

“Presto Change-o! Tyrone Slothrop’s English Again!”: Puritan Conversion, Imperfect Assurance, and the Salvific Sloth in *Gravity’s Rainbow*

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In 1650, Thomas Pynchon’s first Anglo-American ancestor, William Pynchon, published a pamphlet entitled *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*. Its 158 pages constitute a dialogue between a “Tradesman” and a “Divine” arguing that Jesus did not suffer God’s wrath in atonement for the sins of the Elect, nor did he descend into hell, as the Nicene Creed holds. Rather, according to William, Christ endured the worst of what the *devil* could dish out, though God did allow Satan to do so. In a sense, William claimed Christ’s suffering on the cross in the gospels resembles Job’s experience in the Old Testament. Most Puritans disagreed with his conclusions: it is clear that New England’s first Pynchon was a far better merchant than a Puritan religious scholar.

Historically, Pynchon’s treatise has been largely overlooked; his name rarely appears in the most significant studies of New England’s religious roots. But recent scholarship has shown that his attempted contribution to Puritan theology, like most controversial texts, tells us much about the time in which it was published; and what the controversy tells us about colonial America is vital. As Michael P. Winship points out, the English Puritans were not used to real political power, and prior to the Cromwellian coup in England forged ahead as a loosely configured group bound by mere *resemblances* in orthodoxy but essential *equivalence* in oppression and suffering. As history shows countless times, shared margins can help mediate many differences, but centers often feel quite small when finally occupied:

An ever increasing common repression before the civil wars of the 1640s perhaps put a brake on the escalation of theological confrontations among Puritans, but within a decade after the civil wars removed that brake[,] the putative doctrinal unity of the movement was visibly and finally sundered. (Winship 799)

The struggles for orthodoxy in England had an instructive influence on the American Puritans, and intensified what was already a long history of extreme intolerance in the face of controversial opinions: witness Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson and various ill-placed Quakers.¹ The reactions of New England’s religious leaders were swift and unequivocal—and for that, often imprecise.

Based in part on its title page,² many denounced William Pynchon's very mild foray into orthodoxy debates as a kind of Socinian heresy: that is, a heresy that denies the divinity of Christ, settling instead on the opinion that he was an exemplary human being, but no more a part of God than any other human being was. To quash the spread of such dangerous ideas, the books were quickly rounded up and burned at Market Place in Boston by the town executioner (Gura). Shortly thereafter, in the terms used by his more famous descendant Thomas Pynchon when describing the treatment of the fictional William Slothrop, Pynchon was "86'd" from Massachusetts.

This essay argues that *Gravity's Rainbow* finds opportunity in the complexity of America's religious history by revitalizing a suppressed strain of Puritanism rejected by the ruling elite, recovering an excised liberal offshoot from the main trunk of the past to reimagine the novel's present. In so doing, the narrative refigures the capital sin of Sloth into a context wherein its characteristic ambivalence becomes a productive stance of resistance against dogmatism. By recovering William Pynchon's Puritanism from history's scrap heap, *Gravity's Rainbow* ultimately challenges many of the presuppositions about the past, presuppositions which then ground so many of our assumptions about the present.

No one really knows exactly how influential William Pynchon's Puritanism was on the writing of *Gravity's Rainbow*: perhaps not even Thomas Ruggles himself. After all, its William Slothrop is portrayed as a mere ship's cook *cum* pig farmer; a hillbilly espousing theological conclusions derived from his observations of the movements of swine; an outsider that as John Krafft notes was "presumably one of the saints," but that "stood in a subordinate relationship which was theological as well as social to the 'more Elect'" (58). But this representation of William Slothrop is not enough, if it purports to represent the historical William Pynchon. As Robert Daly argues,

Pynchon was a prosperous merchant and influential member of the Puritan community, so influential that when, in the winter of 1629-30, Winthrop makes up his short list of those he hopes will come with him to America, Pynchon is on it; so influential that, sailing aboard the *Ambrose*, he is brought over to the *Arabella* to dine with Winthrop and the captains of the fleet, the only person named in the account; so influential that, in 1640, the town of Agawam changes its name to Springfield in honor of Pynchon's home town back in Essex. He is one of the authorities, and he may be the only person in American history to have defied Thomas Hooker, of whom it is said he could have put a king in his pocket. (206)

In short, William Pynchon and William Slothrop are not identical, or even equal.

We also know for certain that there was not one, but many Puritanisms.

The proto-fundamentalists who provided much of the material and spiritual energy for New England's establishment shared many commonalities, particularly as regards their ideas and attitudes towards the Catholic and English churches of their day. Edmund Morgan explains, "[w]ith so large an area of agreement about the nature and organization of the church, disagreements were confined to details; and as long as Puritans remained powerless to establish the desired organization, details could not be important" (12). William Pynchon's experience reaffirms that Puritanism was multiple, and these differences came to the fore after these radical reformers obtained sufficient political power to effect their desired organization of Church structure, both in England and New England. Though not expressed anywhere in the text of the *Meritorious Price*, an implicit argument is that Puritan orthodoxy was far from settled, and open to wide interpretation. Winship argues,

Approaching old age in Massachusetts, Pynchon saw in the flux of the civil wars period and in the reemergence of issues he had grappled with more than a quarter of a century earlier the opportunity to publish his views. The resulting controversy . . . reflected orthodoxy's now openly fractured state. Pynchon thus provides . . . continuity between contestations for the slippery center in Jacobean England to the shattering of that center, felt all the way from London to Frontier English North American Villages in the middle of the seventeenth century. (799)

While the disagreements between allied Puritan reformers may have existed only at the level of detail, those details could be crucial aspects of an obviously unsettled orthodoxy. Thus although there seemed to be widespread agreement as to how faith ought to be practiced (that is, a relative agreement of what the organization should be) the very tenets of that faith were left unresolved.

The controversy surrounding the *Meritorious Price* also reminds us of a fact evident at many points in history: that hitherto loosely allied leaders are often at the apex of agreement in the face of something with which they all most vehemently *disagree*. In many senses, American Puritanism was and is best defined by what its proponents opposed: the limits of orthodoxy were most clearly drawn by self-identifying Puritans whose interpretations of scripture offended or upset more powerful ecclesiastical authorities.

In retrospect, then, it is evident that the spiritual project we know as Puritanism was far from a stable entity, exhibiting markedly varied beliefs, both within any given period and across time. And these variations require acknowledgement before proceeding with *Gravity's Rainbow's* treatment of the historical phenomenon. So while we cannot know for certain how much Thomas Pynchon was actively influenced by his ancestor's writing, it is my contention that the colonial "heresy" nevertheless shines an illuminating

light on the contemporary masterpiece. Altogether, the novel brings with it a very sophisticated knowledge of America's Puritan roots—roots that warrant greater examination than Pynchon scholarship has hitherto executed. This essay also suggests that Slothrop's experience in the first third of the novel exhibits many of the characteristics of the Puritan "conversion experience," affording a reading of the novel's present within and then against the framework of a Puritan worldview. As *Gravity's Rainbow* then rejects the binaries of conservative Puritanism's reductive method of reading reality, and the painful paradoxes of imperfect assurance, the novel embraces a positive ambivalence found in a positive practice of Sloth: what for the Puritan was a sin becomes, in Pynchon's novel, a necessary position to adopt in the face of so much uncertainty in the post-war world.

1: Slothrop's Morphology of Conversion

Tyrone's engagement with his family's Puritan tradition emerges early in the novel's account of his wartime experiences. Tracking rocket strikes in England, the narrator explains that Slothrop

hangs at the bottom of his blood's avalanche, 300 years of western swamp-Yankees, and can't manage but some nervous truth with their Providence. A *détente*. Ruins he goes on daily to look in are each a sermon on vanity. That he finds, as weeks wear on, no least fragment of any rocket, preaches how indivisible is the act of death . . . Slothrop's Progress: London the secular city instructs him: turn any corner and he can find himself inside a parable. (25)

The allusion to John Bunyan's *A Pilgrim's Progress*, emphasizes the Puritan tradition's influence exercised on Slothrop's view of the world. The parallels are instructive—much like the Puritan who has never communicated with God (since it was believed that direct revelation ended with the death of the last Apostle), Slothrop has never seen any of the rockets whose strikes he is charged with investigating. Yet neither doubts the existence of their driving force.

Slothrop is also at least partly aware that the pattern of rocket strikes mirrors his movements through London. But he is not quite ready to accept God as the ultimate arbiter of Providence. The above passage makes clear that Slothrop has some begrudging belief that Someone, Somewhere has a plan for him: and he's terrified of this plan, has "conviction," that fate is ominous, demonstrating that his secular present is still inflected by his past's Puritanism as a hermeneutic of events in the world: "He's become obsessed with the idea of a rocket with his name written on it—if they're really set on getting him ("They" embracing possibilities far beyond Nazi Germany) that's the surest way, doesn't cost a thing to paint his name *on every one, right?*" (25).

Slothrop tries to explain the complexity and influence of his Puritan heritage to Tantivy, his sole friend and confidante; but the British intelligence officer cannot comprehend the American's genealogical predisposition, what is later described as a "Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia [. . .]" (188). Mucker-Maffick admits value in his friend's pretending to such a practical fiction to keep him sharp, but Slothrop remains resolute, querying, "Who's pretending?" (25).

Though Tyrone refrains from explaining the full character of his fear to his office-mate, the narrator spares little detail:

It's nothing he can see or lay hands on—sudden gases, a violence up in the air and no trace afterward . . . a Word, spoken with no warning into your ear, and then silence forever. Beyond its invisibility, beyond hammerfall and doomcrack, here is its real horror, mocking, promising him death with German and precise confidence, laughing down all of Tantivy's quiet decencies . . . no, no bullet with fins, Ace . . . not the Word, the one Word that rips apart the day. . . . (25)

In his anxiety, Slothrop sees in the pattern rocket falls a similar power to that of the Puritan's God. There is more to it all than the deadly force of a bullet fired from a gun: it is the Word; the Word of the Gospel of John, Chapter One; the Word that creates the world by dividing the void; the Word that "rips apart the day" when creating night, just as this Word sundered the heavens from the earth by separating the waters above from the waters below (*Genesis* 1: 9-10).

This type of fear, an all-consuming terror of the power of something greater than one's self, is the *second* stage in the conventional Puritan conversion experience. Though scholars disagree as to the exact point of origin, at some point in the history of early New England, the colonies' churches began to demand a narrative of the ostensible Saint's assurance that God had bestowed his Grace freely on the Puritan's soul as prerequisite for full membership.³ According to Edmund Morgan, "the outlines of the pattern are plain: knowledge, conviction, faith, combat, and true, imperfect assurance" (72). For the sake of brevity, I will paint the steps with rather broad strokes: *first*, the saint comes to the knowledge of God's greatness and the "power of the word" (71), while accepting God's preordained plan for the world; next, he suffers with the conviction that he is hopeless to remedy the situation on his own (otherwise known as "legal fear"); then follows a desire and hope for God's salvation, manifested in the faith that God has chosen him for regeneration in the afterlife; finally, however, he must remain skeptical of his own knowledge of God's salvation, producing an internal conflict commensurate with his external conflict with the devil and his agents in his effort to erect God's kingdom on Earth.

Slothrop clearly exhibits his knowledge of the faith of his ancestors, and

exhibits, as above, a familiarity with their belief in the “power of the word.” Accepting that there may well be some preordained plot for the world, as the knowledge of Providence effected in the converted Puritan, Slothrop develops a sincere fear and conviction that he is helpless to do anything about his situation, although precisely to what this “legal fear” is directed—Them—remains uncertain.

Thus, Slothrop exhibits the conventional beginning stages of the conversion experience; and while the conversion that he undergoes displays significant parallels to the “morphology of conversion” detailed by Morgan, it also deviates from the form in substantial and telling ways. It is through these deviations that we can begin to see how Pynchon’s novel creates a modern Puritan worldview against which to consider the present: one that views history providentially but without a God; one that ultimately allows Slothrop to recompose the conventional narrative of American Puritanism by eschewing the conservative strains most familiar in American history, which led to fear, despair, and intolerance in favor of recovering a more liberal (but deemed heretical by the conservative factions of New England) approach to orthodoxy that encouraged acceptance, inclusion, and expanded tolerance.

From the stages of knowledge and fear, Puritan conversion generally progresses into faith and combat, which is to say that the convert develops full faith in God, but suffers from a conflict marked by desire and hope for God’s saving Grace and the concomitant despair that it may not come. This element of Slothrop’s own peculiar conversion comes shortly after rescuing Katje from the trained Octopus Grigori on the beaches of the Casino Hermann Goering. To understand the “Puritan reflex” called paranoia, however, one must first recall that the tenets of that reflex hinged upon the belief that “[t]here were, according to Augustine, two churches. One was pure but invisible; it included every person living, dead, or yet to be born, whom God had predestined for salvation. The other was visible but not entirely pure; it included only persons who professed to believe in Christianity” (Morgan 3). By extension, there were also two worlds. First, in order and priority, was the invisible world of God, his invisible church, and the devil that opposed that church’s authority. Second was the visible world, material existence, which was a medium for that interaction. Perry Miller also insists that for the Puritans

the visible world was not the final or the true world; it was a creation of God and it was sustained by Him from moment to moment. Deeper than belief in the more obvious articles of their creed lay the sense of the world as a created fabric, held together by a continuous emanation of divine power. . . . “All creatures are dead Cyphers, of no signification, except the influence of God adds a figure to them.” . . . God not only gives being to the world, but, Himself the supreme intelligence, directs it to intelligible ends. (14-15)

Like his Puritan progenitors, Tyrone is beginning to perceive an alignment between things as they seem to be, and things as they “really are” (in a neoplatonic, idealist sense): “For a minute here, Slothrop, in his English uniform, is alone with the paraphernalia whose presence among the ordinary debris of waking he has only lately begun to suspect. [. . .] Meaning things to Them it never meant to us. Never. Two orders of being, looking identical . . . but, but . . .” (202). In the landscape of *Slothrop’s Progress*, this identification of “orders of being” moves him forward through the steps of conversion—from knowledge, to conviction, to full faith and combat. But the conversion is yet incomplete.

Shortly every institutional marker of Tyrone’s identity is stolen, and everything that can identify him as American—even as Tyrone Slothrop—disappears: papers, uniform, Hawaiian shirts, and all. Essentially moving backwards to the time when the colonists on American soil were still English (“American” being a term reserved for discussing the continent’s indigenous peoples), he is given an English uniform, and “Presto change-o! Tyrone Slothrop’s English again! But it doesn’t seem to be redemption that *this* They have in mind. . .” (204). With this recognition, Tyrone thinks back to his first ancestor to reach American soil, William Slothrop, and muses on the not-yet heretic’s journey across the Atlantic. The language and concepts of Puritanism flood these pages: they refer to “the text of the day, where footnotes will explain it all,” alluding to the Puritan tendency to “read” the world as an expression of God. They single out the world’s “strangers”; they, as ever, see “grace.”

Slothrop’s experience of conversion, however, is not quite identical with the morphology Morgan articulates. Slothrop does not so much accept the power of God as he does give himself over to an idea of Providence, a force manifested by a Them that he never identifies or defines. Secondly, he determines himself to be preterite—something no Puritan would ever imagine (indeed, why would one subscribe to a religion that figures one’s self as damned: what could be more hopeless?)—but, contrary to many critics’ thinking, he does not believe that conclusion for very long. Significantly, however, Slothrop’s experience underscores and seeks to redefine the problematic doctrine of “pure, imperfect assurance.” But for that, we’ll need to look farther back into Slothrop’s family history, and into the history of the American colonies as a whole.

2: Thomas Hooker’s Garden of Despair

To understand more fully the difficulties of imperfect assurance, *Gravity’s Rainbow* cites Thomas Hooker. Quoted twice in the novel, and both from the same text, “Spiritual Love and Joy,” this sermon attempts to explain the source and experience of true love for and joy in God. Since Pynchon cites

Hooker expressly, and Hooker alone, one might read this move as Pynchon playing one of his typically arcane jokes: presenting a criticism of Hooker's theology some 330 years after the fact is a resumption of the "family feud" noted by Daly above that had Springfield removed from Connecticut's—and thus Hooker's—control, and under John Winthrop's in Massachusetts.

In summary, March 1638 brought a major corn shortage in the colonies, and then-Governor of Connecticut Hooker assigned William Pynchon the task of purchasing corn from the indigenous peoples close by. Pynchon found them reluctant to sell and quoted Hooker a very high price: despite the clear opportunity for profiting presented to the Native Americans, Hooker accused *Pynchon* of gouging and fined him a significant quantity of corn. So Pynchon took his city (Springfield nee Agawam) away from Hooker, and attached it instead to Winthrop's Massachusetts. It remains there to this day.

But there is more at work here than trampling the graves of old family enemies. *Gravity's Rainbow* sees a danger in Hooker's Puritanism, particularly as outlined in "Spiritual Love and Joy," and uses the Slothrop family experience to articulate it. In so doing, Slothrop moves far beyond the stark and reductive simplicity of conservative Puritanism into a new way of embracing the world's complexity, rather than reducing it to stark opposites.

Hooker's sermon first appears very early on in the novel, in an oft-cited passage: "'I know there is wilde love and joy enough in the world,' preached Thomas Hooker, 'as there are wilde Thyme, and other herbes; but we would have garden love, and garden joy, of Gods owne planting.' How Slothrop's garden grows" (22). To have the kind of Love that Hooker wants one to have (or at least the Elect to have, his concern is not with the Preterite, for there is no hope for the predestined unregenerate⁴), Hooker outlines a process whereby the chosen can ready their souls for God's divine seed.

First, Hooker cites the doctrine: "The Spirit of the Father kindles in the soule of the sinner, truly humbled and inlightened, love and joy, to entertaine and rejoyce in the riches of his mercy, so as becomes the worth of it" (Hooker 180). He then interprets this doctrine by asserting that the single most important prerequisite for the accepting of the Love that Jesus may bring is a humbled heart. A heart thus composed would suffer tremendous despair for having sinned against the Lord: a despair that is near debilitating. In this state of suffering, one can come to realize that there must be a better state of being, and the humbled heart will yield hope and desire. The torture of having realized one's wrongs, and thus one's unworthiness, naturally leads to the hope for a pardon from God. Such a reprieve cannot be earned, however, as that would be the effort of *works*, and not of a grace freely given by God. When one hopes that something so great as God's grace is available to the poor sinner's heart, one desires said grace: so if and when it comes, one is fully able to recognize it and accept it for what it is. Having desired grace, and knowing the tortures of living without it, Hooker continues, grants insight

into a soul. Thus, if and when God comes to this soul, it is able to identify its salvific operation and responds with *spiritual love* characterized by pure joy, a joy that is commensurate with the greatness and goodness of God.

However, behind the prospect of a loving and joyful soul lurks the genuinely terrifying paradox of assurance. In order to be a member of a Puritan church, one needed assurance of one's own standing in God's good graces: but asserting total assurance would claim absolute knowledge of God's divine workings, which is blasphemy, and a sure sign of a sinner. So when Hooker enumerates the four purposes in the application of his doctrine, serious problems become apparent. He claims that the uses of Spiritual love and joy are "Instruction," "Consolation," "Reprehension," and "Exhortation." For instance, Instruction teaches us a simple lesson: namely, that there is nothing *in the world* that can bring love, or that we *can* love, like God. This goes back to the predominance of neo-platonic idealism in Puritan thinking, and the belief that the world is just shadows of the Real that is God. Not surprisingly, this can be a painful lesson: "It is an unconceivable misery, that any man should be so farre deluded, as to think that he can [attain the highest Love] by his own strength and power. . ." (207), he writes; that is to say, one cannot love in the fullest spiritual sense without the help of God.

What's more, Hooker adds later,

I presse this instruction . . . to shew the disorderly proceedings of many poore Saints, that labour extremely to work their own soules, and to bring their hearts to love Christ; that they even fall out with themselves, and curse their base hearts, that can love the world, and cannot love Jesus Christ: they labour much, and would bring their hearts to love him, but they cannot doe it, because they goe to worke the contrary way . . . (211)

That is to say, a Saint may think he is loving God the right way, but he isn't. Throw in a passionate, assured Saint's slight but necessary *doubt* of his own assurance, and even the most pious fear damnation to an eternity of hell—indeed John Winthrop, who helped found Boston and led the ascension of Puritan New England, went to his own grave terrified that that he would suffer the eternal afterlife separated from God and in anguish of hellfire and brimstone.

The paradoxes of Hooker's theory of love and joy proliferate. When he writes that genuine love serves the end of consolation, he reminds the Saint that "there is a great deale of false love and false joy in the world," and that every man "must put his love on triall" (217). Yet the test requires that one identify genuinely inspired love for God—and again total assurance that this "love come[s] from the Spirit of the Father" (218), and not "leane, earthly, and naturall love, that growes onely out of [one's] parts⁵ and abilities" (218). If confusing fear follows from instruction and consolation, one can easily imagine the terrors that follow from "Reprehension" and "Exhortation." The

simple fact is that, in Hooker's system, where there is absolute fervency in faith, a deep and terrible depression is never far behind. Or think of it this way: behind every good, joyful Saint, there is an even more powerfully debilitating despair. Hooker's treatise on Love and Joy is full of the deepest sorrows; this is a good thing, it leads us to believe.

3: Salvific Sloth

As the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* posits, Slothrop's Garden of Love grows, but the context of his very secular, sexual exploits makes clear that it does not abound with Spiritual Love of the kind Hooker advocates. Instead, it "[t]eems with virgin's-bower, with forget-me-nots, with rue *and all over the place, purple and yellow as hickies, a prevalence of love-in-idleness*" (22, emphasis added). Ever the trickster, Pynchon uses the botany of this garden to clarify a very important point to come in his second explicit reference to Hooker's sermon. Referring to the prevalence of that final flower as "love-in-idleness" (rather than the more common "pansy") suggests a favorite Pynchon theme: *Sloth*.

Hooker talks of three ranks of men that work against the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth: open enemies; hypocrites; and the Slothrop variety, "the glozing neuters." The first two types are self-evident: the final category, however, are more complex. Of this sort, Hooker says,

these also love their sins more than Christ, nay, they love him not at all in truth; these are they that halt between two opinions, your faire fools, they would harme no man; so no man would harme them: the highest pitch these come to, is this, that they may get respect and credit among the best, and they say, He that meddles least is happiest: these are good and civill neighbours, and will sometimes do a man a good turn, provided they may not hurt themselves; if a wretched man come, they will bee like him, and now and then show forth faith and troth:^[c] they will not reprove others, because they shall not censure them. (243)

For Hooker, these people lack the courage of their convictions, and waffle in a state of ambivalence. They adapt to contexts, rather than projecting a rigid dogmatism into every situation.

To the Puritan minister, this type of man is every bit as threatening to the establishment of God's earthly kingdom as an open and avowed enemy to the congregation. But Pynchon's narrator casts suspicion on just how bad this stance is, and expostulates on the difficulties of living such a state:

Those whom the old Puritan sermons denounced as "the glozing neuters of the world" have no easy road to haul down, Wear-the-Pantsers, just cause you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there! Energy inside is just as real, just as binding and inescapable, as energy that shows. When's the last time you felt *intensely*

lukewarm? eh? Glozing neuters are just as human as heroes and villains. In many ways they have the most grief to put up with, don't they? (677)

Neither hero nor villain, saint nor stranger, *Gravity's Rainbow's* glozing neuter is neither Elect nor Preterite. Though Hooker sees these people as enemies of Christ, William Slothrop's heresy identifies the ambivalent as a possible antidote to the intolerance of the fiercely dogmatic.

As is often the case in Pynchon's fictions, a single term's range of signification weighs heavily in understanding the numerous possibilities that his language makes available. Hooker leaves little doubt as to which definition of glozing he prefers, indicting those that tend "to talk smoothly and speciously; to use fair words or flattering language; to fawn" ("Gloze," def. 2a). *Gravity's Rainbow* is not so explicit: commenting on an "energy inside" allows for a reading that glozing means as much "to interpret" as it does "to extenuate." Slothrop and his ilk are as guilty of thinking through a situation as they are of failing to come to a decision. But the novel is not done playing with the dictionary here. In fact, the very name "Tyrone Slothrop" helps to inform the potential positive quality of glozing neutrality.

For one, Sloth is a capital sin of particular interest to Pynchon, and makes up, phonetically, the first half of the surname. In his essay on this seemingly mild mortal sin, "Nearer, my couch, to Thee," Pynchon examines the secularization of sloth throughout the development of capitalist America. He points out that

"Acedia" in Latin means sorrow, deliberately self-directed, turned away from God, a lack of spiritual determination that then feeds back on in to the process, soon enough producing what are currently known as guilt and depression, eventually pushing us to where we will do anything, in the way of venial sin and bad judgment, to avoid the discomfort. ("Nearer" 3)

Crucially, Pynchon emphasizes that sloth is not a sin of laziness or slowness *per se*, as popular accounts hold. Instead, it is a failure of a particular kind of activity—initially an active love for and faith in God, but that is, in *Gavity's Rainbow*, a failure to actively love and have faith in Man—that results in the kinds of sins one commits in order to fill that void. Thus, sloth is a gateway sin, so to speak: a font of more and diverse, but lesser sinning.

However, the kinds of sin that perturb Pynchon in this essay are not those handed down at Sinai or enumerated in *Leviticus*: those biblically based sins are violations against a rigid, set order of carefully defined mandates and thou-shalt-nots. This kind of sinning represented in *Exodus* and *Leviticus* has become a bureaucratic morality; but in *Gravity's Rainbow* the modern sin of sloth that rankles the narrator is the moral malaise of inactivity in the face of injustice and iniquity.

For an example of this kind of sinner, we should consider Franz Pökler. His sin is exactly his unwillingness to stand up for his ethical beliefs: that his wife Leni should be freed from the SS camps; that he should be allowed to keep a life with his daughter, Ilse; that the Rocket be used to prevent and not execute war; and so forth. But he believes too deeply that the system will work itself out. Six times, he is given papers for indefinite leave, the company of a girl that he believes could be his daughter, and no apparent surveillance. He does not flee. Franz instead always waits for Them to once again abduct his daughter, and then to return to the rocket plant at Peenemünde. In his hope for the humanist element of the corporate state to hold sway over its clearly exploitive elements, he glozes (as in “staring intently”) too much upon the stars, to gloze (as in “think through, interpret”) upon his true feelings about Leni, his daughter, Wiessmann, the Wehrmacht, or the War. Pökler exemplifies the danger inherent in Hooker’s kind of Puritanism: believing too strongly without questioning or deviating from the predominant moral order, he sinks into despondency because of the fatal mixture of belief and doubt. And so against the evils in Camp Dora next to his rocket-firing site, he does nothing. Pökler demonstrates a sloth of the kind that Pynchon’s novel condemns.

For America, however, Pynchon says, the sin of sloth is different in kind: it is a sin against economy, a sin against productivity. Citing *Bartleby* and that *exemplar fide* of *acedia*, the Couch Potato, today’s lazy bones commits sins against linear time: what, in *Gravity’s Rainbow* might be called “secular history.” In squandering the finite number of hours and seconds that could be marshaled in the service of profit, the modern sloth enthusiast is the anti-Poor Richard, the opposite of the young Jay Gatz, dreamily eyeing the splendor of a yacht from shore whilst relegating the day’s every moment as a paragon of productivity:

In the idea of time that had begun to rule city life in Poor Richard’s day, where every second was of equal length and irrevocable, not much in the course of its flow could have been called nonlinear, unless you counted the ungovernable warp of dreams, for which Poor Richard had scant use, . . . there would seem to have been no other room for speculations, dreams, fantasies, fiction. Life in that orthogonal machine was supposed to be nonfiction. (“Nearer” 3)

In this type of *acedia*, Pynchon sees hope. For, after all, this is the sin of dreaming, of fantasizing—it is, Pynchon asserts, the “sin” of writing. This kind of dreaming, aided by alternative notions of temporality, may posit a solution to the triumph of linear time, and the death of imagination. Pynchon goes on to argue,

Yet, chiefly owing to the timely—not a minute too soon!—invention of the

remote control and the VCR, maybe there is hope after all. Television time is no longer the linear and uniform commodity it once was. Not when you have instant channel selection, fast-forward, rewind and so forth. Video time can be reshaped at will. What may have seemed under the old dispensation like time wasted and unrecoverable is now perhaps not quite as simply structured. If Sloth can be defined as the pretense, in the tradition of American settlement and spoliation, that time is one more nonfinite resource, there to be exploited forever, then we may for now at least have found the illusion, the effect, of controlling, reversing, slowing, speeding and repeating time—even imagining that we can escape it. Sins against video time will have to be radically redefined. (“Nearer” 3)

Videotape and channel surfing add to the possibilities given by oneiric time as alternatives to predominating notions of temporality. As Steven Weisenburger recognized even before the publication of the Sloth essay, *Gravity’s Rainbow* neither endorses the linear time of Puritan teleology or the predictably cyclic time of Enzian’s Zone Herero faction. As he concludes, “History, we find, does not march inexorably forward by goosesteps, nor does it gyrate in circles” (70). If history and time are not limited to a linear/cyclical binary, as both Pynchon and his best-informed critics seem to assert, it is reasonable to question other predominant binaries that the novel treats. Certainly, the binary of Elect/Preterite fits this description.

The positive function of Sloth resolves into greater clarity in the name Slothrop’s second syllable. “Rop” is yet another typically arcane Pynchonian joke: “ROP,” or just plain old “rop,” is printers’ slang for “run of paper,” “an American term (run of paper) applying when color half-tones are printed at the same time as the type matter” (“ROP”). That is to say, one part of polychromatic images is printed along with the text, images that will be completed later in the printing process.

Gravity’s Rainbow makes much of paper throughout, and thus makes this slang particularly relevant, as paper was responsible for so much of the Slothrop family’s existence—and for the existence of America as it is. Yet the Slothrops are not powerful, nor are they poor, for despite all their production, “they did not prosper . . . about all they did was persist . . .” (28). In short, they neither are Elect, nor are they Preterite, despite Tyrone’s early musings. But they are some *other term*, some middling term that upsets the Puritanical American binary image of success or failure, of good or evil, of saint or stranger. Tyrone is a run of Sloth’s paper, ambivalence and equivocation printed on his being at birth.

In a further wrinkle, Tyrone is a variant of “tyro” or “tyron”—“A beginner or learner in anything; one who is learning or who has mastered the rudiments only of any branch of knowledge; a novice” (“Tyro”). Tyrone is a novice of his own legacy of sloth. His search for his history—more, I argue, than the search

for the rocket—gives him fuller insight into the nature of a salvific Sloth, one that makes up a key term that breaks apart the Elect/Preterite binary and affords him a way of moving beyond his heritage's reductive divisiveness.

4: William Pynchon and William Slothrop

If Thomas Hooker illustrates the despair inherent in Puritanism, William Pynchon's writings reflect a more hopeful strain possible within approaches to orthodoxy excised by the conservative branch from the colonial American politico-religious landscape. He found a danger in valuing only the opinions and ideas of those who have undergone a recognizable conversion experience as a testament to their Election. Daly rephrases this process for a more modern reader:

If we are redeemed from sin at the moment of our justification, and if that redemption is not and cannot be distinct from our justification, then it is possible that many among us who have not yet had the conversion experience are not only justified but also already redeemed from sin, and we may wish to consider their opinions something other than sinful delusions. (209)

In short, even though those around us may not be marked by the same experiences, and therefore share a common identity (be it national, religious, racial, or the more dangerous combination of all three), these people might still be loved by God, forgiven from sin, and worth very much the same as ourselves.

William's descendent Thomas takes some license with his ancestor's theology, but *Gravity's Rainbow* is clearly not uninformed by history. It describes a William Slothrop who, as a pig farmer, "took off from Boston, heading west in true Imperial style, in 1634 or -35, sick and tired of the Winthrop machine, convinced he could preach as well as anybody in the hierarchy even if he hadn't been officially ordained" (554-55). Though pigs were scorned throughout folklore and the Bible, William Slothrop, in good Puritanical fashion and like his descendent Tyron(e) three centuries later, saw his work with the animals "as a parable," and

wrote a long tract about it presently, called *On Preterition*. It had to be published in England, and is among the first books to've been not only banned but also ceremonially burned in Boston. Nobody wanted to hear about all the Preterite, the many God passes over when he chooses a few for salvation. William argued holiness for these "second Sheep," without whom there'd be no elect. You can bet the Elect in Boston were pissed off about that. (555)

William Slothrop's theology is really only one small step to the "left" from

William Pynchon's progressive Puritanism, from theorizing the potential value of the presumed unregenerate to asserting their outright necessity.

The presence of the fictionalized Puritan treatise leads to the novel's greatest reconsideration of American history:

Could [William] have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? Suppose the Slothropite heresy had had the time to consolidate and prosper? Might there have been fewer crimes in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot? It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back [. . .] maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without Elect, without Preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up. . . . (556)

Reflecting on his personal past also allows Slothrop to reflect on his national past, and in so doing Tyrone is able to recover a narrative that, while present in the register of historical events that shaped American history, was suppressed by agents of intolerance and exclusion.

Identifying the suppression of William Slothrop's *On Preterition* as the diverging point where America went astray from a more positive trajectory allows the novel to re-imagine the legacy of Puritanism not simply as an orthodoxy of exclusion, intolerance, and despair, (*à la* Thomas Hooker), but instead as a system of beliefs that values alterity and difference as necessary components of attaining to true selfhood.

This essay does not purport to exhaust the full potential of readings presented by the sensitivity to Puritan history within *Gravity's Rainbow*; rather I hope to show that Pynchon's mastery of America's religious history opens avenues to interpretation that require a knowledge of the full breadth and complexity of an aspect of the past that is too often treated as an orthodox monolith. Like all things Pynchon, it would seem, Puritanism too is multiple, and needs to be approached with the sensitivity due to all the carefully researched elements within Pynchon's big book.

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Notes

¹ William Hathorne's notoriously violent treatment of Quakers, as well as his unapologetic adjudication of the Salem Witch Trials, was so offensive to one of his descendents that he changed the spelling of his name. That was, of course, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

² Massachusetts's governing magistrates "perceiv[ed] by the Title Page that the Contents of Book were unsound, and Derogatory" (qtd. in Gura, 475).

³The articulation of conversion generally took the form of presenting a prepared narrative account of one's knowledge of God's grace to the congregation of Church members, who would generally approve the account. Women, however, were asked to write out their account, to be read by a male interlocutor. While the practice seems a formality today, it appears to function as a kind of coding device—as noted above, "Puritan" was a polymorphous and often contentious term: by creating a somewhat standardized practice of initiation, there was sufficient flexibility to avoid being indicted as a mere going-through-the-motions that characterized the Puritans' critique of the Catholic and Anglican "covenant of works" (as opposed to the Calvinist "covenant of grace"); simultaneously, the form gave a kind of identity to a group that was so internally heterogeneous. In effect, it created a set of people and things visibly Puritan: hence, I refer to the conversion experience as "Puritan," whereas elsewhere in this essay, I refer to the various "Puritanisms" that mark internal conflicts and consistencies. To be clear, for the Puritans, Church *structure* in the earlier years was less in dispute than the particulars of theology: by and large, local churches were given as much autonomy as possible. Even volatile issues like the acceptance of or separation from the Anglican Church were largely set aside in favor of a belief in congregationalism. It was not until the early 1660s, at the beginning stages of a crisis of membership admission policies that would result in the "Halfway Covenant," that more global structural concerns manifested themselves in inter-parish discourse. Hence, the conversion narrative has a more organic history than the Halfway Covenant. Two useful sources on the topic of the conversion narrative, among many, include Edmund S. Morgan's *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (see especially 37-73) and Patricia Caldwell's *The Puritan Conversion Narrative*. Morgan's book is seminal and indispensable for American Puritan studies, while Caldwell's presentation exhaustively updates the debates surrounding the history of the conversion narrative, while providing key insights and a wealth of footnotes for further reading.

⁴ Strict Calvinists, like Hooker, believed that God had preordained the fates of each individual's soul, and that no manner of behavior, belief, or piety could save the Preterite, the "passed over." Either one was saved, or one was doomed to burn for all eternity. The Elect, however, could "backslide" and resume sinning once their behavior was sanctified by God's saving grace: it was against this threat that many Puritan sermons labored.

⁵ Common usage at the time would suggest a definition of "parts" here as "intellect" or "intelligence."

⁶"Troth" is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Online Edition, as both faithfulness and truth. All subsequent definitions are also from this reference.

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