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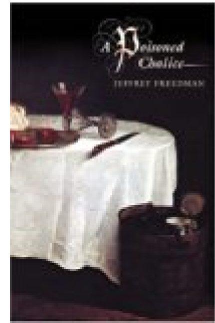

In the Dregs of the Chalice: Enlightenment and Evil in Eighteenth-Century Switzerland

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Microhistory continues to be a popular historical genre in the new century. After drawing our attention to Montaillou, Menocchio, and Martin Guerre a generation ago, historians in recent years have devoted studies to a lesbian nun, a transgendered chevalier, midwives, and murderous marriages on both sides of the Atlantic.[1] Microhistorians commonly depend on legal archives; in all the cases cited above, scholars relied on records generated by religious inquisitors, secular magistrates, and police investigators to endow their studies with rich details and insights that have attracted readers beyond the academy. So, too, Jeffrey Freedman, a professor of European history at Yeshiva University, begins *A Poisoned Chalice* with his findings in the legal archives of the Swiss Canton of Zurich, where he went to learn more about the perplexing claim that someone had poisoned the communion wine in Zurich's main cathedral in 1776. Freedman's investigations led him beyond the case's legal issues to explore class tensions and local and international politics in late eighteenth-century Switzerland, as well as the obscure realm of theodicy in the enlightened thought of the day. The result is a highly learned, highly readable account of strange events and unresolved philosophical debates that will resonate with readers who are conscious of the fractured legacy of modernity bequeathed to us by the eighteenth century.

On the morning of Thursday, September 12, 1776, as a Zuricher sexton prepared the wine for communion, he noticed that it was covered with a "white foam that looked like milk." Others claimed that the wine was "murky," "bluish," and "sweet and insipid." A few of the congregants in attendance took a sip of the foul beverage, but spat it out before swallowing, while others passed on the communion cup. Soon some of the clergymen discretely advised the sexton to replace the wine he had poured with some from a different, uncontaminated keg. No one collapsed in the cathedral that morning, but word soon spread throughout the town of ten thousand inhabitants that someone had poisoned the ritual cup. The rumors intensified when several local medical doctors, asked by the cathedral canon to perform a chemical analysis on the impure wine, asserted that it contained a number of foreign elements, including "true arsenic." These fears grew even more pronounced a few days later when it was learned that a Captain Burkhard had died, ostensibly due to the poisoned drink. No autopsy was performed on the body, however, and it seems more likely that he died of a communicable disease that also struck his daughter at that time. Within a month, thanks to the large number of German-language newspapers in circulation, word had spread throughout Central Europe of the treacherous deed committed by an unknown miscreant against the religiously-minded burghers of Zurich.

The widespread negative publicity occasioned by the so-called poisoning prompted the town authorities to action. The initial focus of the investigation was Herman Wirz, a forty-seven-year-old gravedigger who doubled as a bell-ringer and watchman in the cathedral, and who had been on duty the night before the wine was contam-

inated. In addition to the usual mistrust that surrounded gravediggers in early modern Europe, Wirz had been observed leaving the watchtower to enter the church's main sanctuary early on the morning of the crime. Furthermore, he had ample reason to embarrass his supervisors within the cathedral hierarchy due to several contentious, highly public disputes with them. Some of his enemies within the cathedral community testified that he was an impious, oath-swearing, anti-clerical subject. Despite repeated efforts by the judges to wring a confession from the unfortunate gravedigger, however, he refused to admit any wrongdoing. Without a confession, or any eyewitness testimony that Wirz had dropped poisonous substances into the wine barrels before communion that morning, the magistrates were reluctant to convict him.

A month after the morning when the communion wine was spoiled, an anonymous individual posted four handwritten libels around town claiming that the wine had been poisoned not by the hapless gravedigger, but by high city officials. These elites, the libelist claimed, had hoped to kill their opponents in order to eliminate opposition to the city's pro-French alliances. The affair, initially thought to be the act of a crazed loner, was now alleged to be an organized conspiracy that threatened the political freedoms of republican Zurich. Two more months of investigation failed to yield either the identity of the libelist or any solid evidence against Wirz; by the end of 1776, the gravedigger was set free, the affair had reached a judicial impasse, and the relations between republicans and monarchists in Zurich were more contentious than ever. The next year, when the town's highest political body, the Secret Council, announced the finalization of a treaty with the French monarchy, guild opposition and spontaneous street protests came close to overthrowing the Old Regime in Zurich. The political tensions of the moment led one pro-French observer to suggest that both the poisoning and the libel of the previous year had been the work of the guilds and other anti-French factions within the city.

According to Freedman, the case was never resolved in a court of law, but it did come back to haunt the Zurichers one more time, in 1780. A decade before, a young pastor named Waser in a parish just outside the Zurich town walls had been dismissed from his post for blowing the cover of local officials who had been pocketing funds intended for poor relief. By the late 1770s, even more convinced of the need to redress official wrongs, he had turned to demographic studies of Zurich and the surrounding areas. His work indicated that the population of many rural areas in the canton was in decline, which Waser explained by blaming the lucrative trade in Swiss mercenaries that enriched the pockets of the town's oligarchs. Several provocative pamphlets, including one entitled *Swiss Blood, French Money*, led to his arrest on charges of treason against the city-state. To increase his culpability in the public eye, the investigating magistrates began to spread the rumor that Waser had been responsible for the poisoned communion wine four years earlier. During the investigation, however, the city was unable to produce any credible evidence linking the former pastor to the poisoned wine, and these charges were dropped. The court, however, declared him guilty of high treason, and ordered his public beheading. The execution became a cause c=l=bre throughout Germany; at least one enlightened thinker, sensing a pattern of suppression and perfidy in the actions of the narrow, francophile oligarchy that ruled Zurich, wondered aloud if the tale of the poisoning in 1776 had not been a fabrication to divert the attention of the people away from the details of the French alliance concluded in 1777. Unproven allegations had come full circle from the earlier claim that the town's anti-French faction had staged the poisoning.

Freedman's microhistory uses this discrete incident, the tainting of the communion wine, and the failed judicial investigations it provoked, to shed light on much broader topics, namely the intersection of class tensions and geopolitical strategy in Central Europe late in the eighteenth century. The true protagonists of Freedman's tale, however, are not the town fathers, the rebellious guildsmen, or the various suspects, but two German intellectuals of the period who engaged in a passionate debate about the moral and philosophical meanings of these events. One of them, Johann Caspar Lavater, was a renowned Zurich pastor by the late 1770s. In his youth he had been influenced by the early German *aufkl=rung*, or Enlightenment, which had a greater theological orientation than its French counterpart. By the time of the poisoned chalice, however, he had rejected the rational theology of his youthful studies, which posited a distant deity uninvolved in human affairs. For Lavater, God was "a living, vibrant force whose presence in the world human beings could experience directly," often in the form of sensory experiences and miracles (p. 96). In two sermons that he later published, he interpreted the events in the cathedral that September morning in 1776 in light of these beliefs. He railed against the evil of the unknown monster who had sneaked into the cathedral to pervert the ritual that temporarily purified sinful Christians; he wondered how God could fail to strike down the

assailant; and he concluded that evil was permitted to exist because of the Zurichers' sinfulness and moral laxity. In the end, Lavater preached, all humans were capable of the poisoning; only Christian faith, not human reason, could prohibit the appearance of such evil.

Friedrich Nicolai, a Berlin publisher, bookseller, and editor, took up Lavater's challenge to the primacy of reason in human affairs. Although not a major intellectual figure of the German *aufkl=rung*, he was prominent because he edited the leading review journal in Germany in the late 1770s, the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*. In its pages in 1778, he published a rebuttal to Lavater's sermons in which he cast doubt on the existence of the "crime." Undertaking a thoroughgoing, critical review of all the known testimony and evidence gathered in the case, Nicolai argued that the material placed in the wine was probably not poisonous, that the intentions of the "poisoner," if he or she existed, were benign, and that the chemical investigations of the town doctors were unreliable. In short, Nicolai's rational review of the empirical evidence led him to dismiss the criminal thesis; general hysteria and the panic of the town elders were more plausible explanations for the criminal interpretation given to the events in the cathedral that morning. Human "science," at least that performed by the town doctors on the contaminated wine, was no more reliable than dogmatic religion, and Lavater's determination to see the presence of God in the events at the Zurich cathedral had blinded him to the truth of the affair. As in so many other examples familiar from the writings of the eighteenth-century *philosophes*, the unstinting application of human reason had vanquished religious zealotry.

Or so goes the familiar narrative of the triumph of enlightenment in eighteenth-century Europe. Freedman himself admits that he is far more sympathetic to Nicolai's analysis than to Lavater's histrionics (p. 133). To Freedman's credit, however, he does not end his account of their debate with Nicolai's printed dismissal of the Zurich pastor's sermons. Instead, he turns to a widely-circulated letter that Lavater wrote to a Berlin acquaintance in which he effectively questioned some of Nicolai's interpretations of the scientific evidence and the sequence of events that morning in 1776. More significantly, Lavater suggested that Nicolai's argument was so persuasive not because of its rationality, but because it told his readers what they wanted to hear. Nicolai suggested that an act of such unspeakable wickedness was unthinkable in a rational world. Lavater argued that the Berliner's argument rang true in that enlightened age because of the "prejudice of reason," or the bias towards a rational explanation of unfathomable events. It was comforting to think that evil sprang from rational calculations, and could therefore be understood and eventually corrected. But Lavater argued that in some cases, like that of the cathedral poisoning, evil did not result from rational behavior; it was instead associated with the devil, who inspired humans to do evil for evil's sake, just as God inspired humans to do good for its own sake. Whether one believes in the devil or not, Freedman claims, one must acknowledge the force of Lavater's critique of Nicolai's argument. If all actions, including church poisonings, must spring from rational causes, then human will is no more free than when it is unfailingly subject to divine determination. The doctrine of sufficient reason (as one might label Nicolai's line of argument) is no more supportive of human agency than Augustinian-inflected Christianity.

Freedman's purpose in *A Poisoned Chalice* is to write history, not philosophy, and so he does not ultimately resolve the debate of how one might leave prejudice behind in assessing the validity of arguments made about the cathedral poisoning, or any other highly contested public issue. But in a series of breath-taking moves, this engagingly written microhistory takes the reader from the murky fluid in the church's wine barrels to international affairs, and then to debates about the nature of evil that sound remarkably familiar today. ("Evil-doers" apparently haunted the eighteenth-century imagination as much as they do that of the twenty-first.) At the end of the book, Freedman also puts forth a theory about what actually happened on the morning of September 12, 1776, in the Zurich cathedral. He offers this theory provisionally, however, as part of an ongoing dialogue that all historians necessarily conduct with the past. It is a way of proceeding that we have learned, Freedman suggests, from debates like that conducted by Lavater and Nicolai over some bad wine in a Swiss church more than two centuries ago.

Note

[1.] Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Montaillou, the Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: George Braziller, 1978); Carlo Ginsburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); Judith Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Gary Kates, *Monsieur*

d'Eon is a Woman: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Scandal (New York: Basic Books, 1995; reprint, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale : The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990); Nina Rattner Gelbart, *The King's Midwife: A History and Mystery of Madame du Coudray* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Richard Wightman Fox, *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). This list is by no means complete. For evaluations of micro-history as an historiographical practice, see Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, Penn.: Penn State University Press, 1992), 93-113; Jacques Revel, ed. *Jeux d'=chelles. La micro-analyse = l'exp=rience* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); and David A. Bell, "Total History and Microhistory: The French and Italian Paradigms," in Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza, eds., *A Companion to Western Historical Thought* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2002).

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