

Foundation's Conscience

by George Zebrowski

MY SEARCH FOR HARI SELDON BEGAN IN 1056 F.E. I had intended a simple assembly of Seldon's appearances in the Time Vault at the crisis points of the last millennium, with my own commentary added, and had assumed that the research would require nothing more than routine retrievals. I even suspected that such a stringing together of Seldon's projections already existed, perhaps with another historian's commentary.

My first surprise, as I searched through Trantor's memory, was to find that no such compilation existed in the great library. I proceeded to gather the individual manifestations, and was startled to find only three of Seldon's six appearances.

At first I thought that I had simply failed to enter the retrieval codes correctly; but after repeated runs it became clear that three of the six appearances were not there. I concluded that they had to be in the general bank somewhere, requiring a long search, which I undertook—as much in a fit of pique as out of curiosity about the great psychohistorian's ideas. I would locate, compile, and present in usable form all of Hari Seldon's manifestations. I was good at search programs (colleagues of mine claimed that this was all I had ever been good at, though they were polite enough when they needed my skills). It was unthinkable that anything of Hari Seldon's remains could have actually been lost, but I would make certain of that, if nothing else; even ascertaining such a fact would give me a place in the upcoming 117th edition of the Encyclopedia Galactica.

Three appearances were missing, even though they were cited in other documents. I made my count from the records, as follows: four crises had occurred by the time of the Mule, and for each of these Seldon had prepared a personal simulacrum to appear in the Time Vault, to help and explain. He appeared at the height of the first crisis. The second crisis had been successfully resolved by the time he appeared. No one came to listen to him at the third and fourth crisis, but records show that he appeared on time. The general view is that he was not needed, but a recording was made. The fifth appearance was well attended, occurring just as the Mule attacked Terminus. Seldon's recorded words show him to be out of touch with events. The sixth appearance, alluded to in various documents, puts Hari Seldon's image in the Time Vault on 190 d. 1000 F.E. No one was there to listen to him.

Appearances two, three, and six *were* recorded—and then misplaced, almost as if it were feared that they might play an unwanted role in some upcoming development, but I found no events which Seldon's words might have influenced. It seemed, therefore, that I also had to explain the recent lack of interest in Seldon's ideas.

For nearly a month, I let loose my search programs (reflexive, associative, cross-referencing, and stochastic) through Trantor's vast memory bank, in which are contained the accumulated history and knowledge of twenty-five million worlds. Here and there I found references to Seldon appearances two, three, and six, made by people who had planned to visit the Time Vault, but for one reason or another had been unable to arrive at the appointed time; but there was no reference to where I might find the record of Seldon's appearances.

My fear that these records were in fact lost grew along with the problems I was formulating about Seldon's role in history. Even though psychohistory expressed its predictions only in terms of probable outcomes, there had always been about it an aura of totalitarian control, of an attempt by the past to shackle the future. To what degree had Seldon's thousand-year plan been a self-fulfilling prophecy? How had it actually influenced possible outcomes? If psychohistory was valid, then how could it stand outside history and itself not be subject to its own statistical laws? Did Seldon believe that psychohistorical thinking was independent of history's flow? Or was his plan simply an ideal? And finally, I began to wonder if Seldon's appearances in the Time Vault had been of any use. What had been their importance, if any?

These and other questions played in my mind with a thousand answers as I waited for my search

programs to trap Seldon's missing appearances. I began to feel that an unseen hand was preventing me from getting to the heart of the issues that churned within me. I became convinced that the sixth and final appearance would deliver to me the real motive behind Seldon's appearances in the vault. Only that final manifestation, timed to occur long after the dangers to Galactic Civilization were past, would reveal the great psychohistorian's thoughts about his plan and why he had projected himself across time. I began to think that Seldon's Plan had not been inevitable, since it had needed a coach.

I started to dream that I was in his presence at last, and he was talking to me, revealing secrets that only I could understand, even though in my waking hours I doubted that I was the only one who had ever inquired into these matters. But if I was the only one, then my fellow historians had failed to ask the greatest question in Galactic History: had one man truly been responsible for compressing thirty thousand years of decline into a millennium?

If others had asked my questions, then where was their work? Why couldn't I have it for the asking? Was the birth of our Galactic Renaissance to be shrouded in secrecy?

It occurred to me at this point that I might be asking the wrong questions. For example, if Seldon's Plan had been implemented creatively rather than fatalistically, then there would be no contradiction between free will and psychodeterminism. We determine and are determined, to one degree or another, and there is no difficulty in predicting what we might want to do anyway. Free will is the flow of determinism *from within*. It is therefore not a vindication of determinism to predict what someone *may* do of his own free will, especially if the possible choices are few.

This line of reasoning would mean that once Seldon's Plan began to be developed by the two Foundations, he became largely irrelevant. His appearances in the Time Vault were inconsequential to the creative process he had started! Of course, few thought of it in that way, even though it was implicit in their failure to attend Seldon appearances two, three, and six.

Nevertheless, I needed those appearances to confirm my thinking. Was it Seldon's diminishing importance that had been responsible for the misplacement of his last appearance, or had his confirmation of my line of reasoning so shocked those who had played it back later that they had buried it? Perhaps they had destroyed it completely, and I would never satisfy my intense curiosity.

A vision haunted me as my search program continued its hunt—that of Hari Seldon tricking human history into reforming itself, by getting rational, purposive individuals to work at his plan, which couldn't help but change as it was interpreted and applied to shifting circumstances by the two Foundations, left and right hands unknowingly working together. Did Seldon's true greatness lie in his knowing that the future belonged to those who would live in it, that history is a transcendent problem that cannot be solved, only guided imperfectly?

The answers to my questions seemed beyond reach. Oh, how I yearned to walk up to Seldon and demand that he present me with them! I was convinced that even if records had been destroyed, there had to be a backup somewhere in the vast forest of Trantor's information; even an echo might be amplified and restored to its original form. My search programs were seeking something of great significance, beyond the exercise of mere cleverness; but no program could retrieve information that was hopelessly lost.

Then one day, as I sat down at the work terminal in my apartment on Trantor's 66th Polar Level, my program said, "Seldon appearances six, three, and two, now available, in that order. Search routine complete."

I sat there in surprise, staring into the empty blue glow of the holoblock, wondering if the program had only retrieved the previously available appearances through some filing error. I held my breath and passed my hand over the control plate.

The holoblock blinked. The small figure of an old man in a wheelchair looked up at me, his eyes bright with understanding. I waited for him to speak, hoping that this was not some simple duplication of the known appearances.

"I am Hari Seldon," he said softly, giving the usual impression of a lively voice that was restraining

itself, “and this will be my sixth and final appearance in the Time Vault. “ He paused and I leaned forward excitedly. This was it. I glanced at the record function. It was running.

“A few of you may have wondered by now,” Seldon continued suddenly, “what use, if any, these appearances of mine will have been. They should have coincided with a series of crises and helped you over the difficult times when it might have seemed that psychohistorical projections were having nothing to do with actual events. I hope that this was only apparent, not real. “ The shrunken old man smiled. “For all I know, I may be speaking to an empty chamber in a fragmented galaxy which is still in a dark age. But if you are hearing me, then let me now claim that these appearances of mine *had* to have been useful, *one way or another*.”

He pointed a bony finger at me, and it seemed that he would stand up from his chair and touch my face. An open book fell out of his lap onto the floor of that distant time.

“Let me explain what I mean,” he went on. “Either I was in touch with the way things went, or my failure moved those of you who were in touch to act. Psychohistory could envision large possibilities correctly, but it could not project a picture of specific future details and the actions needed to bring them about. For the large is composed of countless small things, and most of the time we all live in small details. Some of you may now be saying that psychohistory was not what I made it out to be, and you will be right, in the way that most shortsighted minds are right. But it was, I hope, *enough* of what it *had* to be—a rallying cry against the irrational darkness that threatened to plunge the Galaxy into thirty thousand years of barbarism. In all human life, every day, the irrational has threatened to establish its reign, and has been held back by the two foundations of intellect and good will.”

He paused and sat back contentedly, as if he knew that he had succeeded. “There are a few basic features to the exercise of free will in history,” he continued confidently. “Only probabilities can be predicted, but not perfectly or always. Yet in retrospect *all* developments are seen as having been *caused*, including those brought about by free choices. All historical developments flow from a variety of factors, and are therefore explainable—but not exhaustively. Free will can operate only among a finite number of possible choices. No free choice is unconditional, or we would be able to create matter and energy from nothingness according to our whims.” He smiled at me, as if he knew all my most foolish thoughts and vain ambitions.

“I focused your free will,” he said, “by helping you to choose with a greater awareness of possibilities, with the *habit* of looking ahead, and I am sure that it has brought you through your millenium of struggle.” He sighed. “What you will do in your new Galactic Era is not for me to predict. Perhaps humankind will become something better. For me that would be a rational intelligence which would be immune to psychohistorical prediction. I hope so—because otherwise your new age will also decay and fall, and humankind may disappear from the Galaxy, to be replaced by new intelligences that are even now gestating in those countless star systems where the worlds are not congenial to humanoid biologies. Our human history doesn’t even span one hundred thousand years, even though we filled a galaxy with our kind. Planetary species have existed for two hundred million years and passed away without attaining self-conscious intelligence. Do not let the accomplishment of a galactic culture lull you into a sense of security. Become a truly free culture, one which will not be susceptible to psychohistorical laws, but can fully shape its own form and destiny.”

He smiled again, and seemed bitter. “Yes, that is my ideal of a mature species—one that does not need to be led by the hand. And yes, psychohistory does predict its own downfall as a useful way of looking ahead, and I do not mourn it. It worked because it counted on the darkness rising out of a given human nature, for as long as human nature remained unchanged. More than anyone, I was aware of psychohistory’s potential for the control of human life by the manipulative, which is why I always withheld a full understanding of its laws from my kind. Against psychohistory’s dangers as a tool of tyrants, I weighed thirty thousand years of darkness, which will not have happened, because I applied *just enough* of what I knew to the problem. “

He peered around the bare chamber. It seemed to oppress him. “I don’t know what else I can tell you... except, perhaps to say that I have loved the noble impulses in my humankind, even as I watched

you struggle against your inner being. You have among you positronic intelligences, which may already be free of human psychohistorical tendencies, and may help you to become free..." He leaned forward, as if trying to peer across time.

Slowly, the holoblock faded. Hari Seldon's last appearance was over.

A scene flashed into my mind. I saw the leaders of both Foundations in the Time Vault, listening to Seldon's last message. Had it so shocked them that they had resolved never to reveal that they had attended this last message, or even admit that it had ever existed? Had it shaken their faith to realize that for a thousand years human beings of dedicated intellect and good will had rescued civilization by making Seldon's Plan work rather than being ruled by it? Were they afraid that Seldon's Plan would come to be called Seldon's Joke?

Clearly, Seldon's Plan and the best of humanity had worked hand in hand, with the one needing the other. It was wrong, of course, to have attempted the erasure of Seldon's last appearance—if that is what had happened; perhaps it had been an accident. At worst, the aim had been not to disillusion the faithful, some of whom might not have understood that their faith had been something else all along—just as valuable and necessary, if not the vision of bright inevitability that silences all doubts with certainty. They might have seen the last millennium as a series of chance happenings.

As I gazed into the deep glow of the empty holoblock, I knew that my vain hope of having something for the 117th edition of the Encyclopedia Galactica would not be fulfilled. My disappointment was keen—but suddenly I stood beyond my vanity and lack of accomplishment. I would not erase the records of Seldon's unknown appearances, but I would also not call immediate attention to my findings. The records would be there for others to find soon enough, as I had found them, in the coming age that would be free of inner constraints.

All around me, I realized, here on Trantor and on millions of worlds, the positronic intelligences were free of Seldon's laws. We had made the robots in all their forms, from the simplest tools of thought and labor to the most sophisticated brother minds. As they developed, we in turn would be remade. Together we would enter entirely new currents of history. This, I realized with the first selfless joy of my life, was the growing inner strength of our renascent Galaxy, in which I now shared.