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The Hypericon of the Golden Calf

Yvonne Sherwood

Introduction: Memes with legs (or hooves)

The golden calf is one of those few biblical memes that still has legs – or hooves (cf. Mitchell 2005: 87). Despite – or in fact because of – its emphatic destruction, the calf (or more accurately, its ghost or image) has trotted off the edges of the Bible into safer and more permanent cultural domains. The calf has become nothing less than a ‘hypericon’: the term W. J. T. Mitchell coins for those ambitious images that encapsulate an entire episteme or theory of knowledge and summarize a particular assemblage of knowledge, aesthetics, ethics and politics, such as the ‘*tabula rasa*’ or Plato’s cave (Mitchell 1994).

But the golden calf has always been a very peculiar kind of hypericon: a *hyperaniconic hypericon*. The calf survives as an image *and* an image of the destruction of the image. It lingers as a sign of presence and absence; representation and its erasure. Both poles are as extreme as could possibly be conceived. The calf materializes as a hyperimage; an image invested with such passion that we call it an ‘idol’: the term that we use for images with exceptional powers to mesmerize, that seem preternatural, supernatural, divine. The destruction of the calf is equally and oppositely emphatic. Moses burns it, grinds it to powder, dissolves it in water, and forces the creators to drink it and gag on it (Exod. 32.19-20). He then orders the sons of Levi to massacre three thousand people in retaliation, just in case the point was not entirely clear (Exod. 32.28). The annihilation is thorough, genocidal. The calf has become such a powerful cultural meme because it represents not just ‘contested’ but colliding desires.

The (destroyed) golden calf is often taken as a summary image of absolutism and a definitive media decision: from art to scripture. As the golden calf is pulverized, dissolved in water, and given to the sinful people to drink (Exod. 32.20), so the calf seems to dissolve into a *text* about the triumph of textuality. You can no longer see the golden, brazen calf, but you can read the written record of its erasure in any modern Bible. *The smashing of the cow is the victory of the text*, or so it is commonly believed. I say ‘so it is commonly believed’, because such an assertion relies on too sharp a division between ‘word’ and ‘image’, ‘art’ and ‘scripture’ (cf. Plate 2015: 277). ‘The visible can be arranged in meaningful tropes; words deploy a visibility that can be blinding’ (Rancière 2007: 7). Were we to actually read any of the words in the Bible, we would find some

strange old words that have not yet thought of becoming an alternative to the image. Taking our cue from Hans Belting who writes of the ‘image before art’, we could think in terms of words before scripture, and before canons, codices and all the miracles of reproduction and circulation that came with print. In the Bible, words are often strange and graphic, figurative, personified, concrete, tangible *things* – with all the paradoxical powers of the thing (cf. Morgan 2015). Words look at you. They serve as witness, judge and memorial (Josh. 8.30-2; Josh. 24.26-7). Jesus as *logos* walks on earth. Wives suspected of sexual sins are forced to drink potions of words (Num. 5.11-31) just as the Nafana in Ghana make a soup from a tonic washed over slates inscribed with words from the Qur’an (Plate 2015: 78), and makers of the golden calf are forced to drink powdered grains of calf. Words are things, grains, matter – and *in the Bible*, not just in ‘other religions’. The words that replace and archive the destroyed calf are not words that efface their own materiality, dissolving into the interiority of silent reading. They are tablet objects that preserve the petrified fingerprint of the deity (cf. Stordalen in this volume), words that are chiselled and carried on stone, broken and laboriously remade. Caveat lector. We should be extremely cautious about taking the public Protestant, modern *image* of the Bible as ‘Word’ (as we say in English) ‘as read’.

The story of the calf in Exodus 32 is bookended by self-conscious texts about *writing*: the giving of the two tablets of stone, inscribed with the very finger of God (Exod. 31.18); and the laborious cutting of the second set of tablets, to replace the first set hurled to the foot of the mountain in Moses/God’s fury (Exod. 32.19, 34.4). In the second version told in Moses’s own words in the first person in the book of Deut. 9.8–10.5 (Deuteronomy being the *Deutero-nomos* or Second Law, the second casting), the subsuming of the image is even more complete as the figure of the calf is shattered into a little shard of words contained within the first-person words of Moses. As Terje Stordalen points out in his chapter for this volume, Deuteronomy redefines Torah as written, not oral, text (cf. Stordalen, 25). In line with this programme of textualization, it foregrounds the icon of the tablets, and dissolves the calf into the subclause ‘then I saw that you had indeed sinned against the Lord your God by casting for yourselves an image of a calf [...]’ (Deut. 9.16).

Absorbed back into ink on papyrus, or black-and-white print, the destroyed calf has supported the dominant modern image of the Bible as a monolith of logocentricism, a density of *text*. But ironically, in a reversal of the presumed desires of the biblical myth, the calf has persisted as an icon in contexts where the relevance of scripture has expired. As ‘image’, the calf floats eternally free of the brutally destroyed material (first casting). Thus it can be seen as an iconic figure of the *image*, the word we use for the ‘phantasmatic, virtual, or spectral appearance’ that can be miraculously lifted off the picture, and abstracted from its material form (Mitchell 2005: 85). There is something divine about the image: it lives eternally and does not depend on its material form. The very idea of the image recalls Paul’s strange statements about the spirit that exceeds, out-lives, survives and even negates the letter, the flesh or the merely material form (e.g. 2 Cor. 3.6). For Paul, the true word is not merely, or not even, the covenant ‘chiselled in letters on stone tablets’ (2 Cor. 3.7), but the spirit which is compared to the glory and transcendence shown (or not) in Moses’s and God’s unseeable, unrepresentable face. The image, which does not depend on its material form, reflects the representational

aporiae that haunt divinity in the Abrahamic religions. But it also begs the question: How can an image (or a god) possibly transcend material form, and imagine that it/he could live without a material form?¹

Recasting the calf

The image of the calf and its obliteration seems to have had far more life in it than the texts about the calf. Long after the strangely conflicted words of the Torah have been forgotten, a host of artists including Nicolas Poussin, Raphael, François Perrier, Fillipino Lippi, Andrea Celesti, Emil Nolde and Damien Hirst – as well as protestors on Wall Street – have gone on making golden calves (Figures 3.1a, b).

The calf occupies the strange space at the intersection, not just of aesthetics, ethics and politics (according to W. J. T. Mitchell's definition of the hypericon), but *also* of the economy and markets. Damien Hirst's *The Golden Calf* – a bull dipped in formaldehyde, with its head crowned with a solid gold disc and its hooves and horns cast in eighteen-carat gold – was sold at Sotheby's for £10,345,250. No photograph could be included here due to exorbitant copyright fees. Its anti-typos was the papier-mâché golden calf made by Judson Memorial Church for the Occupy Wall Street protests, fusing the biblical calf with the *Wall Street Bull*, or the *Bowling Green Bull*. Ironically, no photograph could be included for this popular icon either, due to the labyrinths of copyright law currently in force. The calf has also functioned as a summary image of politics, separated into the starkly opposed forms of sovereign (divine/fascist) absolutism and the power of the crowd. It is impossible to know whether Nolde's *Dance around the Golden Calf* (1910) sides with 'the people', or the forces of censorship that will/must restrain them. Terror, freedom, revolution, eroticism and fanaticism find conflicted expression in the wild yellow naked women who are dancing and, in Moses's and God's view, acting 'perversely', and 'running wild' (Exod. 32.7.25). (The King James Bible has 'naked' instead of 'running wild'.)

Golden calves have often been caught up in an ongoing cycle of transgression/defiance and retribution; construction and iconoclasm. Nolde's *Dance around the Golden Calf* (1910) was publicly shamed by the Nazis in the 1937 Munich exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art). Despite his personal appeal to the local Nazi party leader in Vienna, and his very public condemnation of 'Jewish art' and his support for National Socialism, Nolde saw a total of 1,052 of his works removed from museums and was banned from producing artworks even in private. This led him to produce secret watercolours which he called the 'Unpainted Pictures': a striking parallel to the unpainted and unspoken Gods produced (or not) by some strands of Jewish, Christian and Islamic art. In 1978, Poussin's *Adoration of the Golden Calf* hanging in the National Gallery in London was slashed with a knife. In 2011, it was sprayed with red aerosol paint. Perhaps the vandals were the old divinities, come back from the dead to wreak vengeance. Or perhaps they were 'freak acts of rage' – an outburst from a member of the always potentially unruly crowd (cf. Waters 2011).

The images most likely to stay with us, and haunt us, are the ones about which we are undecided and divided. The ghost calf has become such a haunting and resilient

Figure 3.1a *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*, Nicholas Poussin, 1633–4, National Gallery, London. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 3.1b *Dance around the Golden Calf*, Emil Nolde, 1910. Public domain, wikiart.org.

memes because it is so profoundly and productively divided. Its destruction has become, in Bruno Latour's terms, an iconic figure of 'Iconoclasm'. Iconoclasm, as opposed to 'iconoclasm', is when 'one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further inquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive' (Latour and Weibel 2002: 14). The destruction of the calf can be celebrated, as when the Wall Street protestors call down divine wrath against the golden idols; or it can be invoked as the ultimate offence against freedom and freedom of expression. As modern thinkers have struggled to define their relations to the old gods and new political orders and 'freedoms', the destroyed calf has functioned positively and negatively: as an image to identify with and an image *against which* to define self-consciously *modern* religions and selves. The destroyed calf has become a pin-up image for aniconicity – and also, conversely, an icon of modernity's necessary coup against the old oppressive gods who so violently opposed our freedoms of expression. *Thus the*

destroyed calf came to embody Europe's tortured and divided relationships to its Christian foundation, and to 'religion' (the word that modern thinkers inflected in very special ways).

Contested/conflicted modern foundation myths: Applauding and lamenting the destruction of the calf

We tell two equal and opposite foundation stories about religion. In one, religion serves as a *foundational allergy* for self-consciously 'modern' times. We are defined by freedom from religion and by rebellion against the old violent gods and the wars conducted in their names. But according to an opposite and equally strong (complementary) foundation myth, the modern 'West' identifies with, and appeals to, a loosely biblical Christian heritage on which (so the myth goes) our very identity depends. According to this extremely helpful myth, Christianity was uniquely placed to birth and sponsor modern dreams of freedom, which it had dreamt from the beginning. Christianity and higher religion helped to birth the founding freedoms, ethics and politics of the modern state.

The same double story that was told about religion was also told about monotheism. According to one foundation story, monotheism was seen as violent, intolerant and opposed (by definition) to plurality and creativity. It was by definition a despotic tyranny of the one. The modern subject had to struggle for his/her freedom against the monotheistic deity, like Prometheus stealing fire from the gods. But the late nineteenth century saw the emergence of a completely opposite narrative of 'ethical monotheism' (see further Vial and Hadley 2001). In this story the single god of monotheism became a figure and an ally for the individual human subject, not his opposite. God and human beings were linked in the revelation of eternal ethics. Our true religious foundation led inexorably to higher, ethical, spiritual religion, which transcended the 'gross' material,² and parochial elements of religion – or at least so we hoped and prayed. The Christian-biblical tradition was for ethics, rights and natural, universal religion. But it was also against.

Both foundation myths have been important. It has also been important not to be forced to notice the fundamental conflict between them. To a large extent, the conflict has been masked by a careful distribution of positive and negative forces between Christianity and 'religion' (cf. Anidjar 2006). In the most crude form of this distribution, positive forces have been attributed to Christianity and the New Testament while negative forces have been displaced onto 'religion' or, more specifically, primitive, parochial religions, such as Judaism and/or Islam, and the Old Testament and/or the Qur'an.³ Recent belated and guilty attempts to rebrand the good Christian foundation as 'Judeo-Christian' and to speak of the three equal brothers in the 'Abrahamic' or Mosaic religions, can hardly paper over the fact that Judaism, Christianity and Islam have been anything but equal brothers and have had anything but an equal relationship to the 'fraternal' community of the modern state. In older, ruder versions of the foundation myths (the ones that were spoken out loud by all and that are still spoken out loud by some), the *valorized* foundation and the tradition that led inexorably to

modern politics was *Christian*. It was defined *against* the shadowy ‘Turk’ or ‘Moor’, who served as a distant site of contrast. The Old Testament often became the lone source for the manifestly intolerant, insensitive, monotheistic, proto-fascist God, who destroyed all who offended him, like the poor creators of the calf. However, because the Christian Bible includes the Old Testament, some Old Testament scenes were caught up in the evolutionary trajectory, understood as the progress of the living spirit latent within the sometimes-dead letters of the text. Chief among these elevated Old Testament texts were those of the Hebrew prophets (widely seen as precursors of ethical monotheism and a truly spiritual religion that stepped up out of the bloody, messy material religion of the Jewish priesthood) and the so-called Second Commandment and the golden calf. Appropriately enough, the Hebrew prophets looked to the future of religion in matters of ethics. And the destroyed calf and the Second Commandment looked towards the future of religion in spirituality and aesthetics.

For many iconic *modern* thinkers, the shattered calf has signified *positively*. In *The Metaphysics of Morals* Kant offers what sounds like a philosophical commentary on the scene of the golden calf: ‘Kneeling or prostrating oneself on the ground, even to express adoration of celestial objects, is contrary to human dignity; as is also the worship of them by images. For then you humble yourself not before an ideal, the handiwork of your reason, but before an idol’ (Kant 1964: 436–7). In the *Critique of Judgment* he writes: ‘Perhaps there is no sublimer passage in Jewish law than the command “Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything which is in heaven or in the earth or under the earth”’ (Kant 1951, 78). Terje Stordalen’s chapter shows how willingly this Kantian reading of biblical aniconicity was taken up by biblical scholars, as an excuse for avoiding evidence of material religion in the biblical texts (cf. Stordalen, this volume). The destroyed calf and the Second Commandment become an icon of aniconic transcendence and a refusal of crude images for humanity and divinity. The ban on and obliteration of images saves humanity from bowing down in an inappropriate fashion and undermining the human autonomy that true divinity supports. In Kant’s reading, the destruction of the golden calf is legitimate, necessary. It is an early sign of the triumph of *Geistigkeit* (abstraction or intellectuality) over sensuality and merely material religion. In this strong modern reading, the hypericon of the golden calf functions rather like the hypericon of the Platonic cave (*Republic* 514a–520a). Both hypericons dramatize revelation as liberation from wrong ways of seeing and emancipation from mistaking the shadow for the Ideal.

The divinely pulverized golden calf points to a transition in the ‘moral and religious tone’ in which we speak about true divinity in the rarefied atmosphere of self-conscious modernity. As William James provocatively observes, gods die due to changes in the ‘mental climate’ (James 2002: 264). Gods cannot live outside the atmospheres created by media and mediation. They are also susceptible to sudden or gradual death when those mediaspheres change. The kinds of gods that can no longer breathe in the changed atmosphere and tone of the modern era include the gods who have relied on too ‘coarse signs of power’ and those who have depended on ritual worship and ‘vulgar forms’. As James puts it: ‘Ritual worship in general appears to the modern transcendentalist, as well as to the ultra-puritanic type of mind, as if addressed to a deity of the most absurdly childish character, taking delight in toy-shop furniture,

tapers and tinsel, costume and mumbling and mummery, and finding his 'glory' incomprehensibly enhanced thereby' (James 2002: 265). Gods caught up in such travesties are quietly forgotten, allowed to die in obscurity, or demonized – or they are actively fought off by tradition's more progressive strands.

Historically, the condemnation of ritual and material religion was inflected as particularly Protestant (and Protestant-secular), and clearly contrasted with the Catholic and the Jewish (Old Testament). Later, in another one of those highly awkward modern compromises, the divisions were patched over and the polemic against material religion and superstition became strangely and awkwardly inclusive. The campaign for truly spiritual religion was now a trademark of 'ethical monotheism' or that awkward amalgam the 'Judeo-Christian,' even as the contours of the argument were still firmly defined by its Protestant roots. The calf episode could still be read as a mutiny against Judaism from within the Old Testament. But now it could also be read, conversely, as a shared epiphany of ethical non-material religion that was Judaism's particular gift to the world. The golden calf and the Second Commandment became the summary image of dignified modern religion: a religion of apophysis, negative theology; God-as-ethics; God-beyond-aesthetics; and a fusion of human and divine dignity that was truly 'divine'. For the German Jewish neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen god was the holy one, the 'beyond me', the archetype of human morality. The people's sin became a philosophical category mistake (Cohen 1995). Philosophical-theological aniconicity found its pin-up image in the calf.

At the same time, the destruction of the calf came to function, equally intensely, as an icon of religious, specifically monotheistic, violence, opposed by righteous human resistance. W. J. T. Mitchell provides one of the strongest and most graphic examples of this myth of divine *Bilderverbot* and human defiance. Conflating Eden and the calf as two versions of the same myth, Mitchell argues that God wants exclusive rights over representation and animation of 'the living'. He will not allow humankind to infringe on his exclusive copyright on life, any more than he will give them a permit to eat from the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. As Mitchell puts it, 'When God creates Adam as the first "living image" he knows that he is producing a creature who will be capable of the further creation of new images. This, in fact, is why the notion that the image is alive seems so disturbing and dangerous, and why God, having made Adam in his own image, goes on later to issue a law prohibiting the further creation of images by human hands' (Mitchell 2005: 93). Fearful of having unleashed the power to make an *eikôn* or *homosiosis*, God attempts to put the genie back in the bottle. He prohibits and destroys all works cast by (merely) human hands, making art one of those fundamental distinctions between the human and the divine. According to Mitchell, the destruction of the golden calf is a sign of God asserting *exclusive custody of the secret of life* (Mitchell 2005: 17) and launching a wholesale attack on 'the cult of images, *whatever they represent*' (Cesare Bori 1990: 19; Mitchell 2005: 17, my emphasis).

Mitchell's reading could have found far more biblical support than he realizes. His story of the absolute divine prohibition of life-drawing and life-making fits well with the established pattern in the Genesis myth. The Eden story is an aetiology of human limits. The myth begins by breaching and blurring the line between the human and the divine – and then redraws the line by stressing the limits of merely human life. The line must be drawn somewhere, but where? Where to draw the line between the merely

human and the divine? According to Genesis, humans will suffer labour: hard work in unyielding soil and labour pains in childbirth. Humans will die; gods will not. And in Mitchell's supplement, gods will make line drawings and draw lines, and humans will not. In Gen. 3.22, a very anxious and not very monotheistic deity says to his shadowy heavenly companions: 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever', and the narrator concludes, 'therefore the Lord God sent him from the garden of Eden'. The human is separated from the God by the boundary guarded by the cherubim: emphatically *not* cute Christmas card baby angels, but winged creatures with a human face and the body of a lion or bull. These bull-human composites, crossing the line between the human and the animal, police the boundary line between the human and divine and prevent all further nibbling from the fruit of the tree of life (Gen. 3.22-4).

Like that iconic text that we call the 'second amendment', the so-called Second Commandment has deeply contested meanings and desires. The Second Commandment is not the second commandment – in fact, not even a separate commandment – for Lutherans and Catholics, Eastern Orthodox churches and Jewish denominations. The Ten Commandments, including the highly disputed 'Second' Commandment, are given twice in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. As an iconic word against the image, the Second Commandment has completely eclipsed other biblical injunctions against images (e.g. Exod. 20.22-3; Exod. 34.17). Its interpretation is deeply contested. Everything depends on how you translate the word '*pesel*' ('idol'? 'image'? 'graven image'? or simply 'sculpture' or 'statue' as in modern Hebrew?); how you relate the creation of the *pesel* to worship of the *pesel* (is the worshipped image distinct from the image as such?); whether you put the injunction against the *pesel* together with the preceding injunction 'You shall have no other gods'; and whether you relate the prohibition to the next commandment, which follows directly after the prohibition of the *pesel* ('You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord'). Is making a *pesel* equivalent to protecting the name of God? (Neh. 9.18 is already connecting the calf to blasphemy and the salvation/securitization of the divine name.) There are also many ways of playing out the centuries-old tradition of trying to work out the true relationship between God, the human and the image, in the vexed textual vortex between Eden and the golden calf. For example, 450 years before Mitchell, in his *Preface to the Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550) Giorgio Vasari read Eden and the calf together to present God as the first artist and the first *patron* of human art. In the beginning 'the Most High [...] descended through the limpid air to the solid earth, and by shaping man, disclosed the first form of sculpture and painting'. The deity used earth because he wanted to 'endow [...] man with a bright flesh colour' but also because by using a mere 'clod of earth', the divine artist could '[...] demonstrate [...] in the imperfection of his materials, what could be done to improve them, just as good sculptors and painters are in the habit of doing [...]'. The modelling of the first man is the first art class: the production of 'a living example'. In Vasari's Renaissance hands, the deity's breath-infused human sculpture, Adam, becomes an animated figure to walk alongside – indeed in front of – Aphrodite of Knidos, Ovid's Pygmalion and Daedalus's statues. The work called 'the Man' eclipses the miraculous statues of Daedalus that, according to Plato, had to be nailed down lest they walk away (*Meno* 97d). Though

Vasari is forced to acknowledge the considerable 'fury' of God and Moses (to put it mildly), he anxiously qualifies this violence as a reaction against 'the golden calf *manufactured and adored* by his people'. Mere creation is not just innocent, but actively encouraged. *Adoration* is the sin. Images can be praised, and loved, and can move us deeply, but they should not be worshipped. (But where do we draw the line and how do we tell the difference?) Moreover, the forms used to embody divinity should be appropriately elevated (but again how high is high enough but not too high?). According to Vasari, 'Moses was greatly troubled at seeing divine honours accorded to *the image of a beast*' (my emphasis).

The *modernity* of Mitchell's interpretation is highlighted in stark contrast to Vasari's Renaissance reading. Mitchell turns golden-calf-making into a fundamental human right – a right that has to be asserted against retro violent deities who oppose it. The calf episode becomes a Feuerbachian drama of stealing back the powers that rightly belong to man but have been wrongly projected onto the divine. The calf-pulverizing God becomes the most perfect image of the rogue deity, against whom modernity rightly rebelled, founding its very modernity and secularity on the necessity of this rebellion. Mitchell's calf becomes the pin-up of secular defiance and the birth of modernity – a version of what Talal Asad calls the 'heroic secular' (Asad 2008). Divinity is seen as a force of regulation and management, and jealousy and violence. The biblical God has a Taliban-like attitude to images. He is the divine Salieri to humanity's Mozart. He is the most violent art critic; the most paranoid and damning reviewer of a work of art.

But this divine fury is all for nothing. Images and names will inevitably be taken in vain. God will not get what he wants. God is not omnipotent. He cannot enforce exclusive copyright to life. In this sense, god is not divine. The image is divine. God cannot control the life of images, any more than he can keep Adam and Eve in their 'herbaceous playpen' in Eden (Sawyer 2002: 52). In Mitchell's reading, the rebellious human figure becomes an anthropomorphized figure of the created object that refuses its passive objecthood and goes live. Adam and, especially, Eve have epistemophilia. They cannot but eat from the tree of knowledge. Similarly human beings have a bad case of technophilia, and compulsively go on making art.

Reading against the grain of the biblical text, Mitchell calls us to side with the people, now allegorized as nascent artists and progenitors of freedom who are 'running wild' (Mitchell 2005: 32). Liberalism has always had an anxiety about the demos/crowd and their potentially unruly freedoms. Assertion of the freedom to draw as one pleases, make what one wants or 'blaspheme' against the old gods has become one of the easiest and most comforting ways of affirming our founding freedoms. Freedom is most freely and easily affirmed as 'secular' freedom in contrast to divine/religious control over freedom of expression and art.

The Moh-Duns and living image: Good lamb versus bad calf

Crucial to the *official* epistemology of the tribe that Bruno Latour calls the 'Moh-Duns' (the 'light-skinned peoples living in the northern reaches of the Atlantic', 2001: 1) is 'the ability to extract the subjectivity of the knower from the material contingency of

the object and from the physical and corporeal immediacy of the experience of cognition' (Masuzawa 2008: 657), so releasing the human agency that had been bound by 'fetishes' and 'despots' (Keane 2007: 49; cf. Latour 2011). According to Hans Belting, art came into being when the beholders 'seized power over the image', transferring agency from the image to its enlightened, contemplative consumer (Belting 1994; cit. Mitchell 2005: 95). We have already noted how the phantasmatic 'image' seems to mimic divinity in its transcendence of the merely material form. The image now takes up the same role as God in the modern drama of stealing back the powers. The image loses (or divests itself of) exceptional powers and becomes the object of a delicately adjusted aesthetic response (Belting 1994). Appreciation might be gushing, but it can be (perilously) separated from 'worship' by an element of critical distance. The enlightened and emancipated Moh-Dun responds to images with appreciation, rather than worship, and with particular forms of words: criticisms, papers, reviews and gallery guides, rather than chants, blessings and prayers.

But the Moh-Duns have never quite believed this, or believed this consistently. Having never been modern, having been predestined to fail at the impossible work of being modern, the Moh-Duns habitually speak as if 'works of art had minds of their own, as if images had a power to influence human beings, demanding things from us, persuading, seducing, leading us astray [...]' (Mitchell 2005: 7). Like the conflicted biblical texts on idols, they lurch between denouncing images as 'mere nothings' and condemning them 'as all-powerful forces, responsible [for] everything from violence to moral decay' (Mitchell 2005: 77).

The tensions around gods, images and objects have become more acute for self-consciously 'modern' thinkers – which is why the calf has continued to be such a resonant image. The act of thinking so self-consciously about the lines between the person, the thing and the God, and the subject and the object has *compounded* the Moh-Duns' problems with 'materiality' and the powers. 'On the one hand, a mere multiplicity of material representations of spiritual reality amounts to idolatry, a cult of many (false) gods; on the other hand, the equally multiple iconic/symbolic representations of the truly spiritual God do not seem to threaten the unity of that deity. But how do we tell the difference?' asks Tomoko Masuzawa (2008: 653). In order to attempt to tell the difference, the Moh-Duns went wild devising comparative tabulations of religions, which related to complex evolutionary schemes, which in turn were often based on tortuous distinctions between neologisms like 'totemism', 'fetishism' and 'animism', and good and bad relations between gods and objects/things. Key – and highly dubious – criteria for discerning bad signs included tautologous materiality folding back on itself, with absolutely no 'spiritual' surplus; and an inappropriate relationship between the subject and the object, involving the attribution of too much power to the object so that creations came alive and subjugated humans to their powers and demands. Other sure signs of a bad object were *extreme* worship, involving the *waste* of resources, especially human resources and category confusions: failing to distinguish between gods, animals and things. The bad object was the object that (seemed to) exert the kind of insistent wanting that we call a demand or a command, and that compelled obedience even unto death. It was also the object that wrongly mixed divinities and animals and things. But these

Figure 3.2 *Agnus dei*, Francisco de Zurbarán, 1635–40, Madrid, Prado Museum. Wikimedia Commons.

anxious distinctions have always been precarious. There is no firm conceptual ground from which to distinguish the good objects from the bad objects, the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the tares, the lambs from the calves, the ‘sacred cow’ from the *agnus dei* (Figure 3.2, cf. Figure 3.1a). The only sure way to distinguish between the good lamb and the bad calf is to invoke those other tortuous–simplifying schemas that moderns are so fond of: the ones that map levels of religion and spirit onto philological kinships. The (bad) calf is Egyptian-Jewish Semite; the (good) lamb is Christian-Greek.

For the Moh-Duns, a key summary image for extreme worship was the god Moloch, who became a doppelgänger for the golden calf. This god, who may have been conjured into being through a misreading of Lev. 18.21 (a prohibition against offering children and their blood ‘to Moloch’⁴), developed into a figure for all extremely bad objects/ idols which brazenly display their badness by feeding on human flesh and blood. Despite the fact that the name relates to the Hebrew word ‘king’ with no reference to any animal, Moloch has frequently been portrayed as a double of the calf (Figure 3.3).

Freud’s divided calf

Even critics like W. J. T. Mitchell, who know (and indeed preach) that moderns have never been modern because they have more faith in ‘vital signs’ than they like to imagine, still tend to prefer a polarized either–or version of the golden calf (see Meyer in this volume). Either the transcendence of the merely (vulgarly) material is celebrated, as a sign of proto-modernity, or divine violence and prohibition is condemned. The calf is popular because the religious figure provides a kind of comfort or escape from

Figure 3.3 *Der Götze Moloch mit 7 Räumen oder Capellen* (The idol Moloch with seven chambers or chapels), Johann Lund, *Die alten jüdischen Heiligthümer*, p. 504, but attached to p. 639 (reprint 1738 – originally printed in 1704/11).

modernity's paradoxical conflicts and impossible positions. The calf goes both ways, but never both at the same time.

But there is one exception: Freud's strange book *Moses and Monotheism*, or *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (2001, orig. 1939), written at the end of his life, in Vienna and London. Freud's strangely haunting book is remembered for its two shocking theses: (1) Moses and monotheism were both Egyptian in origin – a

thesis that came from the recently discovered story of Akhenaten's heretic monotheistic revolution in Egypt; and (2) the Israelites killed Moses. But the book is arguably even more striking for its tortured hypotheses about the relationship between religion (specifically Judaism and Christianity) and materiality: hypotheses conflict around the divided figure of the calf. Rather than reading the divine prohibition on images negatively like Mitchell, or positively like Kant, Freud reads the conflicted figure of the calf as Jewish and Christian, and a convergence of contested desires.

German source critics famously divided the Bible into different textual strands named, for example, 'J' (after Jahve or Yahweh), 'E' (after the 'Elohist') and 'P' (after the Priests). Freud takes his cue from source criticism: but his Bible is simpler. It is simply split between *two* groups of people, *two* religions and '*two conflicting religious impulses*' (2001: 52, 43, my emphasis). This is not really about sources, but about conflicting *impulses*. Like the psyche, the Bible becomes a site of antagonistic conflict between colliding and contested desires. One layer of the Hebrew Bible – let us call it Freud's 'J' source – records the religion of the 'savage semites' who worshipped Yahweh, a 'demonic' narrow-minded local god, imported from Midian (2001: 47). The other – let us call it Freud's 'M', or 'Moses', source – records the 'highly spiritualised' (2001: 47) pure monotheism which was imported to Israel from Egypt by the Egyptian Moses who learnt it from Akhenaten. This 'rigid monotheism on the grand scale' taught that 'there is only one God, he is the sole God, omnipotent, unapproachable; his aspect is more than human eyes can tolerate, no image must be made of him, even his name may not be spoken' (2001: 18).

Freud's point is that both religious impulses are 'alien' (2001: 44) to us, but differently so. The J-Semitic religion is too vulgar and crude. Its God is anthropomorphic and bound to ritual objects – crude artefacts like Moses's bronze serpent. But the other M-religion is too violent in its purity. No one – perhaps, even no God – can live with its austerity, particularly its austerity in relation to material forms. Pure aniconicity is always too much and too little for us. It is also arguably too much for the gods, who simply cannot live without form.

According to Freud's sensationally retold biblical history, it was inevitable that the people would rebel against the Mosaic prohibition on sensation. They did so in no uncertain terms by killing Moses and burying the traces and the corpse. The Mosaic religion of *Geistigkeit* and abstraction was buried under Yahweh religion, in practice and in the textual record. The single clue to all of this – the all-important trace or smoking gun – is the golden calf. The calf, which has always signified erasure and obliteration, now signifies for Freud the obliteration of M-religion, the religion of *Bilderverbot*. The 'people's defection from the new religion is also described in the text – only as an episode, it is true: namely in the story of the golden calf' (2001: 38, 43). Moses was killed and his pure aniconic monotheism was buried in the 'mausoleum' of the text (2001: 62). But ghosts haunt – and this seems to be particularly and uncannily true of ghosts without bodies. Eventually the crudely bodied and violent god Yahweh 'had to pay heavily for his usurpation' (2001: 50). The god without a body and an image returned and defeated him. 'The shadow of the god whose place [Yahweh] had taken became stronger than himself' (2001: 50). In what sounds like a parody of supersession, the shadow was more powerful than the body, and it preceded and exceeded it.⁵ Indeed

it was this shadow – and the light and energy of this shadow god – that had always mysteriously kept the people alive. The tradition of ethical and *geistig* (intellectual/spiritual) monotheism was kept alive in the ‘great and mighty tradition of the Prophets’ and eventually resurfaced as the ‘permanent content of the Jewish religion’ (2001: 50).

But the supersession of J-religion or M-religion has never been perfectly achieved, says Freud. The two impulses are in permanent tension and rotation. Even as it becomes a manifesto of M-religion and ethical monotheism, Judaism retains the memory of a profound allergy to its central tenet. Judaism is ‘alien’ (44) to itself in its very purity. This is why it keeps on falling back into circumcision and other crude material rites. *But crucially Judaism is not alone and certainly not iconic in this for Freud.* In 1939, at least eleven years and worlds before the first public uses of the uncomfortable and guilty amalgam of the ‘Judeo-Christian’, Freud, who wrote *Der Mann Moses* as he was escaping the Anschluss, argued that *Christianity and Judaism were alike because both were uncomfortable amalgams of the two religious impulses and both were similarly split.* Reversing the drama of supersession, he aggressively presented Christianity as a regression – even as in his preface he recorded his former hope in, and then betrayal by, the Austrian Catholic Church:

In some respects the new religion meant a cultural regression as compared with the older, Jewish one, as regularly happens when a new mass of people, of a lower level, break their way in or are given admission. *The Christian religion did not maintain the high level in things of the mind to which Judaism had soared [my italics].* It was no longer strictly monotheistic, it took over numerous symbolic rituals from surrounding peoples, it re-established the great mother-goddess and found room to introduce many of the divine figures of polytheism only lightly veiled, though in subordinate positions. Above all, it did not, like the Aten religion and the Mosaic one which followed it, exclude the entry of superstitious, magical and mystical elements, which were to prove a severe inhibition upon the intellectual development of the next two thousand years. (2001: 88)

The first shall be last. The higher shall be lower. And vice versa. Again and again. In Freud’s counter-usurpation or inverted supersession, Christianity is also lower than Judaism, and rather more Semitic and primitive than Aryan-Greek.

In Freud’s reading, the golden calf becomes a conflicted figure for contested and conflicted religious impulses. Monotheism is presented as violent and intolerant *and* the source of eternal ethics and spiritual, intellectual religion. Aniconic monotheism is modern Europe’s foundation – and it is forever ‘alien’ (2001: 44), ghostly as well as *geistig*. Unlike Kant, who would rather ignore the violence at the level of the crude biblical letter, Freud sees the advocates of pure monotheism, like Moses and Akhenaten, as by definition uncompromising, iconoclastic, destructive, and absolutely authoritarian (even fascistic). And the violent conflict finds its summary image in the (destroyed) calf. Prohibitions against plurality and the image lead to acts of iconoclasm, supersession and contrast: comparative religion with a bloody edge. ‘We are purer than them.’ And, conversely, ‘We are less austere than them, more material, touchable, more incarnate, less removed.’ For Christians and Jews, a purely *geistig* monotheism has proved far too

difficult. It has been – and could only ever be – partially fulfilled. There is nothing here of the contemporary fantasies of separating good and bad images, good and bad religion, good and bad politics that we find in contemporary government agendas that try to separate the promise and values of religion from the danger. It was arguably quite difficult to entertain such fantasies in the age of Nazi Christianity.

The unstable biblical calf

Mitchell compares the calf to the ambiguity and fluidity of the duck-rabbit (Mitchell 2005: 189). But he doesn't know the half of it. It turns out, unexpectedly, that the duck-rabbit would be a perfect figure for the Exodus version of the calf narrative, which is surprisingly close to Freud. Like Freud, Nolde or Poussin – and unlike Kant or W. J. T. Mitchell – the old biblical myth is ambiguous, turbulent, anxious and resistant to polarization as a statement either for or against the calf. The old words do not share the same anxieties as modern thinkers. But it is as if, in a different register, they are trying to epitomize or anticipate or prophesy all our troubles with materiality and plurality, all our confusion about god, gods and things.

Beyond and above the technical fractures of source criticism, the biblical narratives of the calf are fractured between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, between monotheism and polytheism. They are divided between two 'impulses'. And they dispute the very sources of life. When the people see the calf, they say, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt', or, *in an equally possible reading*, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt' (Exod. 32.4). Moses's brother Aaron responds by (a) building an altar before the calf and (b) making the proclamation: 'Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord' (Exod. 32.5). The calf seems to be more orthodox than heterodox; more monotheistic than polytheistic (to use anachronistic terminology). The vocabulary deliberately recalls the two golden calves that were erected by Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel, at the northern shrines of Dan and Bethel, after Israel had split from Judah (1 Kings 25–33). Later overwriters and reinventors of tradition from the southern kingdom saw Jeroboam's innovations as an offence against the centralization of worship in Judah and Jerusalem and ostracized the calves as sin. The prophetic books of Amos and Hosea denounce Bethel (the house of God) as Beth-Aven or Beth-Al, the 'house of wickedness' or the 'house of nothing', and condemn the people for 'kissing calves' (Amos 5.5; Hos. 4.15; 10.5; 13.2). But as archaeological and biblical evidence clearly shows, Yahweh did not always clearly separate, or even desire to separate, himself from the Canaanite deities El and Baal, represented as a bull. Bull-calf terracottas from Bethel and Samaria, a bovine Yahweh and his Asherah from Kuntillet Ajrud, and the figure of a bull on a bronze plaque at Jeroboam's shrine at Tel Dan all suggest that the golden bull at Jeroboam's shrines and Aaron's golden calf may have been traditional and orthodox (cf. Smith 2016: 64–5).

The mass of text that precedes and follows the golden calf, but that is far less shiny and has been largely obliterated from cultural memory, attempts another technique for making the invisible God present: the temple and the tabernacle, the temple's portable,

'camping' form. When Moses goes up the mountain, God gives him six full chapters itemizing an inventory of all the contents of the temple/tabernacle (Exodus 25–31), and then this information is reiterated in Exodus 35–40. The two tablets, written with the very finger of God (Exod. 31.18) are a footnote or an extended colophon in comparison to all the words about the tabernacle, in all its exquisite details, including the frame, the curtains, the vestments, the table, the lampstands, the altar and the oil. The tabernacle is an unfeasibly portable, proleptic temple. The words about the tabernacle are more easily portable. They can be carried for posterity, independently of the temple/tabernacle's material form. The plans include the verbal blueprint for an ark of the covenant with a mercy seat supported by cherubim (like the cherubim that guard the Garden of Eden) modelled on the Assyrian–Babylonian human-headed winged bulls, the *lamassus* or *shedus*. The people willingly give all their gold earrings to make the calf – and then they do the same for the temple, which contains the bull-calves or cherubim. After the calf debacle, Moses commands the people: 'Whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord's offering: gold, silver, and bronze; blue, purple and crimson yarns and fine linen: goats' hair, tanned rams' skins and fine leather; acacia wood; oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, and onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breastplate [...]' (Exod. 35.4–9) – and this is just the beginning of the list. The temple and tabernacle seem to be designed, by God, as vast grids to convert the dangerous force of art into labour: work that is productive and directed to a clear, single referential object that is not only constantly referred to, but worshipped, for worship as intensified reference is what temples and tabernacles demand. Moses makes an altar call; a call, quite literally, for the materials to make the altar. Exod. 35.4–19 reads like an extravagant wish list for a funding campaign. The result is that 'everyone whose heart was stirred' or 'everyone whose spirit was willing' brought 'brooches and earrings and signets and pendants; all sorts of gold objects' (Exod. 35.22), including the gold from Egypt. The people bring more gold than they ever brought for the calf. And/but not everyone comes, but only those who have a willing heart. We can sense the mimetic rivalry, the anxiety and the traces of competition and dissent. The reference to 'those that were willing' implies those that were unwilling. The massive inventory of precious stones and metals, fabrics, yarns, skins, oils, spices, leathers and costly woods anxiously announces: 'We will crush that calf to little pieces. Our temple will be more glorious and more extravagant than the calf (and/but it will contain bull-calves).'

The calf is destroyed – and the bull/calf returns and remains as an orthodox prop and support for the temple – in the same composite text. And the calf is and is not *cheiropoeitos*, made by human hands. Aaron makes it, and the calf makes itself. The first textual casting of what happened states: 'He [Aaron] took the gold from them, formed it in a mold [alternatively "cast it with a graving tool"] and cast an image of a calf; and they said "These are your gods/This is your god who brought you out of Egypt"' (Exod. 32.4). When Aaron stands accused, he re-casts the story of creation as the story of autogeneration in which the calf is *acheiropoeitos* – not made by human hands. He now says to Moses: 'I said to them, "Whoever has gold, take it off" so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!' (Exod. 32.34). 'The calf made itself.' In *The Worship of the Golden Calf* by a follower of Filippino Lippi

Figure 3.4 *The Worship of the Golden Calf* by a follower of Filippino Lippi (1457–1504), National Gallery, London.

(1457–1504), the calf not only lives, but miraculously boings and bounces across the skies (Figure 3.4).

Uncomfortable with the uneasy biblical balance between the calf as automaton and the calf as a work of human manufacture, the Qur'an pushes the calf firmly into the realm of human making and deception (just as Deuteronomy anxiously buries, in subclauses, the making of the calf). Only the tiniest hint of the true supernatural remains. The calf is allegedly made from the dust trodden on by the angel Gabriel, so perhaps it contains a few particles of the right kind of divine magic. But for the most part, it is a work of human hands. The maker of the calf is not Aaron (Harun) but a man of unknown (foreign?) origin, called Samiri. He makes a hollow statue of a calf and, as the wind blows through it, it seems to make a lowing sound, which manages to convince the credulous people that it is alive (Q 20.88). The deception uncannily anticipates those modern gestures of disenchantment that claimed that miracles and movement were special effects produced by 'frauds' of 'Glasses, Speaking Trumpets, Ventriloquies, Echoes, Phosphorus, Magick Lanterns' and machines (Trenchard 1709; cit. Schmidt: 93). In the Qur'an, the calf episode becomes a neater tale of idolatry or shirk (شرك), and the graciousness of Allah. 'Did they not see that it could not return to them any speech and that it did not possess for them any harm or benefit?' (Q 20.89). The people repent and are spared the biblical bloodbath. Most importantly, the calf has no (or hardly any) *real* life in it.

The biblical account is far more ambiguous about animation and the sources of life. Just as the calf has become a meeting point for foundation myths that must be kept apart (serving as an emblem of divine violence and bad religion; and an emblem of good, higher religion, above crude images) so it troubles moderns by embodying the paradox of *le fait*, which means both 'what nobody has fabricated' and 'what somebody has fabricated': the manufactured thing (Latour 2011). In Latour's terms, the calf is a

fact object *and* a fairy object. It really is, and its life is nothing but our projection. It is a 'thing', with all the ambiguities of the 'thing', and its mysterious occluded powers. As David Morgan astutely points out,

In many languages, the pronoun for a thing is an 'it'. An it, or id [the It, *das Es*], signifies some entity other than I, or ego. It often operates grammatically in the passive voice in order to signal, and at the same time also conceal, agency. 'It was said that you committed the deed'. As an 'it', a thing dwells in obscurity [...] thingness refers to an identity and precise agency that remains hidden. (Morgan 2015: 255)

The amorphous raw material, the nameless thing, the object-in-waiting, becomes a calf – a discernable object that we can name. But the calf retains its thingness. What is it? It is said that Aaron made it, and it is said that it made itself. Which is worse? Or to put it another way, which is the best way to terrify those who attribute powers to false gods and objects? Should we say: 'You made it and therefore it cannot be god' (the way of demystification)? Or should we say: 'Beware of it, beware of its very real powers over you'? Are false gods nothing, impotent, mere objects – in which case why do we trouble ourselves about them? Why are there so many passages in the Bible that reduce the idol to something like the modern category of the 'fetish', 'materiality at its crudest and lowest' (cf. Masuzawa 2008: 657) and protest (too much) that the other gods are really nothing but lumps of wood or stone (e.g. Isa. 44.9-20; cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 38)? And why is the biblical discourse on idols so 'astonishing[ly] fluid' (Halbertal and Margolit 1988: 250)? The Hebrew term translated as idolatry is *avodah zarah* ('strange worship'). But the point at which worship becomes 'strange' is contested – as is the question of whether this desire for strange worship comes from outside, from foreign influence, or from inside (even from Yahweh's own command). In this composite syncretistic tradition, it is impossible to pinpoint the exact point at which *latría* (worship) becomes *idolatria*. Denunciations of the merely material and affirmations of the real life of the religious object/god sometimes coincide. The first-century apocryphal text, the *Wisdom of Solomon*, awkwardly combines the solid thump of polemic (idols are nothing, vain illusions) with premonitions of later theories of the complex sources for idolatry in the ancient equivalent of psychology, sociology, politics, statecraft and art. Idols are created (or create themselves) from our desire for beauty, from our grief and mourning, and from realpolitik (the need to disseminate physical figures of the king). Idols are not mere lumps of wood and stone. On the contrary, they are symbols and indices of deities and desires – including the desire for beauty and the desire to commemorate and immortalize. Instead of functioning as empty material forms, idols are full of signification and significance, and, even in the pre-secular world of the Bible, 'the gods' are already only the half of it.

The Hebrew Bible regularly relates the making and worshipping of other gods to 'harlotry': the strongest possible metaphor or more-than-metaphor for the seductive-demonic power of art. Making gods and physical forms is as compulsive as sex and as resistant to prohibition. The people are frantic to create images. They just cannot stop doing it. Like sex, the act is addictive and (re)productive. The intense desire of art finds its iconic expression in the calf. As with prohibited ('adulterous' or 'harlotrous') sex, it

is the other gods that hold the passion/temptation of art. According to the Bible's own witness, the true God seems to be the one who *lacks* these special powers. The invisible God labours to make himself present in the massive edifices of temples (or tabernacles); in a people; in his own partly materialized body; in the Torah (cf. Scarry 1985) – and in destructive acts of iconoclasm against other gods. (He *is* because he was able to make them as if they were not.) But the books of the Prophets are full of passages declaring how much more sensational and desirable the other gods (like Baal or the Queen of Heaven) were, by contrast. Only those who are 'willing' donate to the temple (Exod. 35.22), whereas everyone pitches their gold into the calf. God's preferred forms of presencing (like writing, or the temple) are often portrayed as very labour intensive and precarious. They take so much effort to make/inscribe, and they are regularly destroyed or lost. It is good that the temple is archived in words in scripture, because those same scriptures speak at length about the destruction of the first and second temples. Texts like Jeremiah 36 and 2 Kings 22–3 agonize over lost and burnt scriptures. Condemned to die outside the promised land, Moses sends a piece of writing to go with the Israelites and help them remember, but the recorded oral song foretells the forgetting of the Exodus story and the betrayal of Yahweh by 'making him jealous with strange gods' (Deut. 32.16). Words are not only curiously material. They are often strangely weak. At times, the Bible seems uncannily close to post-Christian times as it presents its own words as a monument to forgetting – an artefact that stands unread.

The 'regimes of sensation' (cf. Stordalen in this volume) in the biblical archive are far more complex than we remember. Even for gods, transcending the body and material form is hardly an easy task. There are many strangely conflicted passages in the Bible that deserve re-reading as a witness to the tortured positions taken on and by God's body and the materialization of divinity. Stordalen gives us a brilliant re-reading of the deuteronomistic temple: the house of God where God is and is not at home; or is at home as trace, name, the material record of the point of contact. At the centre is the empty seat above the ark, the box of sacred things, including the 'petrified fingerprint of the deity'; the tablet as a record of the point of touch. Though the regimes of sensation in the book of Exodus are not the same, the golden calf is god, and is and is not alive. And the calf episode is followed, almost immediately, by a passage about God's passing by which dramatizes, with perfect awkwardness, the Bible's literally shifting position on imaging the divine. In Exod. 33.18–23, God tells Moses that he cannot see his face, but only glimpse his back as he 'covers [him] with [his] hand until he has passed by' (Exod. 33.22). The profoundly awkward portrayal of God's figure can be read as a figure of the intersection of two fundamentally incommensurable biblical positions on images. On one hand – that is, according to the tradition that can show God's hand – the biblical tradition is radically and shockingly anthropomorphic. God clearly has a body, and has had one long before the over-exaggerated newness of the divine incarnation in Christ. But God uses his body parts (his back and hands) to *conceal his body* in faithfulness to the opposing tradition: the prohibition against visualizing the divine. Try to imitate the position of God's body at home, using your own human body and a willing friend or family member. Try to put your hands in front of someone else's face, pass them, then show yourself from the back, without your face being seen. It would be easier for Francis Bacon to paint this split and contorted

figure, than for us to copy it. The impossibly contorted position taken up by God's body can be seen as an agonized figure of conflicting traditions of figuring the divine. Like the empty seat above the petrified fingerprint, God's contorted 'body' in Exodus 33 is an iconic figure of contested figuration. Like the calf, it is a shattered and eternally enduring presence-absence; a figure of temptation-prohibition; and a profoundly conflicted answer to the question of materializing the divine.