a scandalous discipline, insofar as it is founded on the desire of a subject, Freud” (“Psychoanalysis”). In an interview given shortly before his death,<sup>4</sup> Freud spoke of the “desire to know” that guided him for his entire life, a desire to know about what causes the human subject that led him away from the empirical sphere of science and toward an object that could not be verified empirically, but only witnessed in speech. The subject is itself an “impossible object” in this sense, a pure hypothesis that cannot be observed scientifically or explained as a product of culture. In what way is this desire affecting? It is not only inspiring, although that may be part

of it. If it produces effects in other people, it is because an act founded on desire supposes the subject and is therefore fundamentally at odds with any ideal or value.

The interest of the question “What would Jesus do?” for example, is that it makes an implicit distinction between Jesus as a support for identification and Jesus as a subject of desire. The question supposes a kind of immovability in the desire of Jesus, something nonnegotiable: it implies that Jesus would not make concessions, that he would not waver. If the answer to the question is somehow obvious, it is not because it concerns some specific content or principle, but because desire is an orientation or a stance with respect to the impossible object that causes it, and not a *response* to a particular case or circumstance. The question is of a very different order than “What would Jesus say?” or “What would Jesus teach?” because it isn’t a matter of ideals, agendas, or programs. It is also different from “What would Jesus want?” or “What would Jesus tell you to do?” because it is not a matter of demands or of satisfying a leader or an idealized role model by doing what we think he wants.<sup>5</sup>

In his best-selling biography of Dr. Paul Farmer, *Mountains beyond Mountains*, Tracy Kidder offers an extraordinary portrait not only of the man and his unwavering commitment to serve the poor but of the effects that this desire produces in Kidder himself as he accompanies Farmer on his daily rounds over a period of several years. He conveys with remarkable honesty and insight the irritation, resentment, and even hostility that Farmer sometimes provokes in those whose admiration and support for his work are beyond question: Kidder himself, but also the dedicated coworkers and volunteers who collaborate with Farmer on his many projects. The freshness of Kidder’s approach consists not merely in exposing, in the usual biographic mode, the irritating imperfections of the great man (although Farmer, like everyone else, certainly has them), but in revealing how the unwavering or uncompromising quality of his desire itself is irritating: not a distraction or detraction from the force of will that drives his accomplishments, but absolutely of a piece with them. Kidder finds himself becoming exasperated with Farmer at precisely those moments when he gives expression to an uncomfortable truth, takes on a monumental new project widely deemed to be “impossible,” or refuses to turn a blind eye to what almost everyone else manages to accept as inevitable: the gross disparity between the rich and the poor. Desire presents a challenge because it concerns the status of the act and not the affirmation of ideals or beliefs. Indeed, it makes us aware of how the ideals we espouse

make it possible *not* to act. In this case, it provokes an uncomfortable self-examination: why is it that most of us refuse to see the situation of the poor as the scandal that it is? Why do we not do anything about it? This question never comes from Farmer himself, however, who neither proselytizes nor judges the people around him. The challenge has to do with his act itself and its refusal of compromise or concessions. This example suggests that it is easy to embrace the ideals the founder embodies but much more difficult to rise to the challenge of his act or to accept without contestation or resistance the desire that drives him.

Unlike the love at stake in the group psychology, desire invariably appears as something violent, scandalous, or unbearable whose first effect is often to solicit resistance and even aggressivity. Perhaps this explains why betrayal is a leitmotif of all social movements that emerge around the desire of an individual subject and why assassination is so often the fate of the public figures who have marked history with the force of their desire. It may also shed light on the basic problem that groups rarely survive their founders. Once the desire of the founder is no longer at the center, groups tend to dissolve or lose their momentum, or even to become reactionary or repressive. This is the dynamic Freud identifies in *Moses and Monotheism*, where the desire of Moses gives rise to new forms of religious practice and social organization that are rapidly stripped of their force and even brutally repressed by his followers. This is a problem that affects almost all groups. But psychoanalytic groups bear witness to it in a particularly dramatic (or even melodramatic) way. Freud and Lacan were both “betrayed” by a large number of their followers, and both had difficulty finding heirs to continue the work and even found themselves denounced or excommunicated by their disciples. There where desire is most central, it seems that the prospects of a collective undertaking are most uncertain.

In insisting on the way in which collective movements tend to fail or falter, my aim is not to render one more pessimistic judgment on the possibility of bringing about social change (a pessimism that is all too common in psychoanalytic circles), but rather to think about how desire differs from the idealizing love at stake in identification and therefore about its transformative potential.

*Anxiety as a Response to the  
Desire of the Other*

Lacan offers a unique approach to the question of desire when he proposes that anxiety is the affect that responds to the desire of the Other. If love is about the strategies of seduction that sustain the imaginary coherence of the ego, desire is linked to the anxiety induced by the loss of the ego ideals and the encounter with castration. The corollary is that the practice of psychoanalysis is founded on the confrontation with the anxiety provoked by the desire of the Other and on the assumption that only this can result in real change.

What, then, is at stake in the “desire of the Other,” and how does it relate to the question of the leader or founder? What does desire mean, if not passion, will, or determination? What exactly provokes anxiety, and what light does it shed on the problem of social change?

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud already underscores the relationship between anxiety and the loss of the leader as ideal ego. He argues that panic erupts when the emotional ties binding the members of the group break down, or when the group experiences the loss of the leader:

*The typical occasion of the outbreak of a panic is very much as it is represented in Nestroy's parody of Hebbel's play about Judith and Holofernes. A soldier cries out: "The general has lost his head!" and thereupon all the Assyrians take to flight. The loss of the leader in some sense or other, the birth of misgivings about him, brings on the outbreak of panic, though the danger remains the same; the mutual ties between the members of the group disappear, as a rule, at the same time as the tie with their leader. (97)*

He further specifies that the panic associated with the loss of the leader is the group equivalent of anxiety in the individual. Unlike fear, which is provoked by an increase in danger, panic and anxiety are both provoked by the “cessation of emotional ties,” the loosening of the libidinal cathexes that support the ego through identification (97).

Lacan approaches the same problem from a different angle, advancing the thesis that in anxiety, the subject is affected by the desire of the Other (*Television* 82). The analysis of children reveals that anxiety emerges when the child becomes aware of the lack in the Other, which

first takes shape in the mother's desire. When the child perceives that the mother is wanting something, anxiety responds with the question: what can I do to satisfy her? The logic of perversion in particular reveals that the child imputes demand to the mother in an attempt to disavow her desire and so avoid confronting the lack in the Other. The pervert offers himself up as an object for the mother (or undertakes to restore the missing phallus) so as to avoid confronting her "castration," which really means the lack of any object that would satisfy her desire (including the child himself). The point is that the mother's desire, like all desire, cannot be satisfied. It therefore points to the structural lack of the object that for Lacan is the essence of castration. His reading of Freud emphasizes the interdependence of two faces of castration: the lack in the subject and the lack in the Other. The child first encounters the possibility of his own castration in the castration (or lack) of the mother (*Écrits* 576), just as the soldier of Freud's example is struck with castration anxiety at the news that the general has lost his head.<sup>6</sup> This is why the child imputes demand to the mother, or the soldier surrenders to the will of his superior officer: the question "What does she or he want (from me)?" leaves open the possibility that there is an object that could satisfy desire or that the relation with another person might represent a solution to the impasse of castration.

These are two possible avatars of the fantasy of seduction, where the ego comes into being as an object for an Other who is either held responsible for castration or called upon to solve it. In "The Mirror Stage," Lacan suggests that the child attempts to build an ideal ego by identifying with the image it takes to be the object of the Other's love or desire, seeking in its gaze a unified body image that would allow it to repress the fragmented body of the drives (*Écrits* 75–81). His analysis implies that such a mechanism potentially subtends every interpersonal relationship, from the familial to the social to the religious or political. If the function of the interpersonal relation or group psychology is to support the ego by sustaining the strategies of seduction, psychoanalysis takes aim at seduction and the ego it sustains in order to gain access to the subject of the unconscious, the subject of desire.

Psychoanalysis is not simply antagonistic to social mechanisms, however, but itself a form of social tie: one that opposes the symbolic articulation of desire and castration to the imaginary mechanisms of love and seduction. Apollon describes the transference that inaugurates the analytic experience as a "minimal social link" ("Psychoanalysis"), in which analysand and analyst are bound not by love or identification,



but by the desire of the analyst that solicits a response from the subject's unconscious in the form of a dream. The signifiers of the dream contest the ego narrative and the social values, norms, and ideals that sustain the ego by aiding and abetting its repression of the unconscious. But the logic of the transference reveals that only the desire of the Other can solicit the unconscious and so provoke a shift in the subject's position. This is why analysis requires two people. Where the analysand is concerned, repression stands in the way of change; the subject's position is determined by a *je n'en veux rien savoir*, a "not wanting to know anything about it" that precludes any examination of the fantasy structuring his or her symptoms and relations with others. The desire of a second subject, a desire to know about what causes the subject, is necessary to solicit the response of the unconscious in the form of signifiers attesting to another knowledge (or *savoir*) about the subject's encounter with the real of the drives.

Like Hallward's "What would X do?" which underscores the role of one subject's act in transforming the position of a second subject, the logic of the transference reveals that under certain conditions, the desire of one subject can have the effect of liberating another subject's desire and allowing it to find expression in an act. Of course, only a subject can act: there is nothing like a shared or collective act. But the singular act of a subject may *respond* to the act of another person without taking it as a model or ideal. The mechanism of the transference reveals that the difference inheres in the operation of anxiety, which makes the act of the other a motor of change and not the source of stability or support implied in identification. This is because anxiety exposes the *lack* implied in the desire of the Other.

The analyst does not know anything about what is happening to the subject; she or he has no generalizable knowledge or expertise born of experience that might be applied indifferently to each new case. But the analyst *desires* to know, and this desire is what drives the transference by soliciting a response from the subject's unconscious.<sup>7</sup> What, then, provokes anxiety? The analyst's desire points to a *lack in knowledge*, a lack the ego narrative attempts to repress through recourse to the seduction fantasy that rationalizes or compensates for castration.<sup>8</sup> It therefore sets in motion the process that will lead to the falling away of the seduction fantasy and the displacement of the ego by the subject of the unconscious.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud points to the indispensable role of affects in confirming the operation of the transference. While dream thoughts are subject to distortion through condensation and displacement, affect leads infallibly to the latent dream thoughts because

it does not undergo alteration.<sup>9</sup> Anxiety is *the* affect of psychoanalysis, because it responds to the analyst's desire to know by overcoming the censorship applied to unconscious thoughts.<sup>10</sup> Only by traversing this anxiety can the subject come to have another knowledge about what is happening to him or her, and thus find liberation from the repetition-compulsion of the fantasy.

While psychoanalysis may be unique among forms of the social tie in explicitly placing anxiety at the center, it also draws out something that is implicit in some of the most significant examples of social transformation, if not always noticed or emphasized. The remainder of this essay will be concerned with three examples of social tie that are structured around the desire of the founder and the anxiety it induces: the interdiction of sacrifice and the worship of an absent God in the religion of Moses, the role of the transference in Freud's invention of psychoanalysis, and the "love of the enemy" in the discourse of Jesus.

What might be gained by considering the desire of the founder that prompts social or political change alongside the desire of the analyst? The role of the analyst's desire in installing the transference suggests that at the level of the subject, real change necessarily involves the falling away of imaginary supports and thus the loss of ideals and values as motives for action. Moses and Jesus, in the respective challenges they present to the Jewish people, might in this sense be understood as early avatars or anticipations of the analyst's function. Both figures have the effect of completely transforming—indeed dismantling—an existing conception of God. They could therefore be understood as opposing desire (an intervention in the world that makes no concessions, even to the point of death) to the appeal to an all-powerful Other who is charged with the subject's fate. In this sense, they anticipate the evacuation or dismantling of the Imaginary Other of the seduction fantasy that is the first aim of the analytic experience, without which it is impossible for the subject to engage his own desire.

The clinical context in turn sheds light on the violent resistance and repression that erupted in response to the founding acts of Moses and Jesus and offers some insight into the structural antagonism between the founder's desire and the possibility of a collective movement. At the same time, the examples of Moses and Jesus develop or draw out a dimension of the analytic experience that is not always given sufficient weight or attention, even within the clinical context: that desire must find expression in an *act* or in the production of a new object that intervenes in the world so as to transform it.

This is the essence of sublimation, in which the absolutely singular and subjective nature of desire manages to find expression in the production of an object that is collectively valorized. In his *Three Essays*, Freud maintains that the sublimated form of the drive cannot be characterized without reference to the object. Sublimation differs from the fantasy in providing a direct satisfaction of the drive through “objects that are socially valorized, objects of which the group approves, insofar as they are objects of public utility” (Lacan, *Ethics* 94).<sup>11</sup> This is the possibility Freud explores in his analysis of the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci. If Leonardo’s *Madonna and Child with Saint Anne* originates in a childhood fantasy, then what makes his painting a great masterpiece and not merely a neurotic symptom? The answer is that in transforming the pictorial space in such a way as to give visibility to his own psychic object, Leonardo makes the artwork into an object of sublimation by expanding the boundaries of what can be seen (*Leonardo* 76, 79–81, 132–34). The collective dimension of sublimation is what accounts for the motif of the “great man” that appears in so many of Freud’s cultural analyses: the “great man” is someone whose object constitutes a sublimation not only for himself but for his age.

*The Murder of Moses,  
the Leader Who Would Not Lead*

Sublimation for Freud is practically synonymous with the name of Moses, the ultimate example of the “great man.”<sup>12</sup> In Freud’s reconstruction of the Exodus story, Moses the Egyptian introduces the uncultured Hebrew tribes to the rigorous monotheism he learned in the court of the Pharaoh Ahkenaton, which teaches that “the deity disdained sacrifice and ceremonial and asked only for faith and a life in truth and justice” (*Moses* 51). Moses is a leader who evacuates the place of the leader, who undercuts the logic of identification binding the group and refounds the collective undertaking on a nonimaginary basis. This function is most evident in the first tablet of the Mosaic Decalogue, which prohibits worshipping idols, making images of God, or invoking the divine name. In consigning God to the place of the unrepresentable, the law is the sublimation that allows the collectivity to explore the absence or loss of the leader in a way that promotes and sustains the desire of the Other, rather than repressing it.

Immanuel Kant makes a similar argument in a celebrated passage from the *Critique of Judgment*, which describes the second commandment of the Hebrew Decalogue as the “most sublime passage in the

Jewish law,” because it facilitates a purely “negative exhibition of the infinite” in which there is no sensible support for the imagination (135):

*Perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law is the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, etc. This commandment alone can explain the enthusiasm that the Jewish people in its civilized era felt for its religion when it compared itself with other peoples, or can explain the pride that Islam inspires. The same holds also for our presentation of the moral law, and for the predisposition within us for morality. It is indeed a mistake to worry that depriving this presentation of whatever could commend it to the senses will result in its carrying with it no more than a cold and lifeless approval without any moving force or emotion. It is exactly the other way round. For once the senses no longer see anything before them, while yet the unmistakable and indelible idea of morality remains, one would sooner need to temper the momentum of an unbounded imagination so as to keep it from rising to the level of enthusiasm, than to seek to support these ideas with images and childish devices for fear that they would otherwise be powerless. That is also why governments have gladly permitted religion to be amply furnished with such accessories: they were trying to relieve every subject of the trouble, yet also of the ability, to expand his soul's forces beyond the barriers that one can choose to set for him so as to reduce him to mere passivity and so make him more pliable. (135)*

What Kant calls the “dynamically sublime contemplation of might” (119) is linked to the psychic function of sublimation in being concerned with an object (the “indelible idea of morality”) that does not properly speaking “exist,” that is not available to sense perception or the imagination, but that may nonetheless be explored by means of the commandment. The law is an object of sublimation that allows for the pursuit of an impossible or inexistent object without refusing its negative character or seeking to recover it in the real: it substitutes a “purely negative exhibition” for a positive representation, facilitating the subject’s “expansion of his soul” rather than erecting barriers against it.

All of this sounds very good. So why, according to Freud, is Moses murdered? He argues that the Mosaic religion does not simply allow

the subject to “expand his soul” in the absence of barriers or supports, but introduces a fundamental absence or lack there where the totemic structure puts the all-powerful father that functions as the ideal ego for each member of the fraternal pact.

Freud hypothesizes that the people’s lingering guilt over the repressed primal murder is the source of their initial enthusiasm for the new religion, which exalted the primeval father as the source of all life and so satisfied their craving for a powerful ideal ego. The great Moses was not satisfied with a mere father cult, however, but set forth a rigorous ethical doctrine that attempted to “leave a permanent imprint on their character” by encouraging them to abandon their magical practices and “to advance in intellectuality and its encouragement of sublimations” (*Moses* 85–86). This Mosaic innovation failed to catch on with the broad mass of the Hebraic people, however, who never completely overcame the superstitions and hostilities of the totemic mind. Freud suggests that the episode of the golden calf encodes the people’s falling away from the new religion and demand for new father substitutes, which eventually leads them to repeat the original murder on Moses himself. Although an elite minority of the Jewish people (the priestly class) manages to keep the Mosaic message alive and preserve his vision for later generations, the purity of this rational monotheism could at best be said to exist alongside—rather than in place of—all the rest: the broad mass of the people are still subject to the totemic logic and the group psychology that is its social and political expression.

In his own reading of the Mosaic legacy, Lacan explores the psychic function of sacrifice in a way that casts new light on the repression of the Other’s desire and the lack it exposes. When Moses teaches that the Deity “spurns [disdains] sacrifice,” he does not simply relieve the Israelites of the oppressive demands of a bloodthirsty deity but also takes away the sacrificial object whose function is to repress the Other’s desire by giving form to the *object a*: the purely mental object of the fantasy that has no correlate in reality. In the process, he not only dismantles the all-powerful God of the original Hebraic religion but obliges the Israelites to confront the lack in the Other and the anxiety it provokes.

Lacan suggests that the Mosaic religion marks a radical break from its antecedents in being organized not around the demand or jouissance of an all-powerful being, but around “the desire of a God who is the God of Moses” (*Television* 90). He elaborates his reading through a commentary of the Sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:1–14).<sup>15</sup> On God’s orders,

Abraham binds his son on the altar and prepares to sacrifice him as a burnt offering. But as he lifts his knife over the boy and prepares to slit his throat, the angel of the Lord appears beside him and stays his hand.

Lacan declares that “a God is something one encounters in the real, inaccessible. It is indicated by what doesn’t deceive—anxiety” (*Television* 90). But what exactly provokes anxiety? Until this moment, Abraham sees God as a God of demand or jouissance; the proof is that he is prepared to sacrifice everything to him. God’s bloodthirsty demands are not what give rise to his anxiety, however:

*[P]rior to that restraining gesture, Abraham has [. . .] bound [Isaac’s] hand to his feet like a ram for the sacrifice. Before waxing emotional, as is customary on such occasions, we might remember that sacrificing one’s little boy to the local Elohim was quite common at the time—and not only at the time, for it continued so late that it was constantly necessary for the Angel of the Name [. . .] to stop the Israelites, who were about to start it up again [. . .]. Don’t reproach me for having made too short shrift [. . .] of Abraham’s feelings, for, upon opening a little book that dates from the end of the eleventh century by one Rashi, [. . .] you would be quite astonished to hear him give voice to a latent dialogue sung between Abraham and God, who is what is at stake in the angel. When Abraham learns from the angel that he is not there in order to immolate Isaac, Rashi has him say: What then? If that is what is going on, have I thus come here for nothing? I am at least going to give him a slight wound to make him shed a little blood. Would you like that? (93; original emphases)*

In Lacan’s reading, sacrifice is not a gesture of propitiation or submission, but a preemptive act whose aim is to avoid any confrontation with the Other’s desire or lack. Rather than staging the demands of a ruthless and capricious God, the episode really instantiates the *interdiction of sacrifice* that obliges the subject of the covenant to confront his own anxiety by acknowledging the lack of any object that might satisfy the Other’s desire. Charles Shepherdson suggests that the importance of this transformation is that it reveals a God who is lacking, who wants something, but who does not want Abraham to take responsibility for his lack or try to figure out what would satisfy him; instead, Abraham has to be able to tolerate the anxiety of not knowing what the other wants, as opposed to the security

of merely doing God's bidding. In the words of Psalm 51: "For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering."

In his seminar on anxiety, Lacan develops this argument by explaining that sacrifice has nothing to do with offerings or gifts. Its true function is to entangle the Other in the network of desire and so be relieved of one's own anxiety. He notes that the practice of sacrifice assumed its importance at a time when the gods were part of the fabric of everyday life; its true objective was to figure out "whether these gods desired something":

*Sacrifice consisted in acting as if they desired just like us, because if they desire just like us, then a has the same structure. This doesn't necessarily mean that they're going to eat whatever we sacrifice to them, or even that it's of any use to them at all; the important thing is that they desire it, and, more importantly, that it doesn't cause them any anxiety. There is a trait that I don't believe anyone, until now, has ever explained in a satisfying way—it was always specified that the victims must not have any flaws or blemishes [devaient être sans tache]. Now, you will recall what I've said to you about the flaw or stain at the level of the visual field. With the flaw we see emerge the possibility of the resurgence, in the field of desire, of what is there behind it, hidden; for example, that eye whose relation to this field must necessarily be elided if desire is going to remain, [. . .] and that allows it to keep anxiety at bay. When one ensnares the gods in the trap of desire, it is essential not to awaken their anxiety. (L'angoisse 321)*

The underlying logic of sacrifice is that the Other has to be able to handle the objects that cause us anxiety (or, even better, be willing to take them off our hands, whether or not they are of any use to him). The demand that the victim be unblemished or "pure" really works to repress the fact that the object offered up is not a "good" object, but an object of anxiety. Lacan links it to what psychoanalysis identifies as the first gift, the anal object. His own feces is the first part of himself that the child relinquishes; importantly, though, it is an object that he doesn't know what to do with, that must be disposed of somehow and that has no real value, no utility: as such, it becomes the gift par excellence, what is "generously" offered up precisely because one must get rid of it at all costs. Anxiety erupts when God is no longer willing to take these "gifts," no longer able to dispose of them for us.

In foregrounding the question of God's desire, the Mosaic religion substitutes for the jouissance of an all-powerful Other a law-based observance predicated on lack. In Lacan's words,

*Here may be marked the knife blade separating God's jouissance from what in that tradition is presented as his desire. [. . .] That is the key to the mystery, in which may be read the aversion of the Jewish tradition concerning what exists everywhere else. The Hebrew hates the metaphysico-sexual rites which unite in celebration the community to God's jouissance. He accords special value to the gap separating desire and fulfillment. The symbol of that gap we find in the same context of El Shadday's relation to Abraham, in which, primordially, is born the law of circumcision, which gives as a sign of the covenant between the people and the desire of he who has chosen them what?—that little piece of flesh sliced off. (Television 94)*

When he describes the "little piece of flesh sliced off" as the symbol of the gap separating desire from jouissance, Lacan suggests that the severed foreskin is not an object of "sacrifice" but an inscription of lack: a lack that the logic of sacrifice is designed to circumvent, by disposing of anxiety.<sup>14</sup> In its affirmation of the gap separating desire and fulfillment, the Mosaic tradition underscores not only the impossibility of fulfilling the Other, but the necessity of renouncing such an undertaking. Importantly, though, it signals the castration not only of the human subject but of God himself: if God cannot be satisfied, neither is he all powerful.<sup>15</sup>

Lacan hypothesizes that the fantasy of God's omnipotence (which implies that he is not only *all-powerful* but *powerful everywhere*, without exception) marks the emergence of a specifically obsessional response to the problem of anxiety:

*[T]he correlation of omnipotence with omnivoyance reveals to us what is at stake in this fantasy: the projection of the subject into the field of the ideal, split between, on one side, the specular alter ego, the ideal ego, and on the other, what lies beyond it, the Ego Ideal. At the level that is concerned with covering over anxiety, the Ego Ideal assumes the form of the All-Powerful, the Almighty. It is there that the obsessional seeks and finds the complement of what he needs to constitute himself in desire. (L'angoisse 356–67)*



This is why, no matter what he might say to the contrary, “the obsessional always believes in God: the same God that everyone believes in without believing it—namely, this universal eye that surveys all of our actions” (357). The true atheist, says Lacan, would be the one who manages to eliminate the fantasy of the all-powerful Other altogether.

Lacan’s analysis seems to offer a reexamination of Freud’s account of the group psychology by suggesting that the overestimation of the leader, and the belief in his omnipotence, is concerned not merely with love (or the narcissistic ties of identification that bind group members to the leader as ideal ego) but with the refusal of the lack in the Other that is veiled by the imaginary object of identification. When he states that “the object *petit a* is what falls from the subject in anxiety” (*Television* 82), Lacan seems in part to be alluding to Freud’s thesis concerning the leader as ideal ego. If what falls away from the subject in the experience of anxiety is the leader as *object a* or ideal ego, does this not suggest that to confront desire is to relinquish this object?

While Freud’s analysis suggests that panic anxiety is structurally incompatible with group coexistence, at least in the case of such “artificial” groups as Army and Church (*Group* 93–99), Lacan’s reading of the Sacrifice of Isaac finds in the Mosaic religion an example of a group that is not organized according to this logic and that even accords special value to the falling away of the object and the anxiety that accompanies it. Historically we know that the sublimely unrepresentable God of Moses evolved from a “leader god” or “god of way,” who even in the Book of Exodus takes his place at the front of his people in the form of a column of fire (Buber 125–26). But over the course of the narrative, we witness his transformation first into a God with whom one can no longer identify (exemplified by the ban on graven images), and finally into an entirely absent God who obliges his people to wander the world indefinitely, with no leader to guide them. What this trajectory really attests to is the loss of the leader as the one who cements the identity of the group.

With respect to the question of the group psychology, Lacan’s implicit suggestion seems to be that the Mosaic community is founded not on the repression of panic or anxiety through the emotional bond of love uniting each of the members to its leader, but on the confrontation with the desire or lack of the Other and the anxiety it induces in each member of the covenant. Yet Freud and Lacan both stress that while the Mosaic tradition may be exemplary in the value it accords to the falling away of the object and the anxiety it provokes, the broad mass of the Jews are

unable to tolerate this situation. Freud reads the Israelites' forging of the golden calf as an attempt to reconstruct a leader around whom they can rally—one that immediately follows the handing down of the prohibition on making images (or having “imaginary” ties of identification with the leader) by the God who cannot be seen (*Moses* 47–48). But the ultimate example of the Jews' refusal of the Other's desire is their eventual murder of Moses himself, who is sacrificed precisely for having sustained the lack in the Other.

The paradox is that the Jews must kill Moses—the man who truly led them out of Egypt and secured their freedom—in order to keep alive the fantasy of the leader as ideal ego. After his death Moses is deified as a stern and demanding God, his traits and actions attributed to a fearsome volcano deity who better satisfies the popular imaginary and its craving for an all-powerful Other. The result is that the deeds of the man Moses and the desire that engendered them are effaced by the very legend that immortalizes them as supernatural acts:

*Since the followers of Moses attached so much value to their experience of the Exodus from Egypt, this act of liberation had to be represented as due to Yahweh, and the event was provided with embellishments which gave proof of the terrifying grandeur of the volcano god—such as the pillar of smoke [cloud] which changed at night into a pillar of fire and the storm which laid bare the bed of the sea for a while, so that the pursuers were drowned by the returning waters. [. . .] So, too, the law-giving was represented as occurring not at Kadesh but at the foot of the Mount of God, marked by a volcanic eruption. This account, however, did grave injustice to the memory of the man Moses; it was he and not the volcano god who had liberated the people from Egypt. (Moses 40)*

Freud follows Ernst Sellin in supposing that the murder of Moses “became the basis of all the later Messianic expectations” giving rise to the hope that the man the Jews had murdered would “return from the dead and would lead his remorseful people, and perhaps not them alone, into the kingdom of lasting bliss” (36). This impulse finds its ultimate expression in Pauline Christianity, in which Freud sees the triumphant return of the omnipotent father-God who secures the identity of the ego and supports the fantasy of resurrection (108). The gradual displacement and repression

of the Mosaic innovation could therefore be understood as a refusal to go any longer without a leader or ideal ego, a refusal to live with anxiety—and thus the birth of the group psychology.

In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan suggests that the process of sublimation is concerned not merely with the construction of a new object but with the fall of the imaginary object or ideal ego and the emptiness it exposes: “[I]n every form of sublimation, emptiness is determinative” (130). Religious forms of social organization are therefore inherently at odds with sublimation, since “religion in all its forms consists of avoiding this emptiness. We can illustrate that in forcing the note of Freudian analysis, for the good reason that Freud emphasized the obsessional traits of religious behavior.” Nonetheless, the Mosaic religion reveals that in some instances, religious practice can actually establish the conditions under which sublimation becomes possible. In its case, “a phrase like ‘respecting this emptiness’ perhaps goes further [. . .], the emptiness remains in the center, and that is precisely why sublimation is involved.” In terms of the preceding analysis, the obsessional posture of “avoiding this emptiness” can be witnessed not only in the illusion of an all-powerful, all-seeing Other but in the logics of demand and sacrifice that sustain it. Conversely, the “respect” of emptiness appears in what Lacan calls the “special value the Hebrew accords to the gap separating desire and fulfillment,” which finds expression in the ten commandments of the Mosaic law.

Moses founds an institution (the Jewish law), and this institution is the legacy of his desire. It provides a structure or a space in which the subject can encounter and explore the lack in the Other in a creative manner, without being so consumed by his anxiety that he violently rejects and represses it. This is what we see in the practice of the oral law or Talmud, where the collectivity engages in the exploration of God’s absence as the creative foundation of the rabbinic community. The law is a structure that allows for a work on the absent Other, and in this respect functions as a sublimation for the age (and indeed for subsequent ages, as Kant attests: the sublimation functions not only for members of the Mosaic religion but potentially for anyone who takes up this object). In its negative character, the Decalogue underscores the emptiness at the center of the real, the lack that gives rise to a desire without object that only the signifier can sustain.

### *The Constraint of the Transference*

Freud introduced a radical new conception of the social link when he made this desire and the anxiety it induces the foundation of the new movement he called psychoanalysis. The desire of the analyst is a desire to know about what causes the human being, a desire that necessarily leads to the originary castration that Freud identifies with the uniquely human experience of the drives that detach instinctual energies from their natural aims and objects, structuring human life as a quest for an impossible. This desire is what drives the transference, leading the subject toward the incompleteness of the Other and the castration it implies as the only possible support for desire.

In stripping away the imaginary accoutrements of the Hebraic religion and instituting the absent God of the Decalogue, Moses anticipates the function of the analyst by obliging the Israelites to confront the desire or lack of the Other. But while the institution of law provides a space in which the subject can explore the lack in the Other in a creative way, nothing guarantees that a given subject will actually do so. Although Moses induces anxiety in the Israelites, he is not able to make them abandon their earlier practices simply by imposing the imageless worship of God and banning sacrifice. The result is that for the vast majority, the confrontation with the Other's desire simply provokes repression and violence, and a reversion to the very practices Moses allowed them to evolve away from. His example raises the question of how desire can provoke change, and not simply resistance, hostility, or repression.

This is the question Freud confronts at the beginning of his practice. The failures of his first attempts at analytic therapy reveal the limitations of what Freud will subsequently call "wild psychoanalysis," or the attempt to effect a cure by delivering an interpretation of the patient's symptoms and then calling on her to avow the unconscious thoughts at their origin. Even when the interpretation is correct, it fails to produce enduring results: new symptoms emerge to replace the ones that have been treated, and even the patient's embrace of Freud's interpretation fails to bring relief.<sup>16</sup> How, then, can the analyst effect a shift in the subject's position? The transference is the innovation that responds to this problem. Its structuration of the social link establishes the conditions under which one subject's desire can affect another subject in such a way as to provoke a transformation. By calling upon the subject's unconscious to contest the ego narrative and to construct another *savoir* about what is happening to

her or him, the analyst can *constrain* the subject to change position (and generally avoid being murdered in the process).

While the Mosaic tradition emphasizes the necessity of confronting the desire of the *Other*, it has less to say about the process of becoming a *subject* of desire. The analytic experience is concerned with the transition from the first to the second. First, the analysand must confront the desire of the Other and the anxiety it provokes; next, she or he must assume this desire as a subject.

The analysand has to “traverse” the fantasy, to confront the fall of the Other of seduction such that this fantasy is no longer able to function. But this passage can occur only in response to the constraints imposed by the analyst’s desire. In demanding an analysis, the analysand at the beginning is not looking for anxiety and castration; he or she is looking for a solution, in the form of a life free of suffering. Like the Israelites, the analysand is looking to be led into the promised land, as it were, appealing to the analyst as a “subject supposed to know” (*sujet supposé savoir*), as an expert who will know how to cure the analysand’s symptoms or to lead him or her out of this impasse. But the analysis can advance only if the analyst refuses to occupy this position, instead maintaining the lack in the Other.

At the level of the analytic maneuver, this lack manifests itself in the analyst’s way of listening to the patient. In the way she or he “conducts” the session, the analyst exemplifies the position of the leader who does not lead. This is true on many levels, not least of which is the fact that the analyst generally sits *behind* the patient, where she or he cannot be seen. More importantly, the analyst offers no guidance, advice, or assistance, and generally responds to the patient’s questions or appeals with silence. These are the very elements of Freudian technique that often provoke indignant criticism from those expecting a supportive therapy, who complain that the analyst does not “do anything” or has “nothing to offer.” But Lacan argues that the silence that responds to the subject’s appeal is more generative than any answer or reply, because instead of implicating two interlocutors in an imaginary “conversation” or discourse, it interrupts that conversation and allows something else to emerge: the speech of the unconscious (*Écrits* 206). The analyst can enter into an interpersonal “relationship” or conversation with the patient only at the cost of sustaining the seduction fantasy, by positioning her- or himself in the place of the imaginary Other who is the object of the patient’s appeal or complaint.<sup>17</sup> The insistence on the analyst’s lack or absence is really what

distinguishes Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis from every other major school of analysis and forms the basis of Lacan's critique of ego psychology and of therapy more generally. His reading of Freud stresses that the transference is not the staging of an interpersonal relation (as in the concept of "affective transference"), but a solicitation of the unconscious through a question or a silence, which results in the production of a dream that responds to that question by providing new signifiers.

Maintaining the lack in the Other involves more than silence, however. The lack in the Other is not merely descriptive of the analyst's position but is the object of his desire to know. Willy Apollon, Danielle Bergeron, and Lucie Cantin suggest that the analyst's role is to maintain the "ab-sense of the Other," or what Apollon calls the "unfoundedness" (*l'infondé*) of the symbolic (219). They offer a detailed clinical account of how the constraint of the analyst's desire functions in the treatment of psychosis, which illustrates especially well the movement from seduction to castration.<sup>18</sup>

Like the seduction fantasy of the neurotic, the psychotic delusion ascribes to the Other a sense, a meaning. In his *Memoirs of My Mental Illness*, for example, the psychotic Doctor Schreber speaks of a "flaw in the Order of Things," which the delusion ascribes to the machinations of an ignorant God, a capricious, infantile, and vindictive deity who persecutes men because he does not understand them (Freud, *Psycho-analytic* 24). The aim of the analytic act that sustains the transference is to distinguish the structural lack implied in the "flaw in the Order of Things" from the delusion that seeks to explain it, which posits an Other who is responsible for the defect and casts the subject in the role of a savior charged with the mission of repairing it. To the Imaginary Other of demand or jouissance, the analyst opposes the Symbolic Other of lack. The "ab-sense of the Other" is the structural defect in the Symbolic Other that the subject must confront if he is to be liberated from the fantasy and its particular structuration of the social link.

But he can confront it only on the condition that "the analyst, in the position of the missing Other, upholds and insists upon the flaw in the symbolic" (Apollon et al. 218). Rather than "helping" the psychotic or treating him as an object of care, as the doctor or psychiatrist does, the psychoanalyst does not presume to have any knowledge concerning the subject. With respect to the psychotic, he is in the position of a lacking Other, who listens to his speech with a "learned ignorance" (211). In the analyst, the subject therefore encounters a "listening ear that creates a

kind of rupture in the place of the Other” (212) by desiring to know about something the delusion is unable to account for: “[T]o say that the analyst is in the position of a lacking Other is thus to emphasize that his role is above all to *question the savoir* of the psychotic” (222). The object of his desire to know is not the solution proposed by the delusion, but the traumatic event that prompted its elaboration: an “encounter with a real unassimilable by the signifier, what we have called the defect in the Other” (219).

The analyst’s desire precipitates the fall of the delusional Other by soliciting the elaboration of the signifying chain that allows for the construction of a subjective history. The supposition underlying the analyst’s act is that only the unconscious can provide knowledge about what is happening to the subject: it isn’t a matter of applying a theoretical paradigm or bringing to bear an expertise based on clinical experience. Instead, “the logic of the signifier must come to cast doubt upon the psychotic certainty and object to the delusional interpretation” (224) in the form of dreams that contest the delusion by identifying details in the subject’s personal history that run counter to the work of restoring the Other in which he is engaged, and that begin to allow for the elaboration of another knowledge concerning his encounter with a real that the signifier was unable to contain or assimilate.

Undergoing analysis involves confronting the lack in the Other. But it also involves a fidelity to the unconscious as the “discourse of the Other,” the signifiers produced under transference that allow the patient to construct a *savoir* about his encounter with the Other’s defect:

*Since what is at stake is the production of a savoir that will allow the psychotic to bear the defect in the Other, the constraint applied by the analyst’s desire must accomplish two things at once. It must keep open the question of the hole in the symbolic—its “unfoundedness”—through the representation of a structural defect, linked to language. But at the same time, it must not give up on the requirement that the subject produce a savoir in the field of the signifier. [ . . . ] When it happens that one of the analyst’s questions in the course of a session is left unanswered, and a dream then responds to it by furnishing the elements that allow a forgotten memory to resurface, the psychotic discovers a logic other than that controlled by the imaginary of the delusional solution, or what the imaginary constructs to account for the voices, injunctions, and nonsensical acts produced by the*

*crisis. It is a moment of real vacillation, at which the psychotic can assume the position of an analysand by dedicating himself to the analytic work, to the production of his dreams and the savoir they allow him to construct, rather than to the delusion. (Apollon et al. 223, 225)*

The difference between the delusional knowledge and the *savoir* elaborated under transference is that the latter “sustains him in his relation to the hole in the symbolic” (221), *supposing* the lack in the Other rather than masking it over.

Lacan defines the transference as a “love” for the *savoir* produced by the unconscious, which differs from the love at stake in seduction in supposing castration, rather than refusing it: “The love of truth is the love of this weakness whose veil we have raised; it is the love of what the truth hides, which is called castration” (*Other* 52). The traversal of the fantasy of seduction involves the encounter with castration, or the truth that there is no object that would satisfy desire and no Other who could answer for the effect of the drives. It involves an assumption of the psychic object as an impossible or inexistent object that no one else sees, that no one else wants, that no one else can provide. It therefore implies a kind of radical solitude, the assumption of which allows for a new relation to the social link, not as the scene of the ego and its complaints and demands, or the delusional certainty of the paranoid, but as the scene of ethics.

This is why every analyst has to undergo analysis. The desire of the analyst is the desire of the analysand, the desire of the subject who traversed the fantasy of seduction and discovered through an encounter with castration the transformative potential of the signifier that alone sustains desire.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Love of the Enemy in the Discourse of Jesus***

I will illustrate this passage with the same example discussed by Hallward: the desire of Jesus. I propose to read Jesus on the model of Freud’s attempt to extract the subjectivity of Moses from the idealized figure of legend, by distinguishing the Jesus of ideals from the Jesus whose subjective position echoes in singular instances of speech.<sup>20</sup> My emphasis is on the desire of the mortal man Jesus, rather than the role of the risen Christ as a support for identification.<sup>21</sup> This is, therefore, a different Jesus



than one finds in Freud's *Group Psychology*, which is concerned less with the figure of Jesus himself than with his function and meaning for Paul, for whom Jesus is the redeemer who absolves the sins of men by taking guilt upon himself, thereby vanquishing death once and for all.

If the Mosaic tradition exposes the lack or absence implicit in the unknowable desire of God, Jesus shows what it means not simply to encounter and accept the lack in the Other but to find in the lack of the Other the support for his own desire. His story stages the tension between two modalities of love: the love for the ideal ego and the unified body image it sustains, and the "love for *savoir*" that implies a confrontation with castration and death, which Jesus calls "love of the enemy." With respect to the argument of the previous section, my claim is that Jesus models the position of the subject who undergoes analysis, whose acceptance of the "bitter cup" he has to drink before acceding to the "new kingdom" provides an analogy for the embrace of castration implied in the "love of truth." His story exemplifies the solitude of one who traverses castration, who can never be part of a movement or group.

The early chapters of the Gospels tell how Jesus overcame seduction by assuming the lack in the Other as the condition of his desire. This ethical attitude is given mythical form in the legend that tells how Jesus overcame his temptation by Satan. The diabolical adversary might be read as a figure for the logic of seduction, in which someone else is appealed to as a support for the ego. In the trials imposed by Satan, Jesus is asked to call upon his father to perform miracles, or to secure his own enjoyment by assuming worldly power. In refusing to make these appeals, Jesus vanquishes temptation by assuming and sustaining the lack or absence of the Other as the condition of his desire as a mortal man.

The subsequent chapters of the gospels could be read as the account of Jesus' passage from an analysand to an analyst, or his transformation into someone who assumes the desire of the analyst by apprenticing himself to the discourse of the Other, which he calls "my Father's word." In appealing to the father as a word, and not as an almighty being, Jesus recasts the father not as the support for an imaginary reality, but as the signifier of the lack in the Other, a signifier that is the *product* of the subject's desire and not a substitute for or effacement of it. In the words of the Gospel of John, "No man has ever seen God. It is his only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has declared him" (John 1:18). Jesus is not concerned with the imaginary father, in the form of either the protective parental figure imagined by the child or the guarantor of rights and

justice that Freud identifies with the fantasy of a loving God. Instead, his words point to the function of the symbolic father, whose word supports the subject's desire. What Jesus tells us is that his father's word creates a world in which the subject can live, a world that has nothing to do with the world of existence. Or as he puts it, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). When Jesus refers to God as his father, I do not think this should be interpreted as a claim about his own divinity. Rather, my point is that in the way Jesus speaks of his father, he introduces a completely new understanding of what the father is. The father is neither a man of flesh and blood nor an omnipotent being, but a word that gives eternal life: "Call no man your father on earth; for you have one Father, who is in heaven" (23:9). In testifying to this "heavenly father," Jesus is not so much bearing witness to the existence of an immortal and all-powerful God as revealing the essence of the paternal function, in which the father is first and foremost a symbolic function that sustains the desire of a subject.

In deflecting attention away from the all-powerful God and onto the lacking Other of speech, Jesus also offers a new understanding of love: not the narcissistic love at stake in identification, but a "love for truth" that supposes a confrontation with castration and death. In Lacan's words, what he reveals is that "[t]he love of truth is the love of this weakness whose veil we have raised; it is the love of what the truth hides, which is called castration" (*Other* 52).

This is how I interpret the words Jesus is supposed to have spoken at the moment of his death on the cross—"My Father, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). In my view, this is the episode that best reveals the true stakes of the father's love in the discourse of Jesus. On the eve of the crucifixion, Jesus prays to his father to release him from his destiny, saying "if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (26:39). But he realizes himself that it is not possible and that his father cannot preserve him from what he must undergo. When one of the disciples tries to prevent the police from arresting Jesus, he says: "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the father has given me?" (John 18:11). But while the Father gives this bitter cup, his love also makes it possible for Jesus to face death. As Jesus explains to the disciples: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this from my Father" (10:17–18). With these words, Jesus makes

clear that the father's love is not a means of avoiding castration, but what condenses and distills the creative potential of the symbolic as the support for a desire whose stakes are inseparable from castration.

This understanding of love is what Jesus attempts to transmit to his disciples, and not the narcissistic love or eros at stake in identification. In emphasizing that only those who accept the loss and destruction of everything they hold dear will find life, he makes clear that this love is not a binding force that undoes alienation and death, but a love that involves the loss of the world itself:

*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:34–39)*

The reference to the sword cannot be interpreted as a militant battle cry or revolutionary call to arms. To call for the severing of worldly ties, and in particular the love at stake in the familial relation, is something quite different from waging war on tyranny or injustice in the name of a principle or ideal. What Jesus makes clear is that every worldly attachment must be called into question, must be scrutinized as an obstacle to finding life.

In psychoanalytic terms, his words could be understood as staging the tension between two modalities of love: the love for the ideal ego and the unified body image it sustains, and the “love for *savoir*” that implies a confrontation with castration and death. Indeed, it is possible to read the entire passage as if the unconscious itself is talking. Lacan defines the transference as a “love for the *savoir*” coming from the unconscious, a *savoir* that is necessarily a foe where the ego is concerned. To love Jesus, we are told, is to love the truth (“I am the way, and the truth, and the life: and no one comes to the Father except through me” [John 3:15]). But like Lacan, Jesus makes clear that the love of truth is meaningless if it does not also become “the love of what the truth hides, which is called castration.”

This is how I understand the injunction to “love the enemy” that is the centerpiece of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount:

*You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. [ . . . ] For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? (Matthew 5:43–48)*

Together with the last passage, these words suggest that to love Jesus is to love an enemy. In marked contrast with the way the words are usually glossed, the enemy is not someone whose enmity I might annul by inscribing him in the community of the faithful or showering him with my love, but rather, the enemy that Jesus—like the analyst—is, insofar as he sustains the field of the Other and the castration to which it leads, and not the discourse and ideals of the ego.

The desire of Jesus, like that of Moses, presents a challenge to his listeners: one that provokes anxiety. But Jesus differs from Moses in that his speech has a properly analytic function, which goes beyond simple iconoclasm to underscore the role of the signifier in effecting a confrontation with the lack in the Other and sustaining desire. It appears in his predilection for the parable form, which in articulating a truth that can only be half spoken identifies speech as the locus where truth stumbles. But it's especially obvious in his frequent silences and his characteristic way of refusing to enter into a dialogue or conversation. Whenever he is asked, "Are you the Messiah?" or "Are you the Son of God?" Jesus routinely responds with the distinctive formula that is one of the real hallmarks of his speech: "You have said so."<sup>22</sup> Typically, this formula is explained as an idiosyncratic form of assent. But for the purposes of my argument, it is interesting that Jesus does not articulate anything himself, but returns the questioner's speech to him in an inverted form, as if to force him to take responsibility for his own constructions. This strategy is most apparent in the way Jesus speaks with the apostles during the last supper, on the eve of the crucifixion. When Jesus tells the disciples that one will betray him, Judas says, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" To which Jesus replies, "You have said so" (Matthew 26:25).

The disciples have an interesting narrative function in the story, that of modeling the extreme anxiety and even paralysis that takes hold of those who are affected by Jesus' words. The betrayal of Judas may offer the best illustration of the radical challenge that desire represents to the ego and the violent repression it provokes. But the betrayal of Peter,

Jesus' staunchest supporter, is even more revealing (26:69–75). It exposes the limitations of any engagement predicated merely on determination or will by demonstrating that neither resolve nor commitment to ideals is sufficient to confront the castration implicit in desire or the anxiety it provokes. Consider the extraordinary account from the Gospel of Matthew of the night preceding the crucifixion, when Jesus gathers the disciples together to await his certain arrest and execution:

*Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." Peter said to him, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you." Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples. Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsamane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself down on the ground and prayed. "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners." (26:31–46).*

This is surely the most poignant passage in the Gospels, because we see that it is not easy for Jesus to confront his own death; what makes him Jesus is not some innate divinity, but rather his willingness to lose the

world despite the intense agony it causes him. But even more striking than the solitude of Jesus in the face of death is the effect it produces in those around him. Judas betrays Jesus the old-fashioned way, to make a buck. But Peter betrays him first by falling asleep and then later by claiming not to know Jesus after his arrest.

In the slumber of the disciples we see one kind of act in response to desire, an act that annuls its interpellating force. The call to “stay awake” is a call to live with the anxiety desire provokes. In the famous words of Pascal, “Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world; there must be no sleeping during that time.” But to stay awake to desire is perhaps the most difficult thing of all, and the challenge on which groups founded on nothing more than an ideal inevitably founder. Just as Jesus anticipates, the sheep scatter the moment the shepherd is struck down. Strikingly, none of the disciples will go on to do much of anything, as if completely paralyzed by this confrontation with Jesus’ desire. Their slumber recalls the forgetting that takes hold of the Jews in Freud’s analysis of Moses, the forgetting both of the desire of Moses and of the murder that cut it short. But it also anticipates the slumber and forgetting that will follow after the death of Jesus himself—and, of course, the forgetting at stake in every act of repression.

Where Jesus is concerned, I would argue that the ultimate example of this forgetting is the founding of Christianity in the letters of Paul. We see it in the tension between the desire of Jesus (a desire that provokes anxiety) and the love that for Paul founds the community and the militant brotherhood, and whose cornerstone is the possibility of resurrection.<sup>25</sup> Many authors have pointed to the fact that Paul differs from the writers of the gospels in paying almost no attention to the words of Jesus, who he rarely cites and whose life and actions are of very little consequence for his conception of Christian ethics. Alain Badiou even celebrates this effacement as one of Paul’s most original innovations—and if the goal is to conceive the possibility of a “militant brotherhood,” as it is for Badiou, this effacement is in fact essential.<sup>24</sup> This dimension of Christianity is really born with Paul, who calls upon Jesus to function as its mascot and ideal; it is not there in Jesus himself.<sup>25</sup> But while Paul never mentions the words of Jesus, the resurrection of Christ is a constant motif. Even as he abandons Jesus as a subject, he cannot do without the ideal ego he represents. As he tells his young flock, “[Y]ou are all one person in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Paul’s immediate silencing of what is at stake in the words of Jesus, and his replacement of it with the love of “resurrection,” is similar

in many respects to Lacan's argument about the effacement of Freud's innovation in ego psychology, which accuses analysts of immediately busy-ing themselves with building up the ego again, as if to forget as quickly as possible the entire field opened up by Freud's desire. But just as the speech of the unconscious refuses to be silenced by the discourse of the ego, the speech of Jesus continues to resonate with an undeniable force in and beyond the religious discourses that attempt to contain and make sense of it.

As a counterexample of this silencing of the subject, we have the extraordinary phenomenon of *Moses and Monotheism*, where Freud becomes the "enemy" of his own people by dismantling the myth of Moses and revealing the founder of the religion to have been an Egyptian. Writing in 1939 at the height of the Holocaust, having himself fled Nazi persecution in Vienna, Freud opens the volume by saying: "To deprive a people of the man whom they take pride in as the greatest of their sons is not a thing to be gladly or carelessly undertaken, least of all by someone who is himself one of them. But we cannot allow any such reflection to induce us to put the truth aside in favour of what are supposed to be national interests" (7). While the Jews allow the wish for an omnipotent father figure and the myth of national "chosenness" to displace the memory of the man Moses, Freud combats the forces of repression by dredging up the subject whose desire caused anxiety. His exposure of the man behind the myth is not a matter of mere ideological unmasking, however, but of the extraction of the force of subjective desire from a legendary narrative whose function is to silence it by reinscribing it within a set of values and ideals. Freud supposes a subject of desire as the origin of a *savoir*, which the resulting text or legend attempts to repress or efface. In dismantling Moses as an ideal ego, Freud also allows the subject himself to speak.

Each of the examples I have discussed bears witness to the tension between the anxiety induced by desire and the effects it produces, and the restorative tendency to silence or efface that desire and to shore up the ego. They also qualify the possible optimism about social change by reinforcing the extent to which this change occurs at an individual level, through a painstaking process of self-overcoming that is by no means certain and that only occurs in a minority of cases. Religious history in particular suggests that it is much easier to hide behind the ideal ego or to take comfort in the illusion of the all-powerful father than to confront the Other's desire or absence. This is why psychoanalysis is ultimately pessimistic about the possibility of social change and hesitates to affirm the

social beyond the “minimal social link” inaugurated by the transference. If the members of the group do not also traverse castration, the anxiety that results from the confrontation with the Other’s desire will simply provoke repression and violence, and not a change of position.

But while the desire of the founder may not be sufficient in and of itself to incite change, these examples also make clear that the anxiety it induces can have a transformative effect. This is because it exposes the profound freedom of an act founded on desire, in and beyond the castration or lack it implies. Translated into a more existential idiom, my argument is really that anxiety is the affect of freedom. Desire is what is most free in the subject, because it involves a liberation from the fantasy of seduction and its particular colonization of the psychic object. Freud sees in Moses a free man, one who threw off the shackles of superstition and nature worship to create a space for the subject as something other than a product of nature or the object of a capricious deity. While Jewish legend promotes the idea that Moses is the chosen instrument of God, the much more interesting truth is that the man Moses invents something new for civilization: something we can all draw upon and that no God can take away. The difference between ideals and desire is the difference between ascribing their freedom to an omnipotent God and assuming responsibility for that freedom themselves. In the same way, Freud himself will attempt to free the subject of the unconscious from the shackles of morality and to prevent its reduction to an object of scientific observation. But he makes clear that this freedom can come only through traversing anxiety and not avoiding it. It is a difficult freedom, whose stakes are nowhere better expressed than in the words imputed to Jesus: “I lay down my life in order to take it up again.” While these words have been interpreted by many as a promise of eternal life, I believe that the anxiety and solitude with which Jesus approaches his own death points to a more difficult interpretation. His act emphasizes that there is something more than “mere life” and that desire opens onto a life that can be accessed only by traversing death. In a similar vein, the practice of psychoanalysis is founded on the supposition that true freedom comes only from traversing the death drive and not repressing or avoiding it.

In the introduction to his seminar on the transference, Lacan writes that the fundamental question of psychoanalysis is “how to operate honestly with desire [. . .] how to preserve desire in the act. Ordinarily, the act is the extinction rather than the realization of desire, or at best nothing more than its exploit or heroic gesture. How then can we preserve



a simple relation between desire and this act?" (*Le transfert* 14). The murder of Moses and the betrayal of Jesus are examples of acts that extinguish desire. But so, arguably, is any act that finds its value merely in the affirmation of an ideal.

If Freud's relation to Moses is so provocative where the question of desire is concerned, it is because it takes the form not merely of an interpretation but of a response to the desire of Moses that finds expression in an act. It could be argued that Freud responds to the desire of Moses precisely by inventing psychoanalysis, as a structuration of the social link that puts lack at the center by underscoring the Other's absence. It is an invention that responds to *his* age, the age of the foreclosure of the subject from the empirical sphere of science.

Freud invents a mechanism that allows the analysand to free himself by confronting castration. But the end of analysis could be construed not merely as a liberation but as a call to change the world by demanding that it make place for a new object. It involves the assumption of the truth that there is no object for desire, but more importantly, the necessity of constructing a new object: if there is no object or aim that would satisfy desire, this also means that desire is not bound by any existing object and is therefore innately transcendent. The logical conclusion of an analysis supposes that desire finds expression in an act or in the production of a new object that intervenes in the world so as to transform it.

Where the question of social change is concerned, the three examples I have discussed are linked by the fact that this object takes the form of a new structuration of the social tie that creates a space for the subject, rather than silencing or repressing it. In his reading of the Hebrew Decalogue, Lacan's implicit thesis is that Moses invents the symbolic as a creative structuration of the absent Other that allows for the possibility of desire by introducing a gap in the world of natural existence. Moses' innovation is having carved out a space for the subject, negating "what is" in order to open up a space where sublimation is possible, where the subject can exercise reason in the pursuit of justice and truth. His legacy takes the form of a structure or an institution, the Jewish law and the practices of interpretation and debate that encourage spirituality and sublimation. The legacy of Jesus, on the other hand, is a legacy of revolutionary social transformation. If Jesus functions, as I suggest, like an analyst, one could argue that the constraint he imposes produces effects that spread out across history, inspiring the great revolutionary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in particular. His invocation of a "new

kingdom” implies that the world is not a given, but something that has to be created or transformed through love. In Freud’s case, the invention of the transference could be understood as an attempt to give visibility to an impossible object, the subject that is neither a living organism nor a social construction, but a pure hypothesis sustained and given form by the desire of Freud.<sup>26</sup> But as Hallward reveals through the simple example of a man who clears space for a new soccer field, this new object need not be something so lofty. What is important is that it create a space for the subject, a space that was not there before. The creation of this new object gives rise to social change without even aspiring to do so, because it is not guided by ideals or goals, but by the desire of a subject.

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## Notes

- 1 Freud describes Marxism as a revelatory discourse that joins with religion in attempting to “solve all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis.” He adds: “Any critical examination of Marxist theory is forbidden, doubts of its correctness are punished in the same way as heresy was once punished by the Catholic Church. The writings of Marx have taken the place of the Bible and the Koran as a source of revelation, though they would seem to be no more free from contradictions and obscurities than those older sacred books” (*New Introductory* 180).
- 2 Farmer’s decision has the unforeseen consequence of making treatment for drug-resistance tuberculosis much more widely available, by spurring new advances in pharmacology and bringing down its cost.
- 3 “The point concerns the *world*, and not a part or portion of the world. The world is the whole world. What matters is to change it, all of it. That is the material point. If we get the point, what matters is to transform the world, the whole world. If we get the point, the world is a scandal that demands deliberate and universal change” (“What’s” 148).
- 4 This interview is archived on audiotape at the Freud Museum in London.
- 5 Recently, I came across an interesting variant of this question in a poll conducted early in the presidential primaries by the evangelical publication *Relevant Magazine*, which asked its readers, “Who would Jesus vote for?” Barack Obama was the winner and came out twenty-seven percentage points ahead of his nearest rival (Kristof). The example is surprising if you consider the conservative tendencies of American evangelicals. One can imagine how different the result might have been if the question

- were “How does your faith tell you to vote?” to which recent history would suggest that the answer would necessarily be “Republican.”
- 6 This castration really takes two forms: that there is no object that would satisfy the subject’s desire and that the subject cannot be the object of the Other’s desire.
- 7 For a clinical discussion of the role of the analyst’s desire in maintaining the transference, see Apollon, Bergeron, and Cantin 214–15. This essay will be discussed in more detail below.
- 8 This lack in knowledge relates to the fact that there is no signifier for jouissance. It therefore corresponds to a structural lack in the Other (of language), which Apollon writes as sss . . . -1: the signifying chain elaborated under transference leads to a real that cannot be symbolized, or what Freud calls the “navel” of the dream. The fantasy attempts to compensate for this lack by providing a staging to account for the real of the drive, a staging that determines the structure of the subject’s symptoms.
- 9 *Analysis shows us that the ideational material has undergone displacements and substitutions, whereas the affects have remained unaltered. It is small wonder that the ideational material, which has been changed by dream-distortion, should no longer be compatible with the affect, which is retained unmodified; nor is there anything left to be surprised at after analysis has put the right material back into its former position.*  
*In the case of a psychological complex which has come under the influence of the censorship imposed by resistance, the affects are the constituent which*
- is least influenced and which alone can give us a pointer as to how we should fill in the missing thoughts. (Freud, Interpretation 460–61; orig. emphases)*
- 10 In Freud’s words, “[A]nxiety-dreams only occur if the censorship has been wholly or partly overpowered; and, on the other hand, the over-powering of the censorship is facilitated if anxiety has already been produced as an immediate sensation arising from somatic sources. We can thus plainly see the purpose for which the censorship exercises its office and brings about the distortion of dreams; it does so *in order to prevent the generation of anxiety or other forms of distressing affect*” (*Interpretation* 267; orig. emphases).
- 11 See Freud, *Three Essays* 178–79, 194, 206, 232, 238–39.
- 12 For a more detailed version of the argument of this section, see McNulty.
- 13 Although the Isaac story precedes the Mosaic period in the order of narrative, it is composed at a later moment in history and is marked by the Mosaic legacy.
- 14 This passage really supposes an entire genealogy, one that alternately converges with and departs from Freud’s analysis in *Moses and Monotheism*. It supposes three distinct moments or epochs, articulated by a series of repressions and reelaborations. First, the pagan worship of local *elohim* (or what Lacan identifies under the heading of “metaphysico-sexual rites”); second, the institution of Hebraic law and the gap it interposes between desire and jouissance; and third, the return, in Christianity, both of the celebration of God’s jouissance and of the superegoic

logics of demand and sacrifice. In the way he emphasizes the logical articulation of these three moments, Lacan is really zeroing in on a different interpretation of the Hebraic moment, one that is overlooked both by Freud and by most other commentators, who tend to characterize Judaism as the religion of the superego, subject to an oppressive law that is impossible to fulfill. Frank Vande Veire, for example, notes that one of the core innovations of early Judaism with respect to its antecedents was the shift from ritual human sacrifice to law-based observance, whose biblical proof-text is God's intercession on behalf of Isaac. But he argues that the corollary of this shift is that it is no longer possible to manage divine terror: God cannot be seduced or appeased with gifts. The result is a "spiritualization" of sacrifice, which now takes the form of unconditional respect for the law. In this sense, he argues, the nonsacrifice of Isaac corresponds to a demand for totally uneconomic, unconditional sacrifice, a sacrifice that can be required at any moment, without advance warning. He cites as an example the infamous episode from the Book of Exodus, where God, after having called Moses to be his prophet, suddenly decides to kill him. Moses is saved only by the ingenious ruse of Zipporah, who quickly circumcises their infant son and touches the bloody foreskin to Moses' "feet," warding off the demonic attack (Exodus 4:24–26). Vande Veire interprets the impromptu bloodletting as a reminder that God can strike at any time with his insatiable demands. In this reading, the act of circumcision is not so much a protection against divine terror as an extension of it, a mark of the Israelites' subjection to the sacrificial economy of divine wrath. In contrast, Lacan suggests that

the Israelites' real dilemma is not that they are subject to a system of uneconomic sacrifice, but that they are not able to surrender to the Other those objects that cause them anxiety.

- 15 In the story of Moses and Zipporah, the act of circumcision is not just a submission to the deity's exorbitant demands but a talismanic protection against them. Having verified Moses' circumcision, God is no longer at liberty to strike against the mere mortal who stands helpless before him; he cannot go on to demand an arm, a leg, and so forth. As the act that seals the covenant with God, circumcision is not just a demand imposed from without but a pact that protects its subject against the unmediated wrath of God. In this sense the law limits the satisfaction not only of the subject who submits to it but of the deity himself.
- 16 One might say that Moses is an analyst on the model of the early Freud: that is, he evacuates the illusory Imaginary Other but does not allow the subject to arrive at the fall of the seduction fantasy himself, and as a result repression and resistance triumph.
- 17 This position is in fact central to many forms of analytic psychotherapy, which are actually predicated upon the idea that the analyst is the screen on which the patient projects her or his relations with a parent or the good or bad object of the fantasy; the conception of the analyst's function is thus explicitly imaginary.
- 18 This turn to psychosis probably requires a few words of justification, since psychosis is a very specific structure that departs from the neurotic framework supposed by the previous section (where the subject appeals to the ideal ego as a support for the

unified body image that represses castration). In pioneering the psychoanalytic treatment of psychosis that for Lacan remained only a goal, Apollon, Bergeron, and Cantin have gone further than all other contemporary psychoanalysts not only in exploring the specific logic of psychosis but in distinguishing between neurosis, psychosis, and perversion on the basis of structure, and not according to the phenomenology of symptoms or the “seriousness” of one pathology compared to another. In underscoring the analogies among the three psychic structures in and beyond their singular features, they have done much to overcome the historic tendency to conflate the features of neurosis with the human as such. (See, in particular, Apollon et al.’s *Traiter la psychose*). They emphasize that the neurotic seduction fantasy, the psychotic delusion, and the perverse demonstration all work to repress castration through the invocation of an Imaginary Other, even if the form and function of this Other differs from one structure to the next. If the structure of psychosis is of special significance for them, as it is for Lacan, it is because it lays bare the function of the imaginary in a way that may be easier to miss in the case of the neurotic, even if it is no less significant. This is because the neurotic appeals to social reality (a “reality” that is really nothing more than a collective myth, and thus itself a kind of “delusion”) to facilitate his repression of the unconscious. The crux of Lacan’s critique of ego psychology is that the analyst’s own acceptance of or dependence upon this “reality” tends to facilitate the analysand’s repression, precluding any access to the unconscious.

19 This passage is what allows the analyst to enter into the “minimal

social link” at stake in the transference without falling into what Freud called “counter-transference,” or the resistance to the subject’s unconscious that results from the analyst’s failure to traverse the fantasy of seduction in his own analysis.

- 20 Rigorously speaking, such a subjective analysis must necessarily remain speculative in the case of Jesus. While I believe one can distinguish the remnants of something like an actual subjective position from the idealized portrait of Jesus, it is not possible to isolate the historical kernal of the legend as it is in the case of Freud’s analysis of Moses (which draws upon, among other sources, the chronicles of the Egyptian pharaohs, the history of the Aton religion, and the ritual significance of circumcision in ancient Egypt).
- 21 As a kind of cinematic shorthand, you might say that the Jesus I am talking about is not the amiable camp counselor Jesus played by Willem Defoe in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, but the slender, effeminate, and at the same time slightly terrifying figure of Pasolini’s masterpiece *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, as anxiety provoking as he is inspiring. This is the same Jesus who inspires Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, a Jesus who wages war on the transcendent illusion of the eternal self in the name of a transformative desire liberated by the death of God.
- 22 After the arrest of Jesus, the gospel of Matthew records that “Jesus stood before the governor [Pontius Pilate]; and the governor asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ Jesus said, ‘You say so.’ But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him,

- ‘Do you now hear how many accusations they make against you?’ But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed” (27:11–14).
- 23 A resurrection whose stakes, I think, are more profoundly revealed by Nietzsche’s reading than by Badiou’s: it’s about the resurrection of the ego, life after death, the refusal of castration. There is no “resurrection” in Jesus, and this is crucial to the difference between him and Paul.
- 24 Badiou is quite right to insist on the discontinuity between Jesus and Paul and to credit the latter with having conceived the doctrine of the resurrection. Without this distinction, it is impossible to appreciate the singularity of either figure.
- 25 Indeed, at no point does Jesus ever attempt to found a group of any kind. What he tells the disciples is that if you want to “follow me,” you have to take up the cross and lose your life.
- 26 This object cannot, however, take the form merely of a theory or an interpretation. As Hallward suggests in his citation of Marx, it is not a matter of understanding or describing the world in different terms, but of intervening in the world in a different way. This is why a psychoanalytically inflected critique of ideology could never rise to the challenge presented by Freud’s desire. An analytic act cannot consist merely in applying an interpretive grid or of considering unconscious factors, and thereby staying ahead of the usual problems that plague social or political undertakings. The problem with this purely intellectual use of psychoanalysis is that it doesn’t involve a confrontation with desire or anxiety. The clinical experience of analysis pushes toward the necessity of an act: an act in the world, the act of becoming an analyst, the act that sustains the transference. This constant confrontation with the necessity of an act and the anxiety it provokes is an important part of the ongoing experience of analysis. But the theoretical application of psychoanalysis does not suppose such a necessity and even acts as a defense against it.

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