

**Review of: The Death of Sigmund Freud: The Legacy of His Last Days by Mark Edmundson, reviewed by Sheldon M. Goodman.**

Teacher and writer Mark Edmundson expanding on his 2006 *New York Times* magazine article, *Freud and the Fundamentalist Urge*, focuses in his most recent book on the patchwork history of the 1930's developing his theses regarding the lure of powerful, authoritarian leaders. The story opens with an imagined Freud and Hitler passing each other in the streets of Vienna in 1909, where Freud at the apex of his fame and Hitler an impoverished, struggling artist, raging about Jews and communists. Almost thirty years later (1938) their positions dramatically reversed, with Freud suffering from cancer of the jaw, undergoing successive painful operations and Hitler voraciously poised to annex Austria on his way to devouring all of Europe. It is here that the drama of Edmundson's book begins to take us on an unforgettable journey with all the energy of the behind-the-scenes efforts to whisk Freud and his family out of Nazi-controlled Vienna. Edmundson's storytelling powers are riveting as the first half of his book describes all the complex undertakings that eventually culminated in Freud's arrival in London after a terrifying three months that included a gang of Nazis invading the Freud home, the purloining of incriminating financial papers from Freud's Verlag printing offices by anti-semitic thugs in league with Nazi officials, the crucial influence of Princess Marie Bonaparte, and Freud's constant pain from the cancer. Freud was always on with his writing. As he so often uttered in various contexts and forms, he was not alive if he didn't write. A credo he adhered to the very last painful days of his life.

In his 80's Freud got religion. No, Freud did not begin to go to temple every Saturday and wrap himself in a shawl and read from the Torah. To the end of his life, he maintained his position as an uncompromising atheist, the stance he is best known for to the present day. In *Future of an Illusion*, he described belief in God as a collective neurosis: he called it "longing for a father." In his last completed work, *Moses and Monotheism*, for something new to emerge. There Freud, without abandoning his atheism, begins to see the Jewish faith that he was born into as a source of cultural progress in the past and of personal inspiration in the present. Close to his own death, Freud starts to recognize the poetry and promise in religion. In this his last book, written when he was old and ill, he offers another perspective on faith. He argues that Judaism helped free humanity from bondage to the immediate empirical world, opening up fresh possibilities for human thought and action. He further goes on to offer that faith in God facilitated a turn toward the life within, helping to make a rich life of introspection possible.

*"Moses and Monotheism"* was not an easy book for Freud to write or publish. He began it in the 1930's while still living in Vienna, and he was well aware that when and if he brought the book out he could anticipate conflict with the Austrian Catholic Church as well as with his fellow Jews.

In the climate of extreme anti-Semitism that was centered in Germany yet

spreading like wildfire throughout the Western world, Freud was entreated upon to not publish *Moses and Monotheism*; why add anything to the tide of hatred that was engulfing the Jews throughout Europe? But for Freud, within the story of Moses he believed he could uncover the secrets of Jewish identity as well as a psychoanalytic understanding of anti-Semitism. While scandals abound in this book - especially the claim the monotheism is first an Egyptian form of religion and was transmitted by Moses who was himself not a Jew by birth but an Egyptian - Freud upholds Moses as perhaps the first non-patriarchal patriarch by virtue of his ability to sublimate his wrathful anger. Simultaneously, Freud incisively makes clear that while monotheism (in the form of Judaism) is an important psychological step it is still an infantilizing system of belief. Even more than infantilism is at stake, though, in Edmundson's rendering of the events, as he turns his gaze to the links to Freud's view on religion and the rise of modern fundamentalism. Through Edmundson's eyes the essence of Western religion in which he most assuredly would include Islam is fundamentalism. People yearn to believe in a monolithic, all-seeing, all-knowing deity which controls life on earth and throughout the cosmos. Fundamentalism is at the heart of religion precisely because it represents the most direct and intense recapitulation of the early state of things where the father and his powers were all. Paradoxically, Freud is akin to Moses as a patriarch that undermines patriarchy.

An interesting turn is presented to us in the complex conditions that we are challenged by in the twenty-first century, Freud's life was bounded by two distinct yet related oppressing weights: the twin dangers of religious fundamentalism (which Freud relentlessly critiqued even in the face of fierce condemnation) and political fascism (which nearly claimed his life). This is perhaps where Edmundson's book offers its strongest and most utilitarian contributions, in connecting the links between then and now and underscoring Freud's admonishing us not to allow the sheer joy of submitting ourselves to authority - whether it be fundamentalism or fascism or any belief compressed into an ideology - will always embody an emergency we need always to be vigilant of. Freud's argument suggests that belief in an unseen God may prepare the ground not only for science and literature, and law but also for intense introspection. Someone who can contemplate an invisible God, Freud implies, is in a strong position to take seriously the invisible, but perhaps determining, dynamics of inner life. He is in a better position to know himself. To live well, the modern individual must learn to understand himself in all his singularity. He must be able to pause and consider his own character, his desires, his inhibitions and values, his inner contradictions. And Judaism, with its commitment to one unseen God, opens the way for doing so. It gives us the very precious gift of inwardness. We are indebted to Mark Edmundson's *The Death of Sigmund Freud*, Freud's legacy continues to resonate with the brilliant and controversial bristling that has made Freud such a lightning rod for all matters of criticism, projection, transference, and insight. It is a story well told and one that bears never ending vigilance as we attempt to navigate a world as pandemonious as was Freud's. Inviting in us, as his world did, all the potential for human beings to respond with

bloodlist and heroism. How we respond to this invitation may be discerned in Freud's response. In his unflinching integrity to constantly critique and undermine all desires to possess absolute certainty and truth, to expose and deny fundamentalism no matter what form it may come disguised in.

Mingling the stories of these men is a stretch that is bound to send more than a few of his readers pondering how two such disparate characters in history as Freud said so little about the German dictator even after leaving Vienna in 1938 as a refuge. At the risk of repeating a well known tale in reference to Freud's taking leave of the country he so loved- before departing he left the Nazis a parting gift. They had made clear to him that his emigration was contingent upon signing a statement saying that he was not molested in any way and that he had been able to continue with his scientific work. Freud signed, but then added a coda of his own devising that will always be part of Freud's psychoanalytic history "I can most highly recommend the Gestapo to everyone".

Yet Edmundson applies Freud's notion of a universal need for authoritarian father figures as an explanation of Nazism and he explores Freud's militant atheism as a protest against that irrational yearning, especially in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). The crux of the book comes at its conclusion, where Edmundson, a contributing editor at *Harper's*, argues for Freud's profound insights into the rise of a totalitarian, paternalistic leader like Hitler. Indeed, Edmundson's aim seems even grander: to revive Freud's legacy as a sage of human nature in an intellectual climate that has moved beyond many of his ideas. But the earlier sections of the volume are somewhat thin in that Edmundson adds little in retelling the details of Freud's life, and those facts are repeated once to often for this reviewer's taste. Clearly he does present us with moments of grand insight when he veers away from the biographical and tussles with his own critical ideas. The author leans heavily upon Ernest Jones and Peter Gay for Freud's biography, accepting as fact matters of such controversy as his fidelity and midlife celibacy and his disinterest in the Nobel Prize. This portrait of a pessimistic, ambivalent, courageous, rigid, rarely vulnerable man in the context of *Moses* is valuable although some might offer a bit too speculative in nature.

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