



Book Review

The Age of Guilt: The Superego in the Online World (2023), Mark Edmundson

Shouvik Narayan Hore

Part One of Edmundson's book commences with careful literary allusion to sources behind the Super-Ego: William Blake's visionary character Urizen, in *Milton* (1804-1810), followed by the Nietzschean personas in *The Gay Science* (1882) and *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-1885), the pining lady in Sylvia Plath's *Daddy* (1962), Hannah Arendt's characterization of authority/tradition in her essay, *What is Authority?* (1954), and, of course, Freud's conceptualization of the Super-Ego across texts, like *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), *The Ego and the Id* (1923) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), to name a few amongst the most prominent. It [the Super-Ego] is, as Edmundson demonstrates from the very beginning, another manifestation of that which is "often unconscious" (p. 3), or the "supra-moral" (p. xvi), as he calls it elsewhere. The Super-egotistic, symbolic of patriarchal/universal authority, upholds moral ideals as the Ego attempts to negotiate across the contradictory impulses of the psyche, imposing upon the subject the burden of "guilt", which could be the equivalent of sexual instincts, most discernible in Freud's characterization of the id in the primitive unconscious. As it elevates itself through "panoptic presence" (p. 5), one realizes that the Super-ego is much more than guilt imposition – it takes upon itself the Herculean task of weaponizing the Ego with epistemic mobility of a divine, creative order when/whenever successfully negotiated with, paralyzing its individuality if immoral perversions occur, or identification with a "primal horde", as Freud calls it in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), where the leader's Super-Ego is embraced as his own, in order to address that "lack". From a political perspective, neither totalitarian dictatorship nor persuasive discourse is deemed *genau* for it; instead, the fulfilment of a spiritual-moral authority without factual exactitude, except perhaps its immediate reference to the Father-figure, or (to be more precise) – the Father's super-ego, serves a greater objective for its maturity. However, within civilizational limitations, the Super-Ego absorbs and transforms (transmogrifies?) the aggressive primal instincts of the id, internalizing it, despite psycho-pathological protestations for its externalization, but to no avail. As a result, sublimatory acts are partially successful (and mandatory) for the sustenance of civilization, but ultimately unsustainable, since aggressive instincts, or as Edmundson, *a la* Freud calls them, "rogue energies" (p. 32), will ultimately rupture the defensive mechanisms of the ego and its moral counterpart, exposing our primitive instincts as they are, not as they are made to appear, or act like. While Edmundson suggests the need to visualize dreams as a codicil of the Super-Ego, he reminds us of its sinister motive – making humanity conscious of its innumerable drawbacks (sourced in primitive and egotistic gratifications) and activating the Death Drive, which is "the hunger to pass away" (p. 41) - identifying corporeal contaminations, and initiating material cleansing - an imaginative plenitude, a substitutive ideology/false consciousness designed to address that "lack".

Part Two's exposition is framed in the manner of a discourse: the individual's inability towards sublimation, followed by ways of slaughtering the Super-Ego or projecting it away from oneself through crowd-hypnosis, by genuflecting in front of a "strong" leader. Drawing

references from the physiognomy of Donald Trump, Edmundson argues that aggressive personalities become directly responsible for the influx of contemporary digital repression, where “Super-ego warriors” (p. 56) enforce the condemnatory “Thou shalt” upon the primal horde, with diabolical results. Anecdotally, the Super-Ego’s brutal persecution backfires, as its unconscious, ethical prohibition is resisted by the unconscious abreaction of primitive instincts, leading towards what could be called ‘ego-paralysis’. Despite Edmundson’s claim that the Super-Ego is only satisfied through “perfection” (p. 66), he speculates that it detests “authenticity” (ibid.), which is self-contradictory, and the explanation offered is not satisfactory, in this matter. He is justified in demonstrating that human beings are a triumvirate of, at least, one self (the Ego) and two shadows (the id and the Super-Ego), which, alongside identity posturing, could be detrimental for the civilizational cause, since the “hubris” (p. 72) derived as a result is nothing more than the infestation of the primal horde. Medicines are swallowed for the same reason – to camouflage the deficit in primal impulses, and the maintenance of perfective, sublimatory goals of the civilized world. Reimagining the conflict between timelessness and time, between Kairos and Chronos, Edmundson, once again, betrays his identification of the Super-ego with the Unconscious which, definitionally, should remain symbolic of timelessness. If the Super-ego is “aligned with clock time” (p. 90) as I believe it is, it is the supra-conscious Chronos; in that case, the supra-conscious cannot be identical with the Unconscious, here Kairos. Universalizing the temporal is the categorical imperative of the “Thou Shalt”, and the need to relegate Chronos and re-install Kairos seems to be the primary motif behind drug-consumption in the contemporary world.

How does this re-installation function? How are the inhibitions of the Super-ego safely released and channelized? Crack a joke, says Edmundson, in Part Three, for it vents human frustration with the ethical Big Brother of the human psyche, symbolizing the primal release of the “infantile self” (p. 111). Equally efficient is intoxication, where alcohol-induced exhilaration supersedes the ‘fuddy-duddy’ Super-Ego until the hangover, when it resurrects with mightier authority. Drugs would serve similar purposes with equal dexterity, by forcing the ego into that ‘make-belief’ world where the super-ego is restrained, and so are un-sublimated pleasures. With the attenuation of religious rigorousness, civilizational moralities have been reduced to “chocolate chicks” (p. 130) during Easter, which is a disaster, for divine faith often allows us to persevere through the manacles of the Super-ego – see light (revelation, apocalypse, truth, Universality etc.) at the end of the psychological trouble, as Freud would have it. The therapist appears like a viable alternative until she/he transforms into an ersatz Father-figure that was originally what the patient had escaped from, for the Super-ego cannot be escaped from, and cannot be tolerated in its nakedness either. Therefore, Edmundson suggests that we withdraw into the fundamentals of being: “the pursuit of wisdom [Plato, Socrates], the pursuit of bravery [Hector], and the pursuit of compassion [Jesus Christ]” (p. 143). The “citizen soldier” (p. 145), he argues, can break away from the ideological claims enforced by either the id or its supra-moral counterpart and force them into submission on his terms. Individuality, then, cannot exist by rejecting dualities, but by acknowledging, and re-configuring dualities in order to pave way for a higher, enlightened truth to shine upon mankind – the “Hindu wisdom” (p. 152) from which both Oriental and Occidental religions derive contemporary, spiritual bases of divine infusion within human life. Here, Edmundson remarkably re-illustrates how Jesus had, probably, if not actually, turned bread and fish into food for a hungry crowd – not by magic, but by inspiring His crowd to singe their selfishness, produce whatever paltry food they could procure and share it selflessly, becoming a living example Himself, in the process. Despite the spiritual agnosticism of the twenty-first century, one must maintain that transforming a crowd into a community goes beyond narrow pleasure principles into the more Universal order which, even without religion, or petty guilt, can transform the Super-ego into a salvific being.

Bio-note

Shouvik Narayan Hore has published his research papers and treatises in the Journals of the Department of English, Bankura Christian College, Vidyasagar University, Berhampur University, Gauhati University and Bodoland University, India. He has been awarded an MPhil from the University of Hyderabad, Telangana, and he has submitted his PhD thesis on the Wordsworthian Sublime at Vidyasagar University, India. He has guest-edited an issue on the Sublime for the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* (2020), and has co-edited a book with Dr. Anway Mukhopadhyay (IIT Kharagpur), entitled *Thematisations of the Goddess in South Asian Cinema* (2022), published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. He is serving as a Guest Faculty at the Department of English, *Sanskrit College and University*. His essays on Wordsworth and Shelley have been referenced in definitive bibliographies like *The Year's Work in English Studies*, published by Oxford University Press.

Email Id: souvikhore94@gmail.com

