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Ethnic mixing, exilic identities: Said's Freud; Freud's Moses

Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Vintage, 1955 [Knopf, 1939]), 192 pp.

Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003), 96 pp., with an Introduction by Christopher Bollas and a response by Jacqueline Rose. Hebrew edition (Tel Aviv, Resling, 2005), 95 pp., with an Introduction by Christopher Bollas, a response by Jacqueline Rose, and scientific editing and introduction by Eran Rolnik.

Edward Said's booklet *Freud and the Non-Europeans* brings together three figures of mythical magnitude: Moses, Freud and Said. Freud and Said mark two nodal points in recent world culture: the high modernism of Europe in Freud's case and the peak of post-colonial Third-Worldism in Said's case. Moses supposedly "started all this" when bequeathing to the world (allegedly in the twelfth or thirteenth century BC) that religious creed that eventually engulfed and dominated the larger part of the human culture in the last two millennia—monotheism, that same monotheism from whose womb the most discussed "clash of civilizations" is to be generated in the beginning of the third millennium, the one between Western Christianity and Arab Islamism.

All three figures involved here have a biography of a mixed nature: Said is a Christian-born Palestinian Arab, who lived most of his life in America as a refugee from Israeli-dominated Jerusalem. Freud is one of the famous intellectuals of cosmopolitan Vienna, and in the later part of his life was a refugee in London from Nazi-conquered Europe. And Moses, a refugee from Egypt, was an Egyptian who connected himself to the Hebrew tribe and turned them—in their "second rebirth" (the first is related to Abraham, a refugee from Mesopotamia)—from slaves into a nation in Israel, a country in which he himself never set foot. In the current context, the mixed and exilic traits of these biographies are far from being merely of an anecdotal nature; they form the very essence of Said's account of Freud, as well as of Freud's account of Moses.

Freud and the Non-European is a text about a text: a text by Said on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, which in turn is also a text about a text: the Hebrew Bible, especially the books Exodus and Deuteronomy. Freud's book on Moses and Said's book on Freud's

book share the same fate: each is a late-life, perhaps the last published work, of its author, and hence they emit a sense of the intellectual, indeed moral, wills of their authors. The texts in question share yet another commonality: they were delivered in adversarial circumstances and met wide rejection. The rebuff of the Tablets of Testimony offered by Moses to the people of Israel is a well known tale, and is integral to Freud's account. Freud's book in turn, was written in several intervals during a long period. It was started in Vienna and was brought to press with many hesitations only in 1939, in London, and since then it absorbed more scorn and ignorance than praise. Said's essay was to be delivered in Freud's Memorial House in Vienna in 2001. It so happened that before the planned event Said visited Lebanon and was photographed throwing stones on the Israeli border fence there. The invitation to Vienna was thereupon cancelled. To the rescue came the Freud Museum in London—a city that almost always has been a safe haven of cultural freedom—where the lecture was indeed delivered. These adversarial circumstances are also integral to the issues that these texts address.

Freud proposes two major theses in his book: the first is ostensibly factual and it maintains that Moses was not a Hebrew, but rather an Egyptian; the second is psycho-historical, and it maintains that the essence of the Jewish people is stamped by the circumstances of its primordial encounter with Moses. This psychological insight is applied also to the emergence of Christianity.

On the basis of textual and linguistic interpretation of the biblical texts, and on the basis of the evaluations of some experts in Egyptology, Freud raises the conjuncture that Moses was in fact an Egyptian by ancestry. But why should an elderly Freud bother with the remote and obscure facts surrounding the life of the young Moses? Because if Moses was an Egyptian, and if Moses brought the monotheistic idea to the Hebrews, then monotheism—the system of faith in an abstract and universally just God—is not a Jewish invention. Freud traces the beginning of monotheism to the doctrines and rituals of the God Aton, which were ordained by the Egyptian king Akhenaton the 4th (also identified as Amenhotep the 4th, 1362-1380 BC, presumably, although contemporary experts discard the chronology).⁴ After Akhenaton's death, his doctrine was relinquished. According to Freud's narration, Moses was an Egyptian priest or prince, who clung to this doctrine and, after his king's death, preached it to a repressed servile Semitic tribe—the Hebrews.

Dethroning Judaism from the invention of monotheism would have made Freud an enemy of the Jewish people in the eyes of many. But Freud goes even further than that in his reconstruction of ancient history. In his view, the Hebrew tribe could not have absorbed the new religion, which was too pious for them. It rebelled and eventually

4 For the most up-to-date and convincing account of early Israelite history, see Finkelstein and Silberman (2002).

assassinated Moses, repressing the memory of this act. Later on, during its long wandering in the desert, the Hebrew tribe combined with another tribe, the Midians, and accepted their militant and angry God, Jehovah. In the course of several hundred years, the images of the two Gods were intermeshed, and so were intermeshed into a single myth the figures of the two Moseses: the Egyptian Moses and that of a later Midian priest with a similar name. This is Freud's "historical" account of the origins of the Jewish people and its faith.

Yet the thrust of Freud's essay is his mytho-psychology of the history of the collective Jewish psyche. As one would expect, it is a story of repression of an early trauma of killing one's father, and obviously the obsessive neurosis which such trauma generates. The trauma, repression and guilt of the primal group of brethren generated, in time, repenting adherence to the supreme authority, strict obedience to the injunctions and an austere acceptance of moral preserve—in short, the development of Jewish religion as we know it. Moreover, Christianity articulated further the same Jewish guilt-and-remorse symptom, except that "The Mosaic religion had been a Father religion; Christianity became a Son religion. The old God, the Father, took second place; Christ, the Son, stood in his stead..." (1955:111).

All in all—and this is really the crux of the matter—monotheistic religion is interpreted by Freud as a response to a collective infantile psychological trauma, related to the famous Oedipus complex of father-son ambiguous sexual-aggressive relations:

Early trauma—defense—latency—outbreak of the neurosis—partial return of the repressed material: this was the formula we drew up for the development of a neurosis. Now I will invite the reader to take a step forward and assume that in the history of the human species something happened similar to the events in the life of an individual. That is to say, mankind as a whole also passed through conflicts of sexual-aggressive nature, which left permanent traces, but which were for the most part warded off and forgotten; later, after a long period of latency, they came to life again and created phenomena similar in structure and a tendency to neurotic symptoms. I have, I believe, divined these processes and wish to show that their consequences, which bear a strong resemblance to neurotic symptoms, are the phenomena of religion (1955:111).

This thesis of Freud has received an endless chain of responses, to which Said now adds his own. Martin Buber (1958) considers Freud's *Moses* as a regrettable publication; Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1991) relates to the book as an indicator of Freud's own psychological profile; and Salo W. Baron (1963) regards the endeavor as a "magnificent castle in the air." While Freud's critics are correct in rejecting direct analogies between the individual psyche and the collective "mentality" (and Freud was the first to raise the problem), if one relates to Freud's thesis not in scientific terms of cause and effect, but rather in terms of cultural interpretation, one finds there an essential insight into

the collective mind-set of identity groups, especially of the religious and national type. The intellectual traditions of political psychology, psycho-history and psycho-sociological theory have further elaborated and investigated these Freudian insights into the history of the self and into the collective psyche.⁵ Yet Said, it seems, prefers to bypass the collective psychology of Freud and focus upon his cultural politics.

Said offers quite a novel reading of Freud. As put by Jacqueline Rose, whose response to Said's lecture is adjacent to the book (both in the English and Hebrew editions), Said has offered a reading of *Moses and Monotheism* "as nothing less than a political parable for our time" (p. 65). For him, Freud proposes in this book an exemplary consideration of the concept of the self as always including the other and the excluded, the self as not a closed and fixed entity, but rather as a scarred and flawed project. In a word, Freud's Moses is a conspicuously post-modern figure—an archetype of a non-essential identity, one open to the otherness of itself and thus an exilic identity that cannot find itself in any fixed home. In the context of a European culture that was rushing amok towards the worst episode of chauvinism and racism in human history, Freud was making the counter punctual move of portraying the identity of the forefather of Judaism in terms of a mixture, as an insider-outsider, and moreover of depicting Judaism, as well as Christianity, as driven by irrational neuroses. As a literary critic, Said pays special attention to the congruity in Freud's book between content and form or style. He finds special merit in the conversational, undecided, fragmented and eventually unresolved presentation of Freud, which he, as a music lover, likens to Beethoven's late-life compositions. In the late creations of Beethoven and Freud, Said finds a recourse to the most basic questions of identity and an admixture of the archaic and contemporaneous.

As opposed to Yerushalmi's interpretation of Freud, which endeavors to "turn back" monotheism to Judaism (even if it was originated by an Egyptian, it was developed by the Jews), for Said, the single most important aspect of Freud's account is precisely the fissure it creates in Moses' identity, and, by implication, in Jewish identity. In Said's approach, the complex attitude of Freud to Judaism is not a "problem" to be resolved, but rather a point of departure towards a new, and better, concept of incomplete identity, an identity which acknowledges the "other" inside it, all the more so a non-European other.

But Said is not content with exposing Freud as a "harbinger" of post-colonial thought or post-modern hybrid identities. Of no less importance to him is the antithetical case of the Jewish identity in Palestine, as it was conceived by Zionism. In stark contradiction to Freud, Zionism constructed an enclosed Judaism that excludes the other, mostly the "non-European," from it (or remolds the "non-European," in the case of Mizrahi Jews). The varied and multi-ethnic population that resided in Palestine was dissected firmly

5 For a recent review, see Elliott (2004).

by lines of race and nation, and the Jews, who were themselves considered “non-Europeans” in Europe, acquired in Israel the status of “quasi-Europeans.” Said’s whole argument leads, in fact, towards this contrast between Freud’s concept of Jewish identity and that of the State of Israel:

Quite differently from the spirit of Freud’s deliberately provocative reminders that Judaism’s founder was a non-Jew, and that Judaism begins in the realm of Egyptian, non-Jewish monotheism, Israeli legislation countersenses, represses, and even cancels Freud’s carefully maintained opening out of Jewish identity towards its non-Jewish background. The complex layers of the past, so to speak, have been eliminated by official Israel (p. 44).

If the crux of Freud’s *Moses* is exposure of the admixture in the midst of Jewish identity, then the crux of Said’s *Freud* is the exposure of the purism of Jewish identity in Israel. And so, while Freud excavates the sources of his nation’s identity in Egypt, says Said, Palestinians excavate the sources of their identity in Palestine, from which they were expelled or in which they are oppressed. Excavation is not merely a metaphor in Said’s view. In fact, in Israel, archeology had become the par excellence science of Zionism. Referring to the important work of Nadia Abu el-Haj (2002) on Israeli archeology, Said briefly allures to the way in which Israeli archeology is of the habit of “turning an intermittent and dispersed Jewish presence of scattered ruins and buried fragments into a dynastic continuity, despite evidence to the contrary and dissipate evidence of endogamous non-Jewish histories” (p. 48). This one-sided, ideological archeology has been challenged recently, says Said, by post-Zionist revisionism in Israel, and by the awakening of Palestinian archeology. So now there are two competing archeological sciences of Israel/Palestine.

Returning to Freud, Said finds in Freud’s *Moses*, and indeed not less so in Freud’s own figure, an exemplar of the “non-identical” identity he applauds. Referring to Isaac Deutcher’s notion of the “non-Jewish Jew,” and including in this “dissenting tradition within Judaism,” in addition to Freud, figures such as Spinoza, Marx and Heine, Said praises the integrity of these “prophets and rebels” who believed “in the ultimate solidarity of man.” But above all, these figures are characterized by Said as being of an “irremediably diasporic, unhoused character” (p. 53). In our age of vast population transfers, of refugees, exiles, expatriates and immigrants, maintains Said, this is not necessarily a Jewish characteristic, and it “can also be identified in the diasporic, wandering, unresolved, cosmopolitan consciousness of someone who is both inside and outside his or her community” (p. 53). Said thus extols Freud for “an admirable sketch of what it entails, by way of refusing, to resolve identity into some of the nationalist or religious herds in which so many people want so desperately to run” (p. 53).

Said reads Freud’s *Moses* as offering “a troubling, disabling, destabilizing secular wound—the essence of the cosmopolitan, from which there can be no recovery, no state

of resolved or Stoic calm, and no utopian reconciliation even within itself" (p. 54). His reading of Freud has thus acquired the meaning of a dialogue between two exilic intellectuals, two cosmopolitan men of ideas, and—alas—two men affiliated with nations which find themselves in a tragic, if not to say catastrophic, collision. Do Freud's and Said's exilic cosmopolitanism offer a way out of this mutual annihilation of these two peoples? Said ends the book wondering and hoping. His hope, however, is not left as a mere aspiration, and Said seals his lecture by specifying his choice of a political program for the future of Israel and Palestine: a bi-national state, or what is more widely known as the "one-state solution."⁶

It is a pity, in the eyes of this reviewer, that Said has chosen to move in the very last paragraph from the politics of identity to the identity of his politics. A bi-national state is not a feasible option,⁷ and even if it was one, it would be fraught with dangers, not the least of which is precisely the mutual entrenchment of two enclosed and hostile national identities, which might become even more stiffened by their institutionalization in a state structure and their enforced entanglement—with results that are exactly the opposite of Said's stated hope.

In her admiring yet sobering commentary on Said's lecture, Jacqueline Rose raises this specter, and indeed opens the diametrically opposed reading of the meaning of Freud's *Moses*, which

can, after all, be read as the story of a political assassination... it offers the thesis ... that an act of murder is constitutive of the social tie ... [and hence that] there is no sociability without violence, that people are most powerfully and effectively united by what they agree to hate (p. 75).

Somewhat skeptical about Said's interpretation of Freud and, moreover, about the feasibility of the benign identity he purports, Rose reminds us that a trauma, "far from generating freedom, openness to others as to the divided and unresolved fragments of a self, leads ... towards dogma, the dangers of coercive and coercing forms of faith" (p. 76). It is exactly because of this that the "two-state solution" is still the best game in town, while the other game is that of an apartheid state. Moreover, it is only within two mutually recognized, sovereign and secured states that both Israelis and Palestinians will perhaps be able one day to deconstruct the steadfast identities that they currently use as shields from one another.

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6 For a recent account of the "one-state solution," see Tilley (2005).

7 On the non-feasibility of the "one-state solution," see Peled (2006).

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