



**Eliza Slavet.** *Racial Fever: Freud and the Jewish Question.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2009. xiii + 300 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-3141-6; \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-3142-3.

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## The Late Bloomer: Reading Freud's Moses at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

During the difficult years of its composition, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) was, for Sigmund Freud, yet another challenge. As Freud suffered through an Austro-fascist regime, the Anschluss, and then exile, all while his cancerous condition was becoming too much to bear, the book tormented him like an un-laid ghost, to use his own phrasing (p. 4). The reception of *Moses and Monotheism* proved far less dramatic, at least for half a century or so. Followers of Freud often ignored the work, not knowing quite what to do with both the timing of its provocative, if not quite original thesis (Moses as an Egyptian) and its obviously unsystematic appropriation of the latest research in archaeology and ethnology. Freud's detractors, for their part, tended to focus on other texts.

This situation began to change in 1991, with the appearance of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*. Like some of Freud's critics, Yerushalmi read *Moses and Monotheism* primarily as an expression of Freud's attitudes toward Judaism and Jewishness. But rather than interpreting those attitudes as being largely unflattering and driven by assimilationism, as, say, Marthe Robert had (*From Oedipus to Moses* [1976]), Yerushalmi understood the book to be a statement of positive affiliation. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996), Jacques Derrida's by-no-means-hostile response to Yerushalmi, contributed further to the reevaluation.

Meanwhile, other scholars, most notably, Jay Geller,

Sander Gilman, and Daniel Boyarin, had set about trying to show how *Moses and Monotheism* registers not simply assimilationism on Freud's part, but also his anxieties about stereotypes that braid together influential discourses dealing with race, religion, and gender. Whereas for Robert *Moses and Monotheism* is a kind of assimilationist adoption fantasy, with Jews being adopted by a non-Jewish Moses, the book is, according to Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct*, a panicked function of Freud's encounter with anti-Jewish tropes. It is a function of Freud's need to be manly, to discover a manliness at the origins of Jewishness, Moses, and the Bible.[1]

If the criticisms were becoming more radical, so were the attempts at rehabilitation. While their points of interest range from the self/other relationship to the problem of cultural origins, Jan Assman, Eric Santner, Marc Edmundson, and Michael Steinberg all proceeded to treat *Moses and Monotheism* as a meditation that offers up ethical models worth taking seriously.

One of the accomplishments of Eliza Slavet's book *Racial Fever* is that it is able to weave together different, not-so-compatible strands of debate productively. Her title alludes, needless to say, to Derrida's *Archive Fever*; however, the affinities between her work and his are mostly rhetorical and in the background. As she puts it, throughout this book, there are traces of *Archive Fever*, but there are very few explicit references to it (p. 4). More immediate are the connections to Gilman, Assman,

and Santner (among others). Like Gilman, Slavet tracks how Freud's late reckoning with the Jewish Question engages with early twentieth-century thinking about race. And like the latter two scholars, Slavet locates in Freud's book a kind of powerful, progressive intellectual gesture. Slavet's own gesture is thus intriguingly provocative. She wants to find value for the present in precisely Freud's racial theory of Jewishness (which is also a racial theory of memory, for here Jewishness consists in an archaic memory that is transmitted by Jewish people to Jewish people, whether or not they want to).

This is not to suggest that Slavet regards Freud's theory of Jewishness as unproblematic. And neither is it to imply that she wants Jews to accept and integrate into their daily lives the understanding of Jewish identity that Freud provided. Her point, rather, is that for all its indebtedness to ideas about race and heredity that now seem odd or disturbing or both, Freud's final project is serious. It is, for her, the culmination of a lifetime spent investigating the relationships between memory and its rivals: heredity, history, and fiction (p. 7). And if Freud's conclusions are less than tenable, *Moses and Monotheism* nevertheless forcefully raises questions about memory and identity that should speak to us in the here and now, as we continue to puzzle over what Jewishness might be. Like psychoanalysis more generally, Slavet writes, "Freud's theory of Jewishness emerges as a scientific theory that challenges scientific standards of proof and evidence and as a cultural theory that questions the definitions and limits of culture" (p. 30).

*Racial Fever* has a playful streak, something rare in a work that began as a dissertation. Slavet uses an entertaining anecdote to set up her initial claims about the persistence of seemingly outmoded, racial notions of Jewish identity (and thus also her claims about the relevance of Freud's Moses for the present). She employs, as well, wry section headings, like "Why Is This Book Different from All Other Studies of Freud's Moses?" In addition, *Racial Fever* is impressively compact: it has next to nothing in the way of repetition and superfluous in-

formation.

At times, however, *Racial Fever* feels thin rather than concise. Central to Slavet's rehabilitation effort is a point about Freud's discursive context. Having just claimed that Freud was neither the first nor the last Jewish scientist to develop a hereditarian theory of Jewishness, Slavet writes, "in asserting that the Jews inherit the memories of their ancestors, Freud developed a racial theory of Jewishness that opposed racist definitions of the Jewish people and partially (if bizarrely) explained their persistent survival despite centuries of anti-semitism and oppression" (p. 70). Given the importance that these propositions have in her book, it would make sense for Slavet to devote considerable space and energy to situating Freud's memory-centered theory of Jewishness on the larger map of theorizing about Jewishness. Yet Slavet moves rather briskly in distinguishing racist ideas about Jewish identity from anti-racist racial thinking, as well as in discussing the fellow Jewish scientists who came up with hereditarian theories. Moreover, she leaves out of her account the other Jewish thinkers in Freud's orbit who theorized about Jewishness in racial ways, while trying also to resist racism (and there were quite a few of them; Theodor Lessing, whom Freud read and disliked, comes immediately to mind).

Yet Slavet excels in the area that ultimately matters most for the success of her project. She is an astute and meticulous interpreter of Freud's works, and through her well-executed readings she is able to make key aspects of her argument persuasive. Because of this, as well as the fact that her approach is every bit as original and as thought provoking as it purports to be, it is fair to say that her book deserves the high praise it has gotten—and is getting.

#### Note

[1]. Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 257.

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