**By the Pricking in My Thumbs**

*Donald Trump, Harold Bloom and the American Sublime*

‘He’s Ahab, boy; and Ahab of old, thou knowest, was a crowned king!’

‘And a very vile one.’

—Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

The phenomenon of Donald Trump now qualifies as long-running spectacle, like video footage of a tsunami or an avalanche, played over and over again in the public imagination on a scale of years. It simultaneously polarises and paralyses, corralling most responses into flash mobs of right-wing cheerleading and left-wing hand-wringers that race around each other like hamsters on their cage-wheels, going nowhere, *con fuoco*—an OCD nightmare from which none of us seems wholly able to wake.

For all his hammering of his name and ego into our heads, Trump is a remarkably fuzzy beast. His image morphs to answer the gaze of whoever happens to be beholding him at that instant. Hero or bar bore? Square-jawed Gary Cooper or jaw-jutting Mussolini? You make the call. And the call you make will very much hinge on some hidden alignment of predispositions and psycho-tectonic-plate displacements in your own head, a sudden drop in the ocean floor that shrugs off waves to crash against distant coasts, drowning cities ignorant of their peril before the tsunami arrives. The churn of Trump’s cabinet and staff appointments resembles the restless metastasis of a carcinoma, an alien body that somehow foxes its host’s defences into leaving it alone so it can pursue its fatal plundering. The attention of the media gets captured by tweetstorms and the who’s-in-who’s-out melodrama of personalities and hiring and firing, and insufficient thought is given to what powers may be in play from less obvious quarters.

It strikes me that Trump’s elevation to high office, for all its concrete real-world consequences, is fundamentally an *occult* phenomenon, the working out of forces and stress exerted from unseen dimensions, perceptible only in their effects. Attempts to understand what is happening by analysing the man and his base or the broader dynamics of American electoral politics seem time and again to fall short of the mark. However astute their pronouncements on what they see, their seeing, as long as it focuses on the exoteric, public-record aspect of recent events, cannot reach deeply enough into the psychic caverns from which the phenomenon now known as Donald Trump has emerged.

I believe we can catch a glimpse further down into those caverns in the work of the American literary critic Harold Bloom. Bloom has long proposed and explored a concept he calls ‘the American Sublime’, in which he locates the ‘daemon’ or occult motive power of American literature and its wider cultural ramifications. His recent book, *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime* (2015), tracks the daemon’s footprints through the works of a dozen exemplary American authors, from Walt Whitman and Herman Melville to William Faulkner and Hart Crane.

In the book, Bloom identifies the literary sublime as an expression of ‘peak experiences that render a secular version of a theophany’—in other words, a personal experience, commonly of some cognitively overwhelming aspect of nature, that resembles the terrifying manifestations of God to his prophets in the Old Testament, or of Christ’s unmediated glory to his apostles at the transfiguration in the New Testament. In the American variant he postulates, Bloom modulates this commonly received idea of the sublime into a singularly personal register, in which the self is not overwhelmed but promoted to semi-deific heights. The self reveals itself to itself in what we might call an ‘autophany’. This is effected with benign magnanimity in the Whitman who speaks out of ‘Song of Myself’, or with dark anguish and quasi-Satanic pridein Melville’s Ahab, who is literally and terrifyingly self-possessed, driven to pursue the whale who is both his grand antagonist and a projection of his own titanic ego. When taxed with blasphemy by his Quaker first mate Starbuck for both identifying Moby Dick with a maleficent creator-god and then presuming to call him to account, Ahab retorts by laying claim to the cosmic majesty of his own self: ‘Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me’.

Bloom asks us to observe how Whitman strikes precisely the same chord of absolute selfhood, but transposed into a sunny major key:

I celebrate myself and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom of me as good belongs to you.

Whitman acknowledges others’ selves as scarcely other than his own, while Ahab asserts a proud and lonely eminence, scarcely distinguishable from those of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, or the Satan of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*:

All is not lost⎯the unconquerable will,

And study of revenge, immortal hate,

And courage never to submit or yield:

And what else is not to be overcome?

That glory never shall his wrath or might

Extort from me. To bow and sue for grace

With suppliant knee, and deify his power…

To speak such lines, growled as Satan bobs in the nether lake of burning brimstone after being given the bum’s rush from heaven, demands considerable cheek. And no one on the scene feels up to pointing out that refusing to ‘deify’ the power of, erm, God sounds like futility itself. It is not hard to hear, as Bloom does, how Milton’s Satan colours Melville’s Ahab, with a distinctly American inflection creeping into the exchange: ‘Yo, sun! Are *you* talkin’ to *me*?’.

This bit of Milton offers a cue for bringing up Bloom’s examination of what he calls the ‘American Religion’, to which he dedicated a book-length study published under that title. In it Bloom surveys the flowering of beliefs and doctrines that have taken root in the New World, either transplanted from the old or freshly sprung in the new clime. Most (but not all) are nominally Christian, though many of the teachings they espouse would have surprised the church fathers whose writings shaped the better part of orthodox Catholic and Protestant theology. They are denominationally profuse: Mormons, the Southern Baptist Conference, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Nation of Islam and Christian Science, among many others. Though most would claim a Christian identity, all have swerved away from conformity to mainstream Christian belief and practice, in the name of what they take to be a truer, *ur*-authentic embodiment of biblical revelation. Some, such as the Mormons and the Southern Baptist Conference (SBC), have found ways of recovering a degree of mainstream respectability, though a late-twentieth-century *putsch* by fundamentalist factions in the SBC has pulled it back toward restive fringe territory.

Nearly all the faith communities Bloom invokes place special emphasis on the agency and responsibility of the individual believer. This they inherit from the sixteenth-century dispute over the relative efficacies of faith and good works in the pursuit of salvation, over which Martin Luther broke with Rome, setting in motion what would come to be known as the Protestant Reformation. In its strong form, the Lutheran tendency common to all subsequent Protestantisms holds the individual’s faith in Christ as saviour to be the *sole* channel of saving grace. Good works may manifest that faith, but they are wholly secondary to it. To its proponents, this initially represented a liberation of the Christian imagination from what they regarded as lifeless, institutionally administered schemes of confession and penance⎯which were moreover subject to sometimes grotesque corruption. The Pardoner on Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrimage enacts a brilliant satire on how stupid the entire business had grown by the beginning of the fifteenth century. Milton’s seventeenth-century poetry revels in that new atmosphere of liberated mind. In Bloom’s estimation, however, the Protestant elevation of the individual believer’s part in the working out of his or her salvation underwent a transformation when it reached the New World. As Bloom’s ‘American Religion’, it still sports many of its parent faiths’ outward aspects, but its inward bearings now turn in radically different directions, which resemble second- or third-century Gnosticism more than twentieth-century Christianity.

In its time Gnosticism recombined elements of Neoplatonism, Judaism and emergent Christianity into a radical critique of existence. It dismisses the material world as a cruel psychic fraud perpetrated by a wayward angelic intelligence it characterises as the *demiourgos* or ‘demiurge’. That Greek compound commonly translates as ‘maker’ or ‘artisan’, but in its gnostic inflection it implies a fraudster or incompetent maker who has failed miserably in his attempt to imitate the élan of the real creator. The result is the world we experience around us, in which our eternal spirits suffer the outrageous impositions of time, space and mortality. We have been trapped here by the demiurge, who seeks, rather like the Wizard of Oz, to prevent us from waking up to his botched creation. ‘Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!’

Rejected as heresy by the early church fathers, Gnosticism was in practice both dualist and elitist: dualist in that it pitted matter and spirit against each other as wholly hostile principles, dismissing matter as an evil waste product or precipitate of fallen spiritual virtues; elitist in that it promoted an ideal of private enlightenment, in which the individual soul must free itself from the demiurge’s delusive webs by learning to recognise them, hence its eponymous principle of *gnosis* (‘knowledge’ or ‘knowing’). Much of what we know about Gnosticism, given the church’s efforts to suppress its teachings, derives from hostile witnesses we should treat with caution, but they are notably consistent in faulting Gnostics for their air of smug superiority. This elitist tendency did not favour Gnosticism’s survival as a popular religious tradition, but it did prove catnip to the spiritually ambitious, offering a heady assurance that the accomplished Gnostic initiate could see through the con that still held so many other souls in thrall.

And it is in this particular regard that we might discern a point of contact between Bloom’s account of the American Religion, ancient Gnosticism and the bizarre psycho-dynamics of the Trump cult. Milton intended his Satan’s denial of his own creaturely contingency as a joke. *He* could not remember ever having been created, therefore he *must* be eternal and uncreated⎯the angelic equivalent of declaring yourself Napoléon Bonaparte, since the angels were thought to have witnessed the true creator’s work first hand and in person. Many of Trump’s supporters express a kind of condescending pity for their less enlightened fellow citizens who haven’t yet seen through the cons being perpetrated on them by the legions of the demiurge: the press and the political establishment. Trump’s childlike faith in his own self-aggrandising myths strikes a similarly contra-factual note, but his insistence on his own unprecedented awesomeness taps deep wells in the American psyche.

The way Milton’s Satan denies any antecedent contingency finds an odd echo in the American compulsion to reject or deny the priority of Europe, in its myth of the fresh start, the clearing away of the Old World’s history of oppression and corruption to make way for the building of the city on the hill that carries over none of the old contagions. This is also the Gnostic’s recovered ‘knowing’ of his or her pristine ‘true’ self, prior to their immersion in the mudbath of material reality. In the American variation, we shine our exemplary newness and freedom out across the rest of the world still sunk in shadow. In despite of much sorry evidence to the contrary, the myth of American exceptionalism, as many commentators have observed, still resounds powerfully in the American psyche. On a sunnier note, in the final lines of ‘Song of Myself’, Whitman gives the same thought a gently upbeat personal tick, imagining himself as a second Adam, newly awakened in Paradise, innocent in his pre-lapsarian nakedness:[[1]](#footnote-1)

As Adam early in the morning,

Walking forth from the bower refresh’d with sleep,

Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach,

Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass,

Be not afraid of my body.

Remember Ronald Reagan’s ‘It’s morning in America’ shtick? That fell somewhere between the sunbeam-sweetness of Whitman and Reagan’s own ‘evil empire’ Cold War rhetoric, meant to glaze the eyes of voters as they pushed the mechanical levers in old-style (and unhackable) voting booths. Trump and his minions have simply drawn the same quasi-Manichean dualism down darker paths. Trump cannot resist sneering at any questioning of his authority or aura of magnificence; he denounces, as vicious pettifogging, any attempt to qualify or analyse him. In this he draws urgency from the American imagination’s obsession with crude originality, with being beholden to no one, answerable to no *a priori* principle. Freedom means *freedom*, sunshine. Don’t tread on me. Rules are for losers. This might sound a tad odd, given the vocal devotion of Trump and his base to God, Jesus and the Bible as authorities far greater than that of any mortal human being. Bloom’s wondering attempt to comprehend the American Religion resonates eerily against current events:

No Western nation is so religion-soaked as ours, where nine out ten of us love God and are loved by him in return. That mutual passion centers our society and demands some understanding, if our doom-eager society is to be understood.

Bloom’s words, first published in 1992, ring very differently in 2018. His prescient phrase ‘doom-eager’ neatly charts the semantic shifts of the word ‘doom’, from the Old English *dom*, which meant ‘[favourable] judgment’, ‘reputation’ or ‘glory’, to the daunting prospect of divine judgment at Domesday (*Judgment* Day in its original Christian sense) to the present sense of ‘doom’ as ‘ordained calamity’. If Trump can brand it⎯and he’s clearly going for it⎯then he surely will. Commentators regularly reflect on Trump’s rise to political eminence as a ‘popular’ phenomenon, but we must be wary about such easy generalisations. While in videos of Trump’s pre- and ongoing post-electoral rallies we see him striking the populist pose visually⎯the man of the moment being cheered by an adoring *populus*⎯they tend to obscure the *exclusionary* underlay of those occasions: the group chants­ are often hostile, directed at hate figures such as Hillary Clinton or mainstream journalists. Even the hooted iterations of ‘Trump! Trump! Trump!’ or ‘U.S.*A*.! U.S.*A*!’ sound more like angrily wielded blunt instruments than bouquets of approbation.

The other mantras are chanted with similarly feral vigour, their syntax levelled like cobblestones prised from some Paris *arrondissements* during the Revolution, each individual word an equally weighted projectile.‘Lock her up!’ (still a favourite despite Hillary’s removal as an obstacle to this maximum president’s ambitions) and ‘Build that wall!’ Both, note, call for *barriers* to some sort of imagined contagion. This world now seems a-crawl with Hillaries and Mexicans, to be swept out of view so that this new elect may see their right place restored to its pre-lapsarian purity. In its time, Gnosticism was condemned by its critics as a too-clever-by-half intellectual three-card-monty scam. Today its bastardised scion turns the tables by making real-world journalism and its fubsy dedication to ‘fact’ the villain of the piece. In Trump-speak true ‘knowing’ really means ‘not knowing’.[[2]](#footnote-2) With a top predator’s unerring instinct, Trump has attached himself to the transposed Gnostic elements of the American Sublime and the American Religion and stood that old, privileged ideal of ‘knowing’ (i.e. waking up to deep spiritual truths accessible to only a few initiates) completely on its head, but that does not matter.

As Bloom characterises them, both the American Sublime and the American Religion possess the quality of proper archetypes, structures of meaning embedded in the psyche so deeply that their presence is as invisible as their influence is palpable. The action of an archetype follows an intelligible pattern, but it *answers* only to corresponding patterns of antithesis or conformity. Friend or foe. With us or against us. And here is the critical point in everything I have said so far: the energies locked in an archetype are wholly pre-rational and non-linear. If you can tap into a big one, then you can possess yourself of the power of a Hoover Dam, without having first to *build* a dam. It is more like the unstable rock face of a mountain, waiting for that one precisely angled pebble to trigger its collapse. No one gets much say in the business, not even the pebble! Hitler’s brief but calamitous career through the German psyche in the first half of the twentieth century drew all its compelling force from the way he was able to hot-wire such deeply embedded archetypes for his own purposes. The gods of the Teutoburg Forest, who devoured three whole Roman legions and their auxiliaries in 9 CE, for a time stalked the earth once more behind the standards of the Third Reich. Thus trying to ‘understand’ Trump⎯his desiccated character, impoverished vocabulary, social crudity or Jurassic political instincts⎯may entirely miss the point, when the man may in fact be no more than a focal point or fulcrum of far larger psychic forces than are commonly invoked in journalistic commentary.

Which draws me, rather reluctantly, back to Herman Melville and the captain of the *Pequod* in *Moby Dick*. Ahab is no Hitler (though if whales could write novels, that proposition might come out a little differently!). Ahab desires power neither for his own aggrandisement nor for its own sake, nor does he particularly revel in his power to sway his polyglot crew, except as these allow him to pursue the more aggressively his need for revenge upon the White Whale that maimed him. As Bloom observes in *The Daemon Knows*,

Ahab is as much a hero as Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost* or Macbeth. You can call them all hero-villains, but then so is Hamlet. I weary of scholars neighing against Ahab, who is magnificent in his heroism. Would they have him hunt for more blubber? His chase has Job’s Leviathan in view, a quarry representing Yahweh’s sanctified tyranny over man.

Like Milton’s Satan, Ahab wields an imposing majesty over all within reach of his voice. Neither is he simply a tin-pot dictator, though Satan’s declared

‘…study of revenge, immortal hate

And courage never to submit or yield’

settles upon the far lesser beings of Adam and Eve for its objects, leaving him grievously diminished by his final scenes. Nonetheless, his stature as he rallies his fallen associates from the lake of burning brimstone is, literally, titanic:

Forthwith upright he rears from off the pool

His mighty stature; on each hand the flames

Driven backward slope their pointing spires, and, rolled,

In billows, leave i’ the midst a horrid vale.

Then with expanded wings he steers his flight

Aloft, incumbent on the dusky air,

That felt unusual weight; till on dry land

He lights…

No small hands (or anything else) here.. Ahab, too, exerts a grimly fascinating physical (and metaphysical) courage in his public display of command over the element of fire in the play of St Elmo’s fire upon the *Pequod*’s spars:

‘Oh! Thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e’en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee’.

Catch the Gnostic cast here: Ahab declares his *knowledge* (*gnosis*) of his metaphysical antagonist. He even claims knowledge of their dealings in a past life and declares his *defiance* of that power, whose claim on his submission he now denies, in a frontal assault upon the power that has dared to limit him. He will brook no condition or compromise, nor any lesser antagonist. Into the bleak grandeur of his ravings he draws the wills of his crew, who understand little of his purpose yet answer the wind that blows from his wracked spirit, to their ultimate destruction.

One of the puzzles of Trump’s hold on his base has been his self-evident *smallness* of spirit⎯mean, self-absorbed, vengeful and petty⎯which he carries out into the light of day with little concern for who might see. *Chutzpah*, it is called in New York, a brazen indifference to normal canons of shame or decorum. Trump revels in his own uncouth persona as a perverse guarantee of his authenticity. ‘He’s not like regular politicians’, we heard again and again during the presidential campaign and since. And Ahab’s not like a regular whaling-ship’s captain, nor Satan like your average archangel. Their *ir*regularity drives much of their powerful charisma. It is also what renders them so fatally attractive. Some have called Milton’s Satan the first rock star—Mick Jagger on cosmic steroids, maybe. Yet Satan, Ahab, and Whitman at his most beatific each possesses a genuinely compelling aura, light or dark, but fraught, each on its own terms, with a kind of incontestable authenticity. Take them for all in all, we shall not look upon their like again.

Instead we have Trump, shamefully dwarfed by the figures I’ve summoned in contrast. A pygmy for all seasons. And yet, in the uncertain twilight of what passes for his thoughts, fates of whole nations may stumble.

How can that possibly be?

Bloom’s two literary icons (among many) of the American Sublime, the poetic persona of Whitman and Melville’s imposing fiction of Ahab, are both at least *ample*. The self that Whitman sings is embracing and magnanimous, and Ahab’s exerts an irresistible magnetism that sucks even the cool-headed Quaker Starbuck into the maw of its own magnificence and the *Pequod*’s destruction. Viewed objectively against such grand *eidola*, Trump appears a pathetic worm. But activate the archetype of Bloom’s American Sublime, and he suddenly towers, The Donald, tricked out in plumed-serpent finery, bellowing his alpha-male incomparability and demanding that heads roll.

The thing is, even if you reckon you have seen the con in the icon, caught the mountebank palming coins or cards, you may still be vulnerable to his game. The archetype functions subliminally, below the radar of reason, and, if you are not careful, you can find yourself swept up in the hoo-ha, right down the central aisle of those Nuremberg rallies. If you try, like poor Starbuck, to resist with merely rational argument, the archetype may well pull the rug out from under your feet. And that, I fear, may prove the ultimate existential threat of our lifetimes.

1. Against this we can set, somewhat more prosaically and only a little improbably, Noah Webster’s lexicography, which reformed American spelling according to newly established philological principles to allow the New World forms of English words to reflect their true origins more clearly and purely. Different context, same urge to assert New World freshness, which is its own authority. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The resemblance of Trump’s base to America’s nineteenth-century Native American Party, popularly ridiculed at the time as the Know-Nothings, has been observed in sundry quarters. They fulminated, in very trump-of-doom tones, against an illusory Catholic (i.e. Old World, corrupt) conspiracy to subvert healthy New World newness and freedom. *Our* freedom, which (of course) *they* don’t like, to quote Trump’s John the Baptist, George W. Bush. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)