

Freud's Imaginative Work: *Moses and Monotheism* and the Non-European Other

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Abstract

This essay tracks and maps out the ideas that informed the writing of Sigmund Freud's final *opus*, the highly speculative and putatively historical text *Moses and Monotheism*. Contrary to interpretations of *Moses and Monotheism* as a work that critiques Jewishness as it outlines Freud's theories on culture and religion, this essay suggests that Freud, in fact, attempts to defend Judaism by isolating what he believes is its quality that attracts hate—its monotheism—and by then ascribing that quality to the non-European other. In Freud's work the non-European other is an exploitable resource that Freud uses to support and corroborate his theories with little concern at arriving at a genuine understanding of those cultures. Freud's imaginative reconfiguration of the non-European other for his own purposes, what this essay refers to as his imaginative work, animates much of his writings on culture and as this essay suggests, results from Freud's uneasy understanding of his own Jewish origins.

Keywords: Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, Said, *Totem and Taboo*

What I find so compelling about [*Moses and Monotheism*] is that Freud seems to have made a special effort never to discount or play down the fact that Moses was non-European—especially since, in terms of his argument, modern Judaism and the Jews were mainly to be thought of as European, or at least belonging to Europe rather than Asia or Africa. We must once again ask: why?

--Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European*

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud remarked that he had treated dreams "like a sacred text"...What would be more natural for him than to treat the sacred text like a dream?

--Yosef Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses*

I have been all omnipotence, all savage. That's how one must do it if one wants to get something done.

--Sigmund Freud, "Letter to Sandor Ferenczi," December 31, 1912

When Freud referred to himself as being "all savage" in his letter to Sandor Ferenczi, he was describing his attitude toward work as he wrote *Totem and Taboo*, his project that sought to compare the psychical lives of savages with neurotics. By using the term "savage" to characterize his absorption to work, Freud unconsciously rehearses his idea of the psychology of the primitive

man prior the primal patricide as theorized in *Totem*—that is, as a being of unrestricted passion and drives that has yet to internalize prohibition. Indeed, in an earlier letter to Ferenczi, Freud reveals his passionate intensity for this project “occupied [him] from 8-8” (Gay, 1988, p. 324). Apparently, only a kind of savage passion would be able to sustain Freud as he worked on *Totem*, a project that he called, as noted by his biographer Ernest Jones, a “*beastly* business.” Interestingly enough, it was this period of his career that Freud believed that he was at his most productive and creative. In another letter to Ferenczi dated May 13, 1913, Freud says, “Since the *Interpretation of Dreams* I have not worked at anything with such certainty and elation” (Gay, 1988, p. 288).

But where does Freud’s certainty come from? His use of metaphors of savagery betrays the fact that he already had a clear idea of what he will discover about the psychology of primitive people years before he completed *Totem and Taboo*. It is perhaps no wonder why Freud regards the research work for this project as a drudging activity:

I am reading thick books without being really interested in them *since I already know the results*; my instinct tells me that. But they have to slither their way through all the material on the subject...With all that I feel as if I had intended only to start a little liaison and then discovered that at my time of life I have to marry a new wife (Jones, 1961, p. 288, emphasis mine).

Freud’s critics have frequently pointed out that his positivist and empiricist language only cloaks his strong impulse to speculate, hypothesize non-observables, and draw from questionable sources and anecdotal examples. For example, Edwin Wallace in *Freud and Anthropology* writes,

Freud never analyzed a single primitive individual; he thus did not even use the most powerful tool (the clinical method of psychoanalysis) that he possessed. Nor was he, so far as I know, acquainted with the detailed history of a specific primitive group. He picked and chose his data from authors who had in turn picked and chosen their data from a welter of cultures, without regard to temporal, geographical and institutional context (1983, p. 189).

This is not to suggest, however, that Freud opportunistically and rather haphazardly appropriated material from other disciplines and remained uncritical of his intellectual resources; however, he does take those resources as a springboard for theoretical speculation. For example, Vickery observes that although Freud recognized Frazer’s profound influence on his work, he was aware that by that time he was writing *Totem and Taboo* Frazer’s ideas were well on their way to becoming obsolete (Vickery 1973, p. 94). Ronald Martin notes that in 1909 Freud attended a lecture by Franz Boas that challenged the idea that “totemism was a universal evolutionary stage,” but “Freud went right on with his particular program of adoptions and adaptations” (2005, p. 108). Freud, it seems, was conscious of the fact that he uses the concept of the primitive Other as an exploitable resource to corroborate his theories. However, for his (mis)appropriation of the Other, Freud remains unapologetic: “Above all...I am not an ethnologist but a psychoanalyst. I had a right to take out of ethnological literature what I might need for the work of analysis” (qtd in Quinodoz, 2004, p. 122).

I would like to suggest that Freud’s understanding of the primitivism of non-European cultures was fabricated out of the materials from his imagination and primarily conceived to support and corroborate his theories with little concern for understanding those cultures. Freud’s imaginative reconfiguration of the other for his own purposes, what we might refer to as his imaginative work, animates much of his writings on culture. The non-European other became an

exploitable resource that he then used to furnish his theories. However, tempting as it is to reprimand Freud's lack of genuine engagement with other cultures, it is important, following Edward Said, to try to "see [him] in [his] context as accurately as possible" even as we "point out how bound [he was] by perspectives of [his] own cultural movement" (2003, p.23). Thus, with Said's point in mind, this essay would like to examine how Freud's imaginative work functions in his last opus *Moses and Monotheism*. Contrary to interpretations of *Moses and Monotheism* as a text that critiques Jewishness as it recapitulates Freud's theories on culture and religion, I would like to claim that Freud, in fact, attempts to defend Judaism by isolating what he believes is its quality that attracts hate—its monotheism—and by then ascribing that quality to the non-European Other.

Readers who decide to go through Freud's work chronologically would likely have an uncanny experience reading *Moses and Monotheism*. It certainly does not possess a novel hypothesis, for it merely rehearses the patricidal drama of *Totem and Taboo*. Moses, who Freud posits is of Egyptian origin, liberates a Semitic tribe from the slavery of Egypt to Canaan contingent upon their embracing a monotheistic religion (the cult of Aten) that his own Egyptian people would not accept. In notably Freudian fashion, the Semites rebel and kill Moses (this time not because he had access to all the women but because of the severity of his law). And, as in *Totem and Taboo*, the murdered patriarch returns as a stronger phantasmatic force: "The dead man now became stronger than the living man had been; and we can see all of this in human destinies even today" (Freud, 2005, p. 142). In Freud's account, several generations later the descendants of the Semites encounter a second Moses of the cult of the volcanic god Yahweh whose beliefs they accommodate. However, because of internalized guilt and an unconscious desire for atonement, the religion of the first Moses was assimilated into the new religion.

When Freud started writing *Moses and Monotheism* he was suffering from cancer and was aware that this was to be his last work. In a letter to Arnold Zweig dated November 16, 1934 Freud wrote, "Leave me alone with Moses. That this probably *final* attempt to create something has run aground depresses me enough" (qtd in Gay, 1988, p. 608). Freud was writing with the awareness that this work was bound to infuriate even those sympathetic to psychoanalysis. However, despite the conceptual problems that he faced and despite his closest friends' attempt to dissuade him from working on *Moses and Monotheism* because they feared the repercussions of its publication, Freud was determined to go through with his project. In another letter to Zweig dated May 2, 1935 Freud wrote: "*Moses* will not let my imagination go...[It] has become a fixation for me" (qtd in Gay, 1988, p. 608). As one would expect, the publication of *Moses and Monotheism* indeed caused a scandal not only in Jewish but also in Christian circles. Quinodoz notes that Jews were "furious at what they saw as [Freud's] attempt to take their Moses away from them" and Christians "responded all the more fiercely" because Freud argues that Christianity "is the one which most resembles a delusion...[It is] a regression with respect to Jewish spiritual doctrine—a return to idolatry, in fact" (2004, p. 271). As for its scholarly worth, *Moses and Monotheism* has been "rejected almost unanimously by biblical scholars as an arbitrary manipulation of dubious historical data, and by anthropologists and historians of religion as resting on long outmoded ethnological assumptions" (Yerushalmi, 1991, p. 2).

But why then does Freud persistently pursue such a controversial and highly speculative project at this stage of his life? The answer that Freud himself gives is an unsatisfying one. Freud claimed that he merely wanted to establish the truth. He begins *Moses and Monotheism* by expressing trepidation in "robbing a popular tradition of the man it regards as its greatest son" but he justifies his project by saying that one should not "neglect the *truth* in favor of supposed

national interests” (2004, p.167, my emphasis). However, there is valid enough reason to suspect that Freud was not entirely interested in the truth. His entire thesis depended on historian Ernst Sellin’s work *Mose und seine Bedeutung fur die israelitisch-judische Religionsgeschichte (Moses and his Significance for the History of Israelite-Jewish Religion)* published in 1922 that makes the argument that Moses was murdered by his own people. As Yerushalmi points out, Freud was well aware that Sellin’s thesis “was itself highly speculative and had not been generally accepted” (1991, p. 27). However, at that time, it was the only work of Biblical scholarship that supported Freud’s theories on the narrative that he was (re)constructing. Freud, it appears, uncritically but also willingly appropriated Sellin’s thesis as the foundation of his argument. Interestingly enough when Freud was told that Sellin later recanted his thesis, he brushed it aside and simply replied that Sellin’s original idea was correct (Rose in Said, 2003, p. xxvii).

Further, when one reads *Moses and Monotheism* one cannot help but notice that Freud was conscious about the impossibility of ascertaining the truth about Moses’s origins. Freud writes,

[The] traditions regarding...Moses will inevitably, in their intricacy, in their contradictions, and with their unmistakable signs of centuries of sustained tendentious reworking and overlaying, thwart all efforts to throw light on the kernel of historical truth behind them (2004, p. 175).

Although Freud frowns upon such a negative attitude, he nevertheless says that he is not “in a position to refute it.” He adds: “...deductions of such importance cannot be based on psychological probabilities alone” (2004, p. 175). Yerushalmi attributes those uncharacteristic moments of tentativeness to the difficulty Freud experienced in trying to “corroborate a psychoanalytically derived truth with historical facts quite beyond the purview of psychoanalysis” (1991, p. 21). Indeed, Freud need not worry about having to establish the date of the primal murder in *Totem and Taboo*; however, it was, of course, a different case when it came to *Moses and Monotheism*. It was in *Moses and Monotheism* that Freud presents his interesting view regarding the writing of the past: “The corruption of the text is not unlike murder. The problem lies not in doing the deed but in removing the traces.” Thus, as Freud worked within the strictures of History, he also attempted to subvert and redefine what it meant to write History. However, if we are to accept this hypothesis, it raises the question: Why does Freud attempt a radical (re)writing of the origins of Jewish monotheism?

Several commentators have offered various and even conflicting answers to that question. There are those who locate Freud in the tradition of the “non-Jewish Jew” such as Isaac Deutscher who aligns him with thinkers like Spinoza and Marx. For Deutscher, they are figures “whose desires and cravings, scruples and inhibitions, anxieties and predicaments are essentially the same no matter what race, religion or nation...[They] agree on the relativity of moral standards” (qtd in Said, 2003, p. 52). Similar to Deutscher, Richard Bernstein (1988) labels Freud as a godless Jew. He sees Freud as a paragon of Enlightenment ideals, challenging the darkness of irrational drives and desires with the light of rationality and science. However, the problem with accepting the idea that Freud is characteristically a “non-Jewish Jew,” as defined by Deutscher, is that it leads one to ignore the fact that Freud had a more complex relationship with his Jewishness. For example in preface to the Hebrew translation of *Totem and Taboo*, he writes,

No reader...of this book will find it easy to put himself in the emotional position of an author who is ignorant of the language of Holy Writ, who is completely estranged from the religion of his fathers—as well as from every other religion—and who cannot take a share in its nationalist ideals, but who has yet never repudiated his people, *who feels that*

he is in his essential nature a Jew and who has no desire to alter that nature (qtd in Yerushalmi 14, italics mine).

There are also those critics who think that Jewishness and religion are irrelevant to the central argument of *Moses*. For example, Robert Paul in "Freud's Anthropology" writes,

A close reading of the book will reveal, I believe, that neither the question of Moses' nationality, nor of whether there were two Moseses, nor whether Moses was a follower of Akhnaton, nor even whether Moses was killed in a revolt, is central to the argument (1991, p. 280).

This claim draws its strength from the idea that Freud intended his last work to be a redeployment of what he considers to be his most creative argument in the last thirty years. Although this argument is plausible, it ignores the biographical evidence that suggests that the driving force behind the production of *Moses* was actually Freud's desire to explore the root cause of anti-Semitism.

Edward Said suggests that *Moses and Monotheism* was really Freud's way of admitting that he was unable to reconcile his identity as a scientist and as a Jewish intellectual. Said writes:

In [*Moses and Monotheism*], Freud the scientist looking for objective results in his investigation, and Freud the Jewish intellectual probing his own relationship with his ancient faith through the history and identity of its founder, are never really brought into a tidy fit with each other. Everything about the treatise suggests not resolution or reconciliation...but, rather, more complexity and a willingness to let irreconcilable elements of the work remain as they are: episodic, fragmentary, unfinished (2003, p. 28).

Said's claim is convincing, but, as Said himself recognizes, we have to keep in mind that Freud was a product of a time that did not concern itself very much with what poststructuralist/postcolonialist criticism has designated as the problem of Otherness.

While earlier criticism tended to regard *Moses* as Freud's "malicious attack upon the very foundations of Jewish existence" (Yerushalmi, 1991, p. 12), it has become commonplace for more recent critics to use the psychoanalytic theory to claim that *Moses and Monotheism* is a text that dramatizes Freud's ambivalence about his own Jewishness. Psychoanalytic theory suggests that the simultaneous existence of contradictory emotions is always present in the subject's relationship with an object. One cannot simply "purely" love or hate. In "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" Freud writes that it "is common to find both love and hate directed simultaneously toward the same object" (1995, p. 562). Although reading *Moses and Monotheism* as a text that unveils Freud's psychological inner life may produce interesting and provocative insights, surely Freud did not intend the text to be a neurotic confession that demands to be psychoanalyzed. Further, focusing on the unconscious elements at work in the text prevents us from asking the truly pertinent question, "What was Freud trying to tell his readers?"

In the first preface to the third part of *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud writes, "We are living in particularly remarkable times. We find to our surprise that progress has forged an alliance with barbarism" (2004, p. 217). When Freud penned those words he was about to go into exile in England. Freud's biographer Ernest Jones notes that Freud was reluctant to leave Austria because he felt that it was an act of desertion.¹ Jones tells us that he managed to convince Freud

¹ See the last chapter of Jones (1961)

to leave Vienna by quoting the second officer of the Titanic². The officer had been thrown off from the ship by an explosion, and when he was later asked why he abandoned ship, he replied: “I did not leave her, she left me.” But the advent of National Socialism and the rise of Anti-Semitism clearly had an impact on the creation of *Moses*. In another letter to Zweig, Freud writes,

Faced with new persecutions, one asks oneself again how the Jews have come to be what they are and why they have attracted this undying hatred. I soon discovered the formula: Moses created the Jews (qtd in Yerushalmi, 1991, p 16).

Understandably, those anti-Semitic “barbarisms” and “persecutions” urged Freud to examine the reasons as to why Jews “have attracted this undying hatred.” But why is Freud convinced that the answer lies in the idea that “Moses created the Jews”? Also, why does he believe that there is a quality in Jewishness that attracts hatred?

It is my contention that *Moses and Monotheism* is not, as critic Jorge Canastri claims, “a scientific response to the problem of anti-Semitism and racism” (1993, p. 121), but, rather, it is Freud’s attempt to defend Judaism by suggesting that it is the rigid, unforgiving, paternal monotheism in Judaism that attracts undying hatred and not the Jew per se.³ The strategic move of Freud was to unhinge monotheism from Judaism and to imaginatively locate its origins in the history of the non-European other. Contrary to Said’s claim that *Moses* is Freud’s way of “refusing to resolve identity” by demonstrating that even for “the most definable, the most identifiable, the most stubborn, communal identity—for [Freud], this was the Jewish identity—there are inherent limits that prevent it from being fully incorporated into one, Identity” (2003, p. 53), I read *Moses* as a way for Freud to resolve what he perceives is the problem with Jewish identity.

There is enough evidence in Freud’s writing to suggest that he believes in essential Jewish qualities. For example, in the preface to the Hebrew translation of *Totem and Taboo* Freud confesses that although he is “completely estranged from the religion of his father” and that he “cannot take a share in its nationalist ideals,” he has “never repudiated his people” and that “he is in his *essential nature* a Jew who has no desire to alter that nature.” Freud continues:

If the question were put to him: “Since you have abandoned all these common characteristics of your compatriots, what is left to you that is Jewish? he would reply: “A very great deal, and probably its very *essence*. He could not express that essence in words; but some day, no doubt, it will become accessible to the scientific mind” (qtd in Yerushalmi, 1991, p. 14, emphasis mine).

Freud seems to be suggesting that there is an essential Jewish nature that exceeds religion and nationalism. It is no surprise, therefore, that Freud finds no problems in rewriting the origin of Jewish history in the way that he did in *Moses and Monotheism*.

Interestingly enough, it is in *Moses and Monotheism* where Freud gives us an idea of what for him constitutes the essence of the Jew. In the third and final part of the text, possibly written by Freud as he was on transit to England, he posits that Jews are originators and possessors of

² *Freud, his wife Martha and their daughter Anna left Vienna on 3 June 1938, just three months after Austria was annexed by Germany.*

³ *As for monotheistic Christian cultures that also hated the Jews, Freud writes, “it should not be forgotten that all nations currently distinguished by their hatred of Jews became Christian only in recent historical times, often having been forced into it by violent coercion. They were all, one might say, “imperfectly baptized” (2004, p. 254)*

Geistigkeit, which is an abstraction that represents the best of intellectuality and spirituality. According to Rose, it is that which “stands for the moment when man’s beliefs achieved a level of abstraction without which there would never have been ethics, justice, truth” (in Said, 2003, p. xxv). This is perhaps, at least in part, what Freud refers to in his preface to the Hebrew translation of *Totem and Taboo* as the essential Jewish quality that “He could not express...in words.”

It should not escape us that Freud’s *Moses* operates by the logic of what postcolonial theorist Abdul JanMohamed (1985) calls the “Manichean allegory.” Freud cements an elevated intellectuality as the essential quality of Jewishness as he simultaneously shifts violence, murder and guilt out of Jewishness and into the Other. Edward Said calls attention to the opposition that Freud sets up when he writes,

Freud seems to have made a special effort never to discount or play down the fact that Moses was non-European—especially since, in terms of his argument, modern Judaism and the Jews were mainly to be thought of as European, or at least belonging to Europe rather than Asia or Africa (2003, p. 50).

By working within the logic of the “Manichean allegory,” Freud was able to discursively align Jewishness with Europe. Surely alarmed by the growing anti-Semitism in Europe, Freud perhaps hoped that his move might stunt, or perhaps even stop, its growth. Also, the Manichean discourse frames the other as essentially a space of the irrational and incomprehensible, which makes it perfectly suitable for Freud’s hermeneutic method. Interestingly, critical responses to Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* have tended to focus almost exclusively on the improbabilities that had to do with Moses and Jewish history. As far as I know, only Edward Said has challenged the idea that monotheism in Egypt began with Akhenaton (2003, p. 33). But then again, Freud’s (imagined) reader would have not been expected to be an expert in Egyptian history.

If Freud consciously attempted to defend Jewishness, his text also seems to unconsciously rehearse the Biblical idea that the Jews are the chosen people. Moses, according to Freud, chose them, and it is only in Judaism that the repressed actually returns. As Martin Bergmann observes, “Freud deprived the Hebrews of their discovery of monotheism but restored them psychologically to a central position: for among them alone the repressed returned with fateful results for the history of mankind” (1982, p. 134). Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, far from being a vicious attack on the origins of Judaism, seeks, through an imaginative rewriting of history, to show that Jews truly are the chosen people.

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