

## Anti-Semitism as Moral Catachresis

Norman Simms

### PREFACE

„Das Schrecklichste war, dass er weniger wie ein Dachauer Häftling aussah, als vielmehr wie ein Dachauer Häftling, von Fritz Grünbaum gespielt. Man war auf eine Posse gefasst und es war eine Tragödie.“<sup>1</sup>

The most terrible [thing] was that he [Fritz Grünbaum] did not look [like] a Dachau prisoner, but rather like a Dachau prisoner acted by Fritz Grünbaum. One looked out for a farce and it was a tragedy.<sup>2</sup>

This essay extends two basic ideas of mine published some years ago: first, an essay in general terms on how societies, as well as individuals can enter a state of mind (mentality) in which exclusion of a constituent other is essential towards defining the primary self;<sup>3</sup> and second, an essay arguing that what distinguishes “the oldest hatred in the world” from all other forms of bigotry and discrimination is that Jews are not seen as contaminants that pull-down or dissipate the strengths of the dominant identity,<sup>4</sup> but rather are too clever, too privileged and too “necessary” to be allowed to exist, in other words, a form of madness.<sup>5</sup> Not only does Judaism and the Jews who are its bearers (not necessarily believers) create a sense of intense loathing and fear, but insofar as it taken to be so embedded in the host civilization—its cause, its textures, its aspirational hope—so much so that it can only distinguished by artificial separations, labelling, expulsion and/or annihilation, but that even after it is imagined as gone and the world made *Jüdenrein*, its values, culture and spiritual strength have to be preserved in libraries, museums and institutional self-images. The fear and loathing are actually fear of being altogether and self-loathing. It is something people are

<sup>1</sup> Rothaller in *Aufbau* cited in Fritz Grünbaum“ Wikipedia online at <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gr%C3%BCrbaum>.

<sup>2</sup> “Fritz Grünbaum“ Wikipedia online at [http://www/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fritz\\_Gr%C3%BCnbaum](http://www/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fritz_Gr%C3%BCnbaum)

<sup>3</sup> Norman Simms, "The Cagots of Southwestern France: A Study in Structural Discrimination," *Mentalities/Mentalités* 8:1 (1993) 44-64

<sup>4</sup> My friend Nancy Kobrin, after reading these words, insists I put in full caps: PURE ENVY TO BE ATTACKED OR MORE THAN THAT. Then she adds, “Yes it is an illness of the first order. The paranoia is so overwhelming and sweeping with not capacity or opportunity to argue them out of their insanity. A fixed idea.”

<sup>5</sup> Norman Simms, “Anti-Semitism: A Psychopathological Disease” Chapter Two in *Judaism and Genocide: Psychological Under-currents of History – Volume IV*, eds., Jerry S. Piven, Chris Boyd and Henry W. Lawton.(New York: Writers Club Press, 2002).

**Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 28, Number 3, 2016**

**ISSN- 0111-8854**

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born into—not only genetically, but physiologically, due to some malfunctions in the transmission of evolutionary signals towards expression of the genes. It is also communicated unconsciously through triggers in images, words and gestures, hence not ineradicable or inevitable; but highly persistent and terribly contagious. In a very special sense, this essay, also extends the argument that anti-Semitism presents as a form of madness that can be seen best in festival gestures, farcical play, grotesque imagery, satirical wit and self-delusions of sobriety and reason, in other words, not as the perfect child born after a seamless pregnancy and birthing, but as an aborted foetus barely recognizable as human. It is exposed in all its reality in the brutality, cruelty and butchery of the Holocaust. But it is a moral illness, a kind of breakdown in the logical processes of the mind in otherwise healthy individuals and groups, and therefore something that can be traced back to infantile and early childhood traumas, if not in the particular persons manifesting the disease, at least within the direct line of genealogical inheritance. Thanks to the role of the Jewish midwives and her particular functions beyond that of classical, medieval and early modern care offered in the surrounding cultures, Jewish children grew up in healthier and more nurturing environments, where abandonment, neglect, abuse and other forms of negative relationships tended to prevail until well into the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

### **Giving Birth Again and Again to a Terrible Idea**

Have you then not heard, you absurd boy, that I am the son of a noble and burly midwife, Phaenarete?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For the general differences between loving care, close nurturing and contextual home-care Jewish child-rearing practices and their consequences and the tendencies towards abandonment, neglect and abuse among non-Jewish families, see Norman Simms “Forced Conversion and Abduction: The Children of São Tomé” in Norman Simms, ed. *Sects, Sex and Identity* (Hamilton: Outrigger Publishers, on behalf of the New Zealand Association for the Study of Jewish Civilization, 1997) pp. 35-52. But also see the changes introduced by a period of sustained persecution and abuse in Norman Simms “The Radical Transformation of Jewish Childrearing after the First Two Crusades: A Problem in Multi-Generational Post-Traumatic Stress” *Journal of Psychohistory* 30:2 (2002) 164-189 and Devoured by Wild Animals: Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress in the Children of São Tomé” *Revista Lusófona das Religiões* 5:9/10 (2006) 164-179. For a more sustained discussion see Norman Simms, *Masks in the Mirror: Marranism in Jewish Experience* (New York: Peter Lang Verlag, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 148-e. *The Essential Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (1871) with M.J. Knight (The Softback Preview, 1999) pp. 1168-1179..

**Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 28, Number 3, 2016**

**ISSN- 0111-8854**

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In their study of the letters between Sarah Bernhardt, the Jewish actress of the nineteenth century known as the Divine Sarah, and Samuel Pozzi, her lover and friend, whom she often addressed as Doctor God, the two authors— Caroline de Coste and Francesca Miller write:

Despite France being the birthplace of the Enlightenment, anti-Jewish sentiments were deeply embedded within the French psyche and nurtured by the most reactionary elements of the Catholic church...<sup>8</sup>

What exactly does this mean? It is a wonderful conceit, that is, a complicated metaphoric figure of speech with resonance going out in many important directions. Or is it? Perhaps it sounds more impressive than it really is. Perhaps if we follow through, moving from a Graeco-Latin perspective towards a more Hebrew-Jewish interpretation aspects of the conceit will begin to sparkle with new light.<sup>9</sup>

First of all, the opening metaphor is that of France as a birthplace of the Enlightenment. Usually, the term is taken to mean a geo-political and historical moment when a whole new set of liberal and tolerant ideas come into being. But a birthplace can also be a room or a bed or a body in which an infant is born, emerges from its mother's womb. Further than that, the birthplace par excellence is the mother's uterus, and thus behind these two modern American authors' suggestion about the origins of the French Enlightenment lies Plato's *Theaetetus* and Socrates claim to be a midwife just like his mother Phaenere (‘‘she who brings virtue to light’’).<sup>10</sup> The process of argumentation used by Socrates of question and answer is known as *maieutic*, like a midwife: for this is where the figure of the philosopher poses as an *eirone*—someone who claims to be and know and appear as less than he really is—in confrontation with that of the *alazon*—someone who claims to and know and appear as more than he really is, and where the self-confident boaster comes down to confessing to Socrates that he must not know what he was talking about and thus this handsome, strong, healthy, wealthy and is actually in awe of the funny-looking, unprepossessing and apparently

<sup>8</sup> Caroline de Coste and Francesca Miller, *The Diva and Doctor God: Letters from Sarah Bernhardt to Doctor Samuel Pozzi* (XLibris, 2010) p. 207. Samuel Pozzi was a long-time friend, occasional lover, and personal physician in gynaecological matters to ‘‘the immortal’’ Sarah Bernhardt.

<sup>9</sup> On how far Plato may have invented this metaphor of the philosopher as midwife and whether there is any historical credibility to the idea of Socrates having a mother who was a midwife, see Harold Tarrant, ‘‘Midwifery and the Clouds’’ *Classical Quarterly* 38:1 (1988) 116-122.

<sup>10</sup> On some of the main distinctions made between the Socrates in Plato and the old *eirone*'s configuration in other classical dialogues, see Julius Tomlin, ‘‘Socratic Midwifery’’ *Classical Quarterly* 37:1 (1987) 92-102; this definition of *phaenerte* and its background in ancient sources, p.98.

uneducated interlocutor. What before was supposed to be knowledge turns out to be mere sophistic opinion, superficial and inapt.

Secondly, the passage develops that obstetrics imagery into a larger social practice that precedes the moment of the infant's emergence from the mother's body, something contrary and hostile transforms the birthplace into an unwelcoming environment, a place where the foetus—not yet born at all—lies embedded in a poisonous, noxious matrix, the French psyche; or, the neonate child, having passed through the birth canal and entered into the world of reality, politics and religion is immediately removed from the protective warmth of the mother's person and embedded into the mentality of the French nation. But even before that, Socrates indicates that the role of the midwife commences long before the woman becomes pregnant, gestates the foetus within her uterus, and then prepares to endure the ordeal of birthing itself.

Well, have you noticed this also about them, that they are the most skilful of matchmakers, since they are very wise in knowing what union of man and woman will produce the best possible children?<sup>11</sup>

The midwife ensures that the procreating couple have been properly matched according to good health, age, strength, and looks, have a compatible personality, and understand what is expected of them in their new role as parents.

Here is the opening of the famous passage from *Theaetetus* in full that requires careful teasing apart and interpretation pertinent to our basic themes:

All that is true of their art of midwifery is true also of mine, but mine differs from theirs in being practised upon men, not women, and in tending their souls in labour, not their bodies. But the greatest thing about my art is this, mere image, an imposture, or a real and genuine offspring.<sup>12</sup>

At the core of any psychohistorical study of anti-Semitism lies the that human personality begins with a relationship between the mother and her body, the foetus that is conceived within her matrix or uterus and its process of emerging into the world where it will be nurtured not only by that maternal figure but by the community around

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<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 143-c.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 150-c—150-d

her. Not only is the phenomenon of creating a new infant physiological event but it is also an historical one, the social dimension not separate from but dynamically related to the organic, with the stimulation and inhibition of hormonal triggers responding to the human environment, thus influencing the way in which genetic dispositions are expressed. Much that happens is unconscious in at least three ways: (a) the bodily events lie beneath the level of cognitive awareness, and at best may be noticed as sensations and feelings, but not recognized as related to the growth of the foetus, its passage from within to outside the maternal body; (b) the power of the maternal gaze to interact with the neuronal development of the neonate and its initial days, weeks, months and years of maturation, that gaze itself re-enacting experiences of its own as an infant and in response to external factors in its human environment, whether comfortable and nurturing or dysfunctional and abusive; and (c) the textures of the human historical environment as shaped by language, culture and institutionalized social relationships.

What Plato makes Socrates refer to as “[a] mere image, an imposture, or a real and genuine offspring” can be parsed as a reference to the textures of personality that are woven in these unconscious relationships, the deep structures and content of memory embedded in rituals of child-rearing, the iconography of emotion-laden imagery and the articulation of that personality in conventional behaviour and expressions so that it seems to more or less fit in with historical expectations. Further, in his role as *eiron* (the stage comedian who pretends to be less wise, less skilful and less attractive than he really is), Socrates goes on to say to young Theaetetus (the *alazon*, the figure who begins by assuming he is more and other than he really is, and who in Platonic dialogues tends to be the one who confuses opinion with ideas and sophistic knowledge with philosophical wisdom until the *eiron*’s argument wins him over):

For I have this in common with the midwives: I am sterile in point of wisdom, and the reproach which has often been brought against me, that I question others but make no reply myself about anything, because I have no wisdom in me, is a true reproach; and the reason of it is this: the god compels me to act as midwife, but has never allowed me to bring forth. I am, then, not at all a wise person myself, nor have I any wise invention, the offspring born of my own soul; but those who associate with me, although at first some of them seem very ignorant, yet, as our acquaintance advances, all of them to whom the god is gracious make wonderful progress, not only in their own opinion, but in that of others as well. And it is clear that they do this, not because they have ever learned anything from

**Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 28, Number 3, 2016**

**ISSN- 0111-8854**

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me, but because they have found in themselves many fair things and have brought them forth.<sup>13</sup>

However foolish Socrates seems to present himself, what he does do is establish his charismatic power to keep his young alazonic student's attention long enough for the youth to recognize that ignorance in this new sense means not stupidity but irrelevance and arrogance: the need to patiently follow the older man's questions in order to both acquire a new method of learning about one's one self and its processes of acquiring necessary skills and to be patient before attempting to apply the new wisdom in practical situations.

Gradually, from this classical perspective, it is now made possible to achieve wisdom because one can think in a philosophical way, to love eagerly that which one has not yet acquired and to be critical of ideas that start to emerge from within one's mind, distinguishing between those that are not viable and those that are—what is mere illusion precipitated by foolishness, error based on inadequate or misappropriated knowledge, outright lies absorbed from sophists, tricksters and other charlatans. In terms of the French Enlightenment, the arrogant over-reliance on logical schemes rather than close experimental knowledge is one kind of fault to be eschewed, no matter how fancifully it is dressed up as an encyclopaedia; another derives from unquestioned acceptance of religious paradigms, even or especially when stripped of their superficial Christian garments, while the underlying errors and prejudices persist; and lastly, assuming that belonging to a seemingly polite society with the trappings of civilization provides the thinker with a racial and moral superiority, and no felt-need to respect or consider seriously the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of others, such as Jews.

But the delivery is due to the god [*daemon* or heavenly messenger] and me. And the proof of it is this: many before now, being ignorant of this fact and thinking that they were themselves the cause of their success, but despising me, have gone away from me sooner than they ought, whether of their own accord or because others persuaded them to do so. Then, after they have gone away, they have miscarried thenceforth on account of evil companionship, and the offspring which they had brought forth through my assistance they have reared so badly that they have lost it; they have considered impostures and images of

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<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 150-d—10-e

more importance than the truth, and at last it was evident to themselves, as well as to others, that they were ignorant.<sup>14</sup>

Which takes us back to Caroline de Coste and Francesca Miller's original questioning of how the Enlightenment went wrong: no matter what its apparent advances in terms of scientific reasoning and natural experiments, its ideas were born as much out of as into a matrix of religious prejudices and unconscious social prejudices. Critical thinking and questioning, the "chants" of the metaphoric midwife,<sup>15</sup> are necessary to filter out the unwanted assumptions and regularize the methodology of self-analysis, as well as finally the manner of articulating the new ideas in an efficacious way into the world that is created at the same time to accommodate these new ideas. To stimulate and to inhibit the development of an inner world of experiences and an outer environment patient, humble and tolerant causes pain (labour), to be sure, and that is why a midwife must guide the would-be philosophical enterprise. If the only comfort seems to come through mocking, scorning and expelling the "other" from society, as though this sadistic exercise were a ritual of purgation or scapegoating, then there is something still fundamentally wrong with the consequent system of ideas and the institutions set up to process them.

One of these was Aristeides, the son of Lysimachus, and there are very many more. When such men come back and beg me, as they do, with wonderful eagerness to let them join me again, the spiritual monitor that comes to me forbids me to associate with some of them, but allows me to converse with others, and these again make progress. Now those who associate with me are in this matter also like women in childbirth; they are in pain and are full of trouble night and day, much more than are the women; and my art can arouse this pain and cause it to cease. Well, that is what happens to them.<sup>16</sup>

Worst of all, to be sure, occurs when the so-called enlightened ideas that have been born into the world prove to be mere miscarriages and abortions<sup>17</sup> and the result is a tissue of lies, prejudices and unquestioned assumptions, a carnival or freak-show of false reasoning and tyrannical gestures pretending to be both comedy and tragedy. As there is no possibility of accommodating such irreconcilable factors in the new supposedly harmonious and

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<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 150-e

<sup>15</sup> On these special "incantations of the midwife", see Tomlin, "Socratic Midwifery" 99. For Tomlin, the chants stand for the dialectic of the Socratic method, a pedagogy that includes inhibiting (i.e., aborting) as well as stimulating (inducing the birthing of new ideas (p. 100).

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 151-a—151-b.

<sup>17</sup> Tomlin, "Socratic Midwifery" cites Aristophanes' *Clouds* where Thaeatetis is made to say in comic exasperation when Socrates bangs on the door demanding entry, "You have caused a miscarriage of my discovery" (p. 99).

reasonable world of bourgeois morality under an aristocratic system, the impasses only explode into more and more violence, until a reign of terror ensues, and anarchy, chaos and Old Night return. For Voltaire and his fellow *philosophes*, mostly, the Jews seemed at once the embodiment of the alien confusion and the props upon which the archaic bigotry of the Christian Church was maintained. Those who propounded such non-ideas were mismatched to begin with and their birthing a sham, a false labour, and the children brought into the world empty shadows, ghosts and hallucinations. Ironically, the ideal of a Europe that becomes *Jüdenrein*, both free of Jews as a nation and of Judaism as a constant reminder of the false premises upon which Christianity was built, is intolerable to contemplate because it makes Europe impossible to conceive. The wise man's own identity as a midwife (*maia*) disappears.

But in some cases, Theaetetus, when they do not seem to me to be exactly pregnant, since I see that they have no need of me, I act with perfect goodwill as match-maker and, under God, I guess very successfully with whom they can associate profitably, and I have handed over many of them to Prodicus, and many to other wise and inspired men.

At this stage Socrates sets forth the elaborate metaphor of himself as the midwife and his young interlocutor as the pregnant mother-to-be bursting with what the pupil assumes to be new and valuable ideas. What is important is less the actual way in which the midwife assists in the process of labour and birth, but more in the assessment of whether the emerging idea is a viable one or not, and how the philosophical friend can manage the likely anger and outrage if what is born is deemed to be less than worthy of entering into world of intellectual discourse and cultural practice.

Now I have said all this to you at such length, my dear boy, because I suspect that you, as you yourself believe, are in pain because you are pregnant with something within you. Apply, then, to me, remembering that I am the son of a midwife and have myself a midwife's gifts, and do your best to answer the questions I ask as I ask them. And if, when I have examined any of the things you say, it should prove that I think it is a mere image and not real, and therefore quietly take it from you and throw it away, do not be angry as women are when they are deprived of their first offspring. For many, my dear friend, before this have got into such a state of mind towards me that they are actually ready to bite me, if I take some foolish notion away from them, and they do not believe that I do this in kindness, since they are far from knowing that no god is unkind to mortals, and that I do nothing of this sort from unkindness, either, and that it is quite out of the question for me to allow an imposture or to destroy the true. And so, Theaetetus begin again and try to

**Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 28, Number 3, 2016**

**ISSN- 0111-8854**

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tell us what knowledge is. And never say that you are unable to do so; for if God wills it and gives you courage, you will be able.<sup>18</sup>

Returning to Caroline de Coste and Francesca Miller, the newly born Enlightenment is adopted by a wicked step-mother, placed in her bed which is filled with most reactionary elements—anti-Semitic sentiments—of the French Catholic Church, there to be suckled not on the nutrient rich and comforting milk of her breasts but by two withered dugs of superstition and calumny; and what should have been a loving environment is now one that seeks to poison the ideas of freedom, tolerance and rationality, the hallmarks of this period of Light.

Coming back to the original statement, what exactly do these writers (or any others who use this common expression) mean when they say that a nation, a country, a historical moment is the birthplace of some intellectual movement? Most likely they wish to say in this figurative way that a significant number of persons and institutions are in a state of mind ready to change their basic paradigms for understanding what is natural, normal and reasonable from an inherited set of cognitive and affective models to something more satisfying and stimulating. The country would then mean less the geographical features and the climatic conditions under which people live than emotional and social attitudes that are shared by those who are considered authorities. When these paradigms start to shift and the leading thinkers of the age are prepared to entertain and develop new ideas, then the time is right; or, to put it negatively, when the political and spiritual leaders cannot muster sufficient power to resist the new ideas, then the innovators find they have room to manoeuvre, communicate with one another, and begin to consolidate a new set of paradigms.

But two other ways of approach need to be followed. In one, already hinted at in Plato's dialogue, is that the domestic care in choosing a coital partner for the would-be-mother, her preparations to nurture the foetus once it is conceived and begins to develop in the womb, and the environment created to receive the new-born infant and ensure its proper growth and education, all these are social activities, and hence they are conditioned by social and political factors, and again thus under the aegis of history. In the other, as we shall see soon,

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<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 151-c—151-d

the role of the Jewish midwife in and of Western Culture and Civilization needs to be addressed.<sup>19</sup> For throughout the subsequent ages to Plato's writing and their influence on western thought, the place of Jews has been at best marginal or incidental, but at worst considered as a poison container for the unwanted thoughts, feelings and ideals that succeeding generations seek to expel from the body politic. The notion of human kind (or nature) or universal reason therefore needs to be modified to enfold within themselves the Jewish midwife and what she can bring into the world. To aid in the propagation and birth of these new ideas we need to show that humanity is dynamic, diverse and based on collective identities as well as individual personalities.

In classical and most subsequent pre-modern cultures and societies, the midwife was not that of a professional medical officer of the community, but rather a role undertaken in almost ad hoc way by members of the prospective mother's household or extended family. The candidates for dominant and directive female in this obstetric assistance were drawn from the older, most experienced women available, and the others served in various supportive activities prior to and during the birthing process. Midwifery in this extended sense was a very social affair and depended upon the class status of the pregnant woman and her civic power associated with her husband and his family. By the early period, in Jewish communities of Europe, the role of the midwife was essential to the development of bourgeois society. Elisheva Carlebach explains:

Wage earners, tax payers, recorders of vital statistics and dispensers of essential services, midwives were functionaries and even authorities, in domains that were crucial to communal life. They were profoundly connected to many aspects of its governance and deeply intertwined with individual and family lives...<sup>20</sup>

These Jewish midwives were more than just literate bureaucrats who combined their obstetric ("gendered medical") services<sup>21</sup> with those other facets of the traditional paradigm associated with the care and control of the birthing process and the procedures that went before and those that followed the period of confinement which is most usually taken as their predominant one; they were monitors and teachers of communal values, reporting regularly

<sup>19</sup> Michelle Klein, *A Time to be Born: Customs and Folklore of Jewish Birth* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1998), esp. Chapter Seven, "Midwives" pp. 99-100.

<sup>20</sup> Elisheva Carlebach, "Community, Authority, and Jewish Midwives in Early Modern Europe," *Jewish Social Studies* 20:2 (2014) 6.

<sup>21</sup> Carlebach, "Community, Authority" p. 8.

to the religious and lay leaders of Jewish society. Within Jewish communities, the midwife consulted with and often reported to rabbinical specialists, from circumcisers, kabbalists and legal authorities, thus proving, in Carlebach's words the "mediators" between body, soul and the Jewish nation in its inter-generational as well as international conception.<sup>22</sup> Comparing this concept to that found in the parallel (and occasionally intersecting) classical and Christian notions of the midwife as metaphorical link between medical knowledge, philosophical speculation and moral theology, the Jewish figure represented something of world-historical and physical-cosmic importance insofar as she too mediated between the outer non-Jewish world and the internal nexus of rabbis, faith-healers and advisers on ordinary economic problems. In other words, whereas officially it was the father of the family, acting on behalf of the community and its rabbinic authority, who was in charge of a child's formal education, in reality the midwife—in all her different manifestations from wise old grandmother, interfering and controlling mother-in-law, busybody gossip, clever and cunning marriage broker, domestic spy on behalf of civil society—who ensured the practical and healthy integration of the child into the material world.<sup>23</sup>

Alongside the *goyish* world and within the closed Jewish world, as we have indicated, the number of helpers an appointed midwife could call upon, the time and material support granted to them, as well as the knowledge available to them through popular and literate culture all were determined by historical circumstances and thus varied through time and space. Plato's formulation of Socrates as an intellectual midwife modelled on a single specialist Phanarete probably has only partial relations to the reality of classical Athens,<sup>24</sup> but

<sup>22</sup> Carlebach, "Community, Authority" p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Many commentators point out that, like wet-nurses and maidservants, Jewish experts often worked with non-Jewish women and their families, a position that could at times become subject to ambiguous and hostile legislation from the Christian rulers and ecclesiastical authorities. Repeated warnings against permitting Jewish women to come within close—and intimate—contact with the bodies and souls of Christian infants and their families suggests how sensitive these relationships could be and the kind of lines of overt and covert influences could flow between the two communities, especially when the small minority Jewish population seems always to barely impinge on the official consciousness of the majority's conception of itself as a purely Christian enterprise. We certainly know, in a related field, that all the way from the Pope down to the least parish priest or monastic house warnings were issued against dependence on Jewish physicians for the care of body and soul, while at the same time Jewish medicine was highly sought after. These Jewish experts could not be trusted and yet could be better trusted than their counterparts from the non-Jewish world.

<sup>24</sup> Tarrant, "Midwifery and *Clouds*" 119.

once accepted into the literate *Nachleben* of the philosophical tradition could be elaborated outside of any particular social requirements: it had an intellectual life of its own.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the closer one comes to modern philosophy and literature, when this ancient conceit is revived and revised, it tends to take on an ambiguous and ironic function, not only in a sarcastic tonal gloss to whatever is being expressed but in the narrative structures of its rhetorical elaboration, this sequencing of events, revelation of insights into character, and this holding back of material details and their replacement by symbolic or impressionistic hints becomes manifest in the very substance of the narrative, whether outwardly fictional or more or less allegorical. John H. Smith in his discussion of the *Habamme* (midwife) in Heinrich von Kleist's nineteenth-century German novellas speaks of the figure as an agent of epistemology, "even if ironically...for expressing a kind of knowledge."<sup>26</sup> It is, however, interesting to note that for Jewish midwives the task they performed for the household in which a birth was expected and cared for, the additional role included gathering information vital to the community's moral constitution and well-being: ensuring that infants were "kosher", that is, the mother legally married, the husband's household committed to the nurturance, control and education of the child, and the mother herself properly looked after and the contextual non-Jewish society's requirements for moral proprieties and tax purposes. In those jurisdictions where the total number of Jews permitted to reside and carry on business, the status of all members of those under rabbinical supervision had to meet with critical social standards.

Claudia Ulbrich reminds us that in the early modern period, the opposite of public was not private but secret, and concealing marriages and births from communal officials in both Jewish and Christian society could provoke severe penalties.<sup>27</sup>

How complex this was can be adduced from other records in situations where the father and mother were of different religions, not just Christian and Jewish, but also Jewish and Crypto-

<sup>25</sup> On this post-classical tradition of the midwife as a symbol of intellectual aid to creative and speculative thought, see John H. Smith, "Dialogic Midwifery in Kleist's *Marquise von O* and the Hermeneutics of Telling the Untold in Kant and Plato" *PMLA* 100:2 (1985) 203-219.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, "Dialogic Midwife" 208. Not just as an ironic ploy in withholding information from the reader which makes any interpretation too flat and specific by requiring the audience to engage with the text and struggle with its more powerful range of implications, but also sardonically, that is, constantly niggling away at the accepted truisms of the surrounding culture and the structured paradigms of the individual's sense of "belonging to and in" the world (p. 210).

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Carlebach, "Community, Authority" p. 9 from Claudia Ulbrich, *Shulamit and Margarete: Power, Gender, and Religion in a Rural Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Boston, 2004), p. 60, n.63.

Jew or Marrano. While the midwife could be bribed to be silent about this awkward domestic arrangement, she also could, for a variety of reasons, place false information in her personal notebook and from there to the communal register. A child born in these circumstances would throughout their life be subject to the threat of exposure as a *mamza* (“bastard”), with consequences to its ability to choose a marriage partner, inherit property and wealth, and take up positions of responsibility within rabbinical institutions. The midwife could therefore become the point at which modern concepts of public and private took shape, in which moreover the real relationships between members of the larger community—local, national and international—allowed for the development of non-traditional concepts of individual identity, inner and autonomous personality structures to work around and outside of the normative rules of society, and a deepening of self-consciousness to occur.

Thus when the two modern American authors Caroline de Coste and Francesca Miller discussed above state that, despite this late eighteenth-century revolutionary shift in power and paradigms, the new ideas begin to emerge in recognizable form and to influence the day to day life of the people who constitute the nation, a counter-revolutionary event happens, and the older ideas and feelings return—the reactionary elements re-assert themselves. They snatch the new-born infant from its mother and make it their own. These negative attitudes, emotions and institutionalized forces prove to be more deeply embedded in the bed of the nation’s psyche to be over-ridden, and when they take charge of the baby they change it into something ugly and hateful because they nurture it on old ideas, images and attitudes of anti-Semitism. Compare this to what Smith writes:

Both Plato and Kleist unfold their works in the ironic gap that opens up between what is said and what is not said. The untold or the unspeakable, bound up with knowledge, acts not as a hindrance to understanding but as a hermeneutical impulse to circuitous exchanges.<sup>28</sup>

What Smith is getting at here rather awkwardly is what I have many times given as the very parameters of a history of mentalities approach: wrestling with the tensions between what can be seen and what is unimaginable, what can be said and what is unspeakable, what can be thought and what is inconceivable, the aim being to understand the patterns of that tangle of tensions and discover in the language of images, words and gestures that try to articulate

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<sup>28</sup> Smith, “Dialogic Midwifery” 212.

them all that lies beyond. This mentalities approach then slides into a far more dynamic notion of psychohistory with a sense of social, historical and cultural tensions that extend beyond individual or national concerns, an approach that seems to me best undertaken on the model of rabbinical midrashing. In addition, it is in the gap that Aby Warburg sees the opening of a new kind of inner space for psychic developments, the *Denkenraum*, the thinking-space where metaphors articulate awareness and creative responses to each side of the rhetorical divide, the thing supposedly perceived and its attempted description, and since what is experienced in the radically transformed world of early modernity no appropriate words, images or gestures to use, the terms used stretch credibility, do not for a certain period fit, and hence are felt as catachresis, as less than adequate and therefore uncomfortable. Nevertheless once more primitive words, pictures and rituals come into play as supposed correlates for the unspeakable, unimaginable and inconceivable reality, their secret horde of archaic passions are released and registered to be in some kind of temporary dysfunctional status, often more persuasive and convincing than the remembered feelings, some kind of action becomes necessary to relieve the tensions, and to overcome the impasse. When this happens, as it did with the French Revolution, taken in its extended sense as to include the Napoleonic imperial interlude, the restoration of the old regime was also felt inadequate, and there were, as many witnesses aver, such as Chateaubriand, no personnel to fill the old offices, the elderly clergy and aristocracy too feeble to fill old positions, and young people were seen to have lost touch with traditional educational knowledge and norms. Taken in and of themselves, the new situation and the sense of breakdown seemed bleak indeed. Only when it is perceived from the other approach, wherein a Jewish component runs deeply within European culture, can the gaps be filled and the metaphors of personal identity worked out more adequately; for Jewish civilization has already always, at least since its opening emergence as a distinct epistemological appreciation of the world, with Abraham breaking his father's and walking away from home, and then generation after generation facing loss and reconstitution, forgetting and reconceptualization, putting aside visual memories and ideals and replacing them with logical propositions, juridical procedures, and social relationships meshed with suspicion and distrust of vested, hierarchical authorities.

**Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 28, Number 3, 2016**

**ISSN- 0111-8854**

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Yet does this mean that the Enlightenment in France can be imagined more incisively as a Jewish phenomenon? Or rather that the essential element constituting it is a willingness to embrace the Jew, tolerate the religion, and allow its adherents to flourish as equal citizens of the post-Revolutionary society? In other words, that the recrudescence of Jew-hatred in its new guise of nationalistic reaction, religious bigotry, and racial biology is at once made possible because of the Enlightenment and at the same time a denial of its very heart and soul?

All of this is figurative, a trick of rhetoric, as said from the very beginning. It is an elaborate conceit pulling together two different kinds of metaphor, one of birth, the other of embedding moral, spiritual and philosophical germs into the mind of the growing intellect. The first is physiological and therefore physical, the second is metaphysical,<sup>29</sup> social, cultural and therefore political. In the opening gambit, the country—the place, the time and the people then living and thinking and feeling there at a given moment—give birth to a set of enlightened ideas and attitudes. In the next, the embedded-psyche of the nation remains hostile and is in fact more noxious than ever because unquestioned, deeply-held ideas and beliefs, have been put on the defensive, have reacted with new rationalizations, and self-consciously seek to purify themselves by purging the unwanted, dangerous and disease-ridden other they suddenly feel about to destroy everything they hold dear and true.

To speak of a national consciousness or unconsciousness can only be taken as a figure of speech itself. Individuals have minds, collectivities, large and small—from couples, families, neighbourhoods and ghettos—have something else which they share more or less in a generalized sense. It depends on what is heard in church, at school, along the streets, and on radio or television. Much more it depends on kinds of child rearing practice, wherein the more interfering and violent discipline involved, the more likely people grow up susceptible to shared trance-like states, regressive visions, and mob reactions. Yet even earlier modes of domestic abuse—from neglect, abandonment to overly-controlling—create collective dependencies to the point of diminished independence and individuality. States then are set

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<sup>29</sup> In its simplest sense, all those theoretical and speculative treatises collected under Aristotle's name that dealt with matters that were not immediately practical, technological and scientific, were placed in later volumes *after* the physical, i.e., they were *metaphysical*.

up with more than just hierarchical structures to which most subjects find their normal affects and intimate awareness shaped by authoritative models. But these versions of collective behaviours become most acute in times of public crisis: war, famine, plague, drought, flood, sustained deprivation of all manner of necessities. All this, by the way, is commonplace psychohistorical explanation for interactive fantasy life. How else explain the historical occasions when large proportions of a population act out the dreams of a few neurotic or psychotic individuals or when crowds consistently make decisions contrary to common sense and their own best interests as expressed in earlier paradigms of normal morality?

Such may be the basis for the conceit of painful, extended birth of new ideas and the humiliating and grief-filled sense that all that has been promised and brought into view as a better world is snatched away by old devils in guises. Behind all the nice logical paradigms, there lies a messier reality, that of the bloody mess that accompanies birth,<sup>30</sup> the social confusion that impinges on the relationship between mother, infant and midwife, and the inter-generational transferal of incomplete stimuli and inhibitions that form the network of epigenetic tensions we know of as mentalities.<sup>31</sup> In other words, not just drama—whether tragedy, comedy, satire or pastoral idyll—but trauma as a long-lasting collective experience.

### **Hidden Components of the Phenomenon: Symptoms and Signs**

Imagine you're reading a book written in black ink. You should see the white ink behind the black ink.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “Peripherally, the body’s stress response consists of the secretion of norepinephrine by the sympathetic nerves and of epinephrine by the adrenal medulla, while stimulated by ACTH, the adrenal cortex secretes glucocorticoids. These hormones help the body mobilize the energy necessary to deal with stressors ranging from increased glucose release to enhanced immune function. In a well-functioning organism stress produces rapid and pronounced hormonal responses. However, persistent stress blunts this effective stress response and induced desensitization.” (Van der Kolk and Saporta, “The Biological Response to Psychic Trauma” p. 7).

<sup>31</sup> David Samuels, “Do Jews Carry Trauma in our Genes? A Conversation with Rachel Ywhuda” in *The Tablet Magazine* (11 December 2014) online at [www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and.../trauma-genes-q-a-rachel-yehuda](http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and.../trauma-genes-q-a-rachel-yehuda).

<sup>32</sup> Osman Hassan cited in Nick Ashdown, “Once a Jewish Sect, Turkey’s Secretive Dönme Conspiracy and Persecution”, *The Forward* and reprinted in *Ha’aretz* (8 August 2016) online at <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/features/1.735849>,

**Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 28, Number 3, 2016**

**ISSN- 0111-8854**

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Then something happens. Out of the blue, falling from the sky like pieces of dirt, filthy cockroaches, the words, the images, the innuendoes, the gestures, the rhythms of hatred, the tropes of age-old anti-Semitism. Unexpected. Shocking. At first therefore you cannot believe that you are seeing what you see, hearing what you hear, feel what you feel. Someone whispers in your ear. Condescending words that pull you up out of complacency, suggest you have been naughty, because those others now include all of us, me included, not as normal people under duress, not as ordinary political or military acts of self-defence or protective strategies; no, as perfidy, typical of your kind, child-killers, well-poisoners, grasping, manipulative money-grubbers. A series of photographs in the newspaper, everyday, of real people, to be sure, but portrayed as grotesques, with their long beards, sidelocks, gabardine coats, big noses, as though these represented you. Then the signals turn into warnings: best not to come here, you will not be welcomed, we don't want your speeches, your scientific achievements, your philanthropy. We will to buy your products. We will beat you up in the street, stab you in your homes, blow you apart wherever you go, complete the job, finally. The nightmare has returned.<sup>33</sup>

There's a quote in Ezekiel, "The fathers ate sour grapes, and the children's teeth were set on edge." So the Jewish culture and religion has understood that children bear the burden of their parents' legacy. Fair or unfair, it's a cultural fact. It's a cultural fact. It's a biological fact.<sup>34</sup>

Lately I have come across quite a few essays by otherwise seemingly intelligent and normal people who, make assertions that strike me as bizarre. On the one hand, there are those who say that Judaism and Jews have played such a minor role in world history that it is no wonder they are barely mentioned in classical, medieval and subsequent books and discussions, except insofar as they are noticed as an annoyance and a threat to communal order and harmony; and that it is only very recently, when Jews gained a modicum of toleration and

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<sup>33</sup> Samuels, "Do Jews Carry Trauma in our Genes": Rachel Yehuda says here: "epigenetics, offers a very tangible way to understanding how environmental events can permanently change things. And it also offers a mechanism to potentially understanding how those changes can be transmitted to the next generation".

<sup>34</sup> Samuels, "Do Jews Carry Trauma in our Genes": "So culture can also be the bearer of trauma." While Rachel Yehuda takes this as a proof text of her argument about the passing on of trauma from generation to generations, rabbinical tradition debated the issue often, and usually concluded that the burden of sin is not passed on from father to son; but that is not the same thing as saying, as one can see in the way the midrashists had to parse the passage and invent new ways to interpret it, that the tensions were passed on, if not impressed into the genes as an inherited memory, then in the hormonal triggers and synaptic patterns of action to express the genetic code when circumstances required.

then legal status within their host nations, and then used that freedom to amass sufficient wealth and intellectual capital, to create their own version of events, and to claim a role way beyond anything seen in the past. This kind of statement, at first flattering to many Jews who otherwise still feel unsafe in a world only barely shifted from its hostilities and exclusionary policies repeats in a slightly different terms the old libels of anti-Semitic hatred: Jews have too much influence, they are too clever for their (and “our” own “normal”, i.e., “natural”) good, and “good and nice people” ought to be wary of such distorted and subversive views, especially at time when younger generations have never learnt or have forgotten the basic values of Christian society.<sup>35</sup> This kind of slur takes right back to the distrust our ancestors expressed about Jewish wet-nurses, doctors and court advisers. What I have tried to show in the long discussion of the metaphorical role of midwives is that such anxieties and discomforts reveal the “secret” association between Jews and non-Jews in European and Mediterranean civilizations from the very beginning, “secret” here not as the opposite of public but as consciously accepted.<sup>36</sup>

The second set of worrisome ideas floating around in the contemporary world are those expressed by so-called media, academic and diplomatic leaders—and no less obnoxious by Jewish thinkers—when confronted by the acts of unspeakable brutality and inhumanity by Boko Haram and similar terrorist groups, try to explain, rationalize, mitigate and even justify such collective performance of abduction, rape, slavery and mass murder. The arguments tend to run along the line of trivialization (these evil deeds are merely localized manifestations of rage against colonialism, imperialism and capitalist exploitation, they are

<sup>35</sup> Samuels, “Do Jews Carry Trauma in our Genes”: Rachel Yehuda says here: ““Another type of change can be based on changes in the in-utero environment that can become incorporated in the offspring based on what is happening to a mother during her pregnancy.”

<sup>36</sup> Of course, Jewish awareness and acceptance of the deepest, unconscious influences that flow the other way from non-Jewish thoughts, feelings, aesthetic concepts and so forth is often resisted, if not denied outright, rejected as the work of *Epikoros*. The resistance to such restrictions, strongest among those Ashkenazim who have denominated themselves as guardians and conservers of the tradition, and orthodox believers; whereas, as Jose Faur, David Shasha, and others have argued that a more open, culturally tolerant and dynamically creative tradition has obtained mostly amongst the Sephardim, or at least until recently. I would argue against strict dichotomies like this, suggest that there have always been several versions of Jewish civilization, some more based on Hellenistic cosmopolitanism, others having been honed on the notion of working within more or less unseen lines of affiliation with the outside goyish cultures they encounter, and some finding in the tensions that exist between a critical Jewish attitude towards religion itself and various orthodoxies, rigid paradigms of legal instruction and superstitious claims to mystical access to the divine as the most empowering and interesting of all positions to take. This last option recognizes in modern literature and science the disproportionate role of Jewish thinkers the key role of Jews as midwives to intellectual understanding and aesthetic insight.

natural responses to incomplete assimilation into host nations, they are the weapons or tools of peoples forced to fight modern armies by asymmetrical means) and normalization (in effect, on the one hand extending the sense of the Holocaust as a term to cover a variety of experiences of injustice and suffering, and on the other of “weaponizing” the concept as a mirror-thrust at Jews in Israel, who not only never learnt the lesson of being hated for their excessive pride and zealous seeking after power but learnt from the Germans how to be Nazis themselves as soon as they amassed enough military might to displace, occupy and rule as ruthless tyrants).

Not only are the crimes against humanity seen as the natural or logical outcome of the oppression of these nasty collections of violent men, but they are essentially seen as victims of imperialist, capitalist or statist elites. Violent acts of cruelty and hatred seem so obvious and yet they are not seen other than as obverse outlines of other event, perhaps sometimes in and of themselves equally bad and stupid, but so long ago in the past that they do not register with the same intensity in the light of our own contemporary reality, the argument being, in essence, that the perpetrators of terrorism and mass killing could not act as they do if there were no reason and if there is a reason to be found it is probably evident in the victims of these terrible deeds; or, on the other hand, what at first sight seems obvious is not really so at all, but if stared at long enough and with the distortions of a fun-house set of mirrors whirling about by the winds of a pernicious ideology, and the images of history are stretched so far out of shape that they seem to be nothing less than their very opposite or at least some incompatible other version of what is actually there.

But when a leader of Turkey, for instance, confronts grieving and angry relatives of miners killed in Soma and they shake their fists at him, bang on his car, and call him a murderer, he responds—not just as one of his minders did by kicking one of the protesters who had been forced down already by military police—by calling them “Israeli sperms,” we know something is going on which long precedes the immediate crisis. The sperms or germinating seeds of injustice have created, in his mind, much less than an unwanted infant, or a foetus forced out of the womb too early and incomplete in its parts; but a different kind of monster, one that is not even human in origin. If Jews are seen as the spawn of monkeys and apes,

**Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 28, Number 3, 2016**

**ISSN- 0111-8854**

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then their genesis lies outside of nature and even outside of nature's laws. When, too, the blame for the accident down in the mines and other difficulties in the economy of Turkey is blamed on Zionist and Jewish instigators, if not the ancient but now almost extinct sect of the Dönme, castigated in public as *agents provocateurs* and Israeli agents, the very sanity of the leaders and others in such a nation comes under suspicion. The leader calls his opponents "Israeli scum (or sperm)."

Then we have to see if there is a connection between rebel nationalist armies, terrorist bands causing havoc and mayhem and suicide bombers, on the one hand, and the rogue leaders or leaders of rogue states superficially and egregiously acting as "legitimate" governments—when what motivates them is something they articulate in the language of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. While the active operatives may have a variety of mental illnesses that make them susceptible to the pressures of powerful men, groups and institutions, so that seek to relieve horrible pains within, escape from haunting memories of abuse, and act out bizarre mythical roles assigned to them by the society they belong to, the larger configuration of the world-wide phenomena associated with this attempt to annihilate the Jewish homeland and the Jewish people wherever they happen to live cannot be diagnosed or treated in terms of their single experiences. But it is not just a matter of political intrigue, espionage and conspiracy theories run wild; there is something that runs deeper, that has its roots way back in an archaic mentality that gushes up in times of crisis and catastrophe, and that spills out triggering images, words and gestures and releases otherwise unconscious psychotic pains manifesting themselves in verbal abuse, social discrimination and violent terrorist acts. Rather than having to await the explosive emergence of this "most ancient of evils", we can learn to read its presence in the discourses and performances that precede its occurrence in mass murder. This method of careful parsing through the use of psychohistorical fantasy analysis and rabbinical midrash has been signalled at the head of this section of the essay in the citation from Osman Hasman: "Imagine you're reading a book written in black ink. You should see the white ink behind the black ink."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cited in Nick Ashdown, "Once a Jewish Sect, Turkey's Secretive Dönme Inspire Conspiracy and Persecution", *The Forward* and reprinted in *Ha'aretz* (8 August 2016) online at <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/features/1.735849>. The speaker here, Cem, was one of two informants who spoke on condition of anonymity: "Cem is from the more secularist and Judaic Kapancı sect, and Osman is from the more spiritual

There is, to be sure, an optical illusion here, the sort used in elementary psychology classes to show students that certain black and white drawings can be recognized at the same time as a picture of an old woman and a young maiden, or a sheep and a duck. However, that is not all there is to the process. The Sabbatean Dönme have learned, as did the Secret Jews of Spain and Portugal hiding from the long clutches of the Inquisition, to mask their appearances and seen their tell-tale gestures and manners of speaking, while communicating with one another in an intelligible, albeit, coded system of language. This is a way of interpretation that was honed over centuries of Talmudic exegesis and kabbalistic creativity, and then applied under different situations and circumstances, so that one could do more than seemingly discover long lost meanings, thus making ancient texts relevant to modern problems; one could also *midrash* history itself, that is, transform the realities in which one was fated to live to make them bearable and sometimes subject to modification for the better.

### **More than the Baby goes out with the Bathwater**

Yet the fact remains that over the past 70 years the Arab world got rid of its Jews, some 900,000 people, while holding on to its hatred of them. Over time the result proved fatal; a combination of lost human capital, ruinously expensive wars, misdirected ideological obsessions, and an intellectual life perverted by conspiracy theory and the perpetual search for scapegoats. The Arab world's problems are a problem of the Arab mind and the name for that problem is anti-Semitism.<sup>38</sup>

Not just the Arab world, of course. Anti-Semitism lingers in parts of Eastern and Southeastern European virtually *Jüdenrein* since the end of World War Two and exists as well in Japan where there have never been more than a handful of Jewish visitors, traders and diplomatic officials. Anti-Semitism is not just absurd but counter-productive, debilitating and has a long afterlife.

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Karakaş sect. Both are in their forties, and neither speak for the Dönme in any official capacity.” I am preparing a more extensive study of the Dönme in relation to their role, along with the Crypto-Jews and Marranos from Portugal, who formed the backbone of the Salonikan elite for most of the five hundred years during which that city was the “Jerusalem of the Balkans.”

<sup>38</sup> Brett Stephens, “The Meaning of an Olympic Snub” (August 2016) posted by Mladen Andrijasevic on <http://mladisdead.blogspot.co.nz/2016.08/bret-stephens-meaning-of-olympic-snob>.

**Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 28, Number 3, 2016**

**ISSN- 0111-8854**

**@2016 Mentalities/Mentalités**

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Something deeply twisted occurs in the minds of all peoples over a long period of time, to individuals, to small groups, to whole nations. The deformation occurs in the foetal stage, in the process of birthing, and in the earliest months and years when the child is integrated into society, beginning with the home environment. How the pregnant mother is treated—what she eats, what she does, and how she feels about herself in response to how others relate to her—shapes the conditions in which the incipient human child grows up,. Putting aside all the genetic flaws (deficits), illnesses and possible accidents that occur, the mothering body provides the hormonal signals that stimulate and inhibit the ontological emergence of the foetal body and mind. The fears, anxieties, wants and joys are articulated in her person and thus on to the growing being in her womb. The child within may also be responding to the movements, sounds and social atmosphere outside in the domestic and communal environment the mother passes through.<sup>39</sup>

These phenomena form part of the historical matrix of the foetus. Similarly the process of birthing sends all sorts of signals to the emergent infant, with the stresses and strains of the mother's labour, the hormones released and the other electro-chemical changes that occur at this time. The ambient environment—the people present, the interactions between them, the noises, smells, physical and emotional conditions, the historical matrix—supplements in a significant way the natural unfolding of the drama. As José Saporta puts it, “trauma alters the structure and function of the brain and nervous system” so that “the mind cannot represent experience or organize it on a symbolic level,” or at least in a coherent and memorable form. Therefore it is up to the midwife, in the widest acceptance of the term as a social and intergenerational agent of cultural history, to guide the emergent human being (to be “the nurse, guide and guardian”) into its earliest experiences, to keep the neonate warm during periods of cold attachments to the mother and other care givers, to act as supporters and advocate against hostile agents, real or imaginary that impinge on the maternal attitude, and to insure its continuing release of triggering hormones—these all provide the emotional and physical environment.<sup>40</sup> In particular, the infant-mother gaze operates to stimulate and inhibit the neuronal activity of the young brain, with the deep and unconscious unresolved

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<sup>39</sup> Van der Kolk and Saporta, “The Biological Response to Psychic Trauma” p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Van der Kolk and Saporta, “The Biological Response to Psychic Trauma” p.

tensions of her own intra-uterine and birthing experiences. In short, it is not so much some later intellectual or political crisis that brings out anti-Semitic attitudes: but rather long-term propensities towards victimizing others—socially and historically coded into the language, images and gestures of Judeophobia—that provide whole age-cohorts to share in an acceptable and temporary comforting release from the tensions and anxieties of dysfunctional national development. The articulation appears in group fantasies (shared waking dreams) and collective trance (or trance-like) events.

### **Breaking the Surface and Searching for the Hidden Text**

...intrafamilial abuse must certainly be included among the most severe traumas encountered by human beings...<sup>41</sup>

This portion of the essay has been written under the shadow of the shootings at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. Rather than random acts of violence, this and others over the past several months in particular, since the attack on the Jewish school in Toulouse through a number of other terrorist events in the France, Morocco, Canada and elsewhere, have confirmed (as though we needed confirmation) that these are not random acts committed by single madmen or small clusters of deranged youths. Rather they form part of a world-wide scourge of anti-Semitism. While not necessarily orchestrated by a central command, such as Al-Qaida, the terrorist acts are connected through the constant circulation of anti-Israeli, anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish ideology, myth and discourse. On occasion, to be sure, a demented soul, lashing about in search for a shape to his or her rage, may be instigated by this kind of media-born language; such a person may have only the most tangential attraction to Jew-hating propaganda up to this point of personal collapse of personality—perhaps triggered by a private crisis, such as the death of a parent, the rejection by a spouse, or the loss of a job. More usually, such persons have long been attracted by anti-Semitism and anti-Zionist ravings because they are so common in the press, on television, in places of worship and in political speeches. They provide long-term shaping of inner feelings of helplessness and rage against society. Rarest of all perpetrators are professional Jew-haters, rare only in the sense that they are agents of the violence, not the framers of the social, political and religious

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<sup>41</sup> José Saporta, “Synthesising Psychoanalytic and Biological Approaches to Trauma: Some Theoretical Proposals” *Neuro-Psychonalysis* 5:1 (2003) 97.

movements behind them. Their evil is banal only in the sense that they are pathetic perpetrators of crimes they often cannot conceive of and whose aetiology may drive from events many generations before they themselves were born, and at best may be manifest in a feeling of numbing unease, incipient directionless rage and an uncontrollable need to self-harm through projection on to others.

What is this madness? Today—not just in our time, but this day, this hour, this minute—the insane murders make videos of themselves and proclaim their intentions, their causes, their reasons. Al-Qaida mass murderers do this in a staged manner, with associates, flags, and often victims tied up before them ready to be beheaded. The killer in Toulouse last year and the Belgian museum shooter did this with a camera strapped to himself and recorded his actions minute by minute as he killed his victims. The eccentric and highly personal motives of the random killer are one thing; those who tap into the deep roots of anti-Semitism, or the delusionary language and imagery of anti-Zionism, are another. The day of the killing is one thing; the moment of madness an explosion of self into the world through destruction of others. The years, generations, centuries of visceral and aesthetic hatred of Jews is another. And it is a hatred born of what at first sight seems “any overwhelming, threatening and uncontrollable experience”<sup>42</sup> that is easily given narrative rationalization and ideological justification by available anti-Semitic tropes. Words, gestures, images and other triggers in the surrounding culture attach themselves to the private, personal pain and humiliation and release hormonal stimuli and inhibitory signals so as to merge with the so-called *Pathosformeln* that had formed after the original collective debilitating traumas that had to be worked out in communal rituals and related after public dreaming. Those originating events may have included dispossession and dispersal of a group of people following some plague or natural disaster or historical action, such as warfare, invasion and enslavement. Perhaps too it might be some disruption that goes back much farther in time to the very beginnings of social life and include sexual violence or killing of infants, incestuous rampages by rival males on captured female hordes and separation of siblings in slave raids. A sense of constant loss, an incomplete grieving for dead loved ones, breakdown I trust for authority figures, and total disorientation and confusion of memorial markers leads towards a

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<sup>42</sup> Van der Kock and Saportas, “The Biological Response to Public Trauma” p. 3.



reconstitution of the social group based on the need for a distinction between insiders and to relieve stress momentarily of its filth and disease, and festivals of mockery, scorn and insult against those who seem too good, too pure, too clean, too clever and too beautiful. Without, of course, knowing it, the social unit performs rites of hormonal release, stimulating some and inhibiting the flow of others.<sup>43</sup> In brief periods of time, the iteration of these rituals—with the constant recharging of the pathos-laden formulae of word, image and gesture—create modes of gene expression distinct to each group and constant over several generations, overlapping situations with emotional feelings seemingly unrelated to particular persons, places, things and ideas, except insofar as this very lack of coherence triggers an additional need to rid the body politic of the foreign element. Just as Freud showed how the symptoms of neurosis can be understood as a coded language of primitive pains and humiliations of childhood, the psychohistorian argues that the persistence of anti-Semitic discourses and models of behaviour continues from generation to generation without the need for any actual Jews to be present or any (perceived) provocative action to be reacted against.<sup>44</sup>

It might be thought that the experience of repeated trauma—persecution, exile, massacre—would stigmatize the Jew more than the perpetrators of these crimes against the Jewish people and hardly seem a likely place to discover the causes of anti-Semitism. Each outbreak of Jew-hatred—whether in the spontaneous riots that sometimes followed a mysterious death of a missing child, an incidence of poisoning from a local well credited to Jewish malice, a state-sponsored pogrom in Czarist Russia, an orchestrated multi-city series of attacks on Jewish communal and commercial buildings as in *Kristallnacht*, or a sustained policy of providing the Final Solution to the Jewish Question—usually is seen as precisely that, a single incident<sup>6</sup> or a particular policy, with any relationship to the others in different places and at different times merely *happenstantial*, their repeated use of similar metaphors, rhythmic tropes and rationalized propaganda arguments more in the eyes of the beholder than in the minds of the criminals, and the leading “spectatorship” in this process of assimilation

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<sup>43</sup> Van der Kock and Saportas, “The Biological Response to Public Trauma” p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> One recalls the anecdote that went around Germany in the mid-1930s when boycotts of Jewish shops were mandated by the Nazi party: one small town sent a telegram to Berlin urgently demanding a shipment of Jews so they would have someone to act against.

to a single extended trans-historical similarity is the Jewish collective consciousness. Another approach is suggested by Saira Mohamed:

Indeed, if we consider trauma in the perpetration [*sic*] of a crime at all, it usually to inquire whether a terrible experience earlier in life drove a person toward wrongdoing. We are loath to acknowledge that the commission of the crime itself may cause some perpetrators to experience their own psychological injury and scarring.<sup>45</sup>

The suggestion is therefore made that it is time examine two related phenomena, on the one hand “perpetrator trauma” as woven into “cultural evolution” and thus moving the concept of trauma from “a psychological category to a moral one”, on the other, “a counter[-]narrative of trauma—one that recognizes trauma as a neutral, human trait, divorced from morality, and not incompatible with choice and agency”.<sup>46</sup>

Instead of following Mohamed’s argument too closely, I will pick up a few of her ideas and shift them into a different matrix of premises about human conduct, personality development, and moral responsibility. First of all, I will argue that perpetrators share a long history of cultural trauma which is expressed through a sequence of images, words, rhythmic movements and isolated social institutions (*Pathosformeln*) over time (its *Nachleben*) in more or less recognizable forms, these repeating and varying forms constituting triggers that are set off into dreams, social actions and full-blown sustained pogroms when particular and personal crises collide. Second, whereas a few cultures have been able to mitigate the actual violence and sense of falling-apart as a group and as a self through shared rituals of literacy, logical analysis and juridical procedures—thus enduring centuries and generations of repeated suffering relatively intact—other peoples have not adequate coping mechanisms and slip into unconstrained frustration and rage, disrupt and destroy those parts of the society which seem to threaten and undermine emotional stability and social order, their triggers arising suddenly and violently and barely if at all recognizable until articulated into repeated slogans and sustained actions.

I have suggested that we analyse this insanity rationally in a way similar to that used by writers when they quickly sketch out the plot of a novel, set out the character of the persons

<sup>45</sup> Saira Mohamed, “Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity” *Columbia Law Review* 115:5 (2015) 1157-1216; here p. 1157.

<sup>46</sup> Mohamed, “Of Monsters and Men” p. 1157.

they will display in scenes of argument and violence, and interpret the meanings and implications of the allegorical configuration of their art. The process is long and painful, both for the writer and the interpreting midrashist, trying to both trace back through the tangled web of the performance to the core features of the motivating crisis, and then also to break apart that crisis itself, to discover why something—usually some traumatic event, something repressed, displaced by more acceptable scenarios—precipitates the explosion.

### **Writing, Rewriting and Unwriting the Crisis**

They are concrete fragments of experience that they were unable to represent or organize on a symbolic level.<sup>47</sup>

Though often simplicity and lucidity are placed at the head of features of style marking good writing, whether fiction or philosophical or historical, these are not always desirable. Reading is not always a passive experience. At certain times and for certain topics, a reader must not be flattered, smoothed or cajoled into understanding. The world is not always as it seems, persons do not represent themselves accurately or truthfully, and the realities of human experience—including history—are too complex to be rendered in a straightforward manner.<sup>48</sup> The very processes of reading, from recognition or identification of words, as well as of the persons, places, events and ideas have to be challenged. The reader needs to be shocked, insulted, thrown off balance, that is, asked to rethink fundamentals, examine closely passions that are triggered off, and images smashed apart and then carefully reassembled.

The mind, as it is created by the brain in the womb, at the mother's breast and in the cradle, does not emerge finally in an innocent form, transparent to experiences, and co-extensive with the words, images, gestures and contextual frames of reference that are assumed to be part of the natural and the cultural worlds. As we have tried to say in the first two parts of this essay, by the time self-consciousness comes into being, the formations of personality and collective identity have limited the size, volume, shape and atmosphere of the mind—and in

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<sup>47</sup> Saporta, "Synthesising Psychoanalytic and Biological Approaches to Trauma" p. 98.

<sup>48</sup> "There are no cultural categories or narratives that can organize trauma and give the experience meaning (Laub & Auerhahn, 1993) and trauma shatters basic assumption about the world and ourselves (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), cited by Saporta, "Synthesising Psychoanalytic and Biological Approaches to Trauma" p. 99.

all its levels of pre-consciousness, cognitive awareness, and dreamlike or trance formations. These conditionings arise from natural circumstances, historical contingencies, social pressures, individual ontology, and accidental trauma and disease. Nevertheless, nothing is absolutely determined; things are not inscribed into the genetic code, but are expressed in response to emotional and material events. The mind, too, as a product of the brain's neuronal growth has within itself the capacity to resist, reject, and correct itself in vital components of its cognitive and affective functions. This capacity exists on both a conscious and unconscious level, and thus more or less responds to the development of will, intellect and moral forces.

### **The Analogy of Literary Style**

Psychic trauma interferes with the ability to represent personal experiences or to relate these experiences to the self. I submit that this can lead to a relative deficit in auto-noetic awareness in the area of experience affected by trauma, which leads to impaired self-regulation and often to discontinuities in self-experience.<sup>49</sup>

I was recently reading through an 1890 study of Balzac which had many of the chapters as pages from Honoré's sister Lorre and from a long essay by Théophile Gautier. In it there is a description of how Balzac would drive his publishers crazy by his endless revisions: actually, he was trying to do what is so much easier today with word processors—he would write out a dozen or so pages by hand, send them to be set up in type, receive back the proofs and start to make big changes and additions, with streams of handwritten material shooting out all over the page and on to extra pages he would glue to the long sheets of printed text; then back to the printers, and when the new version arrived, he would do the whole thing again, maybe a dozen times or more.

That is how I learned to write, too. In the “good old days” before computers, the university had a group of secretaries in a so-called “work centre”. I would bring in my badly typed text; they would retype it neatly, and I would start to cross-out, add, and soon there would be as much or more scribbled all around the margins, on the back of the sheets, and stapled new

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<sup>49</sup> Saporta, “Synthesising Psychoanalytic and Biological Approaches to Trauma” p. 105.

sheets of handwritten changes. Then back to the work centre. Because there was usually at least a week before the clean text arrived, I was thinking of other things, writing something else, and so clearing my mind of the original muddle; and when I received the neat pages, I could see and think more clearly, and so started to cross out, add, and shift around paragraphs. Because actually there were very few of us using the service—and mostly the others were social scientists getting tape-recorded interviews transcribed—the secretaries enjoyed working for me, and sometimes an essay or chapter would go round and round 50 or 60 times before it seemed ready to be sent off to an editor for publication. Nowadays, though almost all of this rewriting is done by myself on the computer—a few of the last stages when editors send back proofs before publication, but then I have to keep revisions to a minimum so as not to upset page layouts and pagination—what I miss are (a) the days and weeks of cooling down, (b) the pleasant shock of seeing my work in someone else’s typewritten form, and (c) the not ignorant questions and comments by the secretaries about what I was trying to say.

But as I have argued elsewhere, this method of writing is also the method by which reading occurs, and more than of published texts: it is also the way to understand rhetorical moments in history, that is, those processed by the techniques of persuasion—for good and evil purposes; to persuade through enhancing or clarifying an argument or to move to action or to dissuade from taking steps that have been begun out of emotional responses, and these processes of convincing and rationalizing passionate states of mind may have negative rather positive motives—to deceive, to substitute false or only partly true conceptions of truth for the whole truth and nothing but the truth. And it is a way to understand how cultures confronted with the confusions and lapses occasioned by traumatic events in their history—and not always aware of what they are dealing with, except insofar as they see and feel things missing, out of place and threateningly uncanny—attempt to overcome the pains and humiliations these deficits cause; and the way, too, that in the imaginary construct of the ideal midwife, they try to argue their way through the crisis. But as for the Jewish tradition, the rabbinically-sanctioned roles of the midwife as bearer and monitor of religious and judicial values, something similar though not exactly the same occurs, and therefore with significantly distinct results.

**Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 28, Number 3, 2016**

**ISSN- 0111-8854**

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### From text to Non-text and Anti-Text

Gypsy Mike lost no time in sticking four fingers in his mouth, two from each hand, and rolling his eyes in a frenzied glare. The lifeless atmosphere of the courtroom was pierced by a true wild-man bandit-whistle fit to deafen a horse, make it rear up on its haunches, and drain the colour out from any human face. The desperate agony of a man being murdered, the savage thrill of the killer, a terrible pang of foreboding, a call for help, the darkness of foul weather in an autumn night, a sense of solitude—all of these things there, in that shrieking wailing sound, which belonged to neither man nor beast.<sup>50</sup>

At the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth, with logical positivism undermined by the breakthrough of new scientific and mathematical speculations and discoveries, the novelists and psychologists began to imagine a new dimension to the mind. Where before they had seen an analogy between criminally insane people, unruly children on the cusp of rationality and self-control, primitive natives in faraway places who lived in bubbles of archaic sensibility, uneducated peasants tucked away in the nooks and crannies of Europe—now they start to see in their own selves dark areas, escaped remnants of savage passion, autonomous motivations of motiveless evil and monstrous dreams that cloud out everyday reality.<sup>51</sup>

The scene astonishes. After warning the audience that he “may not be as agile as what [he] was then. [Jeffrey] Benzien held a blue pillowcase over the victim’s head, looking up at the Commissioners to answer their questions—and, it seemed to win their approval. One of the Commissioners complained that he did not have a proper view, another responded, “We will just have to stand and have a look.”<sup>52</sup>

Perpetrators of unspeakable crimes, unimaginable horrors and inconceivable evil, we are told, are not monsters at all, but ordinary men and women, like ourselves, pushed to the extreme by circumstances, and so while culpable in a strict sense, to be pitied as victims too, as much as those they tortured, murdered and tried to wipe from the face of the earth.<sup>53</sup> This is the new text that seeks to over-ride the great narratives and unquestioned arguments in the “conversation” between them and us, who are now elided. Therefore, just as one has to make several efforts to smooth out the infelicities in grammar, syntax and style in the discourse that

<sup>50</sup> Leonid Andreyev, *Seven Hanged* (1908), trans. Anthony Briggs (London: Penguin/Random House, 2016) p. 34. Gypsy Mike is one of seven condemned prisoners on trial for murder in Czarist Russia, and he is one of two non-political accused.

<sup>51</sup> Mohamed, “Of Monsters and Men” p. 1166.

<sup>52</sup> Mohamed, “Monsters and Men” p. 1183. The scene is described from witness accounts and transcripts of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1997. Jeffrey Benzien was officers in the Apartheid regime accused of multiple tortures and murders.

<sup>53</sup> Mohamed, “Of Monsters and Men” p. 1167.

rages through your mind in moments of crisis, panic and trauma, so that what you write is finally readable—with as much simplicity, lucidity and grace as possible commensurate with the nature of your topic; so too, when reading both texts and events (that is analysing and interpreting, and eventually applying your understanding to the situation at hand) you need to watch out for bad motives, hidden agendas and the sloppy thinking that lead to disaster. But you find, despite yourself and whatever your experienced habits try to tell you, the new response comes out in a way that at once seems unfamiliar—you write in halting and radical juxtapositions of style, tone and perspective, through hints and riddling allusions—and yet proper for the sea-change that has occurred, for that is the way we have always responded to adversity.<sup>54</sup>

A little old Jew is walking through Berlin in the late 1930s. It is dark and the streets are almost empty. Down one narrow passage way the old man is confronted by a huge burly SS officer who looms over him. The Nazi glowers at the person standing in front of him. “Schweinhunt!” he grumbles threateningly. The old Jew takes looks up, doffs his hat, clicks his heels and gives a little bow: “Mendel Sternberg. A pleasure to meet to meet you.”<sup>55</sup>

In some cases, of course, the explicit nature of the bigotry, ignorance and animosity appears right on the surface of the text. Everything seems dramatic, exaggerated, but right at the knife’s edge of plausibility. Because you have been so long lulled by the notion that everything is right, that tolerance and liberalism prevail, after so many centuries of persecution and rage that had culminated in the Shoah, and you had believed that at last the boil had been lanced, and it would never happen again.<sup>56</sup> Yet here it is again, and out of the depth of your being there come the hormonal flows, the little triggers that set off dormant memories, and you find yourself responding as your parents might have and your grandparents certainly did. At the same time, you are still you, as you have always been, and your mind, also set on edge, ponders the never-before-experienced tensions in your soul.

In collapsing linear timer, and depicting the past resurfacing as a vivid present, [Joshua] Oppenheimer refers to a “central trope” of the study of trauma—the “inability to distinguish present time from the time of the traumatic wound” and the consequent reappearance though mimesis of the traumatic event.<sup>57</sup>

Here the traumatic event is the discovery, in oneself, of the return of the tensions your whole cultural history has been preparing you for, not so much the recognition in the others of

<sup>54</sup> Mohamed, “Of Monsters and Men” p. 1195.

<sup>55</sup> My version of a very old joke I heard in my childhood during the 1940s in Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>56</sup> Mohamed, “Of Monsters and Men” p. 1165.

<sup>57</sup> Mohamed, “Of Monsters and Men” p. 1195.

monsters unlike yourself, but of those who have always seemed friends, colleagues and fellow citizens,<sup>58</sup> playing roles in a drama that seemed to be plain truth, speaking from a script that was written generations ago, choreographed by dancing masters on the other side of the moon.

it is it simply a matter of finding out why the person or group expresses such negative feelings and to what extent they are likely to take action on such noxious thoughts and feelings? That may be followed by steps taken to rectify dysfunctional situations, ameliorate deep senses of rage and fear, and thus avoid the worst consequences of the anti-social currents. More usually, however, the poisonous passions only partly manifest in recognizable forms, with their true nature displaced to less dangerous words, images and actions, or rationalized into a surface texture of something more or less benign or even purportedly liberal, tolerant and ingratiating; so that when verbal or physical violence does erupt, it may be difficult for the outsider to determine who is victim and who victimizer—or even with the aggressive person or persons perceived to be the unprovoked object of the hatred, In fact, these days especially, with the capture of supposedly moral and ethical discourses by bigots and fanatics, whole areas of the world are misperceived, as though murderous terrorists were innocent recipients of abuse and oppression. The mass media are particularly vulnerable to these wrong-headed interpretations, if not outrightly collusive in their perpetration.

### **The Catachresis of Absurdity**

**Catachresis** (from **Greek** κατάχρησις, "abuse"), originally meaning a semantic misuse or error—e.g., using "militate" for "mitigate", "chronic" for "severe", "anachronism" for "anomaly", "alibi" for "excuse", etc.—is also the name given to many different types of figure of speech in which a word or phrase is being applied in a way that significantly departs from conventional (or traditional) usage.<sup>59</sup>

Just as we have tried to show that midrash is more than an exegetical method and genre, and therefore a category of knowledge, something that can be transferred from the historical point of origin in ancient Hebrew readings of sacred text to later situations in which Jews found themselves exiled from their homeland, unable to perform the rituals of the Temple

<sup>58</sup> Mohamed, "Of Monsters and Men" p. 1210.

<sup>59</sup> Cited by Wikipedia in "Catachresis". Anshuman Sharma. *The Impact - The Art of Communicating Eloquently*. p. 78.



cult, and deprived of full rights as citizens or subjects of whatever country they happened to find themselves dispersed during the Galut, so too, in a not unrelated way, the rhetorical trope of catachresis may be extended from a trick that radically juxtaposes, overlaps or interferes with the two places in a metaphorical transfer or translation of meaning, to a way of disturbing the place of perception and the supposed new context of receptive understanding. This disturbance in the first instance fissures the seemingly secure and unquestioned status of the original experience and even its recollection later as a memory, personal or collective; its constituent elements fall apart, scatter and open up to what seem like absences, *aporia* and painful lapses, though in due course conventionalized memory and ritual surrogate gestures and images smooth over the disturbed area, as when the rabbinical *pshat* adjusts the sense of confusion aroused by the unmediated *kiryat* or straightforward reading of the text: the *pshat* explains away discrepancies, contradictions and missing particles of narrative or argument. So that the student is taught to speak what he does not see. The interpreted “received” text then replaces the defective or disruptive original, as the second version of the Law written down by Moses is deemed to be a perfect equivalent to the first inscribed by God’s own hand and then broken apart in a fit of rage by the prophet when he was the people worshipping the Golden Calf. Later *kohanim* collected the broken pieces of the original tablets and kept them in the Holy of Holies, while everyone studied and tried to make sense out of the second written and exegetically expanded version. Over time, the Oral Torah was elaborated many times over, so that the first brief version of the Ten Commandments (“words”) expanded exponentially into the vast sea of Talmud. Even in terms of the mystical and secret meanings that constitute Kabbalah, the ruminations and speculations based on the Written Torah became virtually impossible to contain, the very letters out of which so much interpretation of every “jot and tittle” having changed from ancient Hebrew *alephbet* to the squared letters of an Aramaic script.

**Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 28, Number 3, 2016**

**ISSN- 0111-8854**

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