

Of Phonies and Frankenstein, or Rhetoric and Democracy in 2016

Now that the current presidential campaign has turned into a trumped-up farce beyond all recognition, many of us are shaking our heads in disgust, and wondering whence came the barbarians that have laid siege to the bastion of Reason. While we wring our hands in alarm, supplies are running short and we may have a long wait before hearing the clarion of the coming cavalry, if ever. In the meantime, we can't help peering over the ramparts each morning in prurient fascination to gander at the seeming novelty of the horde pumping up the jam in their indecent spectacle they call running for office.

And what a spectacle it's been! One imagines the pandemonium at Republican headquarters, which hasn't seen this much of a ruckus since the days of Barry Goldwater back in '64. Whence came this madness? How could this have happened? What a finger-pointing, hair-wrenching time for the self-appointed spokesmen of the moral majority, projecting their disgust, feigned or otherwise, on the ridiculously coiffed new-comer. As the self-styled king from Queens smirks and quips his way to the nation's highest office, some Republicans have tried to keep their supercilious poise. No comedian appreciates having his show stolen, or being upstaged by the adolescent antics of an untrained actor. At last, they came up with a riposte, and from the wings came one of their best and brightest to regain centerstage. But for all its rhetorical allusion and dignified prose, Mitt Romney's stern and polished performance panned. Romney branded the repugnant front-runner a 'fraud' and a 'phony,' but audiences went right back to him and his circus under the big top, where there's much more fun to be had. Alas, nobody appreciates the classics anymore. Audience's tastes change as they move on to better, more steroid-driven spectacles.

Pundits left, right and center never tire of telling us how new and unprecedented this is. For all our faddy fascination with the latest version of glitter, it never ceases to amaze how predictable we are as a people. Even the obsession for newness gets old; we Americans haven't quite caught on yet, although as I seem to recall reading somewhere in an oft-quoted book, "There is nothing new under the sun." The recent trumped-up electioneering is but the next logical advance in tactics crafted by the very party who now doth protest too much. Shock and indignation are woefully misplaced: if the pot now accuses the kettle, both have been blackened by the same fire.

Speaking of blackening, let us not forget the good old days, when the party now in an uproar over the popularity of their evil spawn brought us that hideous stream of revolving-door ads, including the infamous one featuring William Horton, whom they dubbed 'Willie'. Although today's

Frankenstein owes much to the Republican counterrevolution, the cabinet of horrors from which he emerged is not haunted exclusively by Republicans. It was a Democrat, Al Gore, who first brought Mr. Horton to the public's attention during the 1988 Democratic primaries; it was Republican Governor Francis Sargent who in 1972 signed the furlough program into law, which the Massachusetts Supreme Court then ruled must extend to first-degree murderers. But in thirty-three seconds, the ad bearing Horton's dusky face skipped over the arduous terrain of reality on the wings of fear. There was no debate about the many questions of humane incarceration and its consequences but an appeal to sordid fear. George Wallace knew as much: those same fears helped the Republican Party to gain the once Democratic stronghold of the South. The same fear still makes it hard for a black man to catch a cab after dark in many an American city.

Build a wall between Mexico and the United States, and make the Mexicans pay 'fer it! Kick out all the Muslims! Beat the crap out of your opponents! It is better to poop like a lion for a day than to gnaw your bone for a life-time! These choice nuggets from the hand-bag of crowd-grabbers from our latest P.T. Barnum have been dubbed 'populism.' So the pundits have pronounced without ever seeking to question the term, or whether it fits these ravings. If by 'populism' they mean the views of ordinary people, one man's popularity is not the sum of the people's opinion. If they are referring to Populism, they do injustice to an all but forgotten movement in the United States, which agitated for public control of railroads, among other things. Such inherent contempt for the people, any people, comes from the most ardent proponents of democracy, in this case members of the press.

These recent ravings cum sound-bites are better deemed rhetoric than populism. Rhetoric, which has become a synonym for empty words, used to be the name for the art of persuasion, the ever-present hand-maid of democracy. She had a fairly venerable career of her own in the United States, at least until a score or so of years ago. In such cases, nostalgia is best kept at arm's length, however, lest we forget an old tale about rhetoric. I am referring to Carneades' field-trip to Rome, when he successfully argued for and against justice on two consecutive days. On the first day, he delivered a speech *in favor* of justice. The crowd loved it. They showed up the next day, and Carneades delivered an equally persuasive oration *against* justice. And the crowd went along with as much enthusiasm as they had shown the previous day. Alarmed, Cato hastily ushered him out of town. Never ones to appreciate subtlety, the Romans failed to understand Carneades' rhetorical about-face as a critique of dogmatism. He was a skeptic who understood that it is impossible to distinguish between what we consciously perceive and the opinions we form unconsciously.

Rhetoric inspires reflection and reaction. Depending on the medium to which we are accustomed, there are always means of provoking the latter by plunging deep into the currents of our being, into that hot, confused place where beliefs triumph in large part because of the sentiments they impart. A maxim in the study of psychology claims that the more you treat a people a certain way, the more they respond in kind. Or to put it more simply, we are what we eat. A vested interest has spent the past century refining rhetoric and reducing our palates to gobble up the pabulum that political discourse has become. Totally devoid of any nutritive debate, electioneering is reduced to a hash of images, a sauce of body language topped with sound bites.

Make America Great Again! Another succulent, stirring slogan of hollow triumphalism straight from the cabinet of Republican ready-made slogans. When you've got nothing substantial to offer a people, you can always give them the good old trio of God, Country and Family. Dare we point out that Europe has bitterly come to recognize them as euphemisms cloaking fascism? Trump up the politics, and America responds just as in the McDonald's ad: *I'm lovin' it!* Even those of us holed up in Fort Lumière can't help themselves from watching in morbid fascination as the spectacle unfolds and feelings trump facts.

The Republicans accuse the cozened from Queens of not being a professional politician: How dare he step from the rank world of reality television to the pristine realm of politics? On the contrary: his ascendancy is the logical and inevitable outcome of the forced marriage between economics and politics. We don't much like to admit it, but democracy is an inherently vulnerable and problematic institution. It is in itself hard to define; harder still to define a nation as 'democratic' in which the people have so little power of self-determination. A system of popular vote can just as easily assure the concentration of power: persuade enough people, and the interests of a few become law for all.

Sorry to say it folks, but we need the rich to make America rich again. This specious bit of nonsense recently dropped from the lips of the magnate from Mar-a-Lago is a re-hash of the Republican mantra which led us blindfolded down the primrose path to economic perdition. We've heard this before, and so we ought to know what it really means: let the rich stand above, and it will all trickle down on the rest of us. We have been brow-beaten into believing that this hegemony is the natural way to organize human affairs because they claim it favors the survival of the fittest. This is not only fatalistic but contrary to the principles of self-determination, and there is something fundamentally apolitical in the belief that every man lives only for himself in complete disregard for his brethren. It is crass manipulation, and a flagrant rebuke of the guardians of our better nature.

Should we be surprised that this megalomaniac projects his feeling of bigness in every irreverent gesture and allusion? We want a strong man to save us, someone in whom we can project our own fantasy of power. We, too, want to be winners, to trump everyone else and cry, *You're fired!* But we can't. Our fates are inextricably woven together. Yet we dare not grab on to one another for support, adrift as we are in a public forum where venerable Reason has been shown the door and puerile one-upmanship ushered in its place. Instead, we await with bated breath for the latest insipid and incessant chirping of Tweets.

Perhaps Francis Fukuyama was right, and history has reached its end, though not in the way he supposed. No political ideology is now required, and words can change from one day to the next: from embrace to disavowal, assurance is all. As long as there's somebody at whom to point our finger, old maiden Fear and many-tongued Rumor will whip up mayhem, and our attention is had. Vitriol passes for conviction. Politics has become pure spectacle, the echo of his master's voice resounding in the hollow tub of the restricted global market. Our absolute and uncontested faith in cut-throat capitalism has created a democracy in which the people systematically vote against their own interests. Had he not been publicly humiliated by President Obama at a Democratic fund-raiser some years past, America's current favorite might just as well have been center stage wearing a donkey's mask. He would not have had to change his act much, although his recent boasts about his trunk are probably more in line with Republican repertory.

It is difficult to maintain a pose of detached bemusement in these our troubled times. The inevitable demise of all republics weighs heavily on the mind: most slide into dictatorships someday or another. Now, the man who would be consul sports a coat of arms and publicly avows his contempt for republican institutions. He spits out some poorly digested bits of Mussolini and, if his former spouse is to be believed, has a penchant for the writings of the man with the little moustache. One of his valiant supporters, a Mr. McGraw of the Carolinas, summed it up best when he punched a demonstrator in the face and later said, 'The next time we see him, we might have to kill him.' My feathered hope flies away at these words — and at their feeble reception by the press quibbling under the guise of 'objectivity' as they lick their chops in anticipation of the next outrage.

As it is, our destiny is manifest: political spectacle-mongering is here to stay, and we will no doubt plumb the depths. Now that politics seems to be heading towards the arena of blood-sport, the latest trumperies may seem mild in comparison with what's to come. We may yet live to see our politicians clad as gladiators and descend into the Coliseum, just as historians tell us they did at the end of the Roman Empire. Or perhaps just a little professional wrestling: apparently, the current front-runner has already been warming up in the ring.