

# Burned by the Hangman: Puritan Agency and the Road Not Taken

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*The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*, by William Pynchon. 1650.  
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About 11: of the Clocke our Captaine sent his skiffe,  
& fetched aboard vs the masters of *the other 2: shippes*,  
& mr *Pincheon*, & they dined with vs. . . .

*This night* Capt. *Kirke* Carried the light as one of our  
*Consortes*. . . .

[T]he *Ambrose* and *Iewell* were separated farre from vs,  
the first night, but this daye we sawe them againe, but  
Capt. *Kirkes* shippes we sawe not since. . . .

[M]r *Pincheon* offered his Assistance but wrote to the  
Gouernor [*Winthrop* himself], that the Indians . . . were  
not our subiectes.

—John Winthrop (15, 17, 18, 711)

To us naïve postmoderns, it all seems so innocent, so long ago and far away. An esteemed first-generation Puritan suggests the slightest possible change in the theology of Puritanism, only to have his book burned. Philip Gura, Stephen Innes, and John Frederick Martin have told the history of William Pynchon, and told it well. 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 *Arbella* 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 old home town back in Essex. In short, Pynchon is not an obscure scholar punished by the authorities. He is one of the authorities, and he may be the only person in American history to have defied Thomas Hooker, of whom it was said that he could put a king in his pocket.

The Pequot War has interrupted the harvest and put a huge dent in the corn supply, so in March of 1638, the Connecticut General Court

instructs Pynchon to buy corn from the Indians, at a price set by the court. Pynchon answers that the Indians will not sell at that price, and Hooker is enraged, believing that Pynchon wants to "have all the trade to himself . . . and so rack the country at his pleasure" (Gura 307). Ordinarily, one just does not mess with Thomas Hooker, sometimes called, though I bet not in his hearing, the Pope of the Connecticut Valley. The Connecticut General Court fines Pynchon forty bushels of corn. That should help out with the corn supply for Hartford and Windsor, and that should show him. But apparently it does not.

In June of that very year, 1638, Pynchon simply changes courts. He takes advantage of discussions of a federation of Connecticut and Massachusetts Bay to apply to have Agawam fall under the jurisdiction of Massachusetts and, of course, John Winthrop. Despite a protest from Connecticut, "which was very harsh," according to Winthrop's *Journal*, Winthrop makes it clear that "we intended to keep it" (279), and so they do. Hooker is apoplectic, but Pynchon wins.

If he can get away with that, why can he not get away, in 1650, with *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*? To address that question, we need to consider both the book's theology and the cultural matrix within which that theology was espoused. Pynchon argues that through the atonement we are redeemed from sin at the moment of justification:

[W]hereas I have oftentimes in this treatise made God's atonement to comprehend under it our redemption from sin as well as our justification and Adoption; I would have you to take notice that I do not mean that God's atonement doth contain under it redemption as another distinct point differing from justification: but I make our redemption and freedom from sin by the Father's Atonement to be all one with our justification from sin. (152)

Justification was election: it was being chosen by God before all time. Redemption from sin was usually construed to follow from the conversion experience, the moment in which poor sinners feel the spirit of God working within them, a temporally identifiable event, which then had to be recounted to the minister and elders, who would judge whether it was genuine. After this conversion experience, Puritans believed, poor sinners would still sin, but they would now wish to avoid sins and to do good deeds, a shift in habitual tendency that the Puritans called sanctification. Even after reassurance by minister and elders, one could still never be entirely sure one's experience had been genuine and so could never entirely trust one's deepest feelings and insights. Even Winthrop, first governor of Massachusetts Bay, who gave up a life as

lord of the manor in Groton to come to the New World and live a life of service to the Puritan colony, died in terror, convinced that he had been deceiving himself all along and that he was reprobate, one of the preterite. This Puritan belief, the one that won out over Pynchon's, led one to live one's life standing at inspection arms, in a continuing state of crisis, distrusting both others and oneself.

The desire to have some trust, however qualified, in human perception stood behind Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in the 1630s. Even Hutchinson did not claim much, only that at the conversion experience the Holy Spirit entered the justified saint's soul so totally that after that one's deepest longings came from it and could be trusted. The merchants, eager for some alternative or countervailing force to the absolutist dictates of ministers and magistrates, supported Hutchinson, even as some would later support Pynchon.

Both were responding to a cultural shift. In England, before the civil war, Puritans had been a persecuted and revolutionary minority. Ideological purity and absolutism based on God's total sovereignty and our absolute dependence had been easy. Now in America, and in England after 1649, the Puritans were the establishment. Revolutionary fervor was winding down, as it tends to do when the former regime is no longer much of a threat. Conversion experiences were becoming fewer and fewer. The fiery revolutionaries of the first generation had brought forth children and grandchildren like them in belief but lacking the fire. Those children and grandchildren were not disaffected or, as their elders thought, in declension. They were not at all like self-righteous and individualistic baby boomers, brimming with self-inflicted self-esteem. They wanted to be just like the ancestors and have the conversion experience. Yet they lacked persecution from the Anglicans and fear of the Catholics to give them the emotional intensity that would carry them past self-doubt. As the Bible continually reminds us, God tends to come to us only in the wilderness, only *in extremis*. By the 1640s, the standard of living in New England had surpassed that in Old England, and Puritans who had risked all to come here and do good were merely doing well. So the children and grandchildren waited for conversion experiences that did not come.

The children who had been admitted to church membership, the center of sacred and secular community and power, with the confident expectation that they would have genuine conversion experiences and join their elders in full communion, were having children of their own and wanting them admitted to the church as well. Something had to be done. What New England eventually did in 1662—the year of Pynchon's death, appropriately enough—was to embrace a complex

fudge called the Half-Way Covenant (the name itself should give us pause), written by Richard Mather and approved by a church synod (shades of Catholic hierarchy!). Though obscure and interpreted variously in various churches, this document meant that the grandchildren would be admitted to half-way membership in the congregation but would be denied full communion in the Lord's Supper until they had a conversion experience. This measure perpetuated Puritan exclusivity and the endless waiting for an experience that was not coming. God responded with a drought and Michael Wigglesworth with two long poems, *The Day of Doom* and *God's Controversy with New England*. Whether these catastrophes could have been avoided if New England had warmed to Pynchon's views can never be known, since history cannot reveal its alternatives.

Yet Pynchon was offering, in 1650—the beginning of that extraordinary decade in which Puritans, for the first and only time, controlled both England and America—an alternative to exclusivity and paranoia. Like Richard Mather, he built on what we now call Puritan tribalism. But where Mather would extend the tribe only to its children and grandchildren, and then only conditionally and half-way, Pynchon would extend it culturally. In England, the need to unite all Puritan opponents of Charles I had led to a latitudinarianism that enabled reasoned discourse and political unity among persons of differing opinions. Even Oliver Cromwell is alleged to have said to the Scottish Covenanters, just before the Battle of Dunbar, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken." They did not, so he slaughtered them, but the point is that at least he raised the issue.

Similar issues were being raised in England by Levellers, Diggers and Ranters, with the result that New England Puritans now feared contagion even from their coreligionists and countrymen. As Pynchon had earlier argued for the protection of Anglicans, adherence to English common law and admittedly only slightly better treatment of the Indians, so in theology he argued for a better appreciation of human reason and common human virtue.

Now to conflate justification and redemption from sin and to argue that atonement was the Father's, not the Son's, were not exactly heresy. The Bible contains no Hebrew or Greek equivalent of the word "trinity." Trinitarian doctrine is just an attempt to unite in one confession the various descriptions of the Godhead. And Pynchon's increased emphasis on Christ's human nature was not nearly so liberal as that of Faustus Socinus in Poland a century earlier. Pynchon's book was recognizably Puritan, though closer to the English version than the American. As Gura puts it, Pynchon's exegetical argument for wider

religious toleration "represented a significant rationalist strain within English Puritanism itself" (305). But it was a significant shift in emphasis. 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. We may wish to entertain the thought that God may have accomplished a few things of which the ministers and the magistrates are not yet aware. We may wish to restrain their attempts to eliminate alterity and alternatives. And we may be more hopeful about our ability to imitate Christ if we reflect that atonement, the redemption of humanity from the sin of Eve and Adam, is not just Christ's work but also the Father's. It is hard to be confident of one's ability to imitate God. But if America had embraced Pynchon's rather slight and carefully hedged gesture in the direction of Socinianism, the belief that Christ was a human being, albeit a very good one, that we are all children of God and Christ was unusual principally in knowing that, then we might have had a higher opinion of ourselves and of others.

Like William Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*, William Pynchon directs America to the road not taken. Given the Puritans' view of the stakes, their reaction to this minuscule increase in the estimation of human agency is bound to be extreme. Pynchon argues a subtle theological point and produces a significant reader response. On 16 October 1650, the court orders "the said book to be burned in the Market Place, at Boston by the Common Executioner" (Gura 309), the more extreme version of being banned in Boston. After another year and one half of legal wrangling, Pynchon leaves the Promised Land for a life of cold mutton and mint aspic in chilly old England, where he continues to argue the point, an indication that he knows of its importance. From our point of view, it is tempting to chalk up the whole matter to a synthetic abstraction like Puritan intolerance, from which we are now happily free. Yet it may be just as well to remember that Captain Kirk (or Kirke, as he is styled in the times before standard orthography) comes back to the seventeenth century and boards the good ship *Admiral*, just to light the Puritans' way to America. As his presence suggests, time travel may be an option, at least in the texts we remember and reprint, and Pynchon's option may yet matter now and in future.

Our current view, then, is conditioned by a number of convenient fictions, among them that our national tradition is one of individual liberty, and that the natural and ordinary social relation is one of individualism. For contemporary middle-class Americans, these may be

current ideals, even if more honored in the breach than in the observance. From this point of view, we tend to view all agency as synonymous with individual liberty and power, and we tend to view all countervailing forces as the oppression of individual liberty.

Yet to an upper-class seventeenth-century Puritan, these notions we take for granted would seem as alien as their ideas to us. Indeed, we shall have to wait until 1840 for Alexis de Tocqueville to coin the term “individualism” to refer to a bizarre idea of nineteenth-century Americans. As Pynchon’s use of the first-person plural suggests, he thinks of identity and redemption in terms of the group. He is interested in “our” redemption. In “Love III,” the Anglican George Herbert figures entry into heaven as the experience of a shy person entering a banquet hall to find only one other person, Christ. But the Puritan Edward Taylor has a different and characteristic figure for salvation. In “The Joy of Church Fellowship Rightly Attended,” he figures salvation as communal, with the congregation riding to heaven together in a stagecoach and singing all the way, in harmony. Pynchon’s agency is communal, effected by and through his membership in a Puritan oligarchy he knows well. His book is not an act of individual expression or defiance. It is an argument from within his community and intended for the good of that community.

Recent scholarly work suggests that we may now be coming round to a view of agency from which we can at least recognize Pynchon’s. Jean-Luc Nancy argues that we do not begin with an individual and separate self to oppose to the larger society. He argues that “ego sum equals ego cum,” and that “being-many-together is the originary state of being.” Our selves are social from the start. We have our agency less as opposed to the group than as members of a group. And while some see agency only as binary, as individual resistance to ideological state apparatuses, Srinivas Aravamudan argues that it can be either binary or more complex. Language can be merely a “battleground between metropolitan sophisticates and provincial proletarians” (265), a binary view in which we nevertheless have agency precisely as agents, as members and representatives of some group that includes others along with ourselves. Like Pynchon, we can extend that group by inscribing the previously marginal—the leftovers, the currently but perhaps not ultimately preterite—into the center. We can, in Aravamudan’s words, enact an agency comprising “many little acts of liberation rather than theologies translated into grand plans. Micropolitics is not necessarily a capitulation to anarchistic nihilism and hedonistic libertarianism; it is to act locally along with the injunction to think globally, conduct eccentric readings as well as mount bureaucratic arguments that inscribe the margin into the center” (330). Like Pynchon, Aravamudan

treads carefully, trying to get a hypersensitive group to think in a new way and not simply to exclude him from it as an anarchistic nihilist or hedonistic libertarian. For his challenge to exclusivity, Pynchon was, unfortunately, excluded, and all writers who challenge orthodoxy run a similar risk of being labeled as other and cast out.

Yet Pynchon, while trying to inscribe those marginal others into the center, also reinscribes a central Christ into a marginal humanity. In his book, the Hebrew Messiah, the Zoroastrian Soashyant or “Son of Light,” the Greek Christ is one of us, a human being, terrified of death, and if one insisted on only his divine nature, one would commit a heresy similar to that of the Manicheans, who despised the body, human nature and the material world. Such “woeful Heresies” would deny Christ’s human nature and make him into an other than human God:

I apprehend that the quality of our Saviour’s troubled fear which he suffered the night before his death, did arise only from his natural fear of death: and if he had died without any manifest fear of death, it would have occasioned woeful Heresies, yea although Christ was so careful as he was, to give such evident proof of his humane nature as he did, yet sundry Heretiques have risen up that have denied the truth of his Humane Nature.  
(47)

Christ shared our common human nature and our common fear of death with Puritans, Anglicans, Indians and others. Even as Pynchon exalts Christ’s humanity, he downplays God’s wrath: “Christ did bear diverse wounds, bruises, and stripes for our peace and healing; but yet the text doth not say that he bare these wounds, bruises, and stripes, from God’s wrath, for our sins, as you would have it” (19). Christ’s sacrifice is for our peace and healing, not just to square up with some celestial accountant and to placate his wrath, a wrath that Puritans and later Americans have been all too ready to emulate in the guise of fearing it.

All this is not to say that Pynchon was just like us, a multiculturalist liberal somehow misplaced in time. He believed in hierarchy and clearly thought his own class and religion better than others, his own group better than others. Yet faced with the cultural changes and stresses that eventually led to the Half-Way Covenant, King Philip’s War and the Salem witchcraft trials, he suggested in 1650 another way to deal with alterity—through agency, representation, negotiation, discourse communities and common laws—through the slow growth of a larger community that I should figure as a rhizomatous mat that would link self and other without merging or melting or sublating either. Though we can only speculate on how much or little Thomas Pynchon knows

about William Pynchon, the difference between the defiantly binary Puritanism we have inherited and the enfolding latitudinarian Puritanism William offered can be illustrated, *mutatis mutandis*, by the contrast between the Pony Express and Tristero: “While the Pony Express is defying deserts, savages and sidewinders, Tristero’s giving its employees crash courses in Siouan and Athapascan dialects. Disguised as Indians their messengers mosey westward. Reach the coast every time, zero attrition rate, not a scratch on them” (173–74). Had Pynchon’s book carried the day, American attitudes toward alterity might have been quite different.

Instead, of course, Americans (and the Puritans were the first people to call themselves Americans) chose to burn it, to fall back on the notion of a chosen people defined as good, a notion that mapped all others—Anglicans, Catholics, Indians, wolves—as evil, all just agents of Satan to be engaged in a holy war that made life on this earth into one long Armageddon. The long habit of distrust, applied at first to others, ended in a distrust of each other that, in 1692, led good Puritans to kill twenty other good Puritans and two dogs for witchcraft: not quite the love of neighbor recommended in the parable of the good Samaritan.

Like Roger Williams, who became a “seeker” willing to commune with all at about the same time Pynchon was urging just a bit of human merit on the road to redemption, William Pynchon was a Puritan trying to enlarge the community through a communal agency, not an individualist trying to defy it. His book used the then common discourse of theology to represent an alternative view and to re-present the Bible as its source. He was an agent of a better and larger Puritanism, representing what his American neighbors could have become.

If Captain Kirk, warping through time to illuminate the way to America, could take us all back again, we might do well to heed Pynchon’s alternative. We may even do well to heed it now.

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