Forgetting Signorelli: Monstrous Visions of the Resurrection of the Dead

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“For I had already been in a grave once.”
—Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams

“I have had no looking-glass in my grave, to see how my body looks in the dissolution.”
—John Donne, “Sermon Preached at Lincoln's Inn on Job 19:26 (Easter Term[?] 1620)”

Few visitors to Orvieto spend more than an afternoon taking in the major sights. A current American guidebook to Italy advises tourists that the Umbrian hilltown, celebrated for its combination of Etruscan antiquities, Gothic architecture, and Renaissance art, not to mention its eponymous white wine, “has a good half day of sightseeing.” German tourists, who far outnumber the Americans visiting Orvieto, seem to have received similar guidance. Each day brings a fresh influx of visitors: in the hour or so before noon, automobiles and tour buses converge on Orvieto, having set out earlier that morning from Rome, Florence, or Siena. First on the travelers’ itinerary is the cathedral, with its magnificent series of apocalyptic frescoes by Luca Signorelli. Typically, a tour of the cathedral will be closely followed by a descent into the Etruscan grottoes for a subterranean glimpse into the town's pre-Christian past.

It seems that the tourist itinerary for Orvieto has remained fairly constant over the past hundred years, as this was roughly Freud's program when he visited the hilltown and its environs during his tour of northern Italy in September 1897. Freud kept a relentless pace during his fortnight of travel, rarely spending more than one night in a town. While the visit to Orvieto was brief, Freud's encounter with the Signorelli frescoes and the Etruscan necropolis proved momentous, supplying fodder for The Interpretation of Dreams (1900) and for
the development of the concepts of parapraxis and repression published in “The Psychical Mechanism of Forgetfulness” (1898) and The Psychopathology of Everyday Life (1901). Orvieto, it seems, was both unforgettable and significantly forgettable. Among the array of charming Tuscan and Umbrian towns that Freud visited on this trip (Siena, San Gimignano, Chiusi, Orte, Terni, Spoleto, Assisi, Perugia, Arezzo), Orvieto stood out: for it was here that Freud encountered death and triumphed over it, here that he descended to the grave and emerged safely, here that he was dissected, buried, and resurrected. As the discussion of the dream of “Dissecting My Own Pelvis” in the Traumdeutung reveals, Orvieto provided Freud with the oddly comforting knowledge that he had “already” been in a grave:

For I had already been in a grave once, but it was an excavated Etruscan grave near Orvieto, a narrow chamber with two stone benches along its walls, on which the skeletons of two grown-up men were lying. The inside of the wooden house in the dream looked exactly like it, except that the stone was replaced by wood. The dream seems to have been saying: “If you must rest in a grave, let it be the Etruscan one.” And, by making this replacement, it transformed the gloomiest of expectations into one that was highly desirable. (1900, 454-55)

Although Freud never draws a connection between the dream of the Etruscan tomb and the Signorelli parapraxis, other scholars, most prominently Anthony Wilden, have seized upon the correspondences between the two subjects. Indeed, Freud's acknowledgment (if not recognition) of such a connection was effectively foreclosed in the discussion of the Signorelli parapraxis in the Psychopathology through his denial of the relevance of the content of the frescoes.

Since the Signorelli parapraxis is relatively well known, having attracted considerable attention from historians of psychoanalysis as well as Lacan and Lacanian theorists, I will supply only a brief summary here. I draw freely from both published accounts of the incident, as the differences between them, while of interest to scholars, are not central to my
concerns. The episode of forgetting “Signorelli” occurred in September 1898, almost exactly a year after the visit to Orvieto. Freud was once again on vacation, this time on the Adriatic Coast. However, memories of the previous year's visit to Italy came flooding back to Freud during a carriage ride with a lawyer from Berlin:

our conversation turned to the subject of Italy and of pictures, and I had occasion to recommend my companion strongly to visit Orvieto some time, in order to see the frescoes there of the end of the world and the Last Judgment, with which one of the chapels in the cathedral had been decorated by a great artist. But the artist's name escaped me and I could not recall it. I exerted my powers of recollection, made all the details of the day I spent in Orvieto pass before my memory and convinced myself that not the smallest part of it had been obliterated or become indistinct. On the contrary, I was able to conjure up the pictures with greater sensory vividness than is usual with me. I saw before my eyes with especial sharpness the artist's self-portrait—with a serious face and folded hands—which he has put in a corner of one of the pictures, next to the portrait of his predecessor in the work, Fra Angelico da Fiesole; but the artist's name, ordinarily so familiar to me, remained obstinately in hiding. (1898, 290-91)

In his struggle to produce the artist's name, Freud found himself drawn to the prefix “Bo”: “Instead of the name I was looking for—Signorelli—the names of two other painters—Botticelli and Boltraffio—thrust themselves on me, though they were immediately and decisively rejected by my judgment as incorrect” (1901, 2). The memory lapse persisted over several days, and Freud eventually had to resort to external help: “Since I had no access to any reference books on my journey, I had for several days to put up with this lapse of memory and with the inner torment associated with it which recurred at frequent intervals each day, until I fell in with a cultivated Italian who freed me from it by telling me the name: Signorelli” (1898, 291).
Freud suspected that an unconscious motive lay behind his failure of memory and sought to retrace the psychic paths whereby Signorelli had been occluded by the substitute names Botticelli and Boltraffio. The explanation, he decided, lay in the preceding conversation, which had touched upon the theme of “death and sexuality” and thus threatened to bring to mind some distressing news he had recently received at Trafoi: one of his patients had killed himself “on account of an incurable sexual disorder” (1901, 3). Place names figure prominently in the psychic pathway that Freud reconstructs. The instance of forgetting occurred during a journey by carriage from the city of Ragusa (now Dubrovnik) into a nearby town in Herzegovina. Freud writes: “Conversation with my companion centered, as was natural, round the condition of the two countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the character of their inhabitants. I talked about the various peculiarities of the Turks living there, as I had heard them described years before by a friend and colleague who had lived among them as a doctor for many years” (1898, 290). Freud had two stories to relate about the “customs of the Turks,” but he conveyed only the first to his companion: “I had told him what I had heard from a colleague practicing among those people—that they are accustomed to show great confidence in their doctor and great resignation to fate. If one has to inform them that nothing can be done for a sick person, their reply is: ‘Herr [Sir], what is there to be said? If he could be saved, I know you would have saved him’” (1901, 3).

Freud did not impart the second story about the Bosnian Turks:

I recall in fact wanting to tell a second anecdote which lay close to the first in my memory. These Turks place a higher value on sexual enjoyment than on anything else, and in the event of sexual disorders they are plunged in a despair which contrasts strangely with their resignation towards the threat of death. One of my colleague's patients once said to him: “Herr, you must know, that if that comes to an end then life is of no value.” I suppressed my account of this characteristic trait, since I did not want to allude to the topic in a conversation with

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a stranger. But I did more: I also diverted my attention from pursuing thoughts which might have arisen in my mind from the topic of “death and sexuality.” (1901, 3)

Freud conjectures that he suppressed the second story because it was unduly reminiscent of the painful news he had received in Trafoi about his patient's suicide. “I wanted, therefore, to forget something; I had repressed something” (1901, 4). The desire to forget was apparently so strong that it affected the conversation immediately following, as if by contagion. That is, the name Signorelli was lost in the process of repressing the second story about the cultural traits of the Bosnian Turks.

Freud claims that the “content” of the Orvieto frescoes had only a slight relevance to the mechanism of forgetfulness in this instance, which he understood as a series of linguistic linkages, connecting the first half of the proper name Signorelli with the German for Signor, Herr, and the first syllable of Herzegovina (Herz = heart). A schematic diagram, included in somewhat different form in both the “Psychical Mechanism” and the Psychopathology versions of the episode, shows displacement occurring along the axis of the paired names Herzegovina and Bosnia, producing names that begin with Bo- rather than Herr/Signor. However, the diagram perpetuates the original repression by relegating the object of repression to the vague phrases “Death and sexuality” and “Repressed thoughts.”

Several pages following the exposition of the Signorelli example in the Psychopathology, Freud returns to the incident and reiterates his denial of any “internal” connection between the Orvieto frescoes and the repressed material: “Contiguity in time furnished the only relation between the repressed topic and the topic of the forgotten name; but this was enough to enable the two topics to find a connection in an external association” (1901, 13). However, in a footnote to this sentence, Freud admits to harboring some doubts: “I am not entirely convinced of the absence of any internal connection between the two groups of thoughts in the Signorelli case. After all, if the repressed thoughts on the topic of death and sexual life are carefully followed up, one will be brought face to face with an idea that is by no means remote from the topic of the frescoes at Orvieto” (1901, 13 n). The editors of the Standard
Edition supplement this note with the suggestion, credited to a personal communication from Richard Karpe, that “there may be a connection here with the visit to an Etruscan tomb near Orvieto mentioned in The Interpretation of Dreams.”

Given that Freud himself could barely sustain his claim to having mastered and resolved the Signorelli mystery, it is not surprising that his followers have turned to the material dismissed as irrelevant—the content of the frescoes—to interrogate their potential significance to Freud. Lacan (1973) points the way to just such an investigation, though without undertaking the task himself, at the close of the seminar entitled “The Freudian Unconscious and Ours.” Here Lacan comments on the “denuded metonymy,” the linguistic pathway, that cryptically inscribes Freud's repressed desire. Lacan notices that in forgetting “Signorelli,” Freud has forgotten himself; he has engineered his own effacement. Signorelli, after all, shares the first syllable of Sigmund. Indeed Freud has a double claim to Signor, as an approximation of his first name and as an honorific, the equivalent of Herr. In Lacan's reading of the incident, forgetting “Signorelli” is a defensive gesture against the Absolute Master, or Death. Ironically, in striving to ward off this threat, Freud has effaced himself, unconsciously rehearsed his own castration and his own death:

The term Signor, Herr, passes underneath—the absolute master, I once said, which is in fact death, has disappeared there. Furthermore, do we not see, behind this, the emergence of that which forced Freud to find in the myths of the death of the father the regulation of his desire? After all, it is to be found in Nietzsche, who declares, in his own myth, that God is dead. And it is perhaps against the background of the same reasons. For the myth of the God is dead—which, personally, I feel much less sure about, as a myth of course, than most contemporary intellectuals, which is in no sense a declaration of theism, nor of faith in the resurrection—perhaps this myth is simply a shelter against the threat of castration.
If you know how to read them, you will see this threat in the apocalyptic frescoes of Orvieto cathedral.2 (Lacan 1973, 27)

Among the critics who have taken up Lacan's challenge, Anthony Wilden (1966) offers the most impressive reassessment of the Signorelli example.3 In an article published in American Imago, Wilden unravels the oedipal implications of the episode, pointing out that the incident bears striking associations with the death of Freud's father in 1896 and Freud's subsequent self-analysis, which occasioned his first formulation of the significance of Oedipus Rex in 1897. As Wilden remarks, “no Freudian discovery is more fraught with the theme of death and sexuality than the oedipal triangle—which also implies the judgment of the Father” (1966, 341). Signorelli's frescoes, with their quite literal and elaborate depictions of the scene of God-the-Father judging an assembly of resurrected, naked humans, could not be more blatantly suggestive of the oedipal linkage of sexuality, death, and punishment.

Wilden also locates an oedipal dynamic in the “visual displacement of the theme of the fresco to the image of Signorelli” (1966, 354), evident in Freud's reported “ultraclear” memory of the portrait of the artist standing beside his predecessor, Fra Angelico. The decoration of the Capella Nuova (later referred to as the San Brizio Chapel) in Orvieto Cathedral was begun by Fra Angelico in 1447, but he abandoned the project soon after starting work on the vaults. Luca Signorelli was commissioned in 1499 to complete the murals on the vaults and to undertake the fresco series on the walls. Among the elements completed by Fra Angelico is a depiction of Christ in Majesty, with right hand raised in judgment: “He looks down to His left and denounces the damned and, at the same time, reminds the sinful, through the exposed wound on his Hand, of the source of His anger” (Reiss 1995a, 90). In an ingenious reading of Freud's memory of the combined portraits of Signorelli and Fra Angelico, Wilden points out the parallels to the pairings of Jakob Freud/Sigmund Freud and God-the-Father/God-the-Son: “The master in the painting is der Herr Gott, and the Son, the potential father, the little Herr
(Signorelli), is at his right hand” (1966, 348). Wilden goes on to explain the function of the “ultra-clear” image of Signorelli as a screen memory, standing in for material that could not appear in consciousness: “Signorelli, both in perception and in verbal representation, represented the theme of death and judgment, with its inevitable link to sexuality through the theme of the Father in the painting and the ‘Herr’ in speech” (1966, 353).

In Wilden's analysis, the Signorelli example constitutes a veritable epitome of Freudian theory, not only encompassing the emergent formulations of repression, oedipal desire, castration anxiety, and dream work, but also anticipating the concept of the death instinct. In exploring the latter dimension, Wilden does not neglect to consider the potential relevance of the “Dream of Dissecting My Own Pelvis” (the Etruscan grave dream). Freud himself deciphered the dream in terms of his anxiety about completing the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and exposing to public view the results of his self-analysis. The dream also incorporates anxiety about living up to the expectations of the Father, in this instance embodied by his former mentor:

Old Brücke must have set me some task; STRANGELY ENOUGH, it related to a dissection of the lower part of my own body, my pelvis and legs, which I saw before me as though in the dissecting-room, but without noticing their absence in myself and also without a trace of any gruesome feeling. Louise N. was standing beside me and doing the work with me. The pelvis had been eviscerated, and it was visible now in its superior, now in its inferior, aspect, the two being mixed together. Thick flesh-colored protuberances (which, in the dream itself, made me think of hemorrhoids) could be seen. Something which lay over it and was like crumpled silver-paper had also to be carefully fished out. I was then more in possession of my legs and was making my way through the town. (1900, 452)

The journey continues, somewhat complicated by the inconsistent performance of the dreamer's legs:
At last we reached a small wooden house at the end of which was an open window. There the guide set me down and laid two wooden boards, which were standing ready, upon the window-sill, so as to bridge the chasm which had to be crossed over from the window. At this point I really became frightened about my legs, but instead of the expected crossing, I saw two grown-up men lying on wooden benches that were along the walls of the hut, and what seemed to be two children sleeping beside them. It was as though what was going to make the crossing possible was not the boards but the children. I awoke in a mental fright. (1900, 453)

In his analysis of the dream, Freud locates a number of allusions to two novels by H. Rider Haggard, memories of which had been stirred up by a conversation with Louise N. earlier that day. At the end of the novel She, as Freud notes, a female guide, “instead of finding immortality for herself and the others, perishes in the mysterious subterranean fire. A fear of that kind was unmistakably active in the dream-thoughts. The ‘wooden house’ was also, no doubt, a coffin, that is to say, the grave” (1900, 454). However, under the effects of the dream-work, that fear was converted into a wish-fulfillment through the provision of (what was for Freud) a consoling image of the grave: a scene that recalled the excavated Etruscan grave he had visited near Orvieto.

Reading this dream from the vantage point of Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Wilden uncovers a wish-fulfillment far more uncanny than that of substituting one image of the grave for another, converting, as Freud insists, “the gloomiest of expectations into one that was highly desirable”: namely, a desire for castration, a feature that Wilden, citing Laplanche and Leclaire, observes is “common in neurotic dreams” and linked to the death instinct (1966, 360-61). In the figure of the abyss in the dream, Wilden discovers a striking image for the torment that Freud claimed to have suffered during the period in which he struggled to recover the lost name of Signorelli: “Freud's Angst over the absence of ‘Signorelli’ gapes like an abyss before him as it did in the dream … and the return of ‘Signorelli,’ … the return of mastery over the repressed, is the means of bridging
that béance” (363). “This return of the repressed signifier,” Wilden writes, “represents Freud's return to mastery of the signifier, at least in this one instance, and consequently to mastery of death and castration in so far as this mastery is ever possible for the human subject” (362-63).

Wilden's reading of the Signorelli example is unrivaled in terms of its elucidation of the episode's “personal importance to Freud” and what that reveals for psychoanalysis through the lens of Lacanian theory. (I have not attempted to summarize Wilden's explication of the Signorelli example in terms of a Lacanian structural analysis.) However, Wilden's attention to the content of the paintings is relatively limited, confined largely to the portraits of Signorelli and Fra Angelico. That is to say, Wilden has read the castrating threat in the frescoes, as Lacan enjoined, but largely by reverting to the textual archive of psychoanalysis. In what follows I too will venture to accept Lacan's invitation, turning to those frescoes in Orvieto whose content and subject matter, as Lacan implies, have apparently passed beneath the linguistic pathways of remembering and disremembering, a pathway whereby Freud's first name (Sigmund) and his honorifics (Signor/Herr) displace the castrating force of the Absolute Master. I shall now take up the frescoes in order to sketch out avenues for reading their own bizarre strategy for inscribing and warding off the castrating threat of the Absolute Master.

My discussion attempts to open up a cultural-historical framework for Wilden's analysis, focusing not on the moment of Freud's response to the paintings but on their place in the aesthetic and religious imagination of the early modern period, that is, the moment of their production (1499-1504) and the century following. Freud's “trouble” with Signorelli and the consolation he claims to find in the memory of the Etruscan grave, I argue, find their counterpart in early modern visions of the Resurrection of the Dead, a Christian doctrine that promises the continuity of the embodied self after death. A seemingly optimistic and reassuring doctrine, with its affirmation
of the restoration and perfection of the corrupted body, this element of Christian eschatology also tended to generate monstrous fantasies featuring a proliferation of detached body parts or, as in Signorelli’s fresco, a congress of animated skeletons. Most writers dealing with Freud's Signorelli parapraxis have focused on the fresco depicting the Rule of Antichrist on the grounds that it contains the portraits of Signorelli and Fra Angelico, the only detail from the composite work specifically mentioned by Freud. However, the Resurrection of the Dead (directly opposite the Rule of Antichrist in the Capella Nuova) warrants attention as this fresco offers the most conspicuous and literal affinities with the “Dream of Dissecting My Own Pelvis.” Indeed Freud's dream might be identified as a dreaming upon that eschatological theme, and has much in common with the monstrous imaginings of the Resurrection of the Dead that circulated from the late fifteenth through the sixteenth centuries.

One of the central tenets of Christian faith, the Resurrection of the Dead at the end of time (also known as the “Resurrection of the Body” and the “Resurrection of the Flesh”) has deeply troubled Christian culture from late antiquity through the early modern period and beyond. With Christ's resurrection on the third day as its prototype, this doctrine promises that all individuals will be resurrected in the flesh on the Day of Judgment, whereupon the elect will be admitted to paradise, while the damned will be dragged to hell. The concept of general resurrection of the dead is not unique to Christianity. The three major Western monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all subscribe to a concept of the resurrection of the body at the end of time. The concept entered Christianity as part of the legacy of Jewish apocalypticism, and a number of passages from the Hebrew Bible have served as key texts in the elaboration of the doctrine. However, the Christian Church's development of eschatological doctrine was complicated by the incompatibility of Judaic and Greek traditions concerning the afterlife. The notion of a resurrection of the body was inimical to Greek and Roman cultures, which instead emphasized the immortality of the soul, freed at death from its corporeal confines. From the second century onwards, Christian theologians felt compelled
to defend the doctrine of resurrection against tendencies in popular and scholarly belief that were inclined to denigrate the corporeal dimension and by extension threatened to undermine the significance of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection.

The Hebrew tradition emphasized the collective nature of the resurrection more than the fate of the individual. However, Christianity, especially in the late Middle Ages, was to move increasingly toward an emphasis on the question of the individual's salvation, with the deathbed tending to displace doomsday as the moment of judgment in the popular imagination. This shift from collective to personal death, from the end of time to the deathbed, heightened curiosity and anxiety concerning the location of the soul in the interim between death and Judgment Day. According to the early Church fathers, the souls of the dead remained in a state of suspended animation until awakened and re-embodied on the Last Day. However, this thinking was eventually supplanted by a rival tradition in Christian belief, which held that the souls were effectively sorted at death and dispatched to one of three possible destinations (to enjoy heavenly bliss, to endure purgatorial expiation, or to suffer the torments of hell), and that Judgment Day would serve merely to ratify the deathbed distinctions. This doctrine was formally endorsed by Pope Benedict XII in 1336 in order to counter the attempt of his predecessor, Pope John XXII, to revive the earlier position. As S. G. F. Brandon observes, “in the matter of eschatological doctrine the Church, while affirming belief in the resurrection and judgment of the dead, never attempted to define its teaching about them in the same meticulous manner in which it dealt with the dogma of the Trinity or the Nature of Christ. Consequently … varieties of belief could be held which, on analysis, are found to be contradictory” (1967, 113-14).

One eschatological doctrine on which all the major theologians of the Middle Ages agreed, in principle, was the resurrection of the dead, although they offered somewhat differing answers to the problems and questions associated with it. For instance, theologians debated whether both sexes would exist in heaven. Some argued that women would be resurrected as men, thus having their inferiority perfected. In
his discussion of the resurrected body in Books 20-22 of The City of God, completed in 426, Augustine, along with many others, favored the retention of sexual difference in paradise, but stipulated that there would be no sexual intercourse or childbearing. And what age would we be when resurrected, in terms of our physical development? Augustine thought the age of thirty, “that age and vigor to which we know that Christ had attained” (1998, 1143), was ideal. Those unfortunates who had died in infancy, he said, “will receive, by the wondrous and most rapid operation of God, that body which they would have received in any case by the slower passage of time” (1142). There were also questions about the status of aborted fetuses, nail clippings, amputations, and so on. Some writers even contemplated a resurrected body without internal organs. Above all, theologians extolled the power of God to correct all deformities and deficiencies: “let neither fat persons nor thin ones fear that their appearance at the resurrection will be other than they would have wished it to be here if they could…. [T]he deformity which arises when there is not a proper arrangement of parts will not exist in heaven. There, all defects will be corrected” (1149).

In the Resurrection of the Dead, Signorelli seems to have followed Augustinian thinking fairly rigorously. All the resurrected figures in the fresco appear in the prime of life, in peak physical condition. While female figures are present, they are vastly outnumbered by male bodies (about six female to more than thirty male figures). Signorelli’s preference for depicting the male body may have less to do with a particular theological position than with his tendency (shared by other artists through Western history) to associate the male body with vigorous movement and the female body with stasis, which boils down to the subject/object axis in dualistic constructions of gender difference.6 To create visual effects of vigorous movement, Signorelli evidently felt compelled to under-represent female participation in apocalyptic events.

Above all, the doctrine of resurrection affirms the notion of the individual as a psychosomatic unity, a concept heavily endorsed by the Church in an effort to combat the gnostic schools of thought that occasionally burgeoned into popular heterodoxies and heretical movements, the most notorious
Whereas gnostic movements sought to transcend corporeality, Christian orthodoxy valued embodiment. The Church could not subscribe to any form of resurrection that did not involve a regeneration of the individual body in some way continuous with the body that had existed on earth. Signorelli’s frescoes, with their overwhelming insistence on the corporeal dimension of the apocalypse, may be understood as contributing to the Church’s program of countering gnostic heresies and bolstering support for eucharistic piety, that is, the devotional movement that emphasized the role of the human body, above all Christ’s body, as a mediator of sacred power.

From the thirteenth century onward, Orvieto was recognized as one of the foremost sites for eucharistic piety. The cathedral was founded in 1290 to house a relic associated with a eucharistic miracle that had occurred in the nearby town of Bolsena in 1263. In that incident, a skeptical priest recovered his faith in the doctrine of transubstantiation when he witnessed the broken communion wafer shedding blood on the corporal (a cloth used in the mass). The year following this reported miracle, Pope Urban IV proclaimed the Feast of Corpus Christi at Orvieto, formally adopting the festival into the Christian calendar. In addition to holding the reliquary for the miraculous corporal, the Cathedral was also the burial site for the martyr Pietro Parenzo, a papal governor who was killed by the Cathar heretics at Orvieto in 1199. Parenzo, whose body was interred along with that of St. Faustino in the Cappella Nuova, is depicted by Signorelli in a deposition scene located below the Resurrection mural. According to Jonathan Reiss, the “program of the Capella Nuova appears as a rebuttal” of the “programs and dogmas” of the Cathars (1995b, 14). As Reiss points out, the Cathars, “in addition to their skepticism regarding the Eucharist, questioned the idea of a bodily resurrection, of purgatory, of a distinct heaven and hell, of the efficacy of prayers for the dead. The Signorelli frescoes forth-rightly and triumphantly proclaim the truth of all these ideas” (14).

However, by the time Signorelli undertook the decoration of the chapel, the Cathar heretics were a distant memory in central Italy. A more immediate threat to the doctrine of

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resurrection at the close of the fifteenth century was the rise of Neoplatonic philosophy with its preference for a spiritualized eschatology emphasizing the immortality of the soul. The influence of the Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino is thought to be partly responsible for the Church's adoption of the immortality of the soul as doctrine at the Lateran Council in 1513 (Hall 1976, 87). Debate over the doctrine raged through the 1520s and 30s, gathering steam from Luther's attention to the issue and the Reformers’ insistence that doctrine had to be grounded in scripture rather than in rational philosophy. Marcia B. Hall (1976) has identified this doctrinal debate as the context for Michelangelo's Last Judgment (1534-41) in the Sistine Chapel, a work that she believes should more correctly be identified as The Resurrection of the Body. “The Roman Church itself,” she argues, “was using Michelangelo's fresco to assert, in the light of the recent debate, that the Christian doctrine of the after-life must be founded in scriptural revelation, including centrally Paul's statement of bodily resurrection” (Hall 1976, 88).

It seems that the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead has never ceased to attract controversy and to generate anxiety. Fundamentally, the promised re-assemblage and revivification of long decayed corpses strains credibility. Even Calvin acknowledges in his Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559) that “it is difficult to believe that bodies, when consumed with rottenness, will at length be raised up in their season…. [I]t is something too hard for men's minds to apprehend” (990). In a 1627 sermon on Matthew 22:30 (“For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage”), John Donne echoes Calvin's remark, and then goes on to imagine the disintegration and dispersal of the corpse, deploying a baroque mode of phantasmagoric elaboration:

Where be all the splinters of that Bone, which a shot hath shivered and scattered in the Ayre? Where be all the Atoms of that flesh, which a Corrasive hath eat away, or a Consumption hath breath'd and exhal'd away from our arms, and other Limbs? … What coherence, what sympathy, what dependence maintains any relation, any correspondence, between that arm that was lost in
Europe, and that legge that was lost in Afrique or Asia, scores of yeers between? (Potter and Simpson 1956, 98)

Of course, in this sermon, as in many other discursive sites, images of corporeal fragmentation are conjured up as a prelude to celebrating God's power to reconstitute the body, rescuing it from mouldering in the grave.

The attraction of the concept of resurrection obviously lies in the consolation it offers against fears of mortality, as it resolves fundamental anxieties about the persistence and integrity of the self. Not only does this doctrine overcome the threat of effacement of the self, it also redeems the decay and partition of the body. Caroline Walker Bynum, in her study of theological debates and iconographic materials relating to this doctrine, documents a pervasive fascination with bodily fragmentation throughout the Middle Ages. She notes that resurrection was often imagined as a regurgitation and reassembly of dispersed body parts (1995, 117-55). In iconography dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, animals and birds are depicted vomiting up human limbs in preparation for their reattachment to resurrected bodies. Wholeness was understood as a victory over fragmentation, a victory epitomized and prefigured in the triumph of the mutilated martyr, who paradoxically defends her physical and spiritual integrity in the very midst of dismemberment. According to Bynum, the doctrine of bodily resurrection and the relic cult “were complementary ways of emphasizing the triumph of integrity over partition” (108). However, Bynum's analysis of the phenomenon seems almost too sanguine; she strains to assimilate the motif of fragmentation to a normalizing teleology. She never acknowledges the possibility that the fantasies of dismemberment entertained in visual and verbal discourses may exceed the doctrinal framework. For Bynum, grotesque features in medieval religious culture are inevitably recuperated by orthodoxy.

Bynum identifies a shift in representations of resurrection in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, and she cites the apocalyptic frescoes of Luca Signorelli and Michelangelo as examples of this development: “Renaissance portrayals,” she asserts, “stress the ethereal splendor of the glorified body or

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the natural beauty of the regenerated flesh” (1995, 187). The motif of regurgitation and reassembly disappears, replaced by “fully formed and even elegant bodies climbing gracefully from the earth” (187). To be sure, Signorelli’s fresco offers a highly confident, optimistic vision, a marked contrast to the grotesque imagery of severed body parts being regurgitated from the gullets of animals that prevailed several centuries earlier. Nonetheless, Signorelli has introduced elements into the work—namely, the skeletal figures—that tend to undermine the impression of splendor and triumph. [Figure 1] The combination of glorious muscular bodies with skeletal figures, suggestive of a dance of death in reverse, strikes a bizarre note, raising troubling questions. By what process, we might wonder, does the skeleton acquire its flesh? On the extreme right of the mural, six skeletons queue up, apparently waiting their turn to be upholstered with flesh. The skeleton who stands first in line appears to be engaged in conversation with a skinny, semienfleshed figure, whose scapulae and vertebrae jut out alarmingly, threatening to pierce the skin. [Figure 2] This is the sole figure in the fresco whose body hovers between the skeletal and well-muscled state. While some figures emerge “fully formed” from the earth, others rise as skeletons. A particularly poignant detail in the foreground has a skull framed between the muscular arm and torso of a beautiful youth. [Figure 3]

The scriptural basis for the inclusion of the bony men is the “dry bones” passage of Ezekiel 37, in which the prophet is set down in a valley full of bones and told by the Lord to declaim upon them: “as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them…. and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host” (37:7-10). As Louis Réau observes, in depicting the resurrection, artists had the choice of treating the event as either instantaneous or progressive (1957, 741). Signorelli opts for the latter, the riskier option. A more common approach in late medieval art was to represent an instantaneous resurrection, conforming to St. Paul’s reference to the resurrection as an event that will happen “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (1 Cor.
15:52). No skeletons appear in Pauline treatments of the resurrection; instead, fully formed bodies are shown erupting from coffins or tombs.

In the decades following Signorelli's completion of the Orvietan frescoes, other artists were drawn to the “dry bones” version of resurrection iconography. For instance, Jean Bellegambe of Douai includes a semi-enfleshed figure in a Last Judgment altarpiece (c. 1520-30). In this case, a fully restored, lively head rests on a skeletal frame, still in the process of emerging from the earth. An angel grasps the man's head under the chin and pulls on his left shoulder, a scene suggestive of a midwife assisting at a birth. Far from being instantaneous, the revivification of the dead in Bellegambe's altarpiece resembles an arduous labor. Most of the figures are fully formed, but the sense of triumph over death is heavily qualified by the compression of resurrection and judgement into a single frame. The figures who rise in terror, cowering under
the threat of punishment, far outnumber those who rise in bliss, standing upright to revel in their glorious bodies.

The element of black comedy in Signorelli’s fresco appears to have inspired Giorgio Ghisi’s treatment of the Ezekiel text in an engraving completed in 1554.8 Ghisi sets the resurrection, not in a natural landscape, the valley of bones
Fig. 3. Signorelli, Luca (1441-1523). Resurrection of the Dead (detail). Prerestoration. Duomo, Italy. Credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY.
described in the scriptural passage, but in a graveyard, where loose, disarticulated bones lie scattered among ponderous Renaissance tombs. Ghisi seems to have deliberately reversed Signorelli's weighting of flesh to bone; here the bony men dominate. In the center foreground, two upright skeletal figures embrace, their pose echoed by two muscular men in the middle ground. The brawny men seem to quote the athletic figures of the Orvietan fresco, except for one jarring note: the most magnificently fleshed body in Ghisi's engraving is topped by a grimacing skull. All of the resurrected figures appear disturbingly cadaverous. Ironically, the most attractive and sensuous figures in the picture, the caryatids on a tomb, are sculptural rather than corporeal. Overall, the engraving brings to mind the iconographic traditions of the Triumph of Death and scenes of the devastation wrought by the plague. The triumph in the Resurrection should be claimed by Life, but in Ghisi's engraving it is difficult to recognize that optimistic teleology through the lineaments of an iconographic tradition so closely associated with the Triumph of Death.

Ghisi's engraving brings to the fore the strain of grotesque parody in Signorelli's fresco, a feature not altogether held at bay by the beauty and confidence that ostensibly dominate the scene. I would venture to say that Signorelli's treatment of the Resurrection registers the sheer impossibility of imagining and representing this apocalyptic event. Signorelli, like many other artists and writers, strives to gloss over the contradictions and problems that shadowed this doctrine, and it is not surprising that his efforts should teeter on the edge of collapse. This doctrine, after all, was a source not only of consolation but of monstrous imaginings from its inception through the early modern period and beyond. Although the doctrine purportedly assured believers of the integrity of the self, an integrity that would survive the decay and dispersal of the corpse, many individuals balked at the sheer impossibility of envisioning this event. Notwithstanding Bynum's claim that the Renaissance ushered in a period of optimistic visions of resurrection, I find that monstrous visions proliferate in the sixteenth century. Imaginings of the resurrection in this period often assume grotesque configurations, bizarre assemblages of animated limbs, suggestive of the fantasms that Lacan identifies with the
Mirror Stage, namely, the *corps morcelé* and its fetishistic double, the automaton. For example, the resurrection that the common soldier Williams imagines in Shakespeare's *Henry V (1599)* suggests a grotesque congress of animated limbs clamoring for the attentions of a surgeon: “But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs, and arms, and heads, chopp'd off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day, and cry all, ‘We died at such a place’—some swearing, some crying for a surgeon” (4.1.134-39). What hideous shapes have been spawned by the doctrinal assurance that on the last day God will, as Donne writes in “A Valediction: of My Name in the Window,” “repair / And recompact my scattered body” (Smith 1976, 88)!

I now return to my claim that Freud's Orvietan episodes—the Signorelli example and the Dissection/Etruscan grave dream—have something in common with the macabre spectres that haunted visual and verbal evocations of the Resurrection of the Dead. “What takes shape … under the name ‘Signorelli’,” according to Gil Anidjar, “has been altogether overlooked to the extent that it articulates, in Freud's text, an early instance of a haunting of and by religion” (2002, 12). Although the “Abrahamic” specter pursued by Anidjar is different from the one that I have conjured, his comments capture the double haunting that I have sought to trace: not only Freud's haunting by a visit to Italian sites steeped in Etruscan and Christian religious significance but also the haunting of religion itself, specifically, the doctrine of Resurrection. In Signorelli's fresco and many other cultural productions, the imagery of wholeness that this doctrine proffers is shadowed by an insistent strain of fragmentation. Which is to say, fragmentation exceeds its appointed role in apocalyptic narrative, so as to undermine the promise that “the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:52). Although I am mindful of the risks of undertaking a psychoanalytic interpretation of religious practices and doctrine, I will reiterate that representations of the doctrine of resurrection are saturated with the sort of imagery that Lacan associates with the specular formation of the subject. What is Signorelli's fresco if not a panoramic view of the *stade du mirroir*, in which the *Gestalt* of physical and psychic unity
emerges out of conditions of formlessness, insufficiency, and noncohesion? Thus, the strain of macabre humor in the painting may be understood as symptomatic of the retrospective pull toward the *corps morcelé*.

Turning to Freud's dream of dissection, we may recognize a number of affinities to the *Resurrection* fresco, details suggestive of the fragmented body that, as Lacan writes, “usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual” (1949, 4). Without attempting to enter into a detailed exegesis, what I wish to underline is the extent to which Freud's account and interpretation of the dream trace a trajectory parallel to that of the Resurrection narrative. The dream moves from dissolution, disintegration, and castration (the eviscerated pelvis and the dreamer's inability to manage his legs) toward resurrection in a glorious, perfected body insofar as the conclusion of the dream promises some form of immortality and redemption, whether achieved through biological or intellectual progeny. The passage into the grave offers a vista onto life beyond the grave (the boards and the children as vehicles for escaping from the grave). In Freud's analysis, the dream revisited a conversation with Louise N. in which he had confessed that “my own immortal works have not yet been written” (1900, 453). The progress of his work on the dream book was weighing heavily on Freud's mind, and the ensuing dream directly addressed those doubts: “The dissection meant the self-analysis which I was carrying out, as it were, in the publication of this present book about dreams—a process which had been so distressing to me in reality that I had postponed the printing of the finished manuscript for more than a year. A wish then arose that I might get over this feeling of distaste; hence, it was that I had no gruesome feeling … in the dream” (477-78).

However, the wish to overcome “gruesome” feelings is not entirely fulfilled in the dream. Freud, after all, “awoke in a mental fright,” a contradiction that he explains through the mechanism whereby a “dream can turn into its opposite the idea accompanying an affect but not always the affect itself. Accordingly, I woke up in a ‘mental fright,’ even after the successful emergence of the idea that children may perhaps
achieve what their father has failed to” (1900, 455). Freud seems all too eager to play down the force of this “mental fright.” His bid to put a positive “spin” on the dream rests to a large extent on the claim that the dream “transformed the gloomiest of expectations into one that was highly desirable” by invoking the Etruscan grave that he had visited at Orvieto. For Freud, death is somehow tamed when imagined in an Etruscan context.10

The Etruscan grave dream resembles both Freud's Signorelli example and Signorelli's Resurrection fresco not only in failing to ward off threats of dissolution and death but, more significantly, in staging the failure of their own defensive strategies. Interestingly, when Freud revisits the Etruscan grave dream in The Future of an Illusion (1927), he indirectly admits to finding in Etruscan culture the sort of consolation that is generally supplied by religious myth:

The sleeper may be seized with a presentiment of death, which threatens to place him in the grave. But the dream-work knows how to select a condition that will turn even that dreaded event into a wish-fulfillment: the dreamer sees himself in an ancient Etruscan grave which he has climbed down into, happy to find his archeological interests satisfied. In the same way, a man makes the forces of nature not simply into persons with whom he can associate as he would with his equals—that would not do justice to the overpowering impression which those forces make on him—but he gives them the character of a father. He turns them into gods, following in this, as I have tried to show, not only an infantile prototype but a phylogenetic one. (1927, 17)

Freud does not indicate that the dream is his own, but those who are familiar with his dream book can follow the pathway to arrive at a confession: Etruscan archeology is Freud's religion, which is to say, in the terms of The Future of An Illusion, his private “system of wishful illusions together with a disavowal of reality” (1927, 43). Freud's avowed distaste for the providential and apocalyptic narratives of the Judeo-Christian tradition does not prevent him from constructing his own
redemption from or through death. Thus, we return to Lacan's provocative claim that the assertion “God is dead” is itself a myth:

For the myth of the God is dead—which, personally, I feel much less sure about, as a myth of course, than most contemporary intellectuals, which is in no sense a declaration of theism, nor of faith in the resurrection—perhaps this myth is simply a shelter against the threat of castration.

If you know how to read them, you will see this threat in the apocalyptic frescos of Orvieto cathedral. (1973, 27)

As Lacan indicates, to supplant a medieval myth with a modern myth, to exchange a faith in resurrection for the conviction that “God is dead,” is simply to seek yet another “shelter against the threat of castration.” Or, as Freud perhaps came to recognize, climbing into an Etruscan grave is no more effective than forgetting Signorelli as a strategy for securing the integrity of the self.

Notes

1 “The Psychical Mechanism of Forgetfulness” appeared in the journal Monatsschrift für Psychiatrie und Neurologie in December 1898. The earliest account of the Signorelli episode can be found in Freud's September 22, 1898 letter to Fliess (see Masson 1985, 326-27).

2 In the passage that follows this quotation, Lacan's own memory fails him as he supplies a somewhat mangled account of the circumstances surrounding Freud's parapraxis.

3 For some valuable reflections on the possible significance of the frescoes for Freud, see Anzieu (1959, 359-62) and Molnar (1994). Molnar reveals that reproductions of the frescoes were found in a folio of prints and photos that Freud brought with him from Vienna to London in 1938.

4 Wilden is referring to Laplanche and Leclaire's (1966) claim that the death-drive “constitutes the ‘bedrock,’ the foundation of the castration complex” (144), a position that Freud himself resisted. See Laplanche and Pontalis (1967, 58) and Pontalis (1978).

Margaret R. Miles (1994) places Signorelli's *Resurrection* in the historical context of contemporary debates over the propriety of nudity in religious art. She sees Signorelli's representation of female nudes as a positive affirmation, unprecedented in a tradition where female nudity was coded as sinful and lascivious. Furthermore, she argues that Signorelli has “eliminate[d] the marks of gender socialization from his resurrected bodies” by eschewing “differences of posture, gesture, stance, and musculature so that female and male bodies appear equally strong, flexible, and expressive” (86). I find some of these claims for the progressive nature of Signorelli's handling of the female nude to be overstated.

In a recent article in *Critical Inquiry*, Fernando Vidal explores the drastic shift in theological and philosophical thinking about this doctrine in the seventeenth century, under the pressure of Cartesian metaphysics. With the emergence of modern conceptions of the self in the Enlightenment, the “emphasis on psychosomatic unity” wanes in favor of a new emphasis on the “unity of mind, the latter becoming the definiitary element of identity” (2002, 939).

Some versions of this engraving bear an inscription indicating that the design was based on a work by Giovanni Battista Bertani, a contemporary of Ghisi and a fellow Mantuan (see Bellini 1998, 112). The engraving is reproduced in Vidal (2002, 954).

Richard and Marietta Karpe point out that of the two visions of death that Freud encountered in Orvieto, the Etruscan was the more appealing: “While the Etruscans celebrate the hereafter as a joyous experience, the Catholic Church could offer the dead threats of punishment and torture in hell, a long wait in purgatory or bliss in heaven. The atmosphere of these Etruscan tombs mitigates the fear of death, representing a special form of denial of one’s own death” (1979, 16).

References
Macmillan, pp. 9-53.
Freud, Sigmund. 1900. The Interpretation of Dreams. *Standard Edition*, 4 and 5. [→]

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