

On Eliza Slavet, "Freud's Theory of Jewishness. *For Better and for Worse*"

In "Freud's Theory of Jewishness. *For Better and for Worse*" Eliza Slavet seeks to mediate how "most scholars" since 1991 have addressed whether Freud, in *Moses and Monotheism*, "saw [*Judentum*] as a religion based on spiritual-intellectual ideals or as a racial-ethnic identity based on internalized anti-Semitism"; these scholars, Slavet notes, have chosen to focus "on either his insistence on the biological transmission of memory or his emphasis on Jewish *Geistigkeit*" (intellectual spirituality or intellectuality; 98-99). She argues that the assumption of incompatible foci is misguided because central to Freud's theory "is the idea that Jewishness is constituted by the biological inheritance of an archaic memory that Jewish people are inexorably compelled to transmit to future generations" (96). That is, in Slavet's reading of *Moses*, these alternative readings of what Freud considers constitutive of *Judentum* are not mutually exclusive; instead, they are chiasmatically intertwined: the texts of the tradition "'awaken' the memory-traces... such that Jews continue to feel compelled to return to these texts" (104).

Slavet solicits support for her resolution of this scholarly dilemma from a source contemporary with Freud's *Moses*. In her January 1935 letter to Freud, Lou Andreas-Salomé comments: "What particularly fascinates *me* [emphasis Andreas-Salomé] is a specific characteristic of the 'return of the repressed,' namely the way in which *noble and precious* [emphasis added by Slavet] elements return despite long intermixture with every conceivable kind of material" (99). Slavet notes: "[T]his sentence has been repeatedly quoted as evidence that Freud's last book can be read as an affirmation of the better elements of Jewish tradition" (99-100). Slavet, however, draws other implications from the sentence by combining Andreas-Salomé's designation of the "noble and precious" as the repressed that return with her own identification of the "noble and precious" as the *Geistigkeit* intrinsic to both Moses's original monotheistic notion and Freud's determination of *Judentum* and thereby.

A problem arises when drawing such implications: too often her discussion evokes the identification of, rather than the dialectical relationship between, memory-trace and Jewish tradition and implies that what constitutes at least part of the biological inheritance for Freud is Jewish *Geistigkeit*. Slavet begins her presentation of Freud's *Moses* with the statement, "Precisely because the Jewish tradition had reached the heights of ideal abstraction, its survival could not be explained solely by the usual cultural media" (97). For Freud, however, it was neither the specific form nor the content of the "religious tradition" that led him to question the adequacy of its transmission by "communication" and to hypothesize the inheritance of memory traces as the explanation for both the re-emergence of Mosaic monotheism centuries after being largely abandoned and, more significantly, its persistence to the present. Rather, the riddle he sought to resolve (as Slavet elsewhere [104] indicates) was Mosaic monotheism's "compulsive character" (*MM* 101), which, he asserted, prevented its withering away as the Aton religion had among the Egyptians.

Further, Freud states in *Moses* that the memories that leave their phylogenetic residue are not Moses's "highly spiritual religion" (97; citing *MM* 47)

but the impressions of the early traumata that, in the “special case” of the Jews, is that “the band of Semites killed Moses.” Slavet notes this also when summarizing Freud’s explanation of why this event was not recorded in the Bible: “the people repressed the memory of the murder.” Her next sentence, however, appears to append a supplemental memory: “However, the memory-traces of Moses *and his tradition* continue to exert their influence” (emphasis Geller). She then parenthetically doubles down the implication of her mnemonic augmentation: “Freud insists that this ‘acquired characteristic’ (of Jewishness) has been biologically transmitted from one generation to the next” (97; interpolation Slavet). From the opening claim that *Geistigkeit* was “[Freud’s] definition of Jewish tradition” (96) to the equivocal apposition, “the Jewish tradition—the memory-traces of the murder of Moses—has survived over innumerable generations” that next condenses into “the ‘permanent imprint’ of the Mosaic tradition” (104), Slavet seems to superimpose Andreas-Salomé’s “intermixture” upon Freud’s discussion of inheritable memory traces and thereby insinuates that, for Freud, *Geistigkeit* is (along with the memory of the murder) what is genealogically transmitted.

Yet are the specific strands of the double helix by which Slavet would resolve the scholarly debate over Freud’s theory of Jewishness indeed the basis for his theorization? I will step aside from the mine-field of memory-traces and instead focus upon *Geistigkeit*. The primacy she would ascribe to it is undermined by Freud’s text. She claims, for example, that Freud “mentions *Geistigkeit* throughout *Moses*” (100) aside from the chapter on “the Advance in Intellectuality.” Actually the term appears only twice before. More significant, however, may be the two occasions it appears after that chapter. In the chapter “What Is True in Religion,” Freud characterizes “an advance in intellectuality” as the third of three manifest attributes of the Moses religion that can only superficially explain (“only a certain superficial layer”) its eventual persistence (*MM* 123; emphasis Geller). When Freud then moves to the “Historical Truth” of religion he states, “we can make the further point that the idea of a single god means in itself an advance in intellectuality, but it is impossible to rate this point so highly” (*MM* 128-29; emphasis Geller). I argue elsewhere how Slavet, Assmann, Yerushalmi, and others—including Freud—“may have erected *Geistigkeit* as a fetish, supplementing Freud’s other strategies to disavow the traumatic knowledge” that in his last days threatened the persistent survival of the Jewish people: “*Judentum*’s identification with the dispositive ‘circumcision’” (“Not a *Geist* of a Chance: Laying to Rest an ‘Unlaid Ghost?’” *Germanic Review* 83 [2008]: 43, 44). Hence, while Slavet’s discussion of the dialectic of *text* and *trace* (whatever its content, however problematic the hypothesis) addresses how “within this complicated narrative” the Jewish tradition had survived, for better or for worse, far more problematic is whether with the progress in *Geistigkeit* Freud “implies ... the Jewish tradition will survive” (96).

MM = Freud, Sigmund (1939). *Moses and Monotheism*. Standard Edition Vol. XXIII.

Jay Geller
Vanderbilt University