# William Slothrop: Gentleman

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Edward Mendelson discusses at length the "illegality of Pynchon's vision." He describes the author of Gravity's Rainbow as an outsider who chooses "a stance alien to our literary culture," a writer who "proposes a grotesquerie that governance can never acknowledge," a person who stakes out a "position at the edge of a culture."[1] Thomas Pynchon, were he available for comment, might agree with such statements. He might also point out that the same sorts of things were said of an ancestor of his, William Pynchon, who published in 1650 a religious tract entitled The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption. Ezra Hoyt Byington writes of this tract:

> It is the production of a very intelligent layman, living upon the outermost rim of civilization, and moved by the currents of theological opinion in his time to put forth his independent protest against opinions that seemed to him inconsistent with the word of God.[2]

Strongly similar phrasing is used in the descriptions of Thomas Pynchon's "position at the edge of a culture" and William Pynchon's position at "the outermost rim of civilization." Another historian states that William Pynchon's "sin consisted in being in advance of his age--happily one of the sins which posterity does not consider damnable beyond forgiveness."[3] Most copies of William Pynchon's book were burned publicly in Boston. Likewise, Gravity's Rainbow was metaphorically "burned" by the awarders of the Pulitzer Prize. History repeats itself, and sometimes it repeats itself in the same family.

Much has been written about Thomas Pynchon's indebtedness to Puritan thought, particularly to the concept of the preterite and the elect. My purpose here is not to go over ground already well covered--not to look at the literature of Puritanism as it relates to Thomas Pynchon's work--but to trace historically the sources of William Slothrop, that premier religious gadfly who haunts the memory of one of Gravity's Rainbow's main characters, Tyrone Slothrop. I will consider in parti-

cular William Pynchon's life and his book, but I will also consider other sources for the character of William Slothrop.

William Pynchon was a well-to-do and well-educated man before he set sail for the Bay colony. He could trace his ancestry back to the time of William the Conqueror. He was enrolled at Oxford at the age of eleven (it was a custom then to send boys this young), although it is not known how long he studied there. He was a church warden, and he was already thirty-nine years old when he crossed the Atlantic. There were three or four ships on that expedition. Most sources place William Pynchon aboard the Ambrose or the Jewell, but at least one source, the Dictionary of American Biography, places him aboard Governor Winthrop's flagship, the Arbella,[4] the same ship on which the fictional William Slothrop took passage. Whichever view is historically correct, it is certain that William Pynchon spent some time on the Arbella during the voyage. Historian Stephen Innes writes:

> Already one of the luminaries in the company, William received a midvoyage invitation to dine with Governor Winthrop. The governor entered into his journal that "About eleven of the clock, our captain sent his skiff and fetched aboard us the masters of the other two ships, and Mr. Pynchon, and they dined with us in the round-house."[5]

Tyrone Slothrop's ancestor, on the other hand, was not a luminary; he was just "a mess cook or something."[6] The dinner "in the round-house" was probably elegant and succulent; the "night's stew" Thomas Pynchon mentions in the passage below most likely would not have been served there:

> There go that Arbella and its whole fleet, sailing backward [ . . . ] across an Atlantic whose currents and swells go flowing and heaving in reverse . . . a redemption of every mess cook who ever slipped and fell when the deck made an unexpected move, the night's stew collecting itself up out of the planks and off the indignant shoes of the more elect, slithering in a fountain back into the pewter kettle as the servant

> himself staggers upright again and the vomit he slipped on goes gushing back into the mouth that spilled it . . . (GR, 204)

In this reverse-time sequence William Slothrop himself seems represented as the type of person who might have vomited on "the indignant shoes of the more elect"; William Pynchon would have been wearing those shoes.

The Puritans in general were seeking religious freedom, but William Pynchon seems to have been more interested in the economic opportunities afforded by the New World. Innes notes:

> While the other migrants made the trek [to the Connecticut River Valley] primarily for religious reasons, Pynchon went to the valley as a merchant, not a Puritan. The community he built reflected this priority.[7]

Even before William Pynchon moved west to what is now Springfield, Massachusetts, he was a successful merchant. Innes writes:

> By 1634, with the help of his London agents, Pynchon was the leading fur trader in Massachusetts with a volume of pelts tenfold that of his nearest competitor.[8]

In addition, William Pynchon had many other business interests, including real estate holdings, grain and meat exports, and a trading post. In contrast, mention is made in Gravity's Rainbow only of William Slothrop's modest "pig operation." Thomas Pynchon writes, "By the time they got to market those hogs were so skinny it was hardly worth it, but William wasn't really in it so much for the money as just for the trip itself" (GR, 555). In giving William Slothrop the absurd occupation of pig-driver, Thomas Pynchon has deflated the stature of his own ancestor; he has succeeded in reversing an old adage by fashioning a sow's ear from a silk purse.

Although William Pynchon was not involved in a pig-driving enterprise as was his fictional counterpart (more will be said on this subject later), he did travel "the long, stony and surprising road to Boston" (GR, 556) frequently on official business during his many years as a magistrate for Springfield. He was on good

terms with the "heathen" Indians. Mason Green writes:

> William Pynchon was a great traveller, both in this valley [the Connecticut River Valley] and in the Bay country, and his impressive figure and strange garb became a familiar sight to the Indians. This stern horseman riding down a forest bridle-path, attended by a mounted servant, became to the Indians the impersonation of justice. . . . He never designedly violated the Indians' notion of right and wrong, but when he made a bargain with the Indians, he even suffered rather than break it, or allow it to be broken. . . . William Pynchon . . . was a student and a lawyer, and a man who believed that only through a primitive code of ethics could amicable relations subsist between the English and the red man.[9]

The Indians who lived near Springfield knew that they would be fairly treated if they were accused of a crime against a white man, and they also knew that justice would be swift if they accused a white man of a crime against them. (In his fiction, Thomas Pynchon has shown a concern like his ancestor's for native peoples.) As things stood before the publication of his inflammatory book, William Pynchon was regarded as an honorable man by most people (both red and white) with whom he came in contact.

The central concern of the fictional William Slothrop's book, On Preterition, is the salvation of the preterite. William Pynchon, however, hardly mentions the preterite (he calls them reprobates). On this issue he is an orthodox Puritan/Calvinist. In The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption he writes:

> [Christ] never intended to redeem all Mankind in general, he never intended to redeem any but the Many [which here means the elect]: he confirmed the promise of the covenant only for the Many . . . Christ did not shed his blood for the whole world, but for the elect number only.[10]

Elsewhere he states, "It is the iniquities of the elected Believers only that the Lord laid upon Christ."[11] He takes Martin Luther to task for making "a most dan-

gerous error to affirm that Christ hath redeemed the whole world."[12] William Pynchon's views on the preterite and the elect differed not at all from views then commonly held in New England.

He ran afoul of such views, however, with his pronouncements on atonement. Religious leaders in England and New England preached that Christ suffered both in body and in soul on the cross--his body the physical tortures and his soul the "hell torments." William Pynchon disagreed:

> [Christ] did more than patiently suffer; for he delighted to give his back to the smiters, and he delighted to give his Soul to God [in the time of his sufferings] as a Mediatorial Sacrifice of Atonement.[13]

This view seems to diminish the weight of Christ's sufferings, and it shocked the Puritan sensibilities of New England. Innes writes:

> By emphasizing the redemptive nature of Christ's life instead of his death, Pynchon undercut orthodox Puritanism's central tenet: that by taking men's sins upon himself and dying for them, Christ had saved the elect from Adam's curse.[14]

In a larger sense:

> Pynchon [demanded] greater toleration for heterodox opinions and less stringent tests of faith, tests always rendered suspect by the innate fallibility of all men, ministers and magistrates included. This individualistic and antiauthoritarian biblicism was scarcely calculated to sit well with the coastal magistrates . . .[15]

Or, as Thomas Pynchon might put it, "You can bet the Elect in Boston were pissed off about that" (GR, 555).

With the publication of his religious tract, William Pynchon endangered enterprises he had built up for twenty years. Historian Philip F. Gura suggests this reason for his doing it:

> Noting the bifurcation of English Puritanism into Presbyterians and Independents, Pynchon observed that the best frame was not necessarily Presby-

> terian or Congregational but rather one "where zeale of gods glory and godly wisdome are joyned together." He went on to maintain that a "world of good hath bin don by godly ministers even in England, that have held no certaine fourme of discipline." On the other hand, "where a could spirit doth rule in ministers," the people may "yet be but dead christians." What mattered was less the form of the polity than the zeal of the clergy.[16]

What William Pynchon's work meant to other colonists is well summed up by Henry M. Burt:

> William Pynchon's book literally and figuratively was "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." The details of his theology are of less importance to us than the fact that he alone in New England dared to proclaim the faith that was in him when the faith was opposed to the lawfully established religion.[17]

Although Thomas Pynchon makes little use of this particular back alley in the history of religious thought, he does use the fact of his ancestor's persecution. William Slothrop also "dares" and he too is persecuted. William Pynchon becomes a metaphor in the person of William Slothrop. "Could he have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from?" (GR, 556) Thomas Pynchon asks. But, ultimately, William Slothrop's ideology doesn't quite mesh with that of William Pynchon. Thomas Pynchon writes: "William felt that what Jesus was for the elect, Judas Iscariot was for the Preterite. Everything in the Creation has its equal and opposite counterpart." "William argued holiness for these 'second Sheep,' without whom there'd be no elect" (GR, 555). William Pynchon had no concept of "second Sheep"; he noted only the "lost sheep" who were stray members of the elect.[18] The rest of mankind is "damned totally and penally, because there is no place of repentance left open to them."[19] And God has no "equal and opposite counterpart"; rather, God "hath destroyed him that had the power of death, that is the Devil."[20] William Pynchon allowed for no ambiguity, and for no balance of power, in his universe.

Both William Pynchon and William Slothrop were "exiled" from the Bay colony. Both had a son named John. William Pynchon returned to the family estate in Writtle, England, but John Pynchon remained behind and vastly expanded the family's business interests. One lucrative enterprise was a "pig operation." Burt writes, "In 1656 John Pynchon set out on a pork-raising speculation";[21] and Innes notes, "Because of John Pynchon's extensive pork exports, pigs made up the majority of animals slaughtered in early Springfield."[22] Of course, William Slothrop drove live pigs to market instead of shipping barrels of pork, but Thomas Pynchon could have had John Pynchon in mind when he fashioned the business side of Slothrop's character. John Pynchon also had a flair for turning a religious phrase. In 1675, during King Philip's War, he wrote to his son Joseph:

> The sore contending of God with us for our sins . . . hath evidently demonstrated that he is very angry with this country, God having given the heathen [Indians] a large commission to destroy.[23]

Interestingly, the sanction for the heathen/preterite "commission to destroy" comes from God here, not from his counterpart.

A later Pynchon, this one also named William, was involved in another religious controversy in 1736. Rev. Robert Breck was nominated for a ministerial post in Springfield, but a certain faction of townspeople including, ironically, William Pynchon, opposed him and almost succeeded in blocking his appointment. They did not care for what Breck once said in a sermon:

> What will become of the heathen who never heard of the Gospel, I do not pretend to say, but I cannot but indulge a hope that God in his boundless benevolence will find out a way whereby those heathen who act up to the light they have may be saved.[24]

When Thomas Pynchon writes that "Nobody wanted to hear about all the Preterite" (GR, 555), he is referring to events that occurred in 1650, but the quote is equally applicable to the Breck case. Breck held the same optimistic hope for the spiritual well-being of the

"heathen" as William Slothrop held for his "second Sheep." Later in his life Breck took on a more somber tone:

> A faithful minister . . . is what the world very much needs in its present dark state. . . . Ignorance and darkness have overspread the world, and if God had not taken compassion upon us, the world had remained in midnight darkness to this time.[25]

The fictional William Slothrop wrote in a similar style when he composed this hymn:

> There is a Hand to turn the time,
> Though thy Glass today be run,
> Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low
> Find the last poor Pret'rite one . . .
> Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road,
> All through our crippl'd Zone,
> With a face on ev'ry mountainside,
> And a Soul in ev'ry stone. . . . (GR, 760)

These last two passages can be joined in a nice amalgamation: Thy Glass today be run. Ignorance and darkness hath overspread the world. Riders sleep by ev'ry road all through our crippl'd Zone. A faithful minister--a Hand to turn the time--is what the world very much needs in its present dark state.

The title page of The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption identifies its author as "William Pinchin, Gentleman, in New England." The tag, "Gentleman," is almost too humble. Early Pynchons were prime movers in the Bay colony. It is quite likely, if not certain, that Thomas Pynchon would be familiar with most of the material presented in this essay. Any general history of Springfield, of Massachusetts, or of New England is replete with references to the Pynchon name. The study of source materials for Gravity's Rainbow is valid because Thomas Pynchon himself pays meticulous attention to historical details. We can read Gravity's Rainbow as a historical document, or we can read Thomas Pynchon's family history as an aid in understanding his encyclopedic work.

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## Notes

[1] Edward Mendelson, "Gravity's Encyclopedia," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 173, 178.

[2] Ezra Hoyt Byington, The Puritan in England and New England (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1896), 204.

[3] Josiah Gilbert Holland, History of Western Massachusetts (Springfield, MA: Samuel Bowles and Company, 1855), 39.

[4] Dumas Malone, ed., Dictionary of American Biography, XV (New York: Scribner's, 1935), 290.

[5] Stephen Innes, Labor in a New Land: Economy and Society in Seventeenth Century Springfield (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 4.

[6] Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 204.

[7] Innes, 5-6.

[8] Innes, 4.

[9] Mason A. Green, Springfield 1636-1886: History of Town and City (Boston: C. A. Nichols & Co., 1888), 20-24. All histories I consulted concur with Green, who sums up the facts well and in a readable style.

[10] William Pinchin [sic], The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption (London: James Moxon, 1650), 87; in the collections of the Connecticut Valley Historical Society, Springfield, Massachusetts.

[11] Pinchin, 28.

[12] Pinchin, 87.

[13] Pinchin, 24.

[14] Innes, 15.

[15] Innes, 15.

[16] Philip F. Gura, "'The Contagion of Corrupt Opinions' in Puritan Massachusetts: The Case of William Pynchon," William and Mary Quarterly, 39 (1982), 474.

[17] Henry M. Burt, The First Century of the History of Springfield, I (Springfield: Burt, 1898), 88.

[18] Pinchin, 28.

[19] Pinchin, 58.

[20] Pinchin, 24.

[21] Burt, 59.

[22] Innes, 115.

[23] Quoted by Holland, 99.

[24] Quoted by Holland, 200.

[25] Rev. Robert Breck, Two Discourses Delivered at Amherst (Springfield, MA: Babcock & Haswell, 1783), 8.