



Heinz Politzer. *Freud and Tragedy*. Hemecker. Translated by Michael Mitchell. Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2006. 176 pp. \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57241-146-3.



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Layers of Affinity

One is tempted to take recourse to some of Sigmund Freud's superstitions or at least point to the Latin adage *nomen est omen* because of the many textual and extra-textual tragedies involved in the composition and publication of Heinz Politzer's *Freud and Tragedy* (2003).

Politzer, born in 1910 in Vienna and forced to flee his hometown when the Nazis came to power, emigrated to the United States after a short stay in Jerusalem and established himself as an academic. He is best known for his seminal works on Franz Kafka and Franz Grillparzer. As a professor at Berkeley in the 1960s and 1970s his interest in psychoanalytic interpretations of literary texts found fertile ground, as well as his growing concern about the dwindling respect for paternal authority in his students, whom Politzer considered a "post-oedipal generation" characterized by a worrisome "mutation beyond tragedy" (p. 5).

Before Politzer started working on the German manuscript of the work and its excellent English translation—thanks to the labor of Jorun Johns at Ariadne Press and translator Michael Mitchell—he composed a college lecture series on depth psychology which ap-

peared in the mid-1970s under the title *Hatte Ädipus einen Ädipus Komplex?* His accumulated notes on Freud were unfortunately lost, but he refused to abandon his plan to add Freud to his areas of scholarly expertise. In his application for a Guggenheim fellowship Politzer explained: "It became obvious to me that Freud himself was a literary figure in his own right, possessed (if not obsessed) by an acute sense of the tragic. Both his life and his writings seemed to unfold according to the laws of tragedy" (p. 4). Describing his proposed approach, he summarized the gist of the project that became this book. In it, he wanted to explore Freud's "life and works in terms of hubris and self-transcendence very much on the pattern of tragic Oedipus" (p. 4). Alexander Mitscherlich strongly supported the project and wanted to include it in the Suhrkamp series "Literatur der Psychoanalyse." Despite failing health, Politzer was determined to get the project done, intending it "as a kind of last will and testament" (p. 1). Unfortunately, he did not succeed. The manuscript—unfinished and uneven-ended up at the German Literary Archives in Marbach. Because the archivist responsible for the Politzer papers died in an accident, the material fell into oblivion.

Many years later, Germanist Wilhelm W. Hemecker discovered Politzer's Freud project and took it upon himself to edit the manuscript carefully—based on the author's handwritten corrections—and, twenty-five years after Politzer's death, made its publication possible.

Politzer's own perception of the Freud book as a "last will" invites speculation about the author's personal fascination with his subject matter. His genuine admiration of Freud as a thinker—"nothing short of Promethean" (p. 34)—and his sympathy for Freud as a paternalistic, immortality-seeking human permeate each of the four chapters. Politzer's own Jewishness, his exile experience, and his growing discomfort with the young, fun-loving generation that "has abolished tragedy, along with Oedipus" (p. 145) contributed to his own alienation and sense of affinity with Freud—particularly when Politzer was studying the old, cancer-ridden Freud as his own life faded.

Freud and Tragedy is undoubtedly a scholarly endeavor, but it is also a very personal evaluation of Freud's life and work. Critics of Freud and the validity of his theories will enjoy Politzer's informative and illustrative links between biographical incidents from Freud's life and key tenets of his psychoanalysis. They may agree that anyone's attempt to universalize his personal obsessions and postulate their scientific validity is hubristic and must anticipate a tragic fall, but this is not the sentiment informing Politzer's careful construction of Freud as Oedipus, as the man who wanted to replace blindness with (in)sight, let the *ego* triumph over the *id*, and show reason conquering dreams and emotions.

With great sensitivity Politzer seeks to explain how Freud—from his early *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) to his late *Moses and Monotheism* (1939)—superbly practiced the art of interpretation, even when he ultimately had to realize that his "scientific" theory was based on nothing but interpretation: "He was what one might call a secularized rabbi of the Enlightenment, of the enlightenment of mankind about itself" (p. 36).

Freud's art of interpretation failed him completely in his reading of written exchanges with his pupils (Wilhelm Fliess, Josef Breuer, Carl Jung, and others). The recurrent conflicts with these symbolic sons, who were only too eager to rid themselves of their father figure, provide the material for the most interesting essay in *Freud and Tragedy*, in which Freud's own "Laius complex" is explored. Politzer focuses on the Freud/Jung

relationship and provides us with an astute analysis of Freud's now famous fainting fits in Jung's presence—"[i]rruptions of his unconscious" (p. 54) that Politzer considers symptoms of Freud's desire for immortality (of himself and the psychoanalytic movement), which, as Freud realized, he could gain only through death. The wish that Freud's fainting fulfilled is a counterpoint to Freud's conscious appointment of Jung as his "heir" and president of the movement, re-enacting the mythical father/son tragedy.

According to Politzer, Freud's recognition of the enormous difficulty of being a (symbolic) father led to a growing preoccupation with the death wish (opposing the pleasure principle): "The further he left Oedipus as a role model behind him, and the more he began to experience the fate of Laius himself, the more unchallenged the position of Thanatos as an equal partner with Eros became for him" (p. 85). In his account of Freud's physical suffering (due to cancer and thirty-three operations) and emotional suffering (due to the loss of his daughter Sophie, his grandson Heinerle, and his escape from Vienna in 1938), Politzer insists that Freud was characterized by an "inborn sense of tragedy" (p. 105), the origins of which he does not venture to pin down.

Part of Freud's tragedy as it emerges from Politzer's immensely readable "psychodrama" arises from Freud's own blindness to the nature of human relationships—as they manifested themselves in his own life and as presented in the literary works Freud knew. Politzer sees silence and suppression as defense strategies Freud applied when something moved too close to the innermost parts of his mind. On the other hand, Freud found ego-supporting models in literature, art, and culture that underscore Politzer's thesis of hubris. In Freud's study of Moses, Politzer sees Freud not only equating himself with the religious primal father of the Jews, but also drawing parallels between monotheism and psychoanalysis. Freud, "the tragic image of a secular prophet" (p. 126), may not have recognized his own and his theory's limitations, but he has Politzer's full sympathy. To Politzer, Freud's destiny was "even more tragic than that which kept Moses away from his homeland" (p. 127).

Freud and Tragedy is a fascinating study of the unconscious of scholarly involvements. Freud's and Politzer's desires, dreams, hopes, disappointments, and failures are revealed in this slim volume and give us plenty of food for thought.

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