



Photo: Ho Lin

Jonathan Hutner Trump's Towers

President Donald J. Trump is the most provocative, fascinating politician of the thermo-nuclear era. He is one of our true celebrities of aspiration. With his defiant, go-for-the-jugular stance, he has already, in his six months in office, significantly modified the geopolitical climate. With electric ambition, he states on Twitter that America must “greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability.” He told MSNBC, “Let it be an arms race. We will outmatch them at every pass, and outlast them all.” This language appears to be a new iteration of an almost forgotten idiom: Nuclear-age braggadocio. (Kim Jong-un, we hear you!) So if you respond to this sort of rhetoric, Mr. Trump becomes an awesome presence, a person with whom to be reckoned.

Whatever your opinion is of Mr. Trump, one irrefutable fact remains: He has enormous power. So, who is Donald J. Trump, and how might he use his power? In the context of a contemplation of the contemporary nuclear moment, it is vital to assess his political persona, to endeavor to determine if he means what he says, and if he intends to follow through with it.

What occurs to us is that Mr. Trump is delineating—redefining, if you will—the contours of possibility of the nuclear age. He really makes us *think*. We are aware, and have been for some while, that we now have the mechanisms of universal obliteration at our disposal. If things get sufficiently nasty, all things can end. So the question is: In this culture of

annihilation, is Mr. Trump capable (through calculated intention, ludicrous bungling, or through the machinations of belligerence) of cosmic obliteration? Will his will and persona, applied to the geopolitical moment, effect the apocalypse of terrors?

President Trump has further induced and clarified the apocalyptic mentality in many persons who are sensitive to our current situation. He has endowed us with a sinister awareness. Yes, we might not (*would not*) prefer to deal with it, but Mr. Trump disposes us to contemplate the stunning amplitude of death.

Mr. Trump did not create, but is creating, the world in which we live. He entered onto the contemporary political scene with a certain ostentatious orientation. The ardent question we must ask is, simply stated: Can we survive his term in office? Mr. Trump makes us entertain “the death ideas.” “What’s that?” you may ask. The tendency toward death is a main feature of human nature. We will all die. But, how is our nuclear age unique in this respect? For most of history, we would die alone or in limited groups. In *our* time we can all actually die *together*. “Death-haunted man,” some have called our race. But now we really have this universal background noise, which grows louder day by day: What about all of those thousands (and thousands) of nuclear weapons which we have prepared for one another? Is our tremulous moment the pre-occasion for their deployment?

Mr. Trump provokes us to think about thermo-nuclear arms. What is the genesis of these weapons? What do they mean to us? Will they ever really be used? Our heritage from civilizations past is mighty: Great works of art and thought and science. History swells with grandeur. But we also share a melancholy heritage: In our midst are stupendous mechanisms of obliteration. The vicious signature of destruction is clearly legible on our nuclear weaponry. This, too, is part of it.

This bifurcated legacy brings us to the study of the philosophy of death. This philosophy is a grim reckoning, but a necessary one. It responds to, among other things, the question: How can a race that has produced grand geniuses on the scale of Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Einstein, have created these venomous, almost incomprehensibly powerful weapons of mass destruction? The answer is: It’s *natural*. Yes, man is good. Man is creative. Man is beautiful. But, man is evil, too. And, man is destructive. Men and women can be enlightened beings. (We all know, or know of, a few such souls). But men and women can also be the enemies of being.

So, these nuclear arms, proliferous and irrefutable, terrible, are the products of certain fundamental tendencies of human nature. We can

love one another, but we can also (and may yet) destroy one another. We must pursue the answer to this question: Is our tendency toward ubiquitous devastation more powerful than our aspirations for peace and love and beauty? In the end, will we take the inventory of love, or will we take the inventory of annihilation? We have learned to manufacture death. Through physics and technology, we have created nuclear arms. We have learned to (warily) live with them. But, now the issue is: Can we *outlive* these weapons? Can we defy the great event of malevolence? We trend towards death, each of us. Death is inevitable and conditions our mentality. But will our tendency towards a fatal ending surge and take us all at once? We need to adopt the structures of reconciliation.

This last consideration brings us back to politics and to our chief diplomat, President Donald J. Trump. “Let it be an arms race. We will outmatch them at every pass, and outlast them all,” he says. This is an articulation of the propaganda of death. “America must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability,” he claims. He advocates for the paraphernalia of doom. With his advent, we note a manifestation of the sinister. We can, in this regard, thank Mr. Trump for refreshing the Zeitgeist: the Zeitgeist is now the motif of oblivion. Mr. Trump is a cause for genuine wonder: Will he give the order of annihilation?

Mr. Trump has done very well for himself. His success is spectacular. Trump’s Towers are, of course, his trophies, his buildings, elements of his empire. After his vertiginous quantum leap into politics, he acquired power over an alternate set of towers: Hidden beneath our discreet hysteria, silent, ubiquitous, of sublime potency, are Mr. Trump’s thermo-nuclear missiles. These towers populate a treacherous territory, a potentially desolate landscape, possibly a utopia of death.

President Trump electrifies us. One can criticize him and label him as a faulty, manufactured product of a rudderless media-consumerist society gone astray. But he is better reckoned with as an *enlightener*. He gives us a clearer picture of who we are and where we may be going. Further, Mr. Trump is a great *educator*. He induces us to study history. He reveals the nature of our times. But, his brand of enlightenment leaves us with a sense of lamentation, the melancholy of the doomed. Ours is a somber enlightenment, a grim reminder of what we are capable, our potential for oblivion. In his presence we hear the echoes of mortality. We may still believe in miracles, but they are desperate miracles.

Our president states an antagonistic credo of the coming of “fire and fury.” In electing Mr. Trump, we have elected possibly to proceed with our own annihilation. The man has a gift for confrontation. Yet his persona is resonant with genius. Simply observe where he has arrived:

He has acquired enormous wealth, prestige and power. But, what he is most potently, it would appear, is our own Wotan: god-like, steeped in intrigue, come to power through corruption, haunted by his selfish quest for utter dominance and control, and possibly engaging us in our own *Götterdämmerung*, our own thermo-nuclear Twilight of the Gods. Who will summon Mr. Trump to the colloquy of survival? Where are the ministers of remission? We attend the voices of refutation.

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