

The Dance of Humanity

*A psychoanalyst
as
sculpting apprentice*

Patrick Cady

Each time I take on a new stone block, I start from scratch. In spite of the bit of experience I have gained over the past five years, there is something in the age of the stone, the density of its memory, which overcomes me. Even though I have the image of a carving in my head, I know something is already there in this shapeless piece of rock that is imposing itself upon me. That “something” is not another carving; it is a presence that has been waiting for much too long to be supplanted, annihilated by the small project of some human being. Of course I do not know exactly what I am saying when I say this, but the fact that I want to talk about my experience as a sculptor confronts me once again with that which is already there. A block of ideas has taken shape in me through the sedimentation of material so ancient, so long before my brief individual history, that I have been turning it over and over for months without daring to begin, like an archaeologist who does not know where he should start digging.

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At the beginning, when I undertook the first couples, I tried to carve a base by abrading the point where I was keeping the block erect and balanced by holding it in my hands. As it seemed about to fall, it began to suggest the life enclosed within it.

And now I am trying to carve a precarious base for my adventure as a sculptor, and what emerges first is a little boy at his window who is discovering and seizing the succession of carvings in the mass of clouds that are kneaded and transformed by the wind as it carries them away.

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When I turn away from my window to re-enter the world in my room, I am moving from the impalpable clouds to the hardness and seemingly precise forms of a carving as tall as I am at two years of age. Officially it represents a woman from the Bible, sitting on the edge of a well, holding her amphora in her hands; but secretly she is a mountain where Indians being attacked by cowboys can hide, since cowboys do not know the art of climbing mountains, with bare feet and hands. They cannot climb the marble face of the mountain rising almost vertically, while the Indians are consummate masters of this kind of carving that we now call rock-climbing.

The vivid remnant of this experience can be found again in my project –not yet achieved but not abandoned – to alter existing carvings, a project that was put on hold because of its murderous violence against the artist who preceded me, even if it was only a copy of his work.

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My room is surrounded by a chest and a cupboard that are two masses already animalized simply because of their four paws and bellies. In the middle there is a woolly carpet supple enough for me to give it all kinds of shapes, like a layer of mist containing all the shapes of the clouds.

Once a year I am entitled to a piece of crisp crib paper that I do not have to flatten out, that I can keep crumpled up for months, as long as I do not crumple it more and cause the clay Christmas ornaments indigenous to Provence to become weary. Each year, as if I had an intuition of a presence that attracted incarnations from every culture, I attempted to put all the figurines of my games into the crib, but, each year, my crib would be subject to an ethnic cleansing carried out by my mother who believed that cowboys and Indians had no right to mix with clay ornaments that were exclusively Provençal.

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Baby Jesus must wait a month before disappearing to grow up far from any adoration. I vaguely feel that it is slightly the same for a carving. I can only create it and make it grow by hiding it from any adoring eyes – starting with mine – idolatrous of the rough shape. In order to do so, I sometimes even feel naively obliged to carve in shadowy light – using the kitchen without windows as a workshop when the cold drives me off the balcony. I am not afraid of carving in the dark. The hardness of the stone, as if justifying my striking it, comforts me maybe even more than the softness of plush animals.

Two plush animals were waiting on my bed for night to return. I cannot remember how old I was when I pretty well finished carving them; probably when they became sufficiently primitive, with moustaches, eyes and noses pulled out and ears worn down by murmured nibbles. I can see much of them being conveyed up in some African and Inuit carvings, but mostly in mine, with their round shapes and the round tips of their feet and hands.

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In 1948, the year I was born, Giacometti carved *City Square* in which there are five walking characters, suntanned like Indians, wandering like Hebrews – the biblical Indians I sent scaling an impregnable marble Sinai. Among everything my eyes saw outside of my room, only the monument to the dead was bronze, as if “cannon fodder” had originally meant “to be consumed by that material conducive to death.” There is no colour red to let the child know he is looking at some official art of the 19^e century, an art coined *pompier* for its glossy reminiscence of firefighters’ blazing red caps. But one day while watching a commemorative ceremony, I am struck by the contrast between the momentum in the giant toy soldier brandishing the flag and the fixedness of the veterans standing to attention in front of the monument at that base of which is written “*Debout les morts*”, the famous battlecry driving exhausted soldiers to keep on facing death at the battle of Verdun.

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Thankfully, my school is situated in a totally different part of the city of Angers. We reach it by crossing a medieval neighbourhood adjoining a fortified castle. The alignment of the castle's towers with row upon row of whitish freestone rubble and blue grey slate foreshadow, if I may say so, the Buren pillars of the Palais Royal in Paris. By cutting off the summits of these towers, Henry III, king of France, provided them with an enduring abstraction.

The wooden carvings that spring from the front of the houses – with animals and humans confronting each other or even merging – prepare me for my meeting with the works of certain Inuit sculptors. The most beautiful of these houses is covered with the carved history of Adam and Eve; later, my daughter would be conceived there. She has now moved from the carved strip to the comic strip as a screenwriter.

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This preparation for the shamanic dimension of the art of the Far North continues just a few steps away, in front of the great doors of the cathedral, doors that were once flanked by two huge whale ribs. The hillock dominating Maine Street where the cathedral stands was once the site of worship of a Celtic god named Belen, a name euphonicly similar to “*baleine*”, the French term for whale. So, in my mind, this repressed worshipping had resurfaced in the framing of the glory of Christ with the bones of a whale the Basques brought back from the Gulf of St. Lawrence. They were not carved as I carve those bones myself now that I have discovered the formidable “expressivity” of this Inuit art material, and the only inspiration they provided was as toothpicks for Rabelais’s giant Gargantua. In carving this substance that I am personally made of gives me a feeling of transgression similar to that of anthropophagy. I must say that it was after suffering a quadruple fracture that I made the decision to carve pieces of bone; perhaps the memory of one of my ancestors, a surgeon in the armies of the Vendée, had awoken in me. In carrying out dissections, Michelangelo may have unwittingly been looking for the secret of the transgression taking place in carvings.

Yes, I know; I am digressing. It was not something that had been planned ... these bones popping out of my pre-history. But a digression related to the subject is also part of the process I follow, creating an appendage where I did not expect one, completely changing the test of strength between the two characters.

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The cathedral is a carving into which we enter. In it we learn to bow our heads from time to time to avoid getting a sore neck from constantly stretching it, eyes riveted to the sky of stone. The little boy wonders for a long time how anybody could have dug so high; perhaps his amazement, his question, really stem from the answer, one that cuts through the roar of the great organ. The little boy can feel through his body the pressure of the music on the walls and the archways. He cannot yet name the force, neither “cantata” nor “toccata”, but he understands that it is only this force that was able to round at such a height the belly of the stone. And the two gigantic atlantes supporting the organ conjure up in him a pagan listening, hands spread out, as the thunder performs its carving.

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Around the city, in the countryside, as powerful as the atlantes, menhirs tower, creations of the block itself, carved into abstraction by simply being stuck straight into the ground.

Further on we reach the south coast of Brittany. After some thorough cleaning of my room, as the high tide washes away any sign of my castle, I rediscover ephemera¹. In fact, it is not a castle; my “work” is made of a hole and a heap emerging from the hole, an entity that creates for the exiled the remainder of the hourglass run aground in the kitchen. It is a “castle” for others, for those who do not like the idea that a little boy is playing with the sand on the beach to measure the time that separates him from returning home. He already knows, in his own way, how living in an imaginary world makes it possible to cut himself off from others.

This child’s game of coupling holes and mounds . . . I can see it emerging again at the core of each of my carvings of two characters where, each time, as time stops, a tension opens a gap between the two bodies, like the gap a baby burrows to breath between two parents closely bound.

¹ In French, the author refers to rediscovering the “effet mère”, meaning literally the “mother effect”; but the expression also is phonetically similar to “ephemera”.

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One day as I was in Paris where I had “descended” – long after I had lost track of childhood in my rear-view mirror – I felt a new shock while standing in front of Rodin’s Balzac: a menhir with a head and a face, the face of that divine writer from a time when I was fifteen.

Elsewhere around Paris, Giacometti’s characters were carrying on their roles of silhouettes, passers-by, samples taken from the anonymous crowd on the sidewalks, petrified by the eruption of the artist, and charred to the bone in memory of Nazi ovens.

Beyond that, white sculptures aroused practically nothing in me. The presence of art within me does not need to be constantly nourished. I hardly even paid attention to the fact that the only galleries in front of which I slowed down were those that had carvings in their windows, especially those from African art.

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Before discovering (while on a couch, where my body ran aground after shipwrecking the father) the desire to dedicate a great part of my life to this “natural disposition” I had for analysis, I ran a workshop where I worked with children staging plays that were presented in various theatres throughout Paris. The inhibitions of some of the children led me to create the staging of a series of excerpts from *Ubu Roi* in which, hidden under some structures, the children executed movements on stage in synch with an audio tape recorded at the workshop. With the help of the children, I built made-to-measure characters in brass wire covered in newspaper dipped in glue and painted. Even though I heard people tell me that these characters made them think of Niki de Saint Phalle, it never crossed my mind that what I had put together had anything to do with sculpture; nor did it when I built in the same way some huge heads of frogs, rats and bestialized humans to demonstrate against the vivisections they obliged us to execute in order to obtain a certificate in neurophysiology from the university.

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Then my two sons were born. The figurines of their games were robots and dinosaurs – prehistory never fails to be repeated in every little man. Very involved politically, one is committed to making people listen to those voices that are not heard; the other mixes his voice with others in choirs and it is in church that for the first time I listen to my son's voice digging even higher the sky of stone of when I was a child.

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Taking a plane always brings about a leap in the narrative, so I will make you cross the Atlantic and land in Montreal. Of course, once I am there, Inuit art is awaiting me, lying in ambush almost everywhere – in museums, at auction sales, in the jumble of a secondhand goods dealer, in the shadow of the soulless bears dancing in their sandstone sequins for tourists. Inuit art is an art of survival and an art that risks dying smothered under its own caricature.

Very soon I start buying works of which my eyes and hands cannot let go. Every day, by touching and looking, I learn how to carve from those who did not learn it; the more recent and sophisticated works of those who were trained at the School of Fine Arts among the whites have nothing to teach me.

At first I bought works by artists who were very different from one another, until one day in a shop I discovered a character, hardly thirty centimetres high, a woman, according to her clothes. Carved in basalt and pumiced just enough to reveal the full range of shades from dark grey to black, she was barely taking a step forward, an imperceptible gesture, but enough for one to feel all the power of her body at play and the hostile environment in which she must struggle to survive. In the gallery, though filled with magnificent works, everything faded, everything came to a halt. This carving, signed by Barnabus Arnasungaaq, led me to a point of no return, anchoring in me the need to challenge the stone.

When I speak about Inuit art, it is as if I am speaking of a new continent I have fallen upon while searching for new encounters. This happened with ten or so sculptors whose works are as important to me as those of Giacometti or some anonymous sculptors of Romanesque art.

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A little while later, in the jumble of a secondhand goods store, I found a piece of grey stone lacking any definite shape except for a small flat base, but already polished. Maybe it was the result of a test in abstraction by some student. Armed with a screwdriver and an oyster knife, I soon extricated from this soft stone a squatting woman that seemed to be meditating.

And this is how the feminine finds itself at work in the opening of oneself to a gift, be it sculpture or psychoanalysis, the opening of oneself to such a gift being totally different from claiming it as one's property and boasting about it, which rarely leads to anything creative.

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From then on I started buying tools, coming to realize that they had not changed much since the time of the Greeks. I felt the need to let the Inuit spirit inhabit me and mobilise in me everything that could arouse the memory of a survival, to the extent that two Inuit art merchants I had invited home to offer for sale works in my collection – and who knew nothing of what was happening to me – wanted to buy my carvings, intrigued by the fact that they were different – though as they said, “Their primitiveness is very recognizable”.

A particularly complex composition forced me to develop difficult techniques while, all resistance vanishing, I was opening up to this influence which is my own prehistory. Cut in harder-than-marble basalt from the Far North, the carving represents the vision of a shaman beating a drum, sitting on the ground, while above him a bear and a hunter are bracing themselves against each other, at arms and paws length, without us being able to tell if they are fighting or forming an alliance.

A collector told me one day, while looking at my carvings: “If you were an Inuit, they would be very expensive, because they are very original.” He was in fact saying that in the art market, as in breeding, the purity of race, linked to the purity of culture in the case of art, can determine what is of value. Even though we have been plunged for quite a while in the emancipation of the artist from the spirit of his people, or in the obliteration of the national character of art; even though we can see with our own eyes the influence of African art on Picasso, or the replica of a carving from Kongo art in Giacometti’s small crouched man, none of those experiences is recognised as the expression of the homecoming of cultural hybridization repressed in the white colonizer who was subjected to the influence of the colonized, in the same way Freud discovered that the gods of the vanquished become the demons of the victor.

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The couple, the undecidable, the ambivalence, the tension are already present and form a set of references that are strong enough to allow me to emerge from this adopted cultural matrix and start creating my distinctive expression made up of carvings that are like ideograms: two characters represented, literally, with the internal tensions, ambivalences, a still unspecified sexuality within the game of desires, but also – why not? – expressing what can be happening in couples, where each partner will recognize a man and a woman, two women, two men, or even an adult and a child.

And since we are dealing with the savagery of desire, the entanglement of animality and humanity can be found in these couples, at the confluence of Romanesque and Inuit art deep within me. It can appear in the traditional image of a bird with the head of a human, this flying human that people are so proud of becoming in their dreams, in which women spread less visible wings since they are the sky in which men dream to fly. But in a more general and fundamental way, the animality of the characters comes from their rough shape, from their state of homo-not-yet-quite-sapiens. And finally, since the lower part of their bodies almost always merges in the stone, each couple is transformed into a two-headed hydra where sometimes one of the characters becomes the double of the other and its predator.

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While constantly trying to find a way of making these couples stand on a minimal base, I dared doing without a base; and since I did not want to set the carvings rigidly on pedestals, I set them on the same cushions of sand on which I carve, which allows me to wedge the piece while softening the blows on the chisel, for the stone not to break. In my mind, this is how the carving remains under the influence of the eyes and the hands that can move it and sink it into different positions. And it is to relay this that I seek to create the indeterminate in my works. The danger is my becoming my own relay by keeping a carving too long so that my eyes force my hands to pick up the chisel again and continue the endless work, which happens to me sometimes to the point of toppling into destruction.

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I always start with the heads, shaping them down to the base of the neck, unless I sense that a hand should hold them. I do not always know if the shoulders will stem from arms or wings, or if I will give in one day to simply sketching some movements in the bulk of the stone. It seems that these heads then keep the trace of having emerged from some exhumation: neither hair nor ears hide the skull, and the face appears only through its cavities, eyes invisible at the bottom of their sockets, mouth dug into the bones of the jaw, the bridge of the nose never prominent. If some people sometimes feel that this makes the carvings look like Inuit, it may be to avoid being confronted with the skull-faces that emerged from the most unbearable hybridization of all, that of life and death.

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Everything that is face here lies at the frontier of obliteration and sudden appearance, at the juncture where humans, in the sexuality of conception, can be neither imagined nor stared at. There is nothing to identify them more distinctly than that they belong to the human race. From this comes the title: “The Dance of Humanity” – “dance” to evoke the dance of the sculptor around the stone to which he transfers his movements and “dance” as a kaleidoscope of images of couples; and “humanity”, not meaning some form of humanism, but rather the refusal to be distracted from working on the link that ties each one of us to the human race, a link carrying all the experiences of survival.

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It may seem surprising that a psychoanalyst does not carve ears on his characters, but the stone itself is an ear, a material that registers sound waves, a wall or cavity that sends back the echo of words. It is also the untouchable block, the crypt of everything that was heard way before the arrival of speech.

The mouth of each one of my characters is shaped as a cry. The fewer ears we have to receive our pain, the more we cry out. But it may also be that I want the stone to cry; that I want to hear the cry of the presence hidden at the heart of the block, the “bleeding block.” Giacometti once said that through the emaciation of his faces he is opening mouths on a suffering. Though rarely present in Inuit art, except in the nightmarish carvings of the Netsilik and with some sculptors like Judas Ullulak, the cry can be found throughout the history of western sculpture. I am only an heir, transmitting it.

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I need only to shape two heads down to the shoulders for the bodies buried in the stone to turn and cling to each other or tear away from each other in a way that is completely different from the vision that had been driving my movements. At that point, rather than defying the stone, I allow myself to follow its veins and flaws, letting my hands dance heavily around them.

The virile strength required to manipulate the chisel and the hammer conceals the feminine dimension that makes it possible for the sculptor to be guided by what is already there, hidden within the shapeless stone.

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When I become tired of revealing these faces and bodies, I go for a stroll in the magnificent English-style park of the Mount Royal cemetery. There, except for a few theoretically-ugly spots and a groundhog sticking its head out from behind a tombstone, doing its bit as an extra, I am dealing only with blocks, with granite, like that of the menhirs. It is as if death were ordering an ecumenical return of a ban on representation that for so long hid from me the fact that what we call “abstract art” can be traced back to prehistory, as the first movement of all sculpture. Sometimes I think of my parents’ gravestones on which only their names are carved; but that is sufficient for carving any block.

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I began this piece by saying that I start from scratch on every new stone block. It is equally true that everything had already started long ago, with the “already there” echoing what I am forever discovering through the experience of psychoanalysis. Ever since Antiquity, the cracks and veins of the stone, its layers, grain and resistance have combined with this “already there” form, the form of a sculpture to be, the form waiting to be delivered by the hands of a sculptor – a conviction confirmed by Aristotle and Michelangelo, and expressed again by Inuit artists. I do not know if the sculptors of the Romanesque era were inspired by this belief but, though my own “already there” was awoken by my second encounter with the world of sculptures from my childhood through numerous Inuit carvings, I did not feel I was being influenced by this fantasy of a pre-existing form exerting on me such a power of attraction that my chisel had to follow its contours.

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Nevertheless, almost every time, I experience, to the point of dizziness and paralysis, the sensation of an entanglement of unknown forms impossible to untangle, that my desires project on the stone, an umbilical cord as sacred as the entanglement of the visual details or associations arising from the details of a dream.

In much the same way as the appearance of a symptom or a dream, the shape of the stone awaiting on my work bench can create a screen against all this proliferation and provide me with the support needed to avoid it. And there are also the times when I sense a certain form as if it really existed, as if the block was a primeval and final sculpture, an umbilical cord still, hidden in the same way as the stolen letter, which was put too clearly in evidence in Edgar Allan Poe's story.

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The Inuit sculptor Pangnark said that he wanted to intervene as little as possible on the stone block that nature was providing him as a gift, and followed the example of water shaping the iceberg. All he wanted to do was soften certain edges, flatten the faces and polish the stone. He merely added some lines for the eyes, nose and mouth. Abstract sculpture was born again with him in the 1950s through this act of softly caressing a raw stone block until he had built a skin for it with only the sign of a face in the corner, like the signature of a human's work. Each time I am tempted by the abstract, by the desire to keep all the possible figures hidden in the mass of the stone, just as I sometimes keep buried the multiple interpretations I may have while listening to the story of a dream or the experience the dream created in the dreamer, which may kill their richness. Each time I must also resist the temptation to bare that skin that may be providing the sculptor's dream with another screen on which to project itself. Each time I have to resist this attraction to the skin in order to attack the block with all the violence of the hammer hitting the chisel, to resist the desire to become a river and let the stone swim at length between my hands.

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And each completed carving, with all the undecidables in its figures, with all the ambiguity of its characters, with the incompleteness of its gestures, recreates a new block in which the eyes must carve a new story.

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More than once I had to resume work on a carving that I thought I had finished, and then worked on it until I had erased it and let a new one appear. While shifting from one shape to another, what triggers in me a “freeze on the image” long enough to conclude that a work is finished is when I feel it is about to collapse into the anonymity of realism, but even more so it is when the carving surprises me, when it becomes foreign to me, gives me the impression that I have nothing to do with it. At that precise moment, the undecidable, the indeterminate, the polymorphous appear, having escaped from the shapeless into which I plunge the moment I start carving a block. .

In developing such an attention to these transitions, carving helps me listen to how the maternal and paternal, masculine and feminine, adult and child can become intertwined in me and in a patient. My practice as a sculptor – where my personal experience of analysis has not ventured, where the link with this experience has slackened – allows me to perceive the presence of the invisible that the figure in a work of art, a dream or a thought always conceals; the meditation of the sculptor makes the listening of the analyst more sensitive to the howling cacophony of the pieces of being in the pained yet articulate words of the patient who is trying to reassemble these pieces in order to tell his story.

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In my way of speaking to the patient, I reveal some vivid traces of the internal work that brings me to propose to him or her any given connection that could be made, in the same way that I leave traces of my tools on my carvings to indicate that they are not an end in themselves, to present them as unfinished subjects, witnesses of a process and presented to the eyes of the other for him or her to reclaim. Alluding to the aesthetics of the unfinished found in the sculptures of the Romanesque period, Michelangelo was already confirming it: works that are too minutely crafted lack strength, being too far removed from the violence of the unconscious life and the incompleteness of life. I have often noticed how an interpretation cleared of everything that had led me to it and of what could still be changed, had little effect.

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The fact that he wrote that the psychoanalyst proceeds, as the sculptor, “per via di levare” (by removing) did not prevent Freud from gathering on the furniture of his analytical lair a whole population of antique Egyptian and Greek miniature sculptures. It is through the history of humanity echoing in the memory of these stones that he heard the words of each of his patients. When I discovered that one of my colleagues has desertified his reception environment where any trace of art had been eliminated from the walls and furniture, I wondered if he was still capable of hearing this echo within himself. But maybe the white nakedness of his walls reflects another memory for him, that of the ban on representations or that of the snow where traces can be read. I am not overcome by magical thinking and fetishism to the point that I believe that my listening is totally dependent on the carvings I have in my office, but I have more than once noticed that they were formidably efficient catalysts.

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You will tell me that Freud had no experience as a sculptor and that he could not claim that the practice of sculpture taught him the first rules of psychoanalysis, as Socrates – the son of a sculptor and a sculptor himself – had claimed concerning philosophy; but when I take the time to follow in Freud's text the extent to which he scrutinises the low-relief in Jensen's *Gradiva*, and even more so Michelangelo's *Moses*, I discover that his gaze, while trying to recreate what the artist was seeing, becomes the gaze of a sculptor, and I recognise my own; a gaze that determines the core of a work as being the undecidable between a foot that is raised and the other that is set on the ground, between the gesture of anger that will break the Tables of the law and the gesture of wisdom that contains it. And it is essential for me to take the time to recognise the complexity of this undecidable in a word, in the freezing on the image of a dream I am told about because I can't see it, not even with my hands, if I am to help the person come out of this undecidable when it is making his or her life an emotional hell.

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In conclusion, I have found an even smaller base on which to build my story as a sculptor. When I was a little boy, I was fascinated by the stethoscope my father in his white coat carried around his neck when he welcomed patients on the first floor of our family home, and I asked him what he did with such an instrument. “I auscultate,” he answered laconically while letting me listen to my own heart. Now I have recaptured in my own way this enigmatic verb that my father used. Trying perhaps to hear the muffled sound of life in the heart of the stone, I sculpt.

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