Guston Presidents Cartoons Questions?

By William Eaton

In a number of Philip Guston's more than 100 cartoon-style drawings of Richard Nixon, which are currently on view at the Hauser & Wirth gallery in New York City, the former President's nose and jowls are transformed into a cock and balls (or scrotum).[1] We recognize the long-standing association of the nose and the penis, and can understand that Guston, in his sixties, was making his way back from Abstract Expressionism toward the cartooning of his adolescence. He was exaggerating the features of Nixon's face that begged to be exaggerated, that many cartoonists during that period were exaggerating. He was making vulgar—much as a boy, or girl, in a midnight subway station draws a cock and balls on an advertising poster. But why the repetitiveness? What might have been working its way through the mature artist's mind as he sketched variations on this same idea—President Nixon's face as a cock and balls, and "bone/boner" jokes—again and again?

Well, not to add further vulgarity, but there was the idea in the late Sixties and early Seventies that Nixon was fucking America. Guston makes this point most explicit in his 1971 drawing of a cock-nose pushing into a bare ass labelled U.S.A. This is in line with slogans of those times such as "Nixon pull out [of the Vietnam War] like your father should have" and "Dick Nixon before he dicks you."

The drawings were made in sketchbooks in 1971 and 1975, but were hardly seen until 2001, more than twenty years after Guston's death. In 2001 The University of Chicago Press reproduced 73 of the works in *Philip Guston's Poor Richard*. In 2016, in Hauser & Wirth's interior, white-walled rooms, one could get a strong sense of the impotence felt by the artist—or, if you prefer, of the impotence of artists. The President and his cronies were screwing the country, and all an artist could do was draw over and over again the President's cock-nose.

"Draw your own cock!" one might exclaim. An old friend, now in her seventies, recently sent me a poem she'd written about her breasts:

These breasts
need to *breathe*, to *float,*

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[1] **Philip Guston Laughter in the Dark, Drawings from 1971 & 1975**, Hauser & Wirth New York, 548 West 22nd Street [new temporary location], November 1, 2016 to January 14, 2017.

William Eaton is the Editor of **Zeteo**. *A collection of his essays,* **Surviving the Twenty-First Century**, *was published by Serving House Books in 2015. Readers interested in Guston might see* ***Guston, Schapiro, Rosenberg, . . . Dialogue***. *For those interested in American politics:* ***Ditch the Term Pathogen***, ***Trump, de Tocqueville, Democracy, Materialism***, *or even* ***The American Flag is at Half-Mast Today***. *For more on Jews and McCarthyism:* ***My Bar Mitzvah (and Thanksgiving) Speech***.

to roll from one side to the other.[2]

There's a certain self-assurance and glee in those lines (from a longer poem), and in writing a poem about your breasts, or even your elbows. My friend proposed that I write a poem about my testicles. I replied that I was more inclined to try to follow in E.E. Cummings wake—"i like my body when it is with your / body."[3] But to draw another man's, a more powerful man's, cock-nose over and over again?

Coming at our subject from another angle, and with help from French literature, we may note that, right from the start, there is sadness is in Edmond Rostand's wonderful, big-nose-centered romantic comedy, *Cyrano de Bergerac*. From Act I, Scene i:

> Un nez ! . . . Ah ! messeigneurs, quel nez que ce nez-là ! . . .
> On ne peut voir passer un pareil nasigère
> Sans s'écrier : « Oh ! non, vraiment, il exagère ! »
> Puis on sourit, on dit : « Il va l'enlever . . . »
> Mais Monsieur de Bergerac ne l'enlève jamais.
>
> A nose!—ah, my lords, what a nose that is! You can't see such a noseliness go by without crying aloud: "Oh, no! it goes too far! And then, with a smile, one says, "He's going to take it off." But that nose Monsieur de Bergerac never takes off.

Philip Guston (né Goldstein) and Richard Nixon were both born in 1913 and both grew up in Southern California; Guston a Jew, Nixon a Quaker. Nicely, I might describe myself as half Jewish, half Quaker. Many would say I have a "Jewish nose," and this even as many would say that I am a clone of my father, of the WASP line of the family. A Jew may come to feel sensitive about his or her nose, and not least because of all the cartoons, jovial and vicious, that have been drawn of Jews, making much of their/our noses. A medical article from 2001 states that "some plastic surgery texts continue to describe the 'Jewish nose' as if it were a standard physical deformity requiring surgical correction."[4] This says less about noses than about how the medical profession seeks to drum up business. However, there is certainly a long, prominent, and often-mocked tradition of Jewish girls from upwardly mobile American families getting nose jobs, and in the Nixon era the result was often described as a "ski-jump" nose. Richard Nixon had a very pronounced ski-jump nose, though presumably not as a result of surgery.

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[2] Carol Wills, "Homage to My Breasts," March 11, 2015.

[3] E.E. Cummings, **I Like My Body When It Is With Your**. Published in *Tulips and Chimneys*, Cummings's first poetry collection (Liveright, 1923).

[4] Beth Preminger, **The "Jewish Nose" and Plastic Surgery: Origins and Implications**, msJAMA [i.e. a product of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*], November 7, 2001.

A next question then: What could be the significance of a Jew drawing a WASP's big nose over and over again? « Oh ! non, Monsieur Guston, vraiment, il exagère ! » But no, it may not be possible for a Jewish artist to go too far in this case. As if to say, OK, we're deformed, we're grotesque, but so are you.

I recall one weekend night of my youth, around the same time that Guston was doing his first Nixon drawings. Some of us were on acid, some just having fun, wandering around our university town, and whenever someone made an assertion, one of our company, a beautiful girl, Jewish, who I was much taken with, would agree with it and say, to the group as a whole, "That's why we're friends." As if these were things of which constant reminder was needed—that we agreed, that we were friends. And thus I can imagine—while Philip drew compulsively late at night in his rural studio, nose after nose—his unconscious saying over and over, as if to Richard, "This is why we're friends."[5]

There are many other repetitions in Guston's series of drawings. These include the Klan-like hoods which also appear in Guston paintings from this period. Also repeated: "Key Biscayne," which is where Nixon held property and had close friends, both of which—the property and the friends—became connected with the sort of scandals, court cases, etc., in which we now find Donald Trump and the Clintons have been entangled. Another set of words that reoccurs in Guston's work, "It seems like an impossible dream." This is a line from the most famous passage from one of Nixon's most famous (and televised, widely heard) speeches, addressing the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, accepting the Republican presidential nomination, in 1968. The entire passage:

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[5] From the **Hauser & Wirth** press release on the show—"Philip Guston: Laughter in the Dark, Drawings from 1971 & 1975"—"Guston's distress over the political situation was fueled by conversations with his friend, the writer Philip Roth. The artist and the writer shared an intellectual disposition for the mundane 'crapola' of American popular culture, and in Nixon discovered a subject they could each mimic and animate in art." This might lead us back to Roth's early, popular novella *Goodbye Columbus*, in which the main female character, Brenda Patimkin, a New Jersey suburban "Jewish American Princess," as such people used to be called, has had a nose job. The male protagonist, Neil Klugman, who lives with his aunt and uncle in Newark and works at the public library, objects. Brenda's old nose fitted her father well, he observes. "There was a bump in it, all right; up at the bridge it seemed as though a small eight-sided diamond had been squeezed in under the skin. . . . I knew Mr. Patimkin would never bother to have that stone cut from his face, and yet, with joy and pride, no doubt, had paid to have Brenda's diamond removed and dropped down some toilet in Fifth Avenue Hospital."

> **College Essay Help** explicates the passage in an appropriate, college-essay-help way:
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> Why is this such a big deal to Neil? Well, the story is set post-World War II. The Holocaust was a very recent memory for many Jewish people. Neil might think that by altering her nose, a physical testament to her Jewish heritage, she is bowing to people who discriminate against Jews and hurting herself in the process. Sadly, he hurts her too by not accepting her current physical state and passing judgment on Brenda and her family.

(The quote from the novella appears on page 28 of *Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories*, thirtieth anniversary edition, Houghton Mifflin, 1989. *Goodbye Columbus* was first published in *The Paris Review*, No. 20, Autumn-Winter 1958-1959.)

> I see another child tonight. He hears the train go by at night and he dreams of faraway places where he'd like to go. It seems like an impossible dream. But he is helped on his journey through life. A father who had to go to work before he finished the sixth grade, sacrificed everything he had so that his sons could go to college. A gentle, Quaker mother, with a passionate concern for peace, quietly wept when he went to war but she understood why he had to go.[6]
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> A great teacher, a remarkable football coach, an inspirational minister encouraged him on his way. A courageous wife and loyal children stood by him in victory and also defeat.
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> And in his chosen profession of politics, first there were scores, then hundreds, then thousands, and finally millions worked for his success. And tonight he stands before you—nominated for President of the United States of America.
>
> You can see why I believe so deeply in the American Dream.

An impossible dream, yes, although more typically, people on the Left, people like my parents, would have used a word like "nightmare." Along with Senator Joseph McCarthy himself, Richard Nixon was the Republican most associated with what has come to be called McCarthyism: the practice of investigating and accusing, of seeking to increase or consolidate one's own power and that of one's allies by accusing other people of disloyalty, subversion, or treason.[7] Often the accused were Jews and always they were people on the

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[6] As a "birthright Quaker," Nixon could have gotten an exemption from the draft and military service—and Quakers would say that he should have! But this would, inter alia, have been un-American, have put him ever on the fringe of American life. Nixon, 28 when the United States declared war on Japan, opted to enlist in the Navy. According to the **Wikipedia article on Richard Nixon**, he requested sea duty and became the naval passenger control officer for the South Pacific Combat Air Transport Command. He was, for example, the Officer in Charge of the Combat Air Transport Command at Guadalcanal. His unit prepared manifests and flight plans for C-47 operations and supervised the loading and unloading of the cargo aircraft.

[7] It is important to keep in mind that on the Democratic side, McCarthy's biggest supporters were the Kennedys. Much has been written about this. Quickly here sketching the history with help from a **blogpost by Marquette University historian John C. McAdams** (who has described himself as "a debunker by temperament"):

> Joseph Kennedy had befriended McCarthy because he found him to be a likable fellow Irish-Catholic who had all the right ideas on the domestic communist menace. . . . JFK liked the fact that McCarthy went after the "elites" [code word for Jews?] in the State Department whom JFK regarded with contempt. . . . The ties with Bobby were forged when [McCarthy] gave RFK a job as minority counsel to his Senate committee investigating domestic communism.

From Arthur Herman (an historian who has been a fellow at the conservative Hudson Institute), *Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining the Life and Legacy of America's Most Hated Senator* (Free Press, 2000):

> John Kennedy's views, on communism and the Soviet threat, were not so different from McCarthy's either. . . . One night in February 1952 he heard a speaker at Harvard's Spree Club denounce McCarthy in the same breath as Alger Hiss [a New Deal liberal who played a large role in the founding of the United Nations and then was accused, before the House

Left, people who were often known as advocates for social justice, for working people, and so forth.

For example, Nixon's political career began in 1946 when he ran for Congress against an incumbent Democrat, Jerry Voorhis, a loyal supporter of the New Deal with a liberal voting record. Nixon suggested that Voorhis's endorsement by a group linked to communists meant that Voorhis must have radical left-wing views. In reality, Voorhis was a staunch anti-communist. He had once been voted by the press corps as the "most honest congressman." But Nixon was able to successfully link Voorhis to the group, and Nixon's political career was launched.[8]

When we ask why the line—"It seems like an impossible dream"—had meaning for Guston, we may note his father—a Jew in a Southern California then riddled with anti-Semitism, and with the local Ku Klux Klan leading the anti-Semitic charge—Louis Goldstein had been unable to find decent work. A blacksmith, for a while he scratched out a living as a junk collector, and then hung himself. Philip, about 10 years old at the time, was the first to find his father's body. As a Los Angeles adolescent, as much later in his Woodstock studio, he found refuge in drawing cartoons.

Afterword on Nixon, Kennedy, Trump, Clinton, the UN, the World Series—Our Values?

In the current election season, and with all the questions being raised about Donald Trump's and Hillary Clinton's integrity, I cannot help calling attention to the role played by integrity, or the lack thereof, in one key aspect of the careers of Richard Nixon and John Kennedy. That is, it might have been thought that these politicians' support for McCarthyism, a movement and approach notable for its lack of integrity, would have led to their disgrace, would have made them unelectable once McCarthyism began to be widely and prominently denounced. But no, both of these people were then elected to be Presidents of the United States. (Footnote 8 touches on the Kennedys' support for McCarthy.)

And thus I was not surprised, yet still more than dismayed to read one of the facts—or no, all of the facts!—reported in Jonathan M. Katz's recent *New York Times* story **U.N. Admits Role in Cholera Epidemic in Haiti**. The epidemic, Katz reminded readers, had "killed at least 10,000 people and sickened hundreds of thousands." The United Nations had

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> Un-American Activities Committee, of being a Soviet spy]. Kennedy shot back, "How dare you couple the name of a great American patriot [i.e. McCarthy] with that of a traitor [i.e. Hiss]!"

[8] This paragraph quotes from Michael Barnes, **The Cold War Home Front: McCarthyism**, a post of the **Authentic History Center**, accessed November 2016.

finally, in 2016, acknowledged that its "stabilization mission" in Haiti (a.k.a. MINUSTAH) played a role in the disaster, because some of the peacekeepers who came to serve in Haiti had brought the cholera virus with them and because the mission was still discharging its waste into public canals *even four years after the epidemic began*. And so—we come to the additional dismaying fact—what was the fate of Edmond Mulet, the Guatemalan diplomat who was the head of MINUSTAH when the epidemic began? Was he, say, fired? Demoted? No, the UN promoted him—to be Chief of Staff to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Was it his long involvement in Latin American politics, peace negotiations, and relations with the United States that got Mulet promoted, or a reputation for incompetence? Was it that he had proved good at something that the previous Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, had also, on his way up the ladder, proved good at? Had Mulet proved that, in the midst or on the verge of humanitarian disaster, he was capable of doing nothing, of accepting his or his organization's impotence, of not speaking out loudly in an attempt to prevent the deaths of thousands?[9]

The more general question here is: What do such phenomena tell us about our society and its values and about those who we would put in key figurehead (if not real leadership) positions? The following may seem trivial when compared to McCarthyism or to the killing of 10,000 innocent people, but, on the day I went to the Nixon drawings show, I happened to tune in the Fox broadcast of the baseball World Series. Before the game, announcers and former baseball stars were shown behind a podium, and they gave their opinions on which team was likely to win and so forth. One of the questions often asked about Trump and Clinton is, in a country with 300 million people, are these two people really the best two presidential candidates we can come up with? So, who were the two former baseball stars Fox came up with to put on national television? Alex Rodriquez, one of the most prominent users of banned performance-enhancing drugs, and Pete Rose, who agreed to permanent ineligibility from baseball amid accusations that he gambled on baseball games while playing for and managing a major league team. Lack of integrity comes to seem a prerequisite for gaining prominent positions in our society.

Could this be, say, because the truly powerful in the society know they can count on the corrupt, spineless, or ductile to be corruptible, spineless, or ductile as and when necessary? Or could it be that prominent corruptness, spinelessness, or ductility—or incompetence—provides a kind of blanket excuse for all the rest of our misdeeds? Or . . . ?

[9] A counter-argument is that such people's lapses were overlooked because the people had so many other good qualities, had done so many other good things. Similarly, an early reader of this afterword suggested that Nixon had played a role in getting the Clean Air Act enacted. And one might say of Kennedy that he re-energized the country in valuable ways, promoted the arts and sciences, etc.