I. Derrida and Said

With the all too recent deaths of both Edward Said in 2003 and Jacques Derrida in 2004, and the irreparable losses our intellectual communities have sustained as a result of their archiving, I am calling on both as my mourning for intellectual fathers, amongst whom I also place Sigmund Freud. Through the perversity of the interlocking histories of the twentieth century, all three found themselves dying as migrants, displaced from their place of birth, the culture of their familial homes. I want to identify a shared aesthetic in these migratory thinkers about the dynamics of culture, dissemination, and the worlded text. These non-trivial effects of their diverse migration constitute not merely the politics of their thought, but a possible aesthetic of deracinated intellectual identities.


What readers of Moses and Monotheism have generally failed to recognise – perhaps because they have been too preoccupied with the more sensational aspects of Moses the Egyptian and his murder by the Jews – is that the true axis of the book, especially the all important Part III, is the problem of tradition, not merely its origins, but above all its dynamics.

The book’s deeper purpose was Yerushalmi’s desire to understand Freud’s own relationship to Jewish tradition: “The difficulty of interpreting Moses and Monotheism is directly related to the difficulty in grasping the nature of Freud’s Jewish identity.” This led to two interesting moves. The first is the publication and analysis of a
“canonical text” by Freud’s father, Jacob Freud’s inscription in Hebrew on the flyleaf of the Philippsohn illustrated Hebrew Bible he had given his son on his bar mitzvah at the age of thirteen, but which he re-presented to him, newly rebound in leather, on his thirty-fifth birthday 1891. The paternal invocation of Freud’s disavowed knowledge of Hebrew haunts Yerushalmi who concludes his erudite study of Freud’s texts with a monologue addressed to the dead author: “Dear and most highly esteemed Professor Freud.” The ghost of this dead “father” is invoked by this device to confirm once and for all the Jewishness of psychoanalysis.

It was this monologue and its compulsive quality to know for sure “from the horse’s mouth” that Derrida took as his text at the 1994 Colloquium: “Memory: The Question of Archives” later published as Mal d’Archive / Archive Fever. The untranslatable title suggests a cultural affliction: the psychopathology of memory as Freud’s lesson.

Yerushalmi’s invented monologue with Freud is a conversation with a spectre, or like Hamlet, with a dead father in a line of dead fathers who, in being thus addressed, acquire the authority that is being created and interrogated in the same performative movement. This is the double space of the archive. Derrida argues that without this possibility of our phantasmatic investment in and memory of the dead others that are the archive in which we imagine “they speak,” there would be neither history, nor tradition nor culture. Culture becomes a sublimated hero-worship, and following Freud’s thesis, it is, therefore, a conflicted enactment of both devotion and guilt-ridden murder. Interrogating tradition as a necessary haunting of the present by what is past but what is only belatedly animated as memory is, of course, the anamnesic core of psychoanalysis itself that tries to bring us face to face with the always determining complex of archaic sexual desires and aggressive impulses forged in infancy that create what we might call the psyche as archive, always containing the spectres with whom we are in permanent, phantasmatic conversation and interrogation.

Derrida has learnt Freud’s lessons better than Yerushalmi. The latter desires his spectral Freud to confirm his identity by affirming Jewishness. In effect, deconstruction works as the literary methodologisation of psychoanalysis. Through his own reading, Derrida reveals how historian Yerushalmi has failed to integrate into his historical method Freud’s monitory lessons. Yerushalmi wants to offer a psychological history of Freud and his relation to his father, but without reference to psychoanalysis: that is, without Freud’s teaching on the unconscious, the return of the repressed:

To want to speak about psychoanalysis, to claim to do the history of psychoanalysis from a purely apsychoanalytical point of view, purified of all psychoanalysis, to the point of believing one could erase the traces of any Freudian impression, is like claiming the right to speak without knowing what one is speaking about, without even wanting to hear anything about it. This structure is not only valid for the history of psychoanalysis, it is valid for all the so-called human and social sciences, but it receives a singular inflection here …