Creative Analysis: Psychohistory in a Troubled World

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After more than twenty-five years of calling myself a psychohistorian and writing many books and articles in defense of the discipline, I find myself forced to question deeply whether what I do can be properly categorized with most of my colleagues' work. Three things seem at first blush to put me off: first, because I am not a social scientist I find the constant effort to turn psychohistory into a predictable paradigm leads towards results that strike me as irrelevant or distorting. Second, because I am not a psychoanalyst or a psychiatrist, I find some of the technical language, clinical paradigms, and social applications useless in my own approach to historical subjects. Last—and perhaps not least, even though it might seem a petty point—I find the predominance of certain American points of view and concerns disturbing—or worse. These are the self-hating and conspiratorial theories that block out proper evaluations of the persons and events being examined. This is something that will be dealt with soon.

For me, then, psychohistory is above all a humanistic art. It certainly can draw on modern psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and other related sciences and social sciences for insights and analogues, but in itself it is not a science in the sense of seeking to abstract general principles, create repeatable and thus qualitatively verifiable (or refutable) experiments or trials, and explain historical persons or events in formulaic, reductive terms. As a humanistic art psychohistory seeks to grasp historical persons and events in the fullness of their unique and dynamic reality, fullness meaning the rounded dimensions of unconscious individual and social, as well as biological forces.

For these reasons, I see psychohistory as an art of creative analysis and synthesis, taking things apart and putting them together again, and in the process coming to understand persons and events as more than the sum of their quantifiable parts—and more than what can be ascertained through strict protocols of evidential study in documentary archives, archeology, and iconography.

Though an objection might be raised that such an analytical creative approach tends towards poetry and mysticism, and I concede that such a tendency may always be present as a danger in sloppy, unsystematic research, my own argument[1] is that, instead, psychohistory requires even more caution, skepticism and diligence than normally used in cultural anthropology or the history of emotions, for instance. The goal is to find a way to deal with the description and development of unspeakable, unimaginable and inconceivable matters in relation to the diversity of speakable, imaginable and conceivable options that the history of mentalities throws up when studying particular times, place, individuals, groups, and events.

There are two ways of describing the analytical creative approach I am advocating. It is above all not as a total replacement for other forms of psychohistory, but a suite suggestive tactics most appropriate for myself. One way such an approach can be explained is set out in a lengthy apology at the end of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; there it seems a justification for the founder of psychoanalysis's attempt to argue for a deeply theoretical, social and philosophical dimension to his usual psychoanalytical studies derived from intense personal relationship with individual neurotic patients. The other way to describe the approach is to use the rabbinical mode of analyzing sacred texts known generally as midrash but coded into the anagram *PaRDeS,* that is, a four stage approach of *peshat* (Pa), *remez* (R), *devash* (D) and *sod* (S).[2]

But before that let me say something about the preponderance of these persistently annoying American views.[3] By this, since I myself am an American citizen though living outside the USA since 1966, I do not mean that there is anything intellectually wrong with studying phenomena inside the country of one's birth or education or in emphasizing its people and founding principles. Indeed, the problem is

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[1] See for example, Norman Simms, The Humming Tree: History of Mentalities. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992) and My Cow Comes to Haunt Me: European Explorers, Travellers and Novelists Constructing Textual Selves and Imagining the Unthinkable in Lands and Islands beyond the Sea, from Christopher Columbus to Alexander von Humboldt **(**New York: Pace University Press, 1995).

[2] It will be seen soon that such a model needs to be adjusted to secular texts and circumstances.

[3] I am sure that someone from France or Germany, for instance, would find a similar problem with those compatriots who cannot see beyond their own national conventions, commonplaces, and assumed realities. This is why study of other languages, experience of many diverse cultures, and other tactics of "defamiliarization" are helpful in breaking the bonds of "commonsense." Too many of our psychohistorical colleagues remain monolingual and monocultural. The issue of "post-modernism," with its emphasis on the present moment of instantaneous experience, also needs to be explored in this regard.

that what I am talking about has to with a tendency, more marked in the last ten years, to hate America to the point of seeing it as the conspiratorial centre and cause of all the troubles in the world. In its latest manifestation, such irrational outbursts turn on the Bush Administration as the worst terrorists history has ever known, worse than Hitler and Stalin, and see as the Great Evil the American Heartland of Fundamentalist Christians, essentializing and demonizing them to a point way beyond anything else, such as Islamicist violence, misognyny, and superstition.[4] It is as though, in other words, all the dispassionate and objective study of many American psychohistorians fails before the supposed disease of their own government, commercial enterprises, and cultural achievements. While something could be said about German or French psychohistory, I think the European perspective is significantly different. What is needed is not so much an ideological shift as an epistemological re-orientation, so that researchers try to locate themselves in—or at least have pertinent knowledge of—different languages, cultures, and periods of history. This "defamiliarization" would be part of the process of shaking up, breaking down, and reassembling the normative perceptions of persons, events, ideas, images, and feelings.

Having said that, now we can turn to the description of the creative analytic approach. As I said, the first way comes from attention to what Freud wrote at the end of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.[5] After venturing to propose some new ideas to add to his basic views on psychoanalysis by positing that beyond the pleasure principle (Eros) there is also a principle or instinct for death (Thanatos), in the sense of a drive in all living organisms back towards their state of being inanimate, a regressive urge to repeat and so obviate the consequences of profoundly painful experiences, Freud finds that he can no longer find in scientific data good or sufficient clinical studies to back up his speculations—insights created in the course of long sessions of analysis of patients. The state of biology and especially neurobiology in the first two decades of the twentieth century was such that it was unable to grasp the dynamic realities that Freud and other psychoanalysts were discovering in their investigations of the human mind. For my case,

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[4] Phyllis Chesler, *The Death of Feminism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[5] *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* was first published in Leipzig, Vienna and Zurich for the Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag in 1920, and had two further important German editions in 1921 and 1923, with the first English translation by C.J.M. Hubback appearing in 1922. I am using the translation by James Strachey published in New York by Bantam in 1959.

however, it does not matter that Freud was not aware of or trust in the newer kinds of investigation that would bear greater fruit only after the Second World War in regard to developmental psychology, the chemistry of the brain, and the insights of quantum physics and genetics. What is important is that Freud writes:

> It may be asked whether and how far I am myself convinced of the truth of the hypotheses that have been set out in these pages. My answer would be that I am not convinced myself and that I do not seek to persuade other people to believe in them. Or, more precisely, that I do not know how far I believe in them.[6]

In a sense, this is an amazing concession of self-doubt and an admission that, so far as he can judge, hard science in the 1920s has run out of valid explanations for the phenomena Freud was interested in. Nevertheless, he does not retract what he has just claimed over the previous hundred pages of text.

Asserting that "the emotional factor of conviction should enter into this question" as a matter of right, and thus allowing the researcher "to follow it wherever it leads out of simple scientific curiosity," Freud sees himself as an *advocatus diaboli*. What he claims as his right, in other words, is to combine "factual material with what is purely speculative and thus diverging from empirical observation."[7] Although this almost aggressive assertion of privilege seems a bit shaky in terms of logic, let me re-state the claim in terms more close to our own twenty-first century circumstances. After examining the data available on a given person, group or event and finding that it does not yield any satisfactory explanation on the face value of such information, the researcher may begin to scratch below the surface, read between the lines, and jump to certain possible conclusions—but scratch gently and jump cautiously and in a self-corrective process of dynamic returns to the original data, their obvious contexts, and the analogies that start to emerge through the mists of such an exercise.

It is moreover in the nature of "combining" facts and speculation that the whole operation turns, since the facts on the ground, as it were, are manifestly inadequate, while speculation is only as good as it guides the research back into the text of the history to be confirmed by a new generation of facts that come closer to the needs of a proper explanation—one that is logical, parsimonious, and, if not refutable in scientific terms, at

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[6] *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Strachey translation, pp. 102-103.
[7] *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Strachey translation, p. 103.

least robust enough to sustain the gradual inclusion of more and more data from contingent, contiguous, and contemporary historical circumstances.

How to go about such a creative analysis is suggested by the rabbinic methods of exegesis that go under the acronym of PaRDeS. The Hebrew words point towards the techniques we can use in more secular circumstances. Thus *peshat* (the simple reading) is a first degree of interpretation based on received opinions, current wisdom, and traditional values. It should not be confused with "the literal level" in medieval Christian commentaries, since *peshat* is, first, one step beyond *miqra,* the act of reading itself by voicing the otherwise silent consonants, the primary division of letters into discrete words and phrases, and the identification of essential points of reference. *Peshat* may be intricate and elegantly allegorical, but it is already a given interpretation, and what the reader receives is fixed into the tradition by rabbinical authority. All subsequent readings of the text require that the *peshat* be broken up, explosively scattered, and reassembled in order to create new interpretations.[8]

In the process known as *remez*, there comes the first disassembling of the apparent coherence and consistently of the text as understood through *peshat.* Now words and phrases, as well as characters, actions, and settings, but also peculiarities of spelling, repetitions of words, and other surface "blemishes" or rhetorical adornments, are keyed to similar appearances in other parts of the sacred writings. By this means, the presumed integrity of the original target text is breached, usually with certain rules of logic and narrative propriety observed, such as that the first appearance of a word or phrase or person or type of event sets its base meanings against which all subsequent usages are not measured but also presumed to include.

In discussions of the History of Mentalities, I have indicated that these first two stages of approach move from a full description of the text of an event as possible—its genre and circumstances of composition, its essential themes, images, and rhetorical devices, its disposition in the network of existing cultural artifacts at the same time and in the same place—towards a comparison of what the text says, images and instigates purposely and consciously as an affective action to what else in those ascertainable and

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[8] Among many possible sources, see Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Le livre brûlé* (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1986) and *Ouvertures hassidiques* (Paris: Jacques Grancher, 1990).

operative contexts might have been said, could also have been imagined, and had available as an emotional and attitudinal range or palette. Therefore whatever the targeted original text has been understood and constructed to mean by its author, performers, audience, patrons, and censors, it is thereafter to be seen as one of several articulations of the contemporary variations possible, each word, image and affective state a choice taken or imposed on it. While in a rabbinical tradition, the move from *peshat* to *remez* shifts focus from a single text to a coherent and consistent body of scriptures, in the secular perspective the shift is from a single and unique event or action to a point along a continuum, or rather an intersection of synchronous and ontological development. It is a change in perspective from that which is fixed and determined, even granting flaws and knots of unclarity, to that which is dynamic and open, even if new areas of confusion and mystery are revealed.

With *midrash* proper—the word emerging from the root sense of *d-r-sh,* an explanation or a sermon—the fissuring of the text becomes more radical. In order to ascertain the meaning of the original piece of articulation in Scriptures, the rabbis violate the logic, narrative coherence, and contextual validation of *peshat* and *remez* by either or both reconstructing the text from its constituent parts (including those variations turned up by drawing in analogous passages from elsewhere in the sacred writings) or constructing new texts altogether with only minimal retention of the original logic, narrative or themes. The new texts may be in other genres, e.g., exemplary tales, riddles, songs, speeches, personal anecdotes from the experience of the midrashist, historical instances drawn from secular history or literature, etc.; or may insert new characters into the original action, or shift original speeches into alternative contexts. Despite these intrusions and violations, the researcher's intention is to come to grips with an interpretation already claimed by tradition in the *peshat* but not adequately accounted for by the details or structure of that original, or to amend, emend or vary that meaning to conform with later, contextual or more coherent understandings of the whole dynamic

tradition. The totality of Scripture[9] thereby is presumed to be more authoritative than any of its parts.

In the more secular scheme set out for History of Mentalities, I have seen this shift in perspective as an advance in understanding of the textualized event as being one that now presumes hidden, unconscious forces at play in the person or action. Usually, the discovery of such hidden forces at play in history does not contradict or cancel out the motivations perceived by the first two approaches—that is, what are consciously understood by the participants in the event themselves or their contemporaries who are affected by these actions—but supplement and modify these other understandings. However, in rare instances, there is a marked disparity between the claimed purposes of an action or the felt consequences of a situation and the occluded dimensions of the event or personalities involved: this may be the result of developments over the *longue durée* that are below the threshold of awareness or belong to a category of repressed traumatic memories in the individual or the group. In such cases, where contradictions seem to be evident to the analyst using the methodologies of psychohistory, the interpretation should take into account the tensions obtaining between what is spoken and what is unspeakable, what is perceived and what is unimaginable, and what is felt and what is inconceivable.

In the last rabbinical approach,[10] *sod,* there is a different kind of secret to be dealt with. Having breached the integrity of the received interpretation and begun to tease apart the textures of the target passage through analogy and explanatory supplementation, the exegete returns to the givens of the text with an awareness that it is not a seamless fabric. Through such manipulations as letter recombination, anagrammatic expansion and condensation, and numerical equivalence, the text is reconfigured to present alternative meanings and dimensions of implication than it initially seemed to yield. Often the rabbinical process enhances the scriptural passages that seem only to deal with historical or legendary (or exemplary examples) actions or legal and moralistic discussions with mystical, spiritual and theurgical revelations as constitute collectively kabbalah. Such secret meanings, however, remain predicated upon the validity and the

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[9] This would mean the three parts of the Hebrew Bible, known by the acronym *TaNaKh* (*Torah*, The Pentateuch; *Navim,* Prophets; *Katavim,* Hagiography), as well as Mishnah, the Two Talmuds of the Land of Israel and Babylonia, Midrashim, and other rabbinical books.

[10] Perhaps it might be best to say "kabbalistic approach", but as almost all early rabbis were experts in both *halachah* (Law) as well k*abbalah* (Mysticsim), the distinction is not required until a somewhat later period.

authoritative or paradigmatic institutionalization of the primary interpretations into halachic law and communal customs. The *sod,* in other words, holds in suspension various levels of understanding and diverse degrees of sacred reality, in a tenuous, dangerous, but also exalting moment of engagement with the sacred texts.

In the history of mentalities, the discipline which permits psychohistorians to analyze then unknown forces in the past, this kind of shift in perspective back to the plain terms of reference originally measured in archival, archeological or experiential evidence, means treating individuals, groups, events and emotional states generated out of specific recollected moments as though they were the manifest content of a dream, and as such to be treated as having already passed through the various kinds of censorship and distortion known to occur in the mind on those elements of memory—from external and internal psychic processes—that belong to the latent content of the dream event. Whereas the manifest content belongs to recent experience of various kinds and to deal with aspects of the ego's anxieties, wishes, and drives, the latent content both returns to the dreamer's earliest experiences[11] and to subsequent frustrating and traumatic engagements with reality. What is required of the analyst, then, particularly the psychohistorian seeking to understand the fantastic and delusional behaviours of historical persons and the strange outcome of public actions that defy political, economic and military logic or even basic common sense (the reality principle) is—not to dismiss the thematic and imagistic discourses operative in the documents or monuments being studied, but to understand them in relation to private experiences not registered (or not recorded clearly) in such evidence because they have been repressed, have lost previous contacts with earlier variations on the culture, or have not yet risen to articulation as they will in later generations.

If there are no explicit signs of childhood trauma, for example, then it will be necessary to seek out the traces of such profoundly disturbing experiences in the distortions to the development of individuals and groups (a development normally described in contemporary terms only by the use of mythical or legendary paradigms that smooth out, cover up, or deny the very disturbances the researcher is seeking to account

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[11] These may be more than just memories of birth and infantile nurturance, but also *in utero* experiences.

for).[12] This is a symptomatic reading, but one that necessitates a great deal of speculative and creative analysis to fill in the blank spots, measure the degrees of distortion in the landscape supposedly equivalent to its mythical ideals, and weight up the absences in a container said to be perfect in its dimensions but clearly askew.

Yet, as indicated earlier, at each stage in the process, as speculative and creative solutions are concocted, the researcher must diligently return to the sources—the original texts, the inter-texts and contexts, and the reconstructed pretexts and anti-texts—to search for the kinds of detail that previously had been invisible or unrecognizable. Such an intensified and refined attention can consequently focus on the original documents and artifacts and begin to see what Robert Liris calls "embedded texts." In one sense, as Liris has demonstrated on the stone and bone relics at Glozel or the rock engravings in the southern Pyrennees, there actually are second and third-level "writings" inside the more obvious drawings and inscriptions, evidence that only emerges through electronic enhancement of photographs or manipulation of filters and other devices. On the other hand, such "embedded texts" are metaphorical, that is, imaginable and conceivable once new ways of thinking about the originals become operative.

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[12] This does not mean that myth and legend are "poor science" or "confused history". They are profound symbolic means of discourse and often express experiences otherwise unreachable by ordinary language and iconographic systems.