



AGNOTOLOGY AND THE KNOW-NOTHING PARTY: THEN AND NOW

I love the poorly educated! They are the smartest people, the most loyal people.

Donald Trump¹

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Willful ignorance is a powerful enablement. So I was taught by Harold Bloom, a most able agon in the gladiatorial arena of poetic discernment and my first poetry teacher in an ordinary place in New Haven some time in the last century. By the beginning of the current century, I found ample confirmation of that insight in the realpolitik of the world, a substantiation that corroborated for me the worldliness of literature as world literature and the transferability of critical comprehension into political awareness. The distance between willful ignorance and belligerent ignorance, I have come to realize, can be scant and easily traversed. And whereas poets create worlds by an act of will, historically politicians and those for whom they rule define the world for convenience by bellicose acts of expediency directed through self-serving management of the intricate ratio between knowledge and ignorance.

The efficacy of managing knowledge to purpose becomes foregrounded in periods of hegemonic ascendancy when the world to be ruled is ruled with greatest efficacy as the world that is to be known. The declaration of “critical languages” and the rubric of “area studies,” the institutional framework for academic pedagogy

1. Upon winning the Nevada primary, 23 February 2016.

and scholarly discourse on the world throughout most of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first is a compelling instance of this connection between knowledge management and the pursuit of worldly mandate. This is the historically repeated confirmation that yokes epistemology to empire and links knowledge management with colonization and hegemonic occupation. Optimally, the hegemon comes to realize, what is not known becomes just as important, if not more crucial than what is known. As with the paradox of negative theology, where faith is predicated on what cannot be known, the doxa of imperial epistemology rests on what must be kept from being known, on what perforce must be ignored. Hegemony's understanding of the potential of ignorance, in other words, makes the production, management, and sanctioning of ignorance of paramount importance. And the ratio between the level of accountability and the credibility index of those who do the managing of knowledge and the purveying of ignorance can be quite stark, even if dismissed and disdained by the governing operatives and their media apparatus. Trading on ignorance, or "manufacturing consent," as the Gramscian title of a 1988 treatise by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky would have it, then, is the trademark of the modern imperial era, and no more so than now, when media are consolidated into monopolistic corporations, monolithic ideologies, and univocal echo chamber.

It should not be surprising, then, that the vehemence with which programmatic ignorance has been instrumentalised as hegemonic and neocolonial stratagem in the first decades of the twenty-first century has spawned a science and field of research called *agnotology*, literally, the science of ignorance, most suggestively explained in a couple volumes from the past decade, one by specialists in philosophy and the other by experts in the history of science. The first is a collective volume of essays edited by two philosophers, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, titled *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, published by the State University of New York Press in 2007. The other, a collection of essays by various specialists in the history of science and the public interest, is edited by Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger with the title of *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, published by Stanford University Press in 2008. Neither volume

draws the connection between epistemology and hegemony, despite the fact that their areas of investigation are intricately enmeshed in colonialism and imperial history. The first is focused on the question of race, while the latter is trained on the management of information on product safety by the tobacco industry. The appearance of both volumes in an epoch of hegemonic control of information and the programmatic production of ignorance, what is known as the era of “spin,” “branding,” and “marketing,” may not be altogether fortuitous. George Orwell might well see the emergence of this discursive phenomenon as a manifest symptom of what is elided in public discourse, including, alas, in the protocols of university governance, namely, the doublespeak of a neo-colonial, imperial era that reigns by purposive occlusion, disinformation, and the manipulation of knowledge for imperial expediency. The corrosive role of the media in the entropy of public discourse and the vitiation of any possible truth echoes the beginning of the previous century, but incisive analyses such as Upton Sinclair’s 1919 book *The Brass Check* that exposed those orchestrated catastrophes in the service of capital and its hegemony always seem to have a penchant for getting waylaid somewhere in the warehouse section of the library. The waning of analytical critique in our own scholarly era may not be altogether unrelated to this symptomatology.

We should not be startled, then, by the fact that the twenty-first century is ushered in by a momentous lesson in hegemonic epistemology, delivered by the mouthpiece of the most powerful, certainly the best funded, government agency on the planet, the Secretary of Defense of the United States of America, Mr. Donald Rumsfeld. At a news briefing from the Department of Defense on February 12, 2002, in response to a reporter’s question on the preparations for the imminent invasion of Iraq, on the lack of evidence on weapons of mass destruction and on the spuriousness of claims regarding the Iraqi government’s supply of such weapons to terrorists, Rumsfeld gave a reply that is now indelibly etched in the annals of hegemonic epistemology and the expedient management of ignorance and obfuscation as instruments of sanctioned violence. Here is the voice of empire’s epistemic reason: “Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me,

because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones." The page with the transcript of this news briefing has since been taken down from the Department of Defense web site, <Defense.gov>, thus illustrating yet another twist in the management of knowability, of knowns, unknowns, and what is foreclosed as possibility for being knowable.

Foot soldier and mouthpiece of the New World Order that had recently been decreed by George Bush the Elder, Rumsfeld was engaged in the verbal legerdemain Orwell called doublespeak on behalf of the impending imperial act of aggression with which George Bush the Younger ushered in the new century and the new millennium, thus setting the stage for a self-declared and still enduring perpetual war. Rumsfeld's centurial, millenarian, and apocalyptic rhetoric that echoed the evangelical zeal of the born-again Younger Bush, was, in fact, a mimetic iteration, as most self-convinced novelty is prone to be, of a poem by D. H. Lawrence from the previous century and another war that was to have ended all wars, a poem resonant with apocalyptic echoes that date to the visions of John of Patmos in the last chapter, Revelations, of the Christian New Testament. Lawrence's poem carries the Johannine title of "New Heaven and New Earth," and serves as a reminder to students and scholars of world literature of the worldliness of literature and the poesis, or making of the world as mimetic iteration of literature. For some this might be a startling reversal, or spectralization, as the ghostly critical idiom would have it, of the commonplace understanding of the relationship between world and literary representation. Poems like Lawrence's, in other words, trouble that reductive view of the existence of literature as manifest symptom of the world in which it is embedded, on the one hand, or of literary production as promissory note of a perpetually anticipated imminent futurity, on the other. Lawrence's poem is neither. It is at once an ambivalent diagnosis of a historical moment living through the ravages of World War I and an ambiguously

keen reflection on visionaries and prognostications of the future. Critical discourse, in its deluded self-perception as mid-wife, if not, in the mind of some critics, outright progenitor of these processes, perennially oscillates between this bipolar obsession that dates from antiquity and Plato's *Republic* to modern sociologists and their *World Republic of Letters*, in the first instance, and, on the other hand, the apocalyptic tradition of the Latin vulgate's "nondum," or "not yet," that runs from John of Patmos to contemporary postcolonial brokers who wager on the features of history's commodity market and the perennially expected yield of historical outcome as the imminent ideal community. Lawrence's troublesome poem seems to dramatize an anxious prosopopoeia of such visionary schemes, whether these be visions of scientific historians who prophesy the past, or of inspired sociologists who prospect in the potential equities of the future. The poem, written in 1917, is on the long side and echoes Lawrence's reflections on America and American literature at a time when he was seriously considering emigrating to the United States, with his ambivalence at the prospect in full bloom. Here is Lawrence's judgment of the place through his analysis of James Fenimore Cooper's equivocal patriotism and his five *Leatherstockings* novels. Lawrence noted: "it is perhaps easier to love America passionately, when you look at it through the wrong end of the telescope, across the Atlantic water, as Cooper did so often, than when you are right there. When you are actually *in* America, America hurts, because it has a powerful disintegrative influence upon the white psyche. [...] America is tense with latent violence and resistance" (56). In the twenty-first century, the history of the present demonstrates, that violence is far from being simply "latent," and, there no longer is a "wrong end of the telescope" since modern technologies have collapsed space and distance and, even when one might not be *in* America, America is ubiquitously wherever anyone happens to be in the rest of the world. The poem's New World, then, is the coming of, quote, "a madman in rapture," as the poem would have it. And Lawrence's is certainly not the Salvationist second coming of Kipling's hortatory poem of 1898, "The White Man's Burden," so meaningful to Theodore Roosevelt, more about which presently. Lawrence's prosopopoeia is a primal eschatology

that displaces the primacy of all who came before, an emphatic exacerbation of Thomas Jefferson's and Ralph Waldo Emerson's disquietude about American primacy and secondariness. Neither Jefferson, nor Emerson, by the way, figure in the collection of essays on American literature Lawrence was also writing at the time. Here is the key passage from part VI of the eight-part poem: "Cortes, Pizarro, Columbus, Cabot, they are noth-/ ing, nothing! / I am the first comer! / I am the discoverer! / I have found the other world! // The unknown, the unknown / [...] Ha, I was a blaze leaping up! / I was a tiger bursting into sunlight. / I was greedy, I was mad for the unknown // I, new-risen, resurrected, starved from the tomb / Starved from a life of devouring always myself / Now here was I, new-awakened, with my hand stretching out / And touching the unknown, the real unknown / The unknown unknown!" (203)

How knowingly Mr. Rumsfeld might have been echoing Lawrence's poem may have to remain one of those known unknowns in the annals of agnotology. What we do know, however, is the correlation we recognize between the poetic persona dramatized in Lawrence's poem and the historical person of the political operative as crazed state apparatchik mad with power and the pathology of what at the time was decreed as the defining teleology of national policy that endures still as axiomatic tenet of US American realpolitik in all its righteousness, namely, "full spectrum dominance"—key doctrine and de facto governing principle of thoroughly militarized international and domestic agenda. That visionary doctrine goes by the official title of "Joint Vision 2020," and its script as US Department of Defense document dates from 30 May 2000.² The translation of that doctrine from declared agenda into global action is now self-evident; its baneful worldly consequences around the globe speak for themselves. In the case of Lawrence's poem, a critical interpretation as part of the larger context of Lawrence's oeuvre comes from a scholar of theology and psychiatry by the name of John McDaragh in a book chapter titled "Desire, Domination, and the Life and Death of the Soul." It appears in a volume edited by Richard K. Fenn and Donald Capps

2. See: <<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=45289>>

from the Princeton Theological Seminary. The volume is titled *On Losing the Soul: Essays in the Social Psychology of Religion* and was published by the State University of New York Press in 1995. I cite from McDaragh's essay on page 227: "In his long poem, 'New Heaven and New Earth,' Lawrence [...] in harrowing imagery [...] evokes the psychic hell of a kind of narcissistic implosion, the condition of someone whose defenses against the risks of mutuality and relationship have sealed him into self-sufficiency and splendid isolation. The poem suggests as well what happens when ideology of domination, as reified and politically realized in the masculine cultures of science and technology, runs to its desperate limits."

The harrowing world dramatized by D. H. Lawrence and so aptly characterized by McDaragh, will find its objective correlative, as T. S. Eliot would have it, in the world made by Mr. Rumsfeld and his neocolonial neocon cadres, just as his echolalic double-speak reverberates with the revenant ravings of Lawrence's poem.

The mid-nineteenth-century decade between 1845 and 1855 in the history of the United States of America stands as a textbook example of the convergence of imperial impulse, willful ignorance, and world literature, a fateful triangle that becomes illustrative of the fate of dissent and also serves as precedent-setting template for wars of choice as instrument of capital and the securing of competing vested interests, economic and territorial, all behind the ideological screen of national consolidation. In terms of agnotology, this period in American history is witness to the most overt declaration of willful ignorance as political project, with all the pathologies of solipsistic invagination, xenophobia, and belligerence that John McDaragh diagnosed in the poetic dramatization by D. H. Lawrence in "New Heaven and New Earth." This is the self-declared Know-Nothing Party that emerged in New York in 1843, was officially named the American Republican Party in 1845, was renamed the American Party in 1855, and would be dissolved in 1860, only to re-surface periodically, in key elements of its political agenda and psychic symptoms, most recently in the spectacle of the Republican and Democratic Parties and their televised "debates" that in saner times might have proved a national embarrassment. But the political real-

ity in the country at this moment mirrors the conditions that brought the Know-Nothing Party to the fore, and contemporary public discourse resonates as echo of that “nativist” precedent. In referring to itself as “native American” the Know-Nothing Party betrayed its racist agenda on various fronts, certainly in its erasure of the true Natives, the indigenous people of the country who had been forcibly expelled from their native territory in the previous decade under the presidency of Andrew Jackson, an ignominious chapter in ethnic cleansing for the benefit of white European settlers that culminated in the Trail of Tears between 1836 and 1839. The party’s xenophobic anti-immigration hysteria, principally against Irish and German Catholics, but, no less significantly, though US historians tend to overlook this element, against the Mexican population that the war on Mexico and the appropriation of half its territory suddenly made part of the USA, should sound very familiar to anyone listening to the current political discourse, especially on the topic of immigration and what are significantly referred to as “illegal aliens” and, more euphemistically, as “illegal immigrants.” The literary response to this pivotal decade in American history is succinctly analyzed in a recent treatise by Jaime Javier Rodríguez titled *The Literatures of the US-Mexican War: Narrative, Time, and Identity*, published by the University of Texas Press in 2010.

The potato famine in Ireland starting in 1845 led to a surge of Irish immigration, and the revolutions of 1848, particularly the March 13 revolution in Vienna that spread across the German states, brought a sudden increase in German, mainly German Catholic immigration, all of which was perceived by the white Protestant Americans as an economic, religious, and ethno-racial threat. The Know-Nothing Party could not very well round-up immigrants and dump them across the newly re-drawn Mexican border, as is the current practice of the US government. They proposed, instead, that all civil service and teaching positions be reserved strictly for white Protestants, and the waiting period for application to become a naturalized US citizen be extended to twenty-one years.

The emergence of the Know-Nothing Party was not a spontaneous event but the manifest symptom of a hegemonic

mainstream political culture that was on a war footing and a relentless push for territorial invasion, occupation, and settlement, with the self-legitimizing sanction of divine providence, fully righteous in the pursuit of turning an “ideology of domination, [into] reified and politically realized” conquest, to cite McDaragh once more. The year 1845 was the year in which John O’Sullivan gave the new administration of James K. Polk the war cry of “Manifest Destiny” in an article titled “Annexation” that appeared in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. The following year, 1846, would witness America’s first war of choice, the war on Mexico launched in May and couched as pre-emptive action, in anticipation of the rhetoric that accompanies the more recent series of wars of choice that usher in the twenty-first century. A month later, on June 24 1846, to be exact, the US settlers in California proclaimed their settlements an independent republic, which promptly requested to be, and was, annexed, as was the territory of New Mexico. 1848, the year of revolutions in Europe, was the year of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo through which the US appropriated half of Mexico’s territory, from Kansas to California. It was also the year in which, *mirabile dictu*, gold was struck in the newly acquired territories, prompting the California Gold Rush that ensued. In a lecture at Concord Lyceum titled “The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government,” better known by its subsequent published title as “Civil Disobedience” (1849), Henry David Thoreau pronounced his dissent and refusal to pay his taxes in protest against slavery and the war on Mexico. The Know-Nothing Party took a different view. Its declared primary concern was how to contain the Catholic Mexicans within the former Mexican territories even while appropriating their land, and to demonize the hungry horde of Irish Catholics and German Catholic political refugees who managed to cross the Atlantic. The Know-Nothing Party resonated with the overarching consensus of a society bent on war, territorial expansion, and the harnessing of natural resources as capitalizable booty to which imperial righteousness feels perennially entitled. By 1860, the Know-Nothing Party was disbanded, ceding the agonistic arena to the patriotic gore and economic opportunism of the Civil War and its aftermath. The Civil War and the predatory Darwinism of the Reconstruction

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era were fundamentally a contest between alternative economic systems of capitalization—the slave-based plantation economy and the slavish exploitation of labor by the second industrial revolution. In contention, then, was the mode of use and maximal exploitation of the newly conquered territory and the economic potential of its human geography. Barely a generation after that bloodletting, yet another war of choice, called the Spanish American War, proved an inevitability, as did the reach across the Pacific into the Philippines which ushered in the twentieth century, dubbed the American century, and the new era of globalization with enhanced modes of extractive colonialism on a planetary scale.

The centurial transition, like the trans-oceanic imperial adventure across the Pacific, occurred quite naturally, starting with the heeding of a February 1898 exhortation by the British imperial poet Rudyard Kipling entitled “The Whiteman’s Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands,” published in *McClure’s Magazine*, in which Kipling urged Washington to pick up the imperial mantle from London with what he called, without irony, “the savage wars of peace” (stanza 3, line 2). The soon-to-be Vice-President, and shortly after President, Theodor Roosevelt was moved enough to copy the poem and send it to Senator Henry Cabot Lodge with a note that reveals his acumen as poetry critic and his imperial enthusiasm. Kipling’s, Roosevelt remarked in his note, was “rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansion point of view.” To my knowledge, Mr. Roosevelt does not say anything about the writings of Mark Twain and the philosopher William James, two leading figures of the Anti-Imperialist League whose views challenged Kipling’s and Roosevelt’s imperial logic. And, so, by April of 1898, two months after Kipling’s exhortation, the US would declare war on Spain, acquiring dominion over Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, a prelude to what would become the American Twentieth Century. That transition is consolidated with Roosevelt’s 1904 “Corollary” to the 1823 Monroe Doctrine. “Roosevelt’s Corollary,” as it is known, would reassert geopolitical hegemony over the Western Hemisphere, a reiteration that discursively anticipated the mid-twentieth-century carving up of the globe between east and west into spheres of influence during the Cold War.

When D. H. Lawrence was composing his poem “New Heaven and New Earth,” in 1917, he had also begun writing his book of essays titled *Studies in Classic American Literature* which would be completed and published in 1923. His only book of literary criticism, it proved a touchstone for nineteenth-century American literary history and for what became the corpus of what he termed “classic American literature.” Despite Lawrence’s unorthodox insight and idiosyncratic language, his wry diagnoses proved determinative in the cultural criticism of such seminal figures as F. O. Matthiessen and his 1941 treatise that defined the American canon, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, and Leslie Fiedler, a student of Matthiessen’s Harvard graduate seminar on American poetry and author of *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960). Both scholars of a non-conformist bent and Marxist ideological leanings, with an early critical interest in the homoerotic strains of American masculinity, their legacy from a tumultuous historical period at mid-twentieth century has proved formative of the American canon and its critical discourse. Lawrence’s 1923 volume and William Carlos Williams’ book of essays *In the American Grain* two years later would foreground the insurgent discourse of American literary historiography whose grain, or defining attribute, is being against the grain, as the ironies of Williams’ iconoclastic sketches of America’s iconic figures illustrate. Thus, a convergence of these critical voices with a number of literary figures such as James Fennimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville, all variously at variance with their own historical time, has engendered the core of a national canon still dissonant with the pathologies of domination and incorrigible bellicosity that characterize the society from which it has emerged. The irony of this historical dissonance was not lost on Lawrence or on certain literary historians who appreciated his wry, at times sardonic, critical insight.

Lawrence’s book on American literature has certain American antecedents, particularly, in the irony and iconoclasm of James Russell Lowell, a demotic poet who voiced his critique of war-crazed America at mid-nineteenth century through the persona and colloquial voice of Hosea Biglow. *The Biglow Papers*, a satirical critique of war published in the bellicose year of 1848, with a second

series in the course of the Civil War in 1862, questioned, in vernacular verse, the social and political anxieties that made the Know Nothing Party possible. As wartime critique, Lowell's *Biglow Papers* could be read as the American version of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, the Roman anti-epic on the first-century civil war between Julius Caesar and the Roman Senate, a work that led to its imprudent author's becoming a suspect in the Pisonian Conspiracy of 65 AD and to being sentenced by Nero to commit suicide along with his uncle, the Stoic philosopher Seneca. Lowell and his contemporaries knew Lucan's *Pharsalia* well enough for the Confederate War Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery to have a line from it engraved in its base, "Victrix causa deis placuit sed victa Catoni" – "The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the vanquished pleased Cato." It is a consolatory dictum in tribute to the honor of the losing side, with Cato being the noble Stoic and the sole redeemable hero of a world gone mad with internecine cruelty and depraved blood lust during Nero's reign. So, if there should be an American prototype for Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, it would have to be Lowell and, specifically, Lowell's *A Fable for Critics, or A Glance at A Few of Our Literary Progenies from the Tub of Diogenes*, also from 1848. Only, Lowell's jeu d'esprit takes on a darker cast in Lawrence, even though the two coincide, more often than not, in their assessment of the writers they sketch. Where they do coincide most meaningfully is in the question of epistemology, of knowing and being. Their portrayal of Richard Henry Dana, Jr. and his 1840 sea voyage narrative, *Two Years Before the Mast*, is especially telling in this regard. One could justly speculate that the very appearance of Dana in Lawrence's book might well be due to Lowell's poetic sketch of this would-be-poet, a portrait that focuses on doing, being, and knowing, terms that Lawrence writes with capital letters when discussing Dana: "KNOWING and BEING are opposite, antagonistic states. The more you know, exactly, the less you *are*. The more you *are*, in being, the less you know.

"This is the great cross of man, his dualism. The blood-self, and the nerve-brain self. [...] The goal is to know how not-to-know" (121). And this, precisely, is the knowledge that eluded the Know-Nothing Party of Lowell's time, as Lowell well knew. In concluding his sketch, Lawrence notes, "Dana's small book

is a very great book: contains a great extreme of knowledge, knowledge of the great element.

And after all, we have to know all before we can know that knowing is nothing.

Imaginatively, we have to know all: even the elemental waters. And know and know on, until knowledge suddenly shrivels and we know that forever we don't know.

Then there is a sort of peace, and we can start afresh, knowing we don't know. (138)

I do not know that Lawrence knew the 1440 treatise by Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia*. But it would be safe to wager that the Latin student Lowell did. For those interested in the minutiae, chapter 3 of a 2011 book *Memos from the Besieged City*, from Stanford University Press, is titled "Of Learned Ignorance: Nicholas of Cusa and Cardinal Spaces of Culture" and is devoted to the German-Italian cardinal's epistemology. The elemental knowing that Lawrence attributes to Dana is in contrast to the ideological knowledge of his contemporaries, whether the utopian transcendentalists, the isolationist and phobic Know-Nothings, or the disciples of "Saviourism," as Lawrence refers to them, that is, those perennial Salvationists who take on Kipling's "White Men's Burden" for whom knowledge and its management are integral to their imperial calculus. "Saviourism is a despicable thing" (127), Lawrence declares unequivocally, and one can only imagine what his judgment would be today of those who maximize the return on their soteriological calculus by catalyzing it with political cynicism and predatory rapaciousness.

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