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# The Death of Sigmund Freud: The Legacy of His Last Days [Review]

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Pinkard next divides the Romantic appropriation of Kant into two chapters: the first treats Hölderlin, Novalis, Schleiermacher, and Schlegel while the second is reserved for Schelling alone. All of this then serves as the prelude to Part Three: “The Revolution Completed? Hegel,” in which Pinkard returns to the labor with which he is most adept: the explication of Hegelianism, which is here pursued quite broadly with separate chapters on Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (titled “Mind and World” in homage to John McDowell), on the concepts of nature and spirit, and of course also on Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. The fourth and final section of Pinkard’s volume is titled “The Revolution in Question” and deals, briefly, with Schelling’s later attempt to restore Idealism before turning to Schopenhauer—whose post-Kantianism is here treated as Romantic pessimism—and Kierkegaard, described here as a post-Schellingian Hegelian. Most surprising here is the omission of any sustained encounter with Marx, who is instead briefly regarded as a post-Fichtean (thus seems not to qualify as post-Hegelian or even part of the “Legacy of Idealism”) and is discussed in the section titled “Exhaustion and Resignation, 1830–1855.” This is a curious omission in a book that means to treat German philosophical, intellectual, and political development in the period 1760–1860.

Pippin, Pinkard, Henry Allison, and Paul Guyer, continue to set the boundaries of what constitutes the canonical accounts of German Idealism. But as they are now extending those boundaries by way of the “aftermath” to Kantianism and the “legacy” of Idealism, it might do us all well to pause to digest the great benefits of their scholarship before we so readily smack our lips at the prospect of continuing the same feast.

SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS

TOM HUHN

*The Death of Sigmund Freud: The Legacy of His Last Days*, by  
Mark Edmundson; 276 pp. New York: Bloomsbury, 2008,  
\$25.95, \$16.00 paper.

Sigmund Freud has been on Mark Edmundson’s mind at least since his 1990 book, *Towards Reading Freud: Self-Creation in Milton, Wordsworth, Emerson, and Sigmund Freud*. In that book, Edmundson uncovers a tension between two sides of Freud: the normative Freud committed to a rigid understanding of human behavior, and the romantic Freud whose restlessness with all given conventions inspired endless self-reinvention in his own writing. This side of Freud shows his kinship to Wordsworth, Emerson, and other writers and provides grounds of resistance to what is most stultifying in his own work. In Edmundson’s view, we need the imaginative energies released by these writers because many of Freud’s basic ideas have by now acquired the status of accepted truths. In fact,

Edmundson goes so far as to say that today we are “commonsense Freudians” in much the same way that Chaucer’s contemporaries were commonsense Christians.

In this cultural climate, even contemporary literary critics who distance themselves from Freud end up manifesting his pervasive influence, or so Edmundson goes on to argue in *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry* (1995). In Edmundson’s view, the therapist arriving at insights repressed by the deluded patient becomes a model for critics as otherwise different as Paul de Man and Stephen Greenblatt, who decode what a text or author unknowingly betrays. The special knowledge available through criticism justifies its place as a university discipline accessible only to highly trained insiders, like the institution of psychoanalysis. Edmundson defends literature against its domination by criticism, once again playing off writers like Wordsworth and Emerson against the critical formulas that would constrain them.

*The Death of Sigmund Freud* backs up from contemporary culture and takes a much more personal look at Freud in his final months, a sick man in his eighties, uncertain of his future, not to mention his legacy. In almost cinematic fashion, Edmundson juxtaposes Freud’s physical decline in 1938 as a cancer-ridden 81-year-old man in Vienna with Hitler’s political ascendancy at the same time. Their two stories intersect when Germany’s annexation of Austria begins and Hitler triumphantly returns to Vienna on March 14, 1938. On March 22 the Gestapo interrogate Freud’s daughter, Anna, convinced that psychoanalysis is a dangerous Jewish science. She survives this ordeal, and over the next few months Freud’s supporters negotiate his emigration to London, where he arrives June 6, 1938, with his health continuing to deteriorate until his death September 23, 1939.

Edmundson vividly describes Freud’s losses during this tortuous time: his home, many of his possessions, his friends, his beloved cigar smoking, his clinical practice, and toward the very end his ability to read and write. Edmundson notes how loss is central to Freud’s thinking about human development, especially in such classic papers as “Mourning and Melancholia.” In “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego” and other works, Freud also astutely analyzed the attraction to tyranny that Hitler was capitalizing on, the deeply ingrained wish to submit to leaders with ironclad convictions and convenient enemies.

It is an interesting but finally unanswerable question whether Freud’s understanding of the forces arrayed against him made them any easier for him to bear. Although Edmundson acknowledges that Freud never directly applied his insights to contemporary political occurrences, he feels that Freud “must have taken some dark, quiet satisfaction in having anticipated the terrible events at hand so well” (p. 97). This is one of many places where Edmundson is willing to speculate on matters where the evidence is far from clear. Although some of his conjectures are more thought-provoking than others, they all speak to Edmundson’s willingness to emulate the side of Freud that he continues to find

so appealing: Freud the daring imaginative writer who chafed at the limits of empirical thinking even as he sought the respectability of science.

I am not sure what Edmundson wants us to take away from the story he tells so well. There is, to be sure, the inspiring example of Freud, “an exuberant troublemaker” (p. 144) to the very end despite relocation, constant pain, and fear for the safety of himself and his family, finishing and publishing *Moses and Monotheism* (in German on February 2, 1939) in the face of warnings that it would play into the anti-Semitism Hitler had enflamed. This Freud exemplified the rebelliousness, self-reliance, and continual growth that Edmundson clearly values.

But even as Freud continued to challenge conventional opinion, Edmundson thinks he also died in such a way that “increased the length and breadth of the authoritative shadow that he would cast into time” (p. 229): sticking to his most cherished doctrines, welcoming disciples, and basking in the role of sage and founding father of the institution of psychoanalysis. According to Edmundson, Freud’s final days thus epitomize “the ultimate riddle” of his life: the autocratic impulses that he diagnosed in others persisted in his own work and shadowed even his most progressive insights. This is the very tension that caught Edmundson’s attention in *Towards Reading Freud. The Death of Sigmund Freud* does not so much shed new light on this tension as recast it in powerful biographical terms. Edmundson concludes by celebrating people who emulate Freud in “thinking for themselves” and moving forward without waiting “for orders from on high” (p. 243): “such people can be quite formidable when they’re pushed to the wall. (Fundamentalists and fascists should be warned.)” (p. 241). It remains unclear, however, whether even these resourceful people can move beyond the tug of war between challenging unquestioned authority and coveting it, the conflict that he keeps returning to in Freud.