

The American Religion and All That Mumbo-Jumbo: The Gnostic, the A-Gnostic and the Pagan in American Literature

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Fifteen years ago, on his way to becoming a one-man culture industry, the literary critic and scholar Harold Bloom took stock of what he might have called his own *agon* with a country that had just concluded the First Gulf War, presided over by President George H.W. Bush, who had won election in part by allying himself with the Christian Right. While accurately noting that that particular war was “not one in which Islam was involved spiritually, on either side” (15), Bloom nonetheless saw the struggle as an expression of a particular set of American beliefs that he goes on to describe in his book *The American Religion*. In the first Bush’s justifications for the first Gulf War, as well as in his separate appeals to anti-abortion Christians (“waving the flag and the fetus,” as Bloom puts it), Bloom hears a battle-cry “against whatever denies the self’s status and function as the true standard of being” (16), curiously anticipating in 1992 the rhetoric of the next President Bush, who would use words similar to Bloom’s in defining the War on Terror after September 11, 2001, and later in justifying the second war against Saddam Hussein.

Many humanists and liberals who supported the war against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban and even, initially, the 2003 invasion of Iraq also might have called the self a “true standard of being” underpinning Western democracy, whose values of individual rights and civil liberties were under threat from Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. (In fact, such a case has been made by the British leftist/atheist commentator Christopher Hitchens.) Yet, according to Bloom, the first Bush implied something different and was heard differently by the practitioners of what Bloom terms the “American Religion.” The first Gulf War, in Bloom’s view, was not understood by the President and these practitioners as being about human rights or even about oil. Rather, Bloom claims, the concept of the “self’s status and function as the true standard of being” actually refers to a deeper and more radical view of the self that defines what Bloom calls the “American Religion” and marks the emergence of what he terms a “post-Christian nation.”

The core belief of this America Religion, Bloom asserts, unites sects whose surface differences might seem irreconcilable—Southern Baptists, Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, Pentacostalists, Christian Scientists, and African American churches, among others. What they

hold in common, according to Bloom, is an understanding of the soul, or “something deeper than the soul, the Real Me or self or spark . . . made free to be utterly alone with a God who is also quite separate and solitary . . .” This spark, “this true Adam is as old as God, older than the Bible, and is free of time, unstained by morality,” linked to the solitude of the American individual, a state of being that Bloom identifies as the American spiritual quest for *gnosis*, a mystical knowing of an eternal self and/with God to be found in “the primal Abyss, named by the ancient Gnostics as both our foremother and our forefather” (30).

The Gnostic emphasis on individual knowing merges, for Bloom, with the American cult of self-reliance. As he put it in one of his typical overgeneralizations, “No American pragmatically feels free if she is not alone, and no American ultimately concedes that she is part of nature” (15). Thus, one of the most visible signs of the American Religion, the revival experience, is “the perpetual shock of the individual discovering yet again what she and he always have known, which is that God loves her and him on an absolutely personal and indeed intimate basis” (17). Lest we object that the groups Bloom singles out as representative of the American Religion, for all their recent rapid growth (at least in the case of the Southern Baptists and the Mormons), are still collectively a small minority of the American population, Bloom extends his definition to claim that supposedly “normative” Methodists and Catholics, as well as Jews and Muslims, “are also more Gnostic than normative in their deepest and unwariest beliefs. . . . [E]ven our secularists [and] atheists are more Gnostic than humanist in their ultimate presuppositions. We are a religiously mad culture, furiously searching for . . . the original self, a spark or breath in us that we are convinced goes back to before the Creation” (22).

The astonishing sweep of Bloom’s claim that this “almost purely experiential” (37) religion is embedded in all the belief systems named above, coupled with his apparent oxymoron that “Biblical Christianity, like Judaism before it, is not a biblical religion” (245) makes one wonder if he can name any “normative” religions at all. Bloom’s book is often maddeningly vague and contradictory in its broad assertions, too often substituting the repetition of cant phrases for sustained argument; nonetheless, he does seem to be on to something in describing an aspect of American culture often noted by observers, foreign and domestic, over the last two centuries: “A religion of the self burgeons,” Bloom claims, “under many names, and seeks to know its own inwardness, in isolation. . . . But this freedom is a very expensive torso, because of what it is obliged to leave out: society, temporality, the other. What remains, for it, is solitude

and the abyss” (37). This “Gnostic” abyss that Bloom describes, however, is not the more familiar Nietzschean abyss of existential isolation that induces the terrible knowledge of true freedom, but a metaphysical state that has always existed. The Gnostic self, soul or “spark” seeks to return to a comforting, womblike solitude, “at peace when it is alone with an abyss that preceded the world God made” and “in which the inner loneliness is at home in an outer loneliness” identified as the solitary nature of God (31).

Such solitude has real social and political costs, Bloom admits, but these are not his focus as a self-proclaimed “religious critic,” following in the footsteps of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Emerson and William James (23). Precisely *what* is the object of Bloom’s “religious criticism” is not totally clear, although he finds a parallel to his effort in literary criticism, whose object is an “irreducibly *aesthetic* dimension [that] transcend[s] societal and political concerns,” just as “[s]piritual values . . . transcend the claims of society and politics” (21). However, if spiritual values are intensely personal and above social concerns (a not-uncommon view in the history of Christianity), then how can one “criticize” religious subjectivity? Bloom’s reply is somewhat obscure. Religion and literature share “a stance against dying,” he claims, but they differ in that “the category of the ‘religious’ is set against death even as the ‘poetic’ seeks a triumph over time.” Bloom implies that the “triumph over time” is a measure of literature’s aesthetic success and that the spiritual “success” of religion can be judged by its stance toward death. Thus “Criticism,” Bloom proclaims, “seeks the poetic in poetry, and should seek the religious in religion” (36).

Such a separation of duties, though, is far too neat. While literature has increasingly diverged from religion in many ways over the centuries, religion was literature’s place of origin and the two have remained intimately involved, just as death (which marks the end of subjective, earthly time for the individual) and time (which informs subjective knowledge of our passage towards death) cannot be neatly separated either. Additionally, Bloom’s description of the American Religion as “an imaginative triumph” (22) suggests that he in fact finds an aesthetic dimension in this set of core beliefs cutting across a group of very different sects, rather far afield from William James’ definition of religious experience as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude” (qtd. in Bloom, 25). There also seems to be a socio-political element to Bloom’s religious criticism when he announces that “the function of religious criticism at the present time [an echo of Matthew Arnold!] is to keep the spiritual in religion

from following the aesthetic in literature into the discard trays of the politically correct School of Resentment” (43). Despite his deep misgivings about such a literally self-centered religion, Bloom finally tips his hand by revealing that his real concern is with the encroaching threat to the American Religion by Fundamentalism. Despite popular confusion, Bloom claims, Fundamentalism, “the parodistic curse of the American religion,” has altogether different aims from this group of sects. Fundamentalism, he warns, threatens to obliterate the spiritual elements that define the American Religion, and it is the duty of “religious criticism” to “uncover and analyze” that threat (44), the looming Fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention being his prime example.

I will leave it to other critics, religious or not, to measure the applicability of Bloom’s Gnostic model to the Southern Baptists and other sects he discusses in detail in his book; my concern is with how his notion of the American Religion does or does not fit American literature. Even Bloom tacitly admits the mutual involvement of literature and religion when he describes Walt Whitman as “our Hermetic national poet” who “sings two selves at once. One is Walt Whitman . . . endlessly merging into other groups, but the other is ‘the real me’ or ‘me myself,’ always fragile, always standing apart” (26), that is, the emblematic Gnostic self of the American Religion. Whitman, of course, proclaimed that he was the American Poet whose coming Emerson had foretold, and it is Emerson, Bloom agrees, who is the “theologian” of the American Religion (16), in effect defining the emerging faith’s parameters in the Divinity School Address (Bloom 24) and his essay on Self-Reliance. Emerson’s prophetic stance, his call to American greatness, is taken against what he called his country’s “diminutive minds.” Emerson complained that his America was, so far, “formless” and had “no terrible and no beautiful condensation” of a uniquely national character and identity. It is Bloom’s contention that the American Religion does exactly offer such a “condensation,” that in its emphasis on an eternal solitary self it is perhaps the clearest expression of what defines the “American soul.” In contrast, Bloom claims, the canonical “major sequence” of American writers—including “Hawthorne, Melville, Dickinson, Mark Twain, Henry James, Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Hart Crane”—“tend to keep their distance from the Orphic and Gnostic abysses of the national self, lest they vanish into it” (16).

On this point, I would agree with Bloom (although Hart Crane's inclusion is problematic; Stephen would be the better Crane to cite), but only if one must identify the American Religion with the "national self." Indeed, Bloom understates the extent to which this set of writers more often than not portrays those "Orphic and Gnostic abysses" with irony and skepticism, if not the outright hostility of other writers such as Sinclair Lewis. (Eliot is the exception who proves the rule in his own journey from the parody of "The Hippopotamus" and despair of *The Wasteland* to the self-described Anglo-Catholicism that informs his later works.) Bloom seems to base his sense of the "national character" on opinion polls, situating the centrality of the American Religion in the huge majority of Americans who are self-professed believers, especially in contrast to a largely secular Europe, but he overlooks the many nuances and distinctions that such polls may hide. Even within the vast body of American believers, Bloom consistently overstates the dominance of the American Religion, in keeping with his own political naïveté, demonstrated by his stated fear that in his lifetime he would never again see a Democrat as President (57)—this in 1992, the year of Bill Clinton's election!

I contend that Bloom's "major sequence" of American writers does in fact represent a particular "condensation" of an important aspect of a "national self" that is actually far more fragmented and diverse than Bloom can see, represented most obviously by the now-familiar political distinction of "Red" and "Blue" states (itself a simplistic dichotomy, political scientists now admit). Skepticism and irony may not be spiritual attitudes, but in these "major sequence" writers such qualities do reflect hard-fought inner battles regarding the basic questions about death and meaning that are at the heart of religion. Twain's view of religion, for example, is always distant but moves from satire and irony in *Roughing It* to confrontation in *Huckleberry Finn* to the growing bitterness and despair of *The Mysterious Stranger* and *Letters from the Earth*, perhaps there touching most closely, while rejecting, the spiritual environment of the American Religion.

Dickinson's poems also move toward greater skepticism across her lifetime but in a more ambivalent fashion. Poem 49¹ ("I never lost as much but twice") declares her anger at God as "Burglar!" for taking lives twice before but shifts to an implied bargain with a "Banker" and then an implied reconciliation with the "Father" (5). That solemn appeal contrasts with the

¹ The numbering of Dickinson's poems follows their designation in Thomas Johnson's edition of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

irreverently playful proto-pantheism of Poem 61, which asks “Papa Above!” to regard a dead mouse and reserve within His heavenly house “A ‘Mansion’ for the Rat!” (7). Throughout her life’s poems, Dickinson wrestles with the prospect of death and absence, several times adopting the aspect of Christ’s bride, but only as apparent recompense for the lack or loss of earthly love taken from her by man and/or God and far from the Gnostic’s lonely but mystic, sweet communion with the Abyss. In her later poems, Dickinson returns to the confrontation with God the Father in force. Poem 1461 (“‘Heavenly Father’—take to thee”) rejects the “inequity” of a God who gives life and yanks it away while requiring us to apologize “for thine own Duplicity—” (288), and Poem 1601 (“Of God we ask one favor”) rejects Original Sin and the need to ask God “that we may be forgiven--/ For what, he is presumed to know” (304). At times, as in Poem 249 (“Wild nights—Wild nights!”), Dickinson’s erotic fervor suggests an affinity with the Gnostic mind (32), but in the end her rejection of the Bible (Poem 1545, “The Bible is an antique Volume—“ [297]) and her cautious but observant regard for Nature, about which, Bloom notes, Gnosticism “has nothing good to say” (50), make it doubtful that she would ever lose herself in an ecstasy not rooted in this (New England) earth.

In retrospect, the most complementary figure to Dickinson may be Robert Frost, who wryly suggests that any possible Gnosis remains beyond our knowing in his couplet, “We dance around in a ring and suppose/ But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.” This Secret is not identified with God or the Abyss and the dancer does not necessarily seem to be seeking affirmation of a Gnostic Self. That point is borne out in other Frost poems, notably “Birches,” where Frost, like Dickinson, acknowledges the desire to move towards transcendence while remaining firmly at home in the earth, which is “the right place for love:/ I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.” Rootedness in the earth is central also to the poetry of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, allied in their battle-cry, “No ideas but in things!” Even when marked as visions of loneliness, Stevens’ Snow Man, who must have a “mind of winter” in order to become “nothing himself” and behold “Nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is,” or Williams, naked in front of the mirror, performing his solitary Danse Russe, strips away any pretense of Gnostic pre-existence or of any knowin beyond the stark, and yet fulfilling, reality of their own temporal moments. If such settings offer momentary triumphs over time, they also have the quasi-religious quality of staving off the imminence of death while acknowledging its inevitability, a marked counterpoint to the Gnostic desires of the American Religion.

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I cite these examples for three reasons: first, to suggest that Bloom's "major sequence" of writers (or many of them, anyway) indeed does offer its own "terrible and beautiful condensation" of one aspect of "our national character," an aspect not (yet) staked out and superseded by the American Religion. Frost, Stevens, and Williams may or may not be atheists or even agnostics, in the usual sense of those who "do not know"—do not have enough evidence—to validate belief or unbelief. It may be safe to say, however, that their poetry (as well as Dickinson's) is "a-Gnostic," that is, it deliberately turns away from the kind of knowing that Bloom describes, with its rejection of society, earth, and time. Even if Dickinson's soul selects its own society, and the figure of Frost's solitary swinger of birches, Stevens's observer of winter, or Williams' dancer in the mirror is a lonely one, it is anchored by the earth, rooted in time, and available by implication as a model for others. Such a vision may offer cold comfort (literally, in the case of Stevens!), but it is still an alternative vision of the "national character," a different kind of heir to Emerson's self-reliant American.

This leads to my second point: I contend that such an "a-Gnostic" vision is a strain in the American character that is most visible in a historical moment, when American literature defined its own project in part as a response to the perceived failure of traditional religion, while looking on the emerging sects of the American Religion (if at all) with scorn—that is, literary Modernism in the first three decades of the twentieth century. There is a danger in Bloom's view of literature and literary influence (however he might deny it—or even celebrate it) of an ahistorical essentialism that places the category of "literature" as beyond the reach and influence of history. The literature of Bloom's "major sequence," I would argue, reflects a particular understanding of "literature" as a category that has been shaped by the experience of literary Modernism, fully emerging in America just after World War I and reaching the peak of its academic reception in the 1950s. Within those three or four decades, not only did "Stevens [and Williams], Eliot, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, [and, yes] Hart Crane" publish their major works, but the "Melville Revival" of the 1920s provided new access to that most idiosyncratic writer, his shattering of novelistic form and extravagance of language in *Moby-Dick* now beginning to come clear to the readers of *Ulysses* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Dickinson herself was first published in nearly complete (though highly edited) form in the 1920s and it would take until Thomas Johnson's edition of the collected poems in the 1950s to reveal the radical nature of Dickinson's own poetic style, situating her as a proto-Modernist. Add to this situation the

project of much American Modernism to redefine American culture in a new century (Crane's *The Bridge* and Williams' *Paterson* being two such projects) and the then-controversial establishment by the 1920s of American literature as a legitimate object of academic study, and a new canon of American literature is in the making (the Parlor Poets need not apply). Soldiers of the "Canon Wars" may or may not accept Bloom's "major sequence," but it is a sequence only in retrospect, identifiable by the historical situation of readers (and academics) as much as of the writers themselves.

My third point is that the emergence of American literary Modernism, with its own quasi-religious and national ambitions, was itself part of a major cultural transition that had been centuries in the making. Bloom's American Religion is also a (separate) part of that transition, emerging from the waning influence of an older American Religion rooted in the Puritan tradition of New England. The failure of Puritanism (which, despite its wider influence, had dominated mainly the American Northeast, especially New England) has left three conflicting legacies in its wake: 1) the American Religion itself, its Gnostic Abyss (if one grants Bloom's terms) substituting for the void left by Puritanism's collapse; 2) a post-Puritan, a-Gnostic reevaluation of the physical world as the signifier of God's order by Modernists and proto-Modernists, deconstructing what remained of the Puritans' metaphysical semiotics; and 3) a more recent reawakening of what might be termed a pagan impulse, only somewhat less repressed under the American Religion than under the Puritans. That impulse turns back to the physical world rejected by Gnosticism and regarded with fear by the Puritans. Within paganism (or neo-paganism), the physical world functions as signifier and referent for an invisible spiritual order that might be confused with, but that is not co-extensive with, the Gnostic core of the American Religion. It is Puritanism's triple legacy that I wish to explore in the last part of this paper.

If, as Bloom suggests, Emerson is the "theologian" of the American Religion, then he is the linchpin of the Puritan and Gnostic visions, which are not, contrary to easy assumptions, divided by time and their sequentiality nor by their apparently dichotomous doctrines, separately bent on the respective submission and celebration of the self. It is, in fact, the focus on the self in each that exposes the continuity between them. In *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, Sacvan Berkovitch extrapolates the Puritan sense of selfhood through his study of Cotton

Mather's biography of John Winthrop, first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Such biographies, Berkovitch notes, "leap from the individual to the universal" (8), with Winthrop presented as monument and model, a type for emulation and signifier of the proper Christian life. In that light, it is not too long a step to Emerson's secularization of the process in *Representative Men*, in which Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe stand as prototypes and models for, respectively, the Philosopher, the Mystic, the Skeptic, the Poet, the Man of the World, and the Writer. The surface signifiers may change, and even the ultimate import of their signifieds, but the Puritan semiotic structure remains intact, the individual life signifying a greater principle, which may then be applied by the larger community of individual selves, leading us back to the emblematic quality of Dickinson's "soul," Frost's branch-swinger, Stevens' Snow Man, and Williams' naked dancer.

Emerson's post-Puritan semiotics are typical in other respects as well. Emerson's doctrine of Self-Reliance, for example, can also be seen as a revision of the Puritan project, which, Berkovitch notes, "betrays a consuming involvement with 'me' and 'mine' that resists disintegration. . . . [The] militancy [the Puritans] hoped would abase the self released all the energies of the self, both constructive and destructive" (18-19), an apt paraphrase of how Bloom describes Emerson's legacy in the American Religion. Indeed, "Emerson's vision," Berkovitch argues, "serves to reaffirm that of the Puritans. He tells us in *Nature* that the principles by which man fulfills himself 'have always been in the world' . . . 'gleams of a better light,' as a mighty 'influx of the spirit' that heralds a 'Revolution in all things'" (160). The Gnostic overtones of such rhetoric also help to justify Bloom's claims about Emerson's influence on the American Religion. Still, Berkovitch's reminder of Emerson's own intellectual roots in a faded Puritan culture justifies his own claim that "Puritan myth prepared for the re-vision of God's Country from [New England] into the United States of America" (136), with Emerson himself as a principal agent of that "re-vision" through a "triad" of themes: "American nature, the American self, and American destiny, a triple tautology designed to obviate the anxieties both of self-consciousness and of the recalcitrant world" (178). (The expansiveness of the Emersonian "re-vision" to American culture at large also connects the Puritan tradition to those Modernist writers with no direct regional link to that past, notably William Faulkner).

The post-Emersonian "re-visioning" of America, I suggest, like the United States itself is no single, monolithic entity. If one strand of Emerson's legacy does in fact lead to the American

Religion, then another leads through Whitman to Allen Ginsburg and the Beats, Gnostics in their own ways perhaps but certainly not founders of any sect (whatever their cult status) or authors of any single holy text. In fact, this particular strand of American literary history exposes the failure of both Bloom and Berkovitch to acknowledge and account for the Americanization of Eastern religions and their synthesis with Puritanism by Emerson and Whitman, whose influence by Hinduism and Buddhism to varying degrees is well known, and their literary heirs, such as the Beats. The Americanization of Eastern thought by these writers, however, would itself become part of the emerging complex of relationships that I have termed the reawakening of the pagan impulse, which will be discussed further below.

If one strand of post-Puritan influence, then, paradoxically leads to Whitman's Democratic Vistas and the visionary ecstasies of Ginsburg, Kerouac, and company, another follows its own skeptical, a-Gnostic, path to a deconstruction of Puritan semiotics. The Puritans invested the physical world with moral meaning, following, as Berkovitch notes, a long-established Christian tradition. However, Berkovitch points out, there was an inherent contradiction in the Puritan process of reading God's signs in the world. The Puritan William Whitaker attested that "When we proceed from the thing to the thing signified, we bring no new sense, but only bring to light what was before concealed in the sign" (qtd. in Berkovitch 111). Contrary to structuralism's later description of the Sign as an *arbitrary* linking of signifier and signified, Whitaker presents a Puritan World-as-Sign, where the Signifier of the physical world's text is inherently linked to a pre-existing Signified (God as the text's "author"). In other words, Berkovitch comments, "literalism precludes interpretation" of a world suffused with God's meaning (111), yet as he further notes interpretation cannot be avoided, for the literal meaning has to come from the "reader's" own knowledge and action. "The very coherence of Whitaker's statement indicates the subjectivity inherent in Protestant thought," Berkovitch argues. "For finally, the connection between the thing and the thing signified is not the sign, but the regenerate figuralist in whom the concealed full sense is already manifested" (111-112).

The individual "figuralist" is the individually capable observer and interpreter, described by Berkovitch as an "exegete" whose exegesis "proceeds from sign to signification . . . brings the spirit to the fact" and who "carries the light of meaning in himself" (112). Once again, we can discern a leap from the Puritans Berkovitch describes straight into the arms of Bloom's American Religion and the foundational texts of Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, and all those

who extrapolate from such Puritan principles to “restructure all of sacred history to bear out [their] signification . . . marshal all the literal spiritual texts of the Bible to sustain [their] private vision” (Berkovitch 112), or, failing that, create their own sacred histories and write their own spiritual texts, their own *Book of Mormon* or *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*.

But how can we trust such “figuralists” and “exegetes”? How can we know that they “bring spirit to the fact” and “carry the light of meaning” in themselves? How can we know that the world-as-sign has any true signified? This I take to be one of the great questions posed by American writers, or at least those proto/Modernist writers who are a-Gnostic heirs to the Puritan legacy. Such questions are inherent in Dickinson’s nature poetry and they are more overtly expressed in a poem such as Robert Frost’s “Design,” in which the speaker reports his observation of a white spider on a white flower (a “heal-all”), carrying a dead, white moth. This unsettling scene of nature as death-at-work (whiteness itself being a common symbol for death in much American literature) makes the speaker wonder about its significance. What brought the spider, flower and moth together in this scene of death, he asks, “What but design of darkness to appall?” Yet, in typical Frostian fashion, this exegesis is immediately undercut by the speaker’s qualifying clause: “If design govern in a thing so small.” Emily Dickinson could ironically suggest that “‘Faith’ is a fine invention/When Gentlemen can *see*” (author’s emphasis), yet the believer’s vision is necessarily limited, so “*Microscopes* are prudent/In an Emergency” (Poem 185 [20]). Similarly, Frost suggests, size may matter, the world-as-text containing no fine print. If Design does not govern the microcosm, by implication it may not be present in the macrocosm after all.

Such skepticism asserts itself in post-Puritan prose as well. The most obvious example, as Berkovitch himself notes, is the scene in Chapter XII of *The Scarlet Letter*, “The Minister’s Vigil,” where Hester Prynne, the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, and their daughter Pearl, the living symbol of their adultery, stand on the town scaffold at night illuminated by a meteor that Dimmesdale perceives as a glowing letter “A” in the sky. Yet, Hawthorne’s narrator dryly remarks, the recognition of the meteor as a signifier, let alone its signification, depends on Dimmesdale’s own state of mind from his guilt as the unnamed adulterer and father of Hester’s child: “another’s guilt might have seen another symbol in it” (150). The Sign is arbitrary, after all.

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More significantly, Dimmesdale's exegesis is placed in the context of Puritan belief: "Nothing was more common, in those days, than to interpret all meteoric appearances . . . and other natural phenomena . . . as so many revelations from a supernatural source" (148-149). This "majestic idea," the narrator ironically continues, "was a favorite one of our forefathers, as betokening that their infant commonwealth was under a celestial guardianship of peculiar intimacy and strictness" (149). If the Puritan forefathers found messages of God's favor or disfavor for the entire community in the world-as-sign, however, the individual, such as Dimmesdale, who imputed meaning to his own case from such signs was suffering in their view from "a highly disordered mental state" that "extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature" (149). Can Design govern in a thing so small as one human life? The context of this scene, however, reverses such an implied judgment. It is the forefathers and the Puritan community who are guilty of "egotism" in thinking that the book of the world was written for them, and it is Dimmesdale who, in the silent acknowledgement of his own guilt, is the better reader of the world-as-text, even if it is a text that he has authored for himself.

Such a deconstruction of the world-as-text can also be seen, again contrary to first impressions, in *Moby-Dick*. This claim might seem puzzling for a text continually studied over the last century for its symbols, with its elaborate structure of ancillaries, its Etymology and epigrammatic "Extracts," its chapters on "Cetology" and "The Whiteness of the Whale," not to mention the musings of the characters on the object of Ahab's mad quest, principally Ahab (a Puritan heir) himself. But it is precisely such overdetermination of signification that leads to what deconstructionists term an "aporia," an impasse in the attempt to choose a signified within the proliferation of possibilities. Each possibility presents its own problems too, such as Ahab's belief that the whale is but a mask covering a deeper reality and that his quest will allow him to "strike through the mask." This belief suggests four possible outcomes: that the Reality behind the mask is itself malevolent, the source of Frost's "Design of darkness to appall"; or that what lies beyond the mask is Nothing, the Void of meaninglessness; or that the mask conceals only another mask, another signifier, and another beyond that, the deconstructionist's "mise-en-abyme" of the endless chain of signifiers with no final Signified as the ground of true Meaning; or that the mask is all that there is—there is nothing to be signified, the whale is just a whale. Even though, as Berkovitch notes, the Puritans never lost sight "of man's inability to choose

correctly” (18), none of Ahab’s possible choices of signifieds is good, none conveys the Puritan sureness of God’s fullness of meaning in the world.

Moreover, Melville also ultimately undermines the Puritan faith—later adapted by its Romantic and Gnostic heirs—in the individual perceiver, the Christian saint (or Emersonian Hero or Gnostic Self) who, as Thomas Hooker put it, “can see God in all” (Berkovitch 116). Hooker’s Puritan saint sees God’s hand in “punishments as well as deliverances,” and at first Ahab would seem, in his monomaniacal way, such a “saint” or perhaps anti-saint, a view in fact held by many critics. Melville, however, throws the “saint’s” perceptive capability—that is, the “unique powers” of the “solitary perceiver” (Berkovitch, 134)—into question, along with free will itself. In Chapter CXXXII, “The Symphony,” Ahab pauses for a moment with his mate Starbuck, who urges him to abandon his quest and return home to the comforts of family, yet Ahab, even while releasing Starbuck from obligation to join his final encounter with the whale, confesses that he himself does not have the power to quit. “[H]ow . . . can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I,” he asks (410). Here, I suggest, is the ultimate dilemma of the Puritan exegete—if the ability to read the world-as-text is not purely subjective (a product of the reader-as-author, as in Dimmesdale’s case), and if the world’s text exists to be read and the reader exists to read it (as the Puritans would insist), then both are products of the same Author, who in effect reads Himself.

The same point is suggested, in a more benign context, by Emerson in his poem “The Rhodora,” where “If eyes are made for seeing/ Then Beauty is its own excuse for being” and “the self-same Power” brought together the observer to see the flower and the flower to be seen. However, in Melville’s a-Gnostic book, Emersonian optimism is taken to its logical extreme—a Power (God) using a human observer (Ahab) to decipher a Text (the whale) that was written by that same Power and that is potentially meaningless. It is Ahab’s recognition of his exegete’s dilemma that ultimately acquits him of the charge of evil or mere madness in his quest and redeems him as a tragic figure. (I leave it to others to find correlations in public life with leaders compelled to stay a course of action because it is not theirs to abandon.)

Later post-Puritan writers also invoke the problematic nature of the world-as-text and the exegete’s dilemma. Berkovitch notes that the regional isolation of Puritanism meant that other regions of America had different visions of the world-as-text and different readings of it. The

Southern colonial “myth,” for example, “was essentially utopian” (137) (for whites, I need hardly add). Climate, geography, and the backgrounds and motives of Southern settlers differed greatly from those of New England, with the South portraying itself as a “benevolent, unspoiled retreat, convenient for adventurers, entrepreneurs, farmers, and idealists in quest of the good society” (138). This myth, however, intensified by the loss of “Paradise” with the Civil War, would degenerate into the Wasteland vision of William Faulkner. Faulkner, however, like Melville, turns the Southern scene from grotesquery to tragedy (and sometimes farce) by a post-Puritan critique of signification not unlike Melville’s. Consider, for instance, Quentin Compson’s confusion of signifier with signified through the destruction of his watch in a vain attempt to stop time in *The Sound and the Fury*, or his brother Benjy’s inability to understand most signifiers in the world while intimating presence (of his sister Caddy) in an absence (of a mirror), or the “sane” Jason’s inability to see beyond the surface of things. Joe Christmas in *Light in August* embodies the ultimate tautological parody of the Puritan hermeneutical process. Christmas, who may be a white man or a light-skinned “black” man, chooses to think himself “black” passing for “white,” bringing to that racial signifier its many, socially-conditioned implications of signification. Yet, as with the whiteness of the whale, there may be no true “meaning” in that process at all. The exegete not only creates his own meaning but is his own meaning and his own sign, which he not only reads but invites others to read as well. This is a-Gnosticism with a vengeance, the Self in no Abyss of primal meaning, at peace in isolated communion with its eternal God; it is pure solipsism, beginning and ending only in itself.

One thing that the Gnostic of the American Religion and the post-Puritan a-Gnostic share, however, is solitude and loneliness, a comfort to the former, a conundrum to the latter. The post-Puritan, but Romantic, solitude celebrated by Emerson and Thoreau as the source-spring of the American character metamorphoses into something else in the context of the American Religion, but the nature of that change requires fuller exploration elsewhere. What is apparent, though, is that Modernist a-Gnosticism itself would ultimately prove inadequate. It is not enough to critique or deconstruct Puritan semiotics, and the heroic, salvational image of the Modernist artist as model and emblem for the Modern American is insufficient as well, a point particularly evident in the context of the social turmoil of the 1960s and perhaps best illuminated by a literal Puritan heir, Thomas Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

Pynchon—a descendent of William Pynchon, Puritan founder of the city of Springfield, Massachusetts, and author of *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*, the first book to be burned for heresy in Boston—sets his novel in contemporary 1960s California. His heroine, Oedipa Maas, finds herself entangled in webs of signification that lead her to discover the apparent existence of a (pre-Internet) alternative communication system known as the Tristero, which might (or might not) be a means by which outsiders and the dispossessed (the “preterite,” in Pynchon’s Puritan terminology) have recourse to a community denied to most Americans, even the Elect. Yet by the end of the novel, the Tristero’s nature and even very existence continue to be in doubt, with no signifiers as obvious as a meteor or whale and with an overdetermination of signifieds. Oedipa too finds herself trapped in the exegete’s dilemma, but this time the dilemma occurs not in the context of the general human condition but in the historical present of an America founded—by Puritans, by Romantics, by a-Gnostics and Gnostics alike—on solitude and loneliness. Oedipa reviews her options and faces her own aporia : “Either you have stumbled onto . . . a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie. Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you. . . . Or you are fantasizing some such plot, in which case, you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull” (128). As with Ahab, almost none of these four choices is good (except possibly the first), and Oedipa finds herself facing the Nietzschean Void of a meaningless world. But the possibility of meaning and of the community it implies still outweigh despair, and in the novel’s ambiguous ending, Oedipa tries one last time to find the signifier that might provide the meaning that she seeks.

One of the paradoxes of Bloom’s description of the American Religion is that the solitude that he describes at its center in fact occurs within various, often highly-committed communities of believers, a counterweight to the individualism that is at their core, the threat of condemnation within or expulsion from the body of the church being one of the strongest institutional weapons wielded by these sects. What other options remain for the would-be American believer? The last, dusty vestiges of Puritanism that can be found here and there? The formal patterns of mainstream Christianity that lack the spiritual ecstasies that the Gnostic impulse seems to afford? The cold comforts of literary Modernism? The dead certainties that Bloom fears in an encroaching Fundamentalism? One other alternative does suggest itself in a tradition of

American literature with at least some emerging corollaries in American public life—what I have described as the reawakening of the “pagan” impulse.

In spring of 2006, the United States Veterans Administration reversed a previous decision and allowed a pentacle, a five-pointed star, to be added to the headstone of National Guard Sgt. Patrick Stewart, who had been killed in Iraq. One year later, the VA added the pentacle, the symbol of the Church of Wicca, to its official list of sanctioned religious symbols for military headstones. Wicca, though relatively new as an organized religion in the United States, has a long history of its own, and is just one of a number of “pagan” or “neo-pagan” groups whose presence in the United States was manifest by the 1980s. In *Drawing Down the Moon*, her study of these groups, reporter Margot Adler notes that this movement identifies itself with “the pre-Christian nature religions of the West” and includes “feminist goddess-worshippers, new religions based on the visions of science-fiction writers, attempts to revive ancient European religions—Norse, Greek, Roman, Celtic—and the surviving tribal religions.” On the other hand, the parameters of these disparate beliefs do not include “Eastern religious groups . . . Satanists nor Christians” nor authoritarian cults (xi). According to Adler, “The Pagan vision is one that says that neither doctrine nor dogma nor asceticism nor rule by masters is necessary for the visionary experience, and that ecstasy *and* freedom are both possible” (xii). Although Bloom has little to say on the subject of such beliefs, aside from his (repeated) dismissal of so-called New Age religion as “orange squash,” there are some affinities between these groups and the sects comprising Bloom’s American Religion; however, the differences, particularly in the Pagans’ rejection of stated creeds and texts and the base of their practices in nature and the natural cycle, rather than the more common Christian (and Gnostic) rejection of the world, are far more significant.

Again, I have to leave more specific analysis of this movement and these groups to others; however, the case of Sgt. Stewart is a testament to the continuing growth of this small but increasingly visible strand of American beliefs. The involvement of paganism with American literature is something else, and may have one of its first expressions in Hawthorne’s sketch, “The May-pole at Merry Mount,” which describes the Puritan overthrow of Thomas Morton’s attempt at a utopian community celebrating nature and consorting with local natives on the Massachusetts coast. Hawthorne notes the historical importance of the event: “The future complexion of New England was involved in this important quarrel. Should the grizzly saints

establish their jurisdiction over the gay sinners, then would their spirits darken all the clime, and make it a land of clouded visages, of hard toil, of sermon and psalm forever. But should the banner staff of Merry Mount be fortunate, sunshine would break upon the hills, and flowers would beautify the forest, and late posterity do homage to the Maypole.” Although Hawthorne’s narrative stance in this story toward the incident is flecked with typical ambiguity (reflecting his more developed critique of the Brook Farm experiment in *The Blithedale Romance*), it is clear that he sees a lost opportunity for a different path in New England and America than the one that Puritanism would define, a path marked out by its attachment to the natural world, the toleration of diversity, and celebration of the sensual.

Thomas Pynchon, in some ways Hawthorne’s most recent heir, also turns from Oedipa’s dilemma in *The Crying of Lot 49* to the more overt exploration of pagan alternatives in his masterwork, *Gravity’s Rainbow*. An extended meditation on the intersections of technology, capitalism, American history and death, set in an uprooted Europe refiguring itself in the turmoil of the close of World War II, Pynchon’s novel defies description or easy synopsis. Nonetheless, the book is replete with religious imagery and beliefs drawn from traditional Christianity, the Jewish Kabala, Norse and Greco-Roman myth, and the Hereros of Southwest Africa (now Namibia), among other references. Witches and supernatural beings appear alongside fictional and historical characters in Pynchon’s critique of the deadening wasteland of modern, technologized, capitalist America. That critique—first elucidated in his novel *V*.—now extends Oedipa’s quest for alternatives historically and geographically, hinting at an animistic vision of a living Earth and a spiritual order of Nature that is symbolized by the circle of the natural rainbow, in contrast to the destructive arc of “gravity’s rainbow,” the trajectory of the V-2 rocket. The spiritual orders invoked in the novel, however, are not all equal. Some, like Richard Wagner’s refiguring of Teutonic myth in his Ring cycle, are ultimately symptomatic, if not causal, of the Western cultural malaise.

Included in this last group are the Masons, the order itself subject to long-standing and continuing suspicion and attacks by churches and governments for its supposed mythic roots in ancient Egypt and associations with the occult and, paradoxically, its advocacy of human reason. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the lawyer Lyle Bland—a rather sinister figure despite his name—is introduced to Masonry’s occult side and its imbrication in American history, itself a possible result of the “cosmic pranksterism” of such Masons as Benjamin Franklin. Bland’s initiation

into Masonry, however, ultimately results in his own transcendence, an ambiguous event that redeems the character from his active role in advancing corporations and ruining individuals but that also marks his own Gnostic isolation.

The ambiguity of Bland's transcendence is clarified somewhat by the narrator's off-hand comment regarding Masonic history and practice, "You'll have to ask Ishmael Reed. He knows a lot more about it than I do." (588). Pynchon is referring to the African American poet and novelist, an advocate of "Neo-Hoo Doo," an updated and Americanized version of Voudoun, more commonly known as "Voodoo," the amalgam of Catholic and traditional African religions formed in Haiti and introduced to America through the ethnically diverse mixture of Western, African and Native American cultures in New Orleans and elsewhere. Specifically, Pynchon's reference is to Reed's 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, another book that defies easy synopsis. At the heart of *Mumbo Jumbo*, though, is Reed's opposition of two forces. One is the "Atonists," the heirs and promoters of a monotheistic, monocultural mindset that has dominated Western society since its origins in the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten's attempt to replace the Egyptian pantheon of gods with worship of the single sun god Aten or Aton. That effort, in Reed's mythology, metamorphosed into the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition and is represented by the Masons, among others groups. The enforcers of this regime, referred to in the novel as the Wallflower Order, are out to eliminate opposition to this dominant, repressive, death-obsessed force. That opposition in the novel is manifested in the Neo-HooDoo movement that Reed calls "Jes Grew" (the name playfully taken from the character of the slave girl Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who said that she "Jes [Just] grew" taller), and its champion is the trickster-detective figure PaPa LaBas. LaBas himself is an avatar of Legba, the Western African deity who is one of the principal *loas* or spirits of Voudoun. Jes Grew is primarily a manifestation of African/African American culture, especially in music but in many other forms of cultural expression as well, continually pushing its way back into the Atonist culture. Although repressed, dismissed, marginalized, and co-opted by the Atonists, at the end of the novel PaPa LaBas predicts that Jes Grew will continue to just grow, its life-affirming principles and practices ultimately irrepressible.

Replete with comic energy, sly irony, and fantastic invention, *Mumbo Jumbo* (the title itself tracing back to West African language via Vachel Lindsay's poem) is itself a manifestation of the Jes Grew character of the reawakened pagan impulse. Pynchon and Reed aside, this quest

for alternative spiritualities can be seen in many other forms in American literature and culture. This multi-cultural, multi-phased movement may track back in American culture to Merry Mount's celebration of European paganism in congress with Native Americans. Like Jes Grew, it reappears from time to time as an expression of desire for alternatives. One incarnation, as I have suggested, occurs in Emerson and Whitman and Ginsburg's fascination with the East, captured early on in Emerson's short poem "Brahma" (which should be titled "Vishnu" or "Krishna"), a remarkably concise synopsis of the *Bhagavad Gita* that situates Emerson's (and later Whitman's) quest for one-ness in the unity of all existence. Even the sects of Bloom's American Religion—even though marked by their generally Manichean division of spirit and world—began in such quests for alternatives, and most have been marked at one time or another by the charge of heresy. Although the lonely Gnosticism of the American Religion sects is at very much at odds with the nature-based, communal, sensuality of neo-paganism and Neo-HooDoo, it can be said that the motivating desires for all of these movements spring from the same source, a desire for alternatives that is perhaps a truer mark of the "national character" than Harold Bloom would recognize.

Although Bloom incorporates African American religious groups as diverse as Baptists and the Nation of Islam into his American Religion, his analysis of these sects may be his weakest. Bloom betrays his own ethnocentricity when, remarking on the native African concept of time as flexible, unregimented and subjective, he confesses his astonishment and envisions "an Africa inhabited only by Sir John Falstaffs and Walt Whitmans" (247). It is just such ignorance that *Mumbo Jumbo* and Reed's other works, including the anthologies of multicultural literature that Reed has edited, seek to combat. Reed stands as one example of a writer determined to discover, resurrect and if necessary invent his own spiritual and spirit-based alternatives. Other African American writers have also tapped into such resources, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* being perhaps the best-known example.

Asian Americans and Native Americans have also returned to their own spiritual heritages, which were suppressed by white Christian culture and continue to be regarded by some with the same mixture of dread and revulsion (but also a touch of envy) as Hawthorne's Puritans gazing down at the festivities around Merry Mount's may-pole. These heritages may have been forgotten, lost, sent into hiding, or put into disguise, but they could never be fully extirpated. While some of these writers and their works reflect what is now called Identity

Politics, ethnicity trumping nationalism's monocultural claims, others—including Reed himself—explore and celebrate the complications, mutual conflicts and mutual enrichments of different cultures, all the while recognizing that white privilege continues to give an edge to would-be Atonists. Louise Erdrich, for example, looks straight-on at the devastation of life for many Native Americans but finds the possibility of change emerging out of the encounters, conflicts, and syntheses of cultures, especially in the relationship between the French Catholic legacy of the Voyageur trapper-trader-explorers of Minnesota and the Dakotas and the traditional beliefs of Objive-Anishinabe culture. Erdrich's work, like Morrison's, has a common ground with Latin American Magical Realism, where the physical and spirit worlds intersect mostly outside the bounds of officially-sanctioned religion and within a diverse mix of cultures, education, personalities and heritages.

The opposition to such possibilities in the sects of the American Religion prompts Harold Bloom's lament for the "societal consequences of debasing the Gnostic self into selfishness and the believer's freedom from others into the bondage of others." The greater threat, though, he suggests is Fundamentalism's encroachment. Its results, he says, "are to be seen everywhere, in our inner cities and in our agrarian wastelands" (258). Still, tainted by Fundamentalism or not, the American Religion draws from the biblical rhetoric that speaks of feeding the soul as well as the body or even in preference to it. The neo-pagan impulse, though, suggests that spirit and body must both be fed, in fact nurture one another.

If the roots of certain violent and repressive aspects of American culture can be traced back to the Puritans, it is important to realize that such violence and repression are by no means culturally or historically unique to America or to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The destructive energies of a radically fundamentalist Islam are also shared in different ways by many different cultures and religions. On the other hand, if those destructive energies have also found new forces of expression in Bloom's American Religion in order to justify American wars, the Gnostic (or Atonist, if you will) cult of the self is no monolith either, as Bloom's fears about the changing status of the Southern Baptists demonstrate. Bloom's own single-mindedness tends to steer him away from more complex models of either religion or literature. Toward the end of his book, Bloom wonders why Americans have produced "so few masterpieces of overtly religious literature" (258). The simplistic nature of the question would require a lengthy answer, but in short we might be advised that—masterpieces or not—there is a literature out there to be read

and it does not require the eyes of God to read it. Or, as PaPa LaBas puts it, echoing writer Arna Bontemps, “Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around.” (Reed, 249).

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