

MIGNON NIXON

In its search for a leader the group finds a paranoid schizophrenic or malignant hysteric if possible; failing either of these, a psychopathic personality with delinquent trends will do; failing a psychopathic personality it will pick on the verbally facile high-grade defective.

—W. R. Bion, *Experiences in Groups* (1961)

An anxious group will typically select its maddest member as its leader. Here is a kernel of psychoanalytic insight, formulated by Wilfred Bion, pioneer of the psychoanalysis of groups, that might have proved salutary in the recent election cycle.¹ Reading Bion in a psychoanalytic reading group at Cambridge University in the autumn of 2015, at the height of the Republican Party presidential debates, I wondered aloud if we should worry. The question was interpreted as an attempt to be droll, so I dropped it. That was a mistake, minor in significance, but perhaps not entirely trivial if multiplied by innumerable others' small acts of self-censorship and disavowal, mounting up to a collective denial of reality. "Silence is the real crime," observed Hanna Segal, the late British psychoanalyst, outspoken critic of American foreign policy, and legendary anti-nuclear activist.² It is the responsibility of psychoanalysts, Segal observed, to bring psychological realities to bear on politics, even if such interventions are likely to be dismissed. Perhaps we all—artists, critics, teachers—have a similar obligation now.

The Republican Party primary debates tested the candidates' abilities to play crazy more than anything else, to prove themselves, in Bion's terms, a "case." Their proposed policies were, many analysts observed, fanciful, irrational, even delusional—in pure economic terms, for example—but there was more to it.³ The

1. W. R. Bion, *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers* (London: Routledge, 2009).
2. Hanna Segal, "Silence Is the Real Crime" (1987), in *Psychoanalysis, Literature and War* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 143–56.
3. For a darkly comic appraisal of the primary candidates and their proposals, see Eliot Weinberger's essay "They Could Have Picked . . ." *London Review of Books* 38, no. 15 (July 28, 2016), pp. 7–8.

debates became auditions for the role of a mad president. And far from turning off primary voters, these spectacles proved highly popular, first as television entertainment, and then as a means of winnowing the field to the maddest contestant, a hands-down winner. “Only a madman would say, ‘I am the most wonderful and strongest person in the world,’” remarked one writer in a memorial tribute to Segal. “Yet, groups say things like that all the time about themselves.”⁴ In 2016, this cleavage between what is deemed pathological in the individual and normative in the group was eroded and then erased. In his convention speech, the nominee who in April had dubbed himself Wonderful Donald now declared, “I alone can fix it.”⁵ The political consensus on the affair seemed to be that while Republican-primary voters might constitute a mad group, general-election voters were more reality-based and would rescue the country from this folly.

Throughout the summer, the Clinton campaign took to the airwaves with advertisements relentlessly repeating Wonderful Donald’s mad speech. The refrain that a mad president poses an existential risk to present and future generations was an echo of the past. In the 1964 election, Vietnam War president Lyndon Johnson—like Clinton a progressive hawk with formidable political chops but “high negatives”—prevailed over the right-wing Republican nominee, Senator Barry Goldwater, by seizing on Goldwater’s avowed willingness to use nuclear weapons. The allusion to the Johnson-Goldwater matchup played to the collective expectation that Clinton, like Johnson, could not only win but win decisively, by showing that her opponent was too mad to be granted control of the nuclear codes. This time, the fail-safe strategy failed. There are many sophisticated data sets and analyses to explain this, but what is beyond dispute is that nearly half the electorate voted for a candidate who showcased his mad tendencies as the core of his appeal. It is worth asking what this reveals about the group.

By using this term, “the group,” I am resisting the political culture of the algorithm, which dices us into categories—working-class white men, single mothers, tea partiers, millennials, *Duck Dynasty* fans—and so enables professional analysts to model and, in theory, predict our behavior. Such empirical analysis has the virtue of efficiency, but it ignores historical and theoretical knowledge of the group, which would counsel that the group is difficult to study, let alone lead, in part because it is prone to be anxious, unstable, volatile, impulsive, destructive, and in flight from reality. It also ignores a central purpose of politics, which is laboriously to connect people and groups. In Bion’s terms, this is the political work of structuring: “The belief in the holiness of idiots, the belief that genius is akin to madness, all indicate this same tendency of the group to choose, when left unstructured, its most ill member as its leader,” he remarks.⁶ In contemporary presidential politics, individual candidates are subjected to a kind of psychological scrutiny, and the delusions of individual groups come in for of a measure of wonderment, but we live in a virtual, and

4. C. Fred Alford, “Hanna Segal—A Memorial Appreciation,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* 17, no. 3 (2012), p. 319.

5. Rebecca Savransky, “Trump Coins New Nickname: Wonderful Donald,” *The Hill*, April 24, 2016.

6. Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, p. 122.

willful, theoretical vacuum concerning the psychical dynamics of the group. That contemporary politics, despite its fascination with group behavior, is untouched by psychoanalytic theories of the group is another symptom of the denial of reality—in this case psychical reality—that afflicts us as a group.

A group, in Bion's terms, is the repository of the mad parts of ourselves. The group helps us to tame our madness, but it may also exaggerate it, reviving infantile trends. For it is in infancy that we feel most mad—fragmented, frightened, threatened, and “paranoid-schizoid,” as Melanie Klein evocatively described the state of anxiety in which the premature ego must temporarily exist.⁷ The mad leader is a kind of baby king, an avatar of our infantile past, a figure toward whom we feel pity. The grandiosity, impulsivity, and self-infatuation of the mad leader revives atavistic memories of our own infantile rages, mania, and megalomaniac ecstasies, and we can derive pleasure, Bion suggests, from indulging the omnipotent fantasies of a helpless psychotic. The group may spoil the leader and be captivated by his excesses to a degree that an individual would not.⁸

The elevation of a mad leader is the predictable outcome of failure to attend to the “basic assumptions” of an anxious group, which, as Bion explains, often expects “to obtain security from one individual on whom they depend,” the baby.⁹ The infant leader's dependency is the psychic correlate, or mirror image, of the group's own dependency on the baby king (“I alone can fix it”). Bion divides groups into two principal types, work groups that are task- and reality-based, and basic assumption groups that are emotionally driven. The two categories overlap, and work groups, which in Bion's terms are ego-like, are “constantly perturbed” by unconscious trends.¹⁰ A wise work group, Bion observes, can only be alarmed by the “spontaneous development of leadership” and by any move to nominate a leader “by ‘unconstitutional’ means, that is to say, by a spontaneous act of choice in which the emotions are not cooled.”¹¹ When politics becomes unstructured, overheated, and driven by basic assumptions, the group loses contact with reality, which is the province of work and, crucially, of cooperation. “A group acting on basic assumption requires no organization or cooperation” because it is not constrained by reality.¹²

The baby king (a usually masculine despot) licenses a departure from reality and, in particular, a denial of our own badness. To put this another way, the mania of a mad president relieves us of the responsibility to mourn. For Segal, the failure to mourn the effects of our own destructiveness is a defining feature of modern

7. Melanie Klein, “A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States” (1935), in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Free Press, 1986), pp. 116–45.

8. In our unconscious, we know, Bion observes, “that the baby, if only we had not become accustomed to associating its behavior with its physical development, is really insane” (p. 122).

9. Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, p. 66.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

American politics. In her writings on “nuclear mentality culture,” Segal observes that all groups resist assuming collective responsibility for war, but the history of the United States from Hiroshima to the Cold War to Vietnam to the First Gulf War to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is one of manic disavowal.¹³ The psychic legacy of the denial of guilt is, in psychoanalytic parlance, a pathological mourning. It is not only that we do not face up to the death and destruction we have caused, but also that our energies are consumed in denying their significance by manically declaring our own omnipotence.¹⁴ Every time we begin to mourn the destruction we have authored, it is morning, or infancy, in America again.¹⁵ And the broader implication of this perpetual recourse to historical amnesia of our own destructiveness in war is a negation of reality itself.

In the spring before the election of the mad president, his predecessor performed a symbolic act, assuming a measure of collective responsibility for past destruction. In May 2016, after visiting Vietnam, Barack Obama became the first sitting US president to make an official visit to Hiroshima. After touring the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, he laid a wreath at the cenotaph in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, met survivors of the atomic bomb US forces dropped on the city in 1945, and made a speech in which he called for the elimination of nuclear weapons. This simple, long-deferred action, taking place over seventy years after the event but still during the lifetime of some survivors, marked a shift from an enduring triumphalist rationalization of the atomic bombings of Japan (mania) to a more hopeful stance (mourning). The annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki might still, the president observed, occasion “a moral awakening.”¹⁶ Here was a different vision of mo(u)ning in America, one in which we might finally be able to acknowledge and grieve for the losses we have caused as well as for those we have endured.

Following his election in November 2016, months after Obama’s visit to Hiroshima, the president-elect moved swiftly to stock his cabinet with former generals. Days before Christmas, he would announce, with his trademark studied casualness, that he was toying with the idea of restarting the nuclear arms race. The non-fake news over the festive period was filled with speculation about the possibility that nuclear testing would be resumed under the watchful eye of a secretary of energy who had, as a presidential candidate, called for the elimination of the Department of Energy. There was still some uncertainty about the target of this new nuclear

13. Hanna Segal, “From Hiroshima to the Cold War and After: Socio-Political Expressions of Ambivalence,” in *Psychoanalysis, Literature, and War*, pp. 157–68.

14. On this dynamic, see Melanie Klein, “Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States” (1940), in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, pp. 146–74.

15. The most influential contemporary account of this syndrome, and the ethical implications of pathological mourning, is Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

16. Gardiner Harris, “At Hiroshima Memorial, Obama Says Nuclear Arms Require Moral Revolution,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2016.



*Rachel Harrison. More News: A Situation. 2016.
Installation view at Greene Naftali, New York, April 2016.
Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.
Photograph by Jason Mandella.*

buildup, given the president-elect's personal regard for the leader of the historical archenemy, but there was a certain logic to his tweet that the nuclear show must go on. For if, as Segal had argued, nuclear politics is a form of mass psychosis in which the prospect of annihilation arouses mania—makes us crazy—then the enemy might truly be a secondary concern. What is crazy about the nuclear attitude, the psychoanalyst explained, is that it actively creates the conditions for what it most fears, the end of the world, while also—and this is crucial—denying the catastrophic reality it risks. To the extent that the president-elect himself represents a kind of political nuclear option, which the group has now exercised, the corollary of a reinvigorated nuclear arms race is a logical extension of that radical act.

Writing in the 1960s, at the height of the Cold War and the American war in Vietnam, about the psychical implications of the nuclear threat, the Italian psychoanalyst Franco Fornari framed the problem as “a collective delusion of negation of reality.”¹⁷ The reality Fornari had in mind was the “pantoclastic prospect” of nuclear annihilation, a catastrophic possibility so overwhelming as to arouse our most primitive manic defense, a denial of reality. In this situation, the psychoanalyst observed, we urgently require some “instrument of verifying reality.”¹⁸ That instrument, he speculated, might be another, contrasting form of madness, namely, melancholia. The possibility exists, Fornari observed, that the melancholic, “while insane,” is still “closer to the catastrophic reality of our times” than “the unsuspecting victims of a collective delusion of negation of reality.”¹⁹ In a climate of reality negation, the melancholic vision of doom has the potential to enlighten.

Perhaps this is our opening. Afflicted as we are by a manic negation of reality—the realities of climate change, nuclear armaments, the pain of others—we also, and not coincidentally, live in a time of mass melancholia.²⁰ Under the headings of an epidemic of opiate addiction and economically induced despair, mass melancholia was a significant, if unheralded, theme of the 2016 campaign. The selection of the maddest member of the group as our leader might be seen as a radical response to this morbid state, or as the psychical equivalent of the nuclear option that risks self-annihilation in a frenzy of energizing paranoid-schizoid destructiveness.

“Love trumps hate,” Clinton's swan song to the 2016 campaign, attempted to salve the anxiety of the group but also risked a negation of psychic reality to rival the negation of objective reality promoted by her nemesis. For the individual, love has in some circumstances the power to overcome hatred, but love between

17. Franco Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis of War*, trans. Alenka Pfeifer (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1974), p. 160.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. By 2030, depression will be the leading illness worldwide, the World Health Organization warns. The phrase “mass melancholia” was recently coined by Juliet Mitchell. Together, she and I have recently begun a research project on melancholia and politics with the working title “Mass Melancholia: Cultural Counteractions.”

groups, as Fornari observed, is far rarer. A principal psychic function of the group, he argued, is to pool our terror and hatred and to export those emotions elsewhere—as onto our enemies in war. Today, our group is split, and this divide can seem to replicate the psychical conditions of war.

Yet, even this intensifying war at home cannot discharge the destructive reserves of nuclear mentality culture, a destructiveness that, as Fornari warned, has precipitated us into a prolonged state of crisis. By resorting immediately and reflexively to the rhetoric of nuclear escalation, the mad president has laid bare the underlying and persistent predicament of our group: that our failure or refusal to mourn demands an unending and unexpendable accumulation of destructiveness to ward off melancholia. This might be crazy, but it reveals a psychical reality we may be forced to confront for our own survival.

What now? We who are writers, teachers, and artists can bear witness to the psychical reality of melancholia, the morbid pull of the death drive, and help turn it into creative resistance. We can work to foster a politics of connection. We can promote cultural counter-actions to “verify reality,” including historical reality. We can “fight with the mind,” as Virginia Woolf taught us to do, and make meaningful use of the hard-won theoretical and political insights previous generations have bequeathed to us.²¹ Silence is the real crime.

January 17, 2017

21. Virginia Woolf, “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid,” in *Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 2.