Eliza Slavet:

Racial Fever. Freud and the Jewish Question, New York: Fordham University Press, 2009, 272 pages, ISBN 978-0-8232-3142-3, $ 28,00.

(Anthony D. Kauders)

In 1939, one year after the so-called *Reichskristallnacht*, Sigmund Freud completed his final work, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*. According to Freud, the Jews had got it wrong: Moses was not an Israelite but an Egyptian. What is more, Moses the Egyptian chose a group of Semites as his people, exhorting them to follow an uncompromising monotheism based on Akhenatan's earlier sun-god worship. Finding the Mosaic injunctions too demanding, the band of Semites murdered this Moses and tried to forget the whole affair. Indeed, they soon joined up with a Midianite tribe headed by another Moses that worshiped the volcano god Yahweh. Over time, the two tribes merged, and the two gods as well as the two Moseses became the one people, the one god, and the one Moses of the Biblical tradition.

In 1939 the Jews of Europe had other things to worry about than a book on *Moses and Monotheism*: they were concerned with Hitler's hatred rather than Moses's extraction. Later scholars, in an altogether more comfortable position, have returned to the text, and have sought to examine the author and his work from many different angles. Aside from psychoanalytic interpretations, which tend to establish links with Freud's earlier work and especially *Totem und Tabu* (1913), recent titles have focused on the Jewish theme of the text. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (1991), Jan Assmann's *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (1997), and Richard Bernstein's *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (1998) are the best-known of these treatments, although Jacques Derrida (*Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, 1996) and Daniel Boyarin (*Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 1997) have also discussed the specifically Jewish aspects of Freud's text. If Yerushalmi addressed Freud personally in his final chapter ("Monologue with Freud"), subsequent authors have often felt obliged to respond to Yerushalmi himself, whose monologue was in many ways a critique of Freud's notion of Jewish identity after emancipation.

Eliza Slavet's *Racial Fever* is by far the most elaborate, absorbing, and sophisticated commentary on the imaginary dialogue between the psychologist and the historian — and for this reason better suited for the expert than the undergraduate reader. Slavet's starting point is the

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following: there is something like racial fever in the world, the “irrepressible desire of individuals and communities to define themselves and others through genealogy”. Racial fever is not only a matter of wishing to belong, it is also “felt in and on the body, even as it is indivisible, indefinable, and ultimately indecipherable” (6). In order to support these rather daring claims, Slavet resorts to Freud. In fact, she hopes to use Freud against Yerushalmi to banish the “chauvinism and racism inherent in the presumptions that ‘real’ Jews look or act in certain ways and that some Jews are more Jewish than others” (25). Yerushalmi, it will be remembered, feared that Judaism would not survive without Jews’ practicing and repeating Jewish rituals over and over again. Slavet does not like this idea. She believes that it entails essentialism, namely the conviction that there are some people who may be more Jewish than others as well as the conviction that certain individuals can determine who in the world is Jewish — and who is not.

In the most important sections of her book, Slavet examines Freud’s Lamarckism. Freud suggested that certain events in the distant past were so traumatic that the memories of these shocks were inherited from generation to generation. Rejecting heredity or history as the only path to (Jewish) survival, he amalgamated the two, mixing the biological and permanent with the psychic and cultural. The Jews, in this view, transmitted their archaic memories to future generations, consciously and unconsciously. Although rituals, gestures, and texts provided one means of communication, they were not enough to guarantee the persistence of the Jewish people. Freud needed biology to explain the compulsion to be Jewish. It is for this reason that Slavet considers Freud’s *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* as a model for a “racial theory of memory” (7).

On the face of it, Freud was proposing something similar to Jung’s phylogenetic memory, the existence of which was stored in each human being. Freud differed from Jung, however, in that he did not posit a collective unconscious, but rather insisted that *his* concept of phylogenetic memory remained firmly grounded in historical reality. There had been a trauma, based on events in the very distant past, and this trauma became part of the Jewish physical make-up. Slavet argues that while Jung’s version was altogether more commonsensical, Freud’s appeared to be more convincing, proffering as it did something more “grounded — more outrageously real — than any available mythologies” (64). Whereas Jung remained preoccupied with symbols and archetypes, Freud did not abandon the realms of history and memory.

Slavet’s preference is a personal one: nowhere does she critically question the fantastic account of trauma perpetuated through millennia. Elsewhere she is more sensitive to the problems facing Freud. She rightly wonders whether Lamarckism, already discredited in the scientific world, can help Freud’s cause, especially in light of overwhelming difficulties. After all, if individuals inherited the products of their ancestors’ experiences, why weren’t other effects of culture, such as

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circumcision, transmitted? If acquired characteristics could be passed on physically, Jews need no longer perform circumcision, as the cut would already be present at birth. Or, even more to the point, if Freud himself acknowledged that there have always been "mixtures of blood" (181), the theory of biologically transmitted memory-traces must be dropped — unless one introduces derivations from the original or opts for one central aspect of the theory.

Slavet chooses the latter. Instead of emphasizing the physical, she sticks to the spiritual. Freud's Lamarckism is helpful as long as it is confined to feelings, memories, and reminiscences. As such, it can show that somewhere down the "genealogical line — whether literal or figural, real or fictive — the repressed will return, the memory will be 'awakened', and the person will return to this 'archaic' past" (96). Moreover, Freud's concept of transference, which occurs between individuals every day, allows Slavet to contend that the whole "Jewish question", and especially Jewish identity itself, is caught up in an "interminable process of transference" (132). Jewishness, then, is the very process "of transmitting, awakening, and responding to the memory-traces of Moses". It is a state of remembering that one is Jewish, "even if this 'remembering' is unconscious, rejected, or refused" (158).

Slavet is particularly strong where she traces the background to Freud's thinking and engages with the vast literature on the subject. Her account is less compelling where she attempts to re-establish race as a conceptual tool to address Jewish history through the ages. In other words: *Racial Fever* is better history than theory, for at least two reasons. First, it is not clear why Freudian psychoanalysis is necessary to support Slavet's case; in fact, Freud might be more of a problem than an asset. The inextricability of "genealogy and history" (ethnicity and religion, Exodus and Torah), for example, has been a conundrum for many, but Slavet neither persuades us that the dialectic needs a systematic explanation, nor that Lamarckism, of all theories, can do the job. Jews have managed to live with this tension for quite some time, and while there have been calls to reduce Judaism either to biology (race), religion (denomination), or history (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*), most Jews seemed to have preferred ambiguity to certainty. More seriously still, Freud's Lamarckism jeopardizes Slavet's project. As she herself admits, the belief that the Jewish people will survive no matter what lends credence to the idea that identity is fixed once and for all (191). For an anti-essentialist, this inescapability of Jewishness is hardly a happy prospect, and its proximity to racism, albeit in a rarefied, psychic form, cannot be played down. Indeed, one sometimes wonders whether Bourdieu's *habitus* might not have been more instructive in this respect.

Second, Slavet is so obsessed with power and authority that she turns Yerushalmi into a racist. Let us recall that her main objective was "to work against the chauvinism and racism inherent in the presumptions that 'real' Jews look or act in certain ways" (25). Power and authority are not

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necessarily racist, however. Yerushalmi, like more traditional Jews, may be troubled that Jewish memory per se would not be sufficient to sustain Judaism and that, yes, Jews had to formulate rules and regulations as to what counted as Jewish belief and practice. Yet defining Judaism is less racist than espousing Freudian Lamarckism. And defining Judaism as part of diverse power struggles within the Jewish world, which follows from Yerushalmi's position, at least ensures that definitions may be openly challenged or even overturned. Had Slavet embraced a more positive notion of power, it seems, Freud's theory of eternal Jewish memory could have remained interesting history rather than a highly problematic method to understand the current Jewish predicament.

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