# *After Paradise*

*Also by Jon Thompson:*

**Poetry**
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JON THOMPSON

# After Paradise

## *Essays on the Fate of American Writing*

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## Contents

To Zoë and Sofie—readers of the future

What a noise the words make
writing themselves.
—Michael Palmer, 'Construction of the Museum'

Speak and say the immaculate syllables
That he spoke only by doing what he did.

God and angels, this was his desire,
Whose head lies blurring here, for this he died.
—Wallace Stevens, 'The Men That are Falling'

Always the same. The deliberate consciousness of Americans so fair and smooth-spoken, and the under-consciousness so devilish. *Destroy*! *destroy*! *destroy*! hums the underconsciouness. *Love and produce*! *Love and produce*! Cackles the upper consciousness. And the world hears only the Love-and-produce cackle. Refuses to hear the hum of destruction underneath. Until such time as we will *have* to hear.
—D.H. Lawrence,
*Studies in Classic American Literature*

There is hurt within the word.
Word that hurts and, strangely, comforts.
Mystery of its strangeness.
—Edmond Jabès, *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Book*

# Chapter 1
# William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*: Puritan Cannibalism in the New World

"Thus out of small beginnings . . ."
—William Bradford

(The lost book of a lost people, wandering, too, through history, wandering in and out of this moment, a moment which never stays *put*. The book surfaces from a distant past, a past of arcane religious feuds and schisms, a time of zealotry and persecutions. The temptation: to lapse into history-as-chronology, the divide of centuries, and end by denying the inheritance because it *cannot be seen*, traced in a standard lineage—which only testifies to the tyranny of the seen. And yet signs of it are unmistakable: without it, I would not be where I am, who I am, like so many others, descendent, son, inheritor, scratching out a history and a future not of my own making . . .)

Bradford's book anticipated this one, made the space for it, *made* it . . .

*Of Plymouth Plantation*: a new Book of Revelations in which the Word of God makes itself manifest in a wilderness of hieroglyphs. Bradford's God is alive in the language of his book, which draws on the Bible, but longs to become the book of books, the text of the world that will envelop all others, supplant all others—even this one. The Word has an aural power, an aural authority: to define the past and the future . . .

Sanctification of the Word: rather than seeing language as a threat to the dissemination of the Word (diffusion), the Puritans sanctified language itself. (Or, perhaps, *because* of its power of diffusion, it was sanctified). If language could be transubstantiated, moved from naming to invocation, then speaking and writing—all signification—could be a way of honoring God, a form of fealty to divine authority, a kind of prayer. Hence the prestige of writing in Puritan culture . . .

Yet language, too, is distrusted. Puritan writing longs for the unitary wholeness of a pre-linguistic state, to apprehend God directly rather than

through the veil of language. Language is consecrated in part because it is an unavoidable expedient, but it is also distrusted as a second-order means of signification. This accounts for the Puritan reverence for silence: signification without signification . . .

The Word itself is performative, active, dynamic: it damns and redeems. It does not so much reflect the world as is; it is an emissary of the world to come. As a particle of God, it is invested with the divine power of change. By internalizing the Word of God, the Pilgrims help to bring about the world to come. The Word as Janus-faced: one face looks backward in time to the Word-made-flesh in the Scriptures; one is future-oriented, looks toward a future that resembles an imagined past: a New Jerusalem. Traveling toward the future is also a return to the past—a past that never was . . .

Persecution as a sign of God's election: for the Pilgrims, as for the first Christians, persecution proved their righteousness, and the world's corrupted state. Suffering is redemptive inasmuch as it is a means of bringing the elect into a visionary state of being. Indeed, God authors suffering so that his elect will come to understand his Word. Suffering, even martyrdom, educates them into an understanding of divine purpose; it becomes a *necessary* prerequisite for seeing it: "[. . .] they bore sundry years with much patience, till they were occasioned by the continuance and increase of these troubles, and other means which the Lord raised up in those days, to see further into things by the light of the Word of God."

Transparency of the soul: the greatest desire of the Pilgrims—and their greatest fear.

For them, the world has no autonomy, no being-in-itself, being-for-itself; it exists only as a means of fulfilling the promise of a New Jerusalem. Puritan arrogance: the world exists only for *us*, to teach *us*, to redeem *us*. (That arrogance, our ancestral curse . . .)

Bradford's Book of Revelations is written to future generations as a testament of faith; through this witness, future generations will know

how to preserve God's work. The Book of Revelations of the New Israelites will be the Book of the Future, the book of all futures. Yet writing, for Bradford the historian, is an effort bent upon *arresting* futurity. By relegating time and change to an unchanging narrative in which submission to the Word is exalted as redemption, the martyrdom of the particular is offered as the means of deliverance.

The Puritan imagination of the New World: in their mind's eye, the Puritans saw it as a vast, unpeopled land. The work of that imagination would be to bring reality into compliance with itself, that image of a nation. That imagination acknowledged the existence of native peoples, but they were not seen as people, but as "wild beasts," to be dealt with as such. "The place they had thoughts on was some of those vast and unpeopled countries of America, which are fruitful and fit for habitation, being devoid of all civil inhabitants, where there are only savage and brutish men which range up and down, little otherwise than the wild beasts of the same." This invitation to extermination is intrinsic to the design of this Book of Revelations. Absolutism demands the abolition of all unsettling difference, and so it is that the dream of a New Jerusalem can be founded without shame upon genocide dreams, spiritual regeneration upon violence . . .

Whence this righteousness? From God's Word, which for the Puritans, speaks the language of absolutes. To be godly, therefore, is also to speak a language of absolutes, to avoid trafficking in the fallen, debased languages of qualification—which is not now an idiolect . . .

In a world divided into Good and Evil, Good will always partake of Evil . . .

"And I may not omit here a special work of God's providence. There was a proud and very profane young man, one of the sea man, of a lusty, able body, which made him the more haughty; he would always be condemning the poor people in their sickness and cursing them daily with grievous execrations; and did not let to tell them that he hoped to help to cast half of them overboard before they came to their journey's end, and to make merry with what they had; and if he were by any gently reproved, he would curse and swear most bitterly. But it pleased God

before they came half seas over, to smite this young man with a grievous disease, of which he died in a desperate manner, and so was himself the first that was thrown overboard." To Bradford the sin of pride in relation to Puritanism itself is not a possibility.

*Puritan cannibalism*: having fled Holland—in part due to a fear of assimilation—Bradford projects a similar fear onto the indigenous peoples of North America, who are presented as not only mindlessly violent sadists, but as cannibalistic connoisseurs, who long to take in, *assimilate*—the flesh of the Puritans. In his journal, Bradford's imagination lingers over the image of a dismembered body, a blasphemous version of communion: "And also those who should escape or overcome these difficulties should yet be in continual danger of the savage people, who are cruel, barbarous, most treacherous, being most furious in their rage and merciless where they overcome; not being only content to kill and take away life, but delight to torment men in the most bloody manner that may be; flaying some alive with the shells of fishes, cutting off the members and joints of others by piecemeal and broiling on the coals, eat the collops of their flesh in their sight whilst they live, with other cruelties horrible to relate." What is being cannibalized here is not only flesh, but the Word-made-flesh: the godliness of the Puritans is lost within pagan bodies. The fear here is the fear not merely of physical violation, but the fear of a loss of identity within the "wilderness" of the New World.

This *imagined* cannibalism describes an attitude of revulsion— and fascination. Indeed, the fate of the dismembered body is *desired*: as a metonym for Christ's tortured body, the violence visited upon it is a sign of God's election. To be dismembered is to be sacrificed, but it is also to be made spiritually whole . . .

The body in pain: testament to a faith beyond words (in Bradford's imagination, the consumed bodies are *voiceless*, their silence symbolizes a ecstatic union with Christ through a New World Calvary). It is this voicelessness that Bradford longs to speak for, needs to speak for, speaks *for* . . .

*Of Plymouth Plantation* yearns, implicitly, for Christ-like mutilation: in the body's resemblance to Christ's crucified body lives the hope of resurrection, of becoming one with God.

In Bradford's text, the body appears dramatically in a prostrate state—ill bodies, dying bodies, wounded bodies, suffering bodies, dead bodies. The afflicted body is the only body worthy of representation. The healthy body offers no lessons, teaches nothing, unless it is the lesson of the exception. The healthy body: invisible. The afflicted body: a sign of God's love—or punishment; at any rate, a sign *of* God . . .

Anno Domini 1634: "This spring also, those Indians that lived about their trading houses there, fell sick of the small pox and died most miserably; for a sorer disease cannot befall them, they fear it more than the plague. For usually they that have this disease have them in abundance, and for want of bedding and linen and other helps they fall into a lamentable condition as they lie on their hard mats, the pox breaking and mattering and running one into another, their skin cleaving by reason thereof to the mats they lie on. When they turn them a whole side will flay at once as it were and they will be all of a gore blood, most fearful to behold. And then being very sore, what with cold and other distempers, they die like rotten sheep. The condition of this people was so lamentable and they fell down so generally of this disease as they were in the end not able to help one another, no not to make a fire, nor to fetch a little water to drink, nor any bury the dead. But would strive as long as they could, and when they could procure no other means to make fire, they would burn the wooden trays and dishes they ate their meat in, and their very bows and arrows. And some would crawl out on all fours to get a little water, and sometimes die by the way and not be able to get in again [. . .] But by the marvelous goodness and providence of God, not one of the English was so much as sick or in the least measure tainted with this disease, though they daily did these offices for them many weeks together." This is illness as punishment for paganism; their illness confirms the Puritans in their goodness (a different goodness from the goodness which, in their extremity, the English showed to them).