

“Nowadays, well, we just don’t have that many substances”
A Response to Eliza Slavet

Eliza Slavet’s essay helpfully situates the peculiar “bodily definition of Jewishness” that she identifies in *Moses and Monotheism* within an ongoing conversation about embodied versus intellectual-spiritual approaches to “the Jewish Question”. Whereas the conversation surrounding Freud’s relationship to *Judentum* has tended to emphasize only one side of his definition of Jewishness, Slavet argues that his last book operates at the “counter-intuitive”¹ juncture of immateriality and materiality and offers a theory that rejects neither the religious nor the racial elements of what it means to be Jewish (103). The dispute into which she intervenes apparently arises from the fact that Freud deploys a borrowed and outmoded Lamarckism to explain the survival of the Jewish people via the ostensibly *material* inheritance of memory traces, while at the same time maintaining that the key to a group-psychological analysis of Jewishness is the specifically *immaterial* ideals and abstractions of Jewish *Geistigkeit*. On Slavet’s account, however, Freud’s theory of the genealogical inheritance of memory “integrates two seemingly contradictory aspects of Jewish definition: In the most material sense, Jewishness is collectively determined by one’s ineluctable descent, while in a more non-material sense, Jewishness is individually determined by one’s beliefs, choices, and practices”.² My concern with this assessment is that as a solution to the apparent contradiction in *Moses*, Slavet’s reading of the genealogical inheritance of memory as a “link”³ between Jewish religion and race risks collapsing the immaterial and material aspects of Freud’s analysis into an obscure synthesis. I want to suggest another approach to this supposed incongruity that could help clarify the stakes of Slavet’s intervention for the question of the unconscious and of the psychoanalytic body.

For several years I have been consumed with what psychoanalysis might be able to tell us about the idea of race. I was unable to get beyond the impasse of the constitutive—perhaps ontological—primacy of sexual difference, however, until Slavet’s *Racial Fever* called my attention to this particular ambiguity in Freud’s *Moses*. Her analysis of the tensions in his definition of Jewishness led me around the “sexual difference is the *only* difference” roadblock that especially tends to impede Lacanian considerations of the idea of race, and it pointed me in the direction of psychoanalysis’ radical troubling of the Cartesian dualism implicit in the immaterial/material, cultural/biological, spiritual/bodily terms of the conversation into which her work intervenes. Building upon her insistence on Freud’s refusal to choose, I argue that we must think the relation between materiality and immateriality in his understanding of *Judentum* beyond the parameters of Descartes’ mind/body dualism, beyond the demarcation of thinking and extended substance (*res cogitans* and *res extensias*).⁴ As with sex, when it comes to our

¹ Eliza Slavet, “Freud’s Theory of Jewishness: For Better and For Worse,” *The Jewish World of Sigmund Freud: Essays on Cultural Roots and the Problem of Religious Identity*, ed. Arnold D. Richards (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 99; hereafter cited parenthetically.

² Here I am citing a longer version of Slavet’s argument from *Racial Fever: Freud and the Jewish Question* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 30.

³ Again, Slavet uses this specific term not in her essay, but in her chapter on “Immaterial Materiality” in *Racial Fever* (ibid., 167, 170).

⁴ In “Taking the Body Literally,” Serge Leclaire addresses precisely the same seeming contradiction that so troubles readers of *Moses and Monotheism* within the context of the Freudian doctrine of the drives: “[O]ne is confronted with two apparently contradictory points of view: On the one hand, there is the notion that everything in the psychoanalytic field is situated at the level of representations conceived of as formal elements. On the other hand, there is the notion that the essence of the unconscious process should be situated at the level of impulses of the instincts or drives, that is, of an energy that has an organic nature. But it is quite clear that when the debate is

assessment of something like race we are, without psychoanalysis, limited by a framework inherited from philosophical modernity within which everything seems to be a matter either of biology, genetics, and heredity (extension) or of social constructs and cultural practices (thought). As Lacan lamented in Seminar XX, “Nowadays, well, we just don’t have that many substances.”⁵ In positing a third—*la substance jouissante*⁶—he, like Freud, did not bridge the gap between the two Cartesian options, but rather insisted that we think them both as divided internally. *Jouissance*, in other words, does not offer a synthesis of thinking and extension, but acts as a generator of division⁷ within the two: the former is divided into thought and its unconscious residue, while the latter is understood as “a body that enjoys itself” (21).⁸ And although certain readings of *Moses* seem to suggest that Freud was trapped between the very same Cartesian terms from which Lacan tried to extricate us, I believe we can locate the dividing function of *jouissance* in his theory of Jewishness as well.

Reading *Moses* with an eye toward this anti-Cartesian notion of *substance jouissante* transforms the very terms of the religion-or-race question in which we have thus far been embroiled. By reorienting our focus from the apparent division between spirit and body, this approach requires that we evaluate thinking substance not only in terms of the unique advance in spirituality that Freud attributes to the Jewish people (*Geistigkeit*), but also in terms of its unconscious underside—the guilty compulsion to repeat, to return to the murderous act Freud constructs as the traumatic foundation of Jewish spirituality.⁹

Perhaps more importantly, however, this focus also allows us to make a crucial distinction between this unconscious logic organizing “Jewish embodiment” and genealogy from the *biological* composition and regulation of the organism. Though it is not as apparent in his last book, I believe that this separation of body and organism pervades Freud’s oeuvre. Lacan’s “body that enjoys itself” is simply a rearticulation of what Freud developed in his writings on narcissism, autoeroticism, and erotogenic zones. In another text written and published in at the same time as *Moses*, Freud stressed that “the whole body is an erotogenic zone.”¹⁰ This body, this “pleasure machine,” as Serge Leclaire has described it, “not only does not coincide with the organic apparatus, but [...] even seems to be basically opposed to [it].”¹¹ Willy Apollon has also

initiated in this way, and no matter what the intention may be, one goes against Freudian thinking by underscoring an opposition of ‘psychic’ and ‘organic’ terms, whereas the difficult concept of the drive, which constitutes Freud’s true contribution tends to comprehend precisely this dualism within a truly novel dynamism. The originality of this concept, described as a limit, is that it grounds the unconscious outside the categories of the biological and the psychological understood in their pre-Freudian senses. In other words, the division or gap grounding the dimension of representation in the whole doctrine of the drives is without question situated elsewhere and otherwise than in the traditional opposition between the soul and the body” (*Psychoanalyzing: On the Order of the Unconscious and the Practice of the Letter*, trans. Peggy Kamuf [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998], 40).

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, Encore* (New York: Norton, 1998), 21.

⁶ “Enjoying substance.” We should not be distracted by the word “substance” here since enjoyment, as I will explain, is more properly understood as a *function* for Lacan and others.

⁷ I borrow the phrase “generator of division” from Joan Copjec in her seminar on “Sexuated Being and Event” (unpublished, SUNY Buffalo, 2008).

⁸ It would take more room than I have here to do justice to this notion of a body that enjoys itself, but suffice it to say that this Lacanianism, as usual, has its roots in Freud’s own work. See, for example, Freud’s examination of childhood autoeroticism in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

⁹ Slavet does examine this important aspect of *Moses and Monotheism* at greater length in “Immaterial Materiality,” the final chapter of *Racial Fever*.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1989), 21.

¹¹ Leclaire, 47.

insisted upon this distinction between body and organism. *Jouissance*, from his clinical perspective, is something that “cuts a memory of its occurrence into the being’s neurochemical and genetic structure and thus profoundly modifies it and constructs its body as the writing of a subjective history that detaches it from the logic of the organism.”¹²

Slavet herself is well aware of this psychoanalytic distance from biology,¹³ and though she reads Freud’s biological references as recourse to a medium of inheritance “beyond all forms of ‘direct communication’” she never stops insisting upon the question of the body (104).¹⁴ This is one of the most provocative lines of thought in her work, I think, and it persists despite her conclusion that Freud “refigures the materiality of Jewish genealogy as a purely spiritual-intellectual [*geistig*] matter” (102). Because the notion of the body produced by any blending or synthesis of substances cannot but be vague, however, this response has attempted to offer a consideration of the dividing function of enjoying substance that might clarify what I hope will be a continued exploration of the idea of race and embodiment in Slavet’s work. “That which is designated by the name body in physiological anatomy cannot,” according to Leclaire, “accommodate, in its descriptive illustrations or in the metabolism of basic needs, either the phantom organ that is the penis of the woman or the hallucinated object that is the lost breast.”¹⁵ These objects, and the instances of embodiment with which Slavet contends—the double damnation described by Eilberg-Schwartz, Nordau’s fantasy of the “Muscle Jew,” the ritual of circumcision, and, indeed, Freud’s theory of the bodily inheritance of memory—demand an explanation of the body beyond biology. The raced body is an erotogenic body, a body that enjoys itself.

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¹² Willy Apollon, “The Untreatable,” *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious, Incurable* (Buffalo, NY: The Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture, 2006), 331.

¹³ Slavet’s analysis of the historical and theoretical factors contributing to Freud’s various liaisons with scientism in *Racial Fever* is incredibly informative. See her chapter on “Freud’s ‘Lamarckism’ and the Politics of Racial Science” in *Racial Fever*.

¹⁴ This notion is brilliantly elaborated in Slavet’s chapter on “Secret Inclinations Beyond Direct Communication,” *Racial Fever*.

¹⁵ Leclaire, 45.