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AML 4213: Journeys to America
Summer 2011

WHY THE PURITANS ARE FASCINATING:

We--even if religiously minded--tend to compartmentalize our "religious" life from our day-to-day lives as we from, say 8:00-3:00/5:00 work in a part-time or full-time job, run some errands (perhaps go to the mall!) from 4:00-5:00, and then go home to study or attend to family matters.

For the early Puritans who came to America (in the generation right after Shakespeare is writing his plays), however, religious being, community being, and personal being was inseparable.

The story of the Puritans is not monolithic: they came in different shapes and sizes, as it were. But, crucially, they saw themselves as engaged on a mission, an "errand," when they travelled to the "wilderness" of America. They would be a "model" of how to make God's reality a reality on the earth. The pressure was immense, and most Puritans recognized their "errand" potentially was NOT God's will ... a vast errancy, not an errand. Or at least they were puzzled (you'll see this more in Bradford than Winthrop) about God's role in their history as they were making it (that is, how providential history matched, or did not match, with human action).

Individually, Puritan theology also pressured individuals to endless introspection, in the anxious quest to determine whether their hearts were right with God. (Please keep in mind when I use "God" I do so from a neutral perspective, as a theological term, not as an endorsement of any particular religious sentiment or affiliation.)

In short, to be a Puritan was to be on a quest of endless interpretation!

Once upon a time, as it were, in the beginning, in the Garden, God walked among Adam/Eve and spoke directly. But now, our faculties are fallen and we don't even "see" God. (Emily Dickinson, famous mid-19th-century American poet refers to God as an "eclipse").

The Puritans, in the absence of direct revelation, used typology. They believed that the Old Testament prefigured the New Testament, and that parallels between the Old Testament and the New Testament could be extended to current history.

So, for instance, the Old Testament story of the Israelites escaping Egyptian tyranny prefigured for them Jesus liberating us through his grace. And, the Puritans, fleeing corruption of the Old World, often likened themselves to Israel fleeing bondage of Egypt. The theory of typology can be quite dusty and arcane, but think of how empowering it is: everyday actions or community actions get ramped-up when they can be compared to biblical precedent.

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION:

It's important that you grasp the paradoxes of the Puritan belief in innate depravity and predestination. Both, to our sensibility, will seem weird ... but in fact both concepts have a logic that perhaps makes some softer forms of Christianity seem rather flakey!

In very abbreviated fashion:

MARTIN LUTHER (1483-1546), a German monk, publishes his famous "95 Theses":

--challenges the Medieval Catholic idea of indulgences (that you could, in effect, purchase redemption)

--salvation not by good works or individual merit

--but by faith in Christ's loving, redemptive sacrifice

--consequence 1: no real need for priesthood to mediate b/w man & God

--consequence 2: no need for Catholic ceremony/sacraments/veneration of saints, etc.: Catholic ritual is not efficacious

--consequence 3: all Catholic ritual = human institutions polluting/mixing with pure word of God and apostolic Church

JOHN CALVIN, French lawyer living in Geneva, publishes Institutes of Religion in 1536:

--Insists upon the logical consequences of perceiving God as omnipotent / omniscient.

--God knows from the beginning of time who will be elected to salvation and who will suffer eternal damnation.

--God cannot be coerced or cajoled into extending His grace to you and you cannot earn it (to say you deserve His grace, to be saved, is to restrict His power).

--In the "Book of Life" your name is already written or not written: your fate is predestined.

--Consequence 1: no efficacy of church ritual (same as Luther).

--Consequence 2: Christ's church should consist only of "Visible Saints" (those who testify to a gracious experience); this is one of the reasons Puritans want to separate themselves from the Elizabethan national Anglican church. Would not God frown on a national church encompassing England with so many rotten souls?

--Consequence 3: preoccupation with exterior behavior as an (imperfect) sign of inward election: best to act holy.

--Consequence 4: anxiety/inward searching: do you feel saved? Example: one Puritan mother so stressed out by knowing whether or not she is saved, decides to kill her child to ensure damnation!

--Consequence 5: constant looking about for signs of God's love = His providential acts. But good

events may be Satan's snare, luring you into complacency ("Do not let me drowned in this deluge of security," one Puritan poet says); vice-versa, afflictions may be a sign of God's mercy, weaning you from love of this world.

HOW PURITANISM COMES TO AMERICA:

--Henry VIII wants a son, needs a divorce, & so splits from Catholic Church in 1533 and England becomes "national" in faith.

--Puritans in late 16th/early 17th century believed the English Anglican church still maintained too much Catholic ritual (still had bishops, priestly vestments, stained glass windows, etc.).

--Some hoped to reform from within; but still wanted a national church (most of the Puritans).

--Others believed you should not have a national church, because church body would encompass some sinners

--The Pilgrims (William Bradford's party that land in Plymouth in 1620) did not want to participate in a corrupt church. They are a variation of Puritans known as "separatists."

--They believed only elect should be part of church membership; so separated altogether to form their own church of the faithful.

--The Puritans (John Winthrop's group that lands in Salem in 1630) hope the English church will cleanse itself: perhaps they, in the New World, will be an example.

THE PLEASURES OF BEING A PURITAN:

Well, at first it seems a rather grim faith. God decides whether you are one of the elect or not; given inherited depravity (we all fall when Eve makes a bad dinner meal menu choice!), most of us are damned; and we can never be sure, from introspection, whether we are saved or not; and, no church participation has much of an effect one way or the other. So, why be a Puritan? What is the appeal?

Let me give you a personal story:

1. To exert your will creates anxiety. Think of all the things you have to do today; how do you choose what to put on your "todo" list? Yikes.

2. Once upon a time, I had to be hospitalized (with what seemed to be a very serious illness ... the type where you might not wake up after surgery).

3. Hooked up to various tubes on the hospital bed, I started to get all feisty and anxious about daily things that would not get done: would my wife pay the bills, would I grade a batch of papers, would the cat litter get cleaned (yes, I'm obsessive!)??

4. And then I realized, I didn't have to worry about #3. Not because I might be dead in the

morning, but because, immobile in the hospital, there was nothing "I" could do.

5. And then ... I was flooded with a deep sense of relaxation; "I" no longer needed to be anxious about what "I" wanted to do. I was in destiny's hands. (Of course, the narcotic drip from one of the tubes may have facilitated my euphoria!).

Get it?

The pleasure of being a Puritan is to surrender to a will that is not your own. The pleasure is to hollow out the self and feel an influx of power not your own. Even in affliction ... when "God" takes over ... there is ecstasy. That is why in a famous poem "HouseBurning" Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet speaks of how sweet it is to have her house burn down: God afflicts us, not in punishment only, but to shock you into feeling a zone where all your ego/"I" stuff is diminished. You will see this quite intensely when you read Rowlandson who speaks of her dire affliction (Indian "heathen" kill family members; take her into the depths of the strange American wilderness; and she has the solace only of a Bible tucked under her skirt) as the "wine of astonishment".

In the meantime, read this poem, in which the self becomes but a channel for Godly influx:

"THE REFLEXION" BY EDWARD TAYLOR

Canticles 2:1 "I am the rose of Sharon."

Lord, art thou at the Table Head above
Meat, Med'cine, Sweetness, sparkling Beautys, to
Enamour Souls with Flaming Flakes of Love,
And not my Trencher, nor my Cup o'reflow?
Ben't I a bidden guest? Oh! sweat mine Eye:
O'reflow with Teares: Oh! draw thy fountains dry.

Shall I not smell thy sweet, oh! Sharons Rose?
Shall not mine Eye salute thy Beauty? Why?
Shall thy sweet leaves their Beautious sweets upclose?
As halfe ashamde my sight should on them ly?
Woe's me! For this my sighs shall be in grain,
Offer'd on Sorrows Altar for the same.

Had not my Soule's, thy Conduit, Pipes stopt bin
With mud, what Ravishment would'st thou.Convay?
Let Graces Golden Spade dig till the Spring
Of tears arise, and cleare this filth away.
Lord, let thy Spirit raise my sighings till
These Pipes my soule do with thy sweetness fill.

Earth once was Paradise of Heaven below,
Till inkefac'd sin had it with poyson stockt;
And Chast this Paradise away into
Heav'ns upmost Loft, and it in Glory Lockt.
But thou, sweet Lord, hast with thy golden Key
Unlockt the Doore, and made a golden day.

Once at thy Feast, I saw thee Pearle-like stand
'Tween Heaven and Earth, where Heavens Bright glory all
In streams fell on thee, as a floodgate and

Like Sun Beams through thee on the World to Fall.
Oh! Sugar sweet then! My Deare sweet Lord, I see
Saints Heaven-lost Happiness restor'd by thee.

Shall Heaven and Earth's bright Glory all up lie,
Like Sun Beams bundled in the sun in thee?
Dost thou sit Rose at Table Head, where I
Do sit, and Carv'st no morsell sweet for mee?
So much before, so little now! Sprindge, Lord,
Thy Rosie Leaves, and me their Glee afford.

Shall not thy Rose my Garden fresh, perfume?
Shall not thy Beauty my dull Heart assaile?
Shall not thy golden gleams run through this gloom?
Shall my black Velvet Mask thy fair Face Vaile?
Pass o're my Faults: shine forth, bright sun; arise!
Enthroned thy Rosy-selfe within mine Eyes.

WINTHROP SERMON AND BRADFORD EXCERPTS:

Well, after all of above, I'll just pose a few study questions for you about the snippets from Winthrop and Bradford.

1. Note how clear Winthrop in his sermon aboard the ship taking the faithful to the New World is about hierarchy. We may all be ligaments of a godly church body, but make no mistake: there are still social "betters". Is this a document expressing egalitarianism or not?
2. Note the conclusion of the sermon—the famous "City on a Hill" passage. This new community will be a shining light to the rest of the world. This is the first expression of what we call "American exceptionalism": somehow here, in the U.S., we are special and unique, with a mandate perhaps to foist our specialness on the rest of the world (some call this good; some call this bad....imperialism decoyed in religious clothing). Do you see in his sermon the seeds of, say, our vigilance against terrorists who come from the outside?
3. Bradford: try to love his style, all those heavy balanced alliterations!
4. Note how for Bradford the American wilderness is NOT a pastoral delight; you have to be paranoid. See #2 above, although Bradford is much less holier-than-thou than Winthrop.
5. Note the sad episode he relates at the end.... Sodomy with beasts. Who would expect it: we travel thousands of miles to make a new world, a holy community; and Satan is up to his old tricks, and the poor servant bonds not with the spirit/Jesus, but with animals. Purity is indeed difficult to maintain. It is key to see how vexed Bradford is in trying to explain this unfortunate event. As an historian, he doesn't fudge: an honest accounting.... you've got to give him some respect.

LOOKING FORWARD AND THE BIG PICTURE THUS FAR:

--Even before 1776, cultural themes appear that are important to later U.S. identity per se.

--1620: Protestant Pilgrims land in New England. They think of themselves as British, but also see

themselves as escaping the corruptions of the Old World (Bradford's story of poor Thomas Granger learning his sodomy habit in "old England") = U.S. isolationism.

--They also want to set an example of a pure community (Winthrop's "City on a Hill").

--Escape/isolationism + pure = a sense of U.S. being the Redeemer Nation = American Exceptionalism (we are uniquely free and so on) = a right to dictate our way elsewhere via imperialism (U.S. has been imperialistic, but the ideology is that the U.S. is not imperialistic).

--Later immigrants in the 17th/18th centuries see the "new" country as a land of opportunity (cheap land/ less hierarchical class system), because of:

--a) pastoral vision (escape from grimy London and go farm in Kentucky): the "heartland" of America is farming, supposedly.

--b) self-reliance (we're all just farmers; not dependent on elaborate commodity exchange): you'll see this in the short Crèvecoeur selection at the end of the semester (President Bush, during his presidency, would pretend to be a down-home Texan, etc. etc.). President Jefferson, especially, feared that the nation would shift from being one of agricultural/independence to one of mercantile, dependent exchange.

The above a) and b) are jumping ahead. But start now making connections among our readings and to patterns of U.S. identity seeded by this early American/journeys to America stuff!

LITERARY THEORY TIP:

"New Historicism" is a type of literary criticism (developed about two decades ago) that views historical documents in a literary way and sees literary texts in an historical way. Everything is a "text" but all "texts" are also historical, embedded in their time period.

You likely like to think of literary works as being "great"—timeless masterpieces. "New Historicism" doesn't deny greatness, but wants to see the issues that animate a text as being intimately associated with their social/historical era. Old "Historicism" usually would just give a bunch of cultural background and context, and not see "context" and "text" as folding together.

So, for instance, a New Historicist might meditate on issues of purity... in New World documents such as Bradford and Winthrop and associate those with issues of purity in Shakespeare's The Tempest. Rather than looking at the "theme" of purity as being timeless (Miranda versus Caliban), the critic might summon up a bunch of Elizabethan law documents where some criminal was punished for rape, and then bit by bit slide into an interpretation of Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda. The Tempest would then be seen as a working-thru of an historical preoccupation; perhaps more complex and nuanced, but the complexity and nuances would come from the historical "script" (the collective "texts" out there in Shakespeare's day.

New Historicism is a lot of fun, but it requires massive research and thus typically not a literary approach taught in highschool or college for that matter.

I am broadly speaking a "New Historicist" as are many of my FIU English department colleagues.

Note that I have introduced, indirectly, a sort of “what professors do” moment: this is an implicit invitation for those who are pondering an M.A. or Ph.D. to start thinking about these things.