

Making the Irregular Regular



I would like to begin this column with a brief quiz: Please identify the source of the following quotes:

*Note this down [Satan]: I have sh*t in the pants, and you can hang them around your neck and wipe your mouth with it.*

A slanderer does nothing but ruminate the filth of others with his own teeth and wallow like a pig with his nose in the dirt. That is also why his droppings stink most, surpassed only by the Devil's . . . And though man drops his excrements in private, the slanderer does not respect this privacy. He gluts on the pleasure of wallowing in it, and he does not deserve better according to God's righteous judgment. When the slanderer whispers: Look how he has sh*t on himself, the best answer is: You go eat it.

Give up? That would be none other than Martin Luther, the father of Protestantism and one of history's great theologians. To some it will come as no news to learn that Luther was also one of history's great scatologists. He was obsessed with things fecal, to the point where his own intestinal habits consumed him, perhaps even killed him. Through much of his adult life, Luther suffered a terrible combination of depression, anxiety, and constipation ("My arse has gone bad," he once said). The man was, in a word, a wreck. As his psychobiographer Erik Erikson put it,

Luther's suffering began with cardiac symptoms accompanied by severe anxiety.

"Mein herz zappelt," he said: "My heart quivers." He broke out in severe sweats (his old 'devil's bath') and into severe fits of crying. He was sure that death was impending and felt, in such fateful moments, without faith and justification. Above all, or below it all, he was depressed and deprived of all self esteem . . . even when he was free from these acute attacks, he suffered from indigestion, constipation, and hemorrhoids; from kidney stones which caused him severe pain; and from an annoying . . . buzzing in the ears.

Luther's problems aren't all that surprising. There is something we call "stress" that happens to a person who takes on an institution as powerful and pervasive as the sixteenth-century Catholic Church. And stress does strange things to the body. It slows the digestion, tires the circulatory system, lightens the head, and dulls the senses. These are biological facts. For Luther, of course, there was no such biological connection between mind and body. The connection was entirely spiritual. Physical suffering was the price paid for failure of conscience.

What is interesting about Luther's views on the mind and body is that, unlike many modern enlightened and secular figures, he understood them to be related. A misalignment of the humors was never just that. It was the result of a misalignment of conscience, and a misalignment of conscience would, of necessity, produce physical suffering and mental anguish. It might even produce constipation, which in turn, could become a metaphor for the suffering of self and society. Erikson describes one particular moment of despair when Luther observed, "I am like ripe sh*t and the world is a gigantic a** hole. We probably will let go of each other soon."



Fig.1

Few of history's famous neurotics and melancholics—Newton, Lincoln, Whitman, and my personal American favorite Meriwether Lewis—were as forthright about their suffering and its physical manifestations as was Luther. And the consequences of this have been much handwringing—now mostly discredited—about just what did happen behind the carefully choreographed public performances of

these notables. Actually, that's a bit of a misstatement. The reality is, for the past twenty or so years, there's been very little handwringing of this sort. The inner life of historical figures—very different from their private lives, which, *qua* Alexander Hamilton or Bill Clinton, are usually quite public—has generated little interest. And much of the reason for this, it seems, is entwined with the fate of what must be among the history profession's most troubled methodological adventures: the application of psychoanalytic techniques to the psyches of the long dead. The collapse of "psychohistory" and "psychobiography" appears to have been nearly total. Even the much assailed cliometrics—the interpretation of historical data through mathematical modeling—escaped the fate of history's Freudian step-child, the latter almost entirely relegated to the dust heap of discredited pseudo sciences.

There are many reasons for the demise of psychohistory. Among the earliest problems was its failure to convince the liberal establishment that it was something other than an Orwellian tool for mind games: "You don't want to be psychoanalyzed? Well, perhaps we should look at that . . ." The circularity of psychoanalytic logic is best described by Freud himself who said that lacking the self-knowledge derived from analysis, his critics could not possibly evaluate the therapeutic and scientific integrity of psychoanalytic methods. This logic, not surprisingly, struck Freud's critics as enormously self-serving and disingenuous. In his fire-breathing 1980 *Shrinking History*, the historian David E. Stannard condemned Freud's modern disciples for perpetuating the "fatuous" claim that "psychoanalytic theory is so subtle, so complex, and so sophisticated that none of the tools of evaluation yet devised by the best of human minds is capable of testing it. This, like the other common *ad hominem* complaint that critics of psychoanalysis are only displaying their neuroses, is a reply worthy of a mystic or an intellectual charlatan."

Or, for another more emblematic burst of venom, we might turn to Vladimir Nabokov, who in a characteristic anti-Freudian passage said of the "Viennese Quack" who started it all,

I think he's crude, I think he's medieval, and I don't want an elderly gentleman from Vienna with an umbrella inflicting his dreams upon me. I don't have the dreams that he discusses in his books. I don't see umbrellas in my dreams. Or balloons.

History would judge Freud, and it would judge him and his theories harshly. "Our grandsons no doubt will regard today's psychoanalysts with the same amused contempt we do astrology and phrenology." So, pronounced Nabokov in 1964. And one has to say the pronouncement has more or less held true, certainly among historians.

To these general denunciations have been added a long list of highly specialized studies whose conclusions about Freud's system, succinctly summarized by the noted anti-Freudian Frederick Crews, converge on the simple point "that there is literally nothing to be said, scientifically or

therapeutically, to the advantage of the entire Freudian system or any of its component parts.”

It is hard to imagine even the most vociferous free marketer saying the same of Marx and Marxism. They would at least acknowledge fundamental agreement that, say, states can shape markets, though they might disagree about whether this was for good or ill. Indeed, to my relatively young and naïve ears the vitriol directed toward the bespectacled man and his umbrella seems, if I may, a bit obsessive, perhaps even neurotic. While I am aware of Freud’s failures as a clinician (he fudged his findings, often to the profound detriment of his own patients, not to mention subsequent generations of patients whose treatment was guided by fraudulent Freudian claims), I wonder if his virtues as philosopher of mind and narrator of inner turmoil aren’t ripe for return. And I wonder if that comeback will mean that psychohistory has not breathed its final breath. My reasoning rests on two phenomena, one observable and the other conjectural: the first is, despite its unbelievably precipitous fall from grace, psychohistory has survived—albeit with a barely discernable pulse—at the center of the history-writing enterprise.

Take for instance Mechal Sobel’s 2000 book *Teach Me Dreams: The Search for Self in the Revolutionary Era*, a work whose primary concern is the emergence of a modern individual identity toward the end of the eighteenth century. At the center of that story, as she sees it, are dreams—widely reported in contemporary autobiography—because in their dreaming lives her subjects reflected the unique socio-economic pressures of their fast-changing age. And those pressures had much to do with the way individuals began to define themselves. One could argue, as I think Sobel would, that there is no necessary connection to Freud or psychoanalysis here: Freud would have had little use for the idea that dreams reflected social reality. For him, they were scientific facts—rather like gravity or photosynthesis—rather than historical facts. Insofar as they varied, they did so not through time but according to the distinct pathologies of individuals. Nonetheless, the very persistence of interest in the subconscious, in the dreaming life of the long dead, suggests that at the very least the interests that animated psychohistory continue to animate some practitioners of the historical craft.

Now for the purely conjectural: psychoanalysis is getting popular again. Consider television’s vanguard, HBO. There is of course the case of Tony Soprano and his shrink Dr. Jennifer Melfi, but there are more recent developments, notably the airing of the new series *In Treatment*. Anybody who’s had their own encounters with the psychoanalytic world, or just plain “therapy,” will view the show with that same combination of pain, shame, and comforting routine that comes with visits to the shrink. In each episode, the psychoanalyst and his patient or patients (Dr. Paul Weston does couples work too) engage in an often excruciating *pas de deux* that seems made for TV (e.g., what patient who sleeps with other patient, after inadvertently encountering said patient in between sessions is trying to tell therapist, whom she’s in love with) and yet chillingly real (clogged toilet produces serious, disruptive

patient-therapist tension).

But what is most compelling about the show is the psychoanalyst himself. Here is no omnipotent guide to the subconscious, a secular priest for the modern age. But a flawed, confused, cowering, obsessive, and endlessly endearing character, the sort of father figure classical Freudians never really grasped but modern Americans will find all too familiar. Dr. Paul Weston is much closer to Martin Luther (bathroom issues and all) than the bespectacled man with the umbrella (there's even a bit of Humbert Humbert in Weston). It's impossible to imagine anybody ascribing to this person the tyrannical tendencies once thought inherent in the psychoanalytic system.

One has to wonder whether or not Dr. Weston and his patients will strike a chord. Will Americans find in the fumbings and foibles of these people reassurance not only that psychoanalysis can be entertaining but also that it can be oddly therapeutic? The [ratings for the show](#) actually haven't been that great. But it has a history of popularity in places embroiled in wars against terror and constitutional struggles with entrenched religious minorities. *In Treatment* is based on the wildly popular and critically acclaimed Israeli TV series *Be' Tipul*. Perhaps there is something in the intimate exchanges between therapist and patient that appeals to citizens of nations whose policies so often seem at odds with the way rational, self-aware people see the world. And perhaps, if in fact psychoanalysis has lost its menacing airs, writers of history will once again find worthy subject matter in the inner lives of their subjects.

In Treatment may well be more than a symptom of a psychoanalytic resurgence. It may also feed that resurgence by reminding us that Freud was a master storyteller. As the *New York Times* television critic Virginia Heffernan put it in a piece about *In Treatment*, "Freud's elegant theories of repression, family romance and erotic transference may seem dated or irrelevant to contemporary American audiences, but they also offer intense narrative pleasures, like those of well-composed science fiction." Now may not be a time for science fiction; but it is surely a time for narrative pleasure.

Further Reading:

Erik Erikson's biography of Martin Luther is *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York, 1958). Nabokov's anti-Freudian quips can be found in the [New York Times](#) and in Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (1973). Frederick Crews's remark can be found in his "The Verdict on Freud," *Psychological Science* 7:2 (March, 1996). Also see Crews's "The Unknown Freud," *New York Review of Books* 40:19 (November 18, 1993). The historian Peter Gay has been a vocal defender of Freud if not, strictly speaking, psychohistory. See his *Freud for Historians* (New York, 1985). On the broader assault on psychoanalysis, see Paul Robinson's balanced *Freud and His Critics* (Berkeley, 1993). In terms of history that uses Freudian insights,

mention should be made of Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance and the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1992). Virginia Haffernan's observation appears in "The Rerun of the Repressed: The Secret Life of HBO's 'In Treatment,'" *New York Times Magazine* (March 9, 2008).

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