

George Shulman: Genre & Impasse in American politics and literature

My current project pursues the idea that American literary art repeatedly dramatizes what Phillip Roth once called "the indigenous American Berserk." As writers critically engage the twinned engines of liberal individualism and racial nationalism, I argue, they comprise a heretical chorus that theorizes the political beyond the rationalist frame set by a Madisonian political regime. Those who venture beyond that frame are often labeled paranoid, or charged with having left the realm of the real. So, today I use one issue from my larger project - the relation of fiction and politics- to analyze Richard Hofstadter's critique of "the paranoid style" and its impact on the ways that liberal and left critics frame the event of Donald Trump.

My point of departure is the premises of liberal and left critique of Trump: first, that he lies and invents hyperbolic fictions that substitute fantasy for reality; second that the best response to "the big lie" is to dispel the public's ignorance, by replacing the fantastical with the factual; third, that exposure to facts suffices to enable a critical counter-politics. I agree that Trump's big lies need correction, but I think concern for factuality is misconceived if we presume that facts speak for themselves. Instead, surely, background narratives, paradigms, and organizing fictions select empirical evidence and endow it with different worldly implications.

I thus conceive "fiction" not in referential terms of true and false, to be (in)validated by empirical evidence, but in a mytho-poetic and constitutive sense, as a passionate frame of reference or

partition of the sensible, materialized in social practices and identities. Then the issue we face is less fake facts and ignorance - though these are real problems- and more the invested fictions that people enact or defend violently and self-destructively. As literary artists dramatize through protagonists from Ahab to Gatsby and from Sutpen to Sethe, we are trapped by fictions we live out and make real, at great cost to others and to ourselves; these figures are doomed because their fictions disavow crucial aspects of reality, which return to haunt if not destroy them. And because these organizing fantasies are inscribed and embodied at visceral and unconscious levels, they are not undone by reason, facts, logic, or by events or even catastrophe.

Rather, our capacity to undertake or surrender to change is elicited or inspired only when an alternate frame of reference compose our experiences of suffering, anomaly, ambivalence, and aspiration into a compelling narrative that begins with and dramatizes what we already know, feel, and wish for, but inflects our tacit knowledge and inchoate desire in new ways. Just as literary artists create fictions to dramatize the animating power and fatal costs of the fictions that organize and entrap us, I will argue, so creative political action cannot so much replace the fictive with the real, as mobilize people around an organizing fiction that depicts the grip but also the contingency of a reality they can change.

In literature and politics, such truth-telling not only reveals fiction-making but requires it; rather than dichotomize reality and

fiction, we must face the disturbing truth that fictionality is inescapable, at once dangerous and generative. A politically salient counter to Trump's politics thus requires, not exposure of facts to remedy ignorance or false consciousness, nor pragmatic assembling of extant interests into coalition -though that would be good- but a compelling counter-fiction that, like a good metaphor, carries our imagination from the familiar toward the unexpected and new, to open a possibility for new possibilities. ¹

My first move, then, is to situate Hofstadter' paranoid style in a discussion of fiction broadly conceived, and of literature as its interlocutor. My second move is to say that "fiction" in politics is usefully theorized by identifying how GENRES frame political speech, shape expectations, legitimate collective action. To situate the paranoid stye we then ask: what inherited genres does Trump take up?

In my view, the dominant and recurring form of American political rhetoric joins what literary critic Leo Marx once called "pastoralism" -which conjures an idealized America unmarked by history, inequality, or conflict- to a "paranoid style" conjuring monstrous powers and alien threats that subvert this ideal of harmony and plenitude. In the term proposed by political theorist Michael Rogin, "counter-subversive demonology" repeatedly projects an idealized America -an identity that splits off much of itself- and protects this idealization by counter-insurgency war (against violent Indians, conspiratorial communists, and barbaric terrorists) and culture war (against subversive threats lodged in impulses, people, and practices marked as alien.) Pastoral

idealization is the systole, and paranoid demonology the diastole, that drive the beating heart of American nationalism. The liberal principles of civic nationalism (formal equality, rule of law, and representative government) live inside a frontier of phobia marking the dangerous, un-American outside, which is always already inside. As DH Lawrence thus said, white Americans repeat pious rhetoric of "love and produce, love and produce," but underneath the surface of our life you always hear "the hum of destruction."

We could follow Hayden White to see all of this in relation to a "mode" called "romance." It promises mastery over circumstance and time to individual or collective protagonists seeking self-determination against charged objects. In narrower terms of genre, pastoral images of harmony and virtue entail melodramatic moralization of victim versus villain, as well as paranoid figuration of malevolent powers that threaten captivity or emasculation. Stories with such pastoral and paranoid features authorized American Revolution, civil war, late 19th century populist insurgency against corporate power, and since Nixon, a right-wing project against elites using the state to benefit blacks and women at the expense of white men. Rather than propose a taxonomy to distinguish what is properly romance, jeremiad, melodrama, pastoral -or paranoid- I instead see their entwinement in American political language. By "genre" I would highlight vernacular idioms, inherited narratives, and habitual expectations we bespeak and rework as we conjure imagined political community and projects to remake it. **I then can ask: by what genres do critics depict the phobic**

& fantastical features (or character) of American political romance?²

Critics typically invoke the empirical and practical to defend against the ideological and extremist. But rather than own realism as a genre, as a convention of thought and expression that mediates our relation to reality, they claim to inhabit the real, as the ones who know. At American origins, for example, a revolutionary period of pervasive democratic participation involved what historian Bernard Bailyn called paranoid rhetoric, that depicted dangerous centralized power corrupting and enslaving a virtuous and free people. Denouncing this exuberant enthusiasm for democracy as archaic and irrational, melodramatic and polarizing, Madison and Hamilton endorsed a powerful central state, cosmopolitan elites, and a machinery of highly mediated political representation. Such a system would prevent majoritarian movements, and assure rule by rational elites, to save "the people" from their instincts and from demagogues exploiting them. Hofstadter bespoke this genre of critique when he defended New Deal liberalism, ethnic immigrants, and new elites by diagnosing "the paranoid style" of a nativist, populist "New Right."

Instead of using evidence to expose a conspiracy IN history, he argued, this style depicts history AS a conspiracy; by connecting disparate facts and events in a narrative or theory, it purports to care about empirical evidence, which ostensibly exposes the real cause of diminished status and power. Because the motor or motive of this rhetoric is the sense of displacement he called status anxiety, the style justifies and directs *ressentiment*. Like Ahab's monomania, this

style posits a charged object -King George, the state as a Leviathan, the slave-power conspiracy, the trusts, wall street, jews, communists, globalist elites- and it "plots" how this malevolent author covertly controls life and causes our servitude and suffering.

Hofstadter rejects this style for several reasons: first, it gives resentment a cause and object in a way that moralizes conflicts and demonizes adversaries, in contrast to what he deems a political perspective on history and institutions; second, if a conspiratorial narrative purports to seamlessly explain every coincidence, accident, and event in a vast design, it displaces both the complexity and the contingency that are crucial to a political sensibility. As fiction replaces rather than illuminates reality, melodramatic simplification displaces politics. He thus foregrounds the aesthetic and affective dimensions in politics, but in a wholly negative sense. Seeing history as a conspiracy shows the danger in fiction as fantasy: if we imagine a god-like author masterminding a plot, art replaces life, as rancor and wish-fulfillment displace politics.

What is wrong with Hofstadter's critique of paranoid style? His critique rejects the channeling of resentment into demonization of adversaries, the presumption and anticipation of intentional harm, and the capture of the real by the symbolic. In these regards he could be said to prefigure Eve Sedgwick's use of Melanie Klein on the paranoid position, but his critique enacts its own problematic displacements, and it legitimates interest-group liberalism rather than a politics that embodies the reparative position. First, he locates the paranoid

style only at the margins of American politics, not as a bipartisan, indeed hegemonic common sense. Second, he denies his own part in status politics; he reverses the accusing nativist gaze as he makes the problem a declining WASP middle class, not elites or ethnics, especially Jews, and he thereby enacts his own paranoid presumption of harm in the moment he claims to dispel it. As a result, third, he finds genre only in the melodramatic narrative of those cast as marginal extremists, the objects he diagnoses, while he disclaims the paranoid features of his critique; he remains the subject who knows, not also an object seen by another subject. Moreover, by presuming that prosaic ethnics, pragmatic elites, and rational experts inhabit the real -while con-men, demagogues, and populists, inhabit paranoid fantasy- this critique makes a form of liberal "realism" into the only valid genre of politics, now narrowly conceived as negotiation over resources by elites adjudicating group interests. Lastly, his critique is directed against an emergent new right, but by anchoring their style in the populists, he echoes Hamilton & Madison; he reverses the right's counter-subversive narrative, making them the problem, but by equating the democratic and populist with irrationality, rancor, and a religious yearning for coherence. The price of his critique of the paranoid style is thus two-sided; defining fantasy as what betrays politics, not what politics traffics in, and foreclosing rather than recovering the radically democratic.³

When Democratic Party and media elites use this analysis on Trump and his deplorable supporters, they repeat these displacements: first,

they make Trump's paranoid style a scandalous anomaly and deny its historic and systemic roots; second, they deny their own investment in both status politics and genre; third, they make interest-group liberalism a remedy for Trump by severing it from the violent history and national impasse that produced them both. They disavow the very fiction-making by which they reject the fictions of their adversaries. It is important that left critics object to these displacements, but through a genre that assumes white workers will cross racial lines and enact a radical politics if told the truth or given the facts about capitalism. By disavowing race and gender, or so-called identity politics, the left sustains its own organizing fiction, which, not coincidentally, repeats the national romance of redeeming white men.

Because the neo-liberalism of the Democratic Party (since Clinton) created an opening for -and calls forth- the paranoid style of a racial nationalism, but because the prevailing idiom of left politics is not a politically credible alternative to either, we inhabit a structural impasse in political economy and party politics, and a discursive impasse as well. People see the fact of impasse, but conceiving its meaning in politically salient ways requires a capacity for fiction-making precluded by rationalist or empirical approaches.

We thus must return to "paranoia" as a trope for theory and politics.

The dangers in fantasy and fiction -and so in paranoia- are manifest today in such intense and scary ways that critical and political anxiety about illusion, self-deception and disavowal, about seduction by narrative and fantasy, is surely justified. In another

context I would respond to that anxiety by depicting the dynamic interplay between fiction and reality in our social practices, and in our discursive conventions for making sense of the world. I would also parse how social reality is elastic in response to our fictions, and yet also a defeating limit, a mocking return of the repressed. But here I will conclude by invoking Melville, Pynchon, and Sedgwick to creatively rethink the so-called paranoid style.

First, I propose viewing paranoia not as merely pathological but as implicitly and potentially political, by noting the inescapability and value -not only the danger- of organizing fictions and dramatic narrative. If we follow Pynchon, and presume the necessity of social, political, and literary practices of making sense of a world and of a history whose structure and meaning is not self-evident, then paranoid styles appear on a kind of spectrum that runs from Ahab, say, to Freud and Marx, then to C. Wright Mills, Sheldon Wolin, and Michael Rogin. For if we are dominated by powers and plots, we need to name them to oppose them; politics requires us to weave the disparate and discrete into wider forms of sense that identify danger, designate causation, and dramatize meaning, to indicate what is to be done, as Lenin put it. As C. Wright Mills argued, we identify public causes to politicize what otherwise remain merely private troubles. "Epic theory," Wolin thus argued, composed various features of social life into a whole, a system, a regime, and composed history as a dramatic narrative of crisis, decision, and change.

Pynchon's view of paranoia echoes Mills and Wolin in these

overtly political ways, but it also gives dramatic form to the deep and true perception that all dimensions of reality are related, that human beings are connected to each other and nature by "mortal inter-indebtedness" as Melville put it, and that these connections are not invisible but rather hidden in plain sight, if only we had the vision to see them. "Paranoia" thus offers no new facts or information, but makes connections visible by seeing the familiar differently, just as the Greeks made "seeing" the root of "theorizing." But Pynchon, like Greek tragedians, also dramatizes its dangers: If we deny the space between narrative and reality, the gap between coherence and contingency, and what Ralph Ellison calls "the joke between appearance and reality," then we entrap ourselves in our organizing fiction by presuming our knowledge, and we risk violence and self-destruction. The risk of tragedy is inescapable, though, if we are to make sense of power and its impact, give form to temporality, and conjure collective actors and action.

I credit the concern of critics who diagnose paranoia as a symptom of agency panic, whereby we try to protect a fantasy of sovereign agency by identifying threats to kill off, as we see in injured Ahab's enraged monomania. As contemporary social life seems characterized by increasingly diffuse, circulating forms of power -as in neo-liberalism and institutional racism- so paranoid styles of theorizing or narrating then seem a symptom that distorts reality by designating intentional authors and malevolent plots. Such arguments rework Hofstadter: like his nativists, we salvage integral agency,

inherited identity, and coherent meaning by theorizing in the paranoid style suggested by Mills or Wolin. But we might test this critique by asking: does Bernie Sanders bespeak a paranoid style by naming "wall street" the source of American decline? Is that style modified -or exercised- by naming financialization and neo-liberal globalization as our object? Is Tanahasi Coates' account of Trump as "the white president" a "paranoid style" analysis or something like it? Are such counter-fictions a danger to renounce? A necessity to complicate?

I would echo Pynchon's view that features of paranoid style narrative are crucial to making visible and visceral the dangers in modern surveillance, the extent of corporate power, the insidious impact of marketing designs, the presumptions and violence of a racial state. The great analysts of the paranoid style -Freud and Pynchon- recognized that it is not irrational in any simple sense, and they acknowledged their own implication in it by the practice of diagnosis and writing. Freud said "the compulsion not to let chance count as chance" was the interpretive bond relating religious narrative and paranoid projection to his own theory of systemic symptoms. For Eve Sedgwick, therefore, a "hermeneutic of suspicion" has been inseparable from radical critique and politics, to identify forms of power that invade, shape, and control us. But she used Melanie Klein to depict the "reparative (depressive) position" as an antidote to its dangers.

That position signifies and fosters affective shifts, from rage at injury to gratitude for life, from anticipation of harm to surprise at contingency, from investment in purity and antagonism to acceptance

of contamination and ambivalence, from splitting to repair. Many read Sedgwick in a paranoid way, as if she replaced a merely pathological paranoid position by a reparative one deemed the only ethical way to live, but in fact she saw both positions as imaginatively conjured fictions, and she said -albeit with reluctance- that politics requires us to sustain both positions in a complementary tension. If theorists propose a reparative ethics that makes deflation the only antidote to dangerously inflated affects, I see an example of (paranoid) splitting that would save politics from excessive enthusiasm and fiction-making.

When Pynchon dramatizes the necessity of paranoia as a political and aesthetic practice of identifying power and making sense, he does so by fictions that problematize our efforts to finalize a plot or stabilize representation. As we readers identify with/as characters struggling to make sense of the powers and plots that ensnare us, we infer or project coherence, while feeling the author conspires or plots against not with us; our longing for certainty, for knowing what to count as evidence to prove definitively what is true, is elicited by texts that demand interpretation but that withhold closure. Making readers into co-authors, his texts thus model and nurture democratic citizenship. Whereas Hofstadter positions himself as Starbuck to a wounded, enraged Ahab, speaking sober prose to Ahab's intoxicated poetry, defending the prosaic against the lure of fiction-making, Pynchon's texts position us not as Starbucks, but between Ahabian projection and Ishmaelian perspectivism, between heroic protest and quotidian resilience, between epic theory and reparative ethics. This

means we need to navigate our way through the paranoid -by tracing plots and power- and through the reparative -by enacting impulses toward reconciliation. Their art situates politics between protesting injury to our democratic dignity, and acknowledging the limits of our sovereignty, between angry demands for justice and forbearing hopes for healing, between the value of antagonism and the irreducibility of ambivalence. As Melville and Pynchon contain these tensions within dramatic counter-fictions, can we sustain them in our politics? As their texts vindicate and not only problematize fiction-making, so must we.

¹ I would say the problem is not fake facts as such but the organizing fictions that make them necessary, plausible, meaningful. But the larger claim about fiction echoes the theorists who argued that European fascism - and American racial politics- can be understood only if we shift from the language of interest and reason that characterizes the rationalism of liberal and marxist theory, to instead foreground desire and dream, fantasy and anxiety, to explore investments in collective identity, in authority, and in violence. I am thinking of the Frankfurt School, of Deleuze and Guattari, of Michael Rogin, but also of Ernesto Grassi recovering the tradition of rhetoric and of Cornelius Castoriadis developing the idea of "radical imagination."

² There are various versions of this romance of self-determination: the story of new world emancipation from old world caste or despotism; the myth of new frontiers, manifest destiny, limitless possibility, and endless growth; the "American Dream" of self-making; the neo-liberal fantasy of a "free market." Each weds a rights-based liberal individualism to "America" as "imagined community," in Benedict Anderson's phrase. In turn, forms of political romance also depict redemptive struggle of a virtuous people against corrupt interests, a free market against a coercive state, or an innocent nation against the empires, terror, or aliens that represent old world dangers to liberty. The progressive version of American romance, voiced most recently by Obama, appeals to the universalism of the Declaration to promise progress toward more perfect union by overcoming polarized antagonism. As American Studies scholar Sacvan Bercovitch also argued, figures from Lincoln to JFK, from Eugene Debs to MLK, from Reagan to Trump, narrated "jeremiads," a genre that posits national corruption or decline to authorize action promising national rebirth. Speaking as good sons who will save the house of founding fathers from what is corrupting or subverting it, political leaders and critics can and do propose various, even antithetical projects, but always in redemptive terms of saving a jeopardized republic.

³ Hofstadter's defense of ethnic immigrants suggests the romance of an inclusive pluralism in a civic nationalism -the progressive, inclusionary romance that Obama affirmed. But as anti-communism, war on terror, and anti-blackness indicate, pluralism reveals its exclusionary premise in moments of danger. Indeed, Hofstadter's critique suggests that the exclusion of excess is the inescapable premise of the pluralism he defends.