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PURITAN NEW ENGLAND. TIME AND SPACE IN LITERARY
PRODUCTIONS
(1630-1729)

-SUMMARY-

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Argument

The aspects that we intend to approach in our paper are related to the concepts of “time”, as passing/history (personal and communal), and of “space”, as a special physical context, as they appear in Puritan literary productions of the golden era of New England Puritanism: the third decade of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. The emphasis will fall on the perspective on history as the resultant of the two coordinates: the temporal and the spatial. The thesis that I propose is that the Puritan texts written in this period and within an idealist and religiously non-conformist community are complex literary texts in their own right bearing a multidimensional message and which not only portray, through their subjectivity in continual and sometimes pressing struggle for objectivity and strictness, a fresco of the Puritan society, but also offer the opportunity of an in-depth analysis of the American self by relating it to the way it situates itself in time and space, two coordinates without which experience could not exist. In a Collingwoodian key, the interest will be centered in this paper not primarily on what the texts offer qua answer, but on the discovery of the essential question(s) to which these answer¹. The research that we have done has led to the conclusion that this question is connected to the idea and the need of the certitude of immortality, of the continuity of the mundane existence in a transfigured state in a sacred place, beyond subjective time. The motivation that stays behind the choice for such a theme resides in the aforementioned complexity and the manner in which seventeenth-century Puritan texts unveil themselves as subtle mechanisms of the workings of the concepts of “time” and “space” within the inner life of the individual as well as in society seen as a unitary corpus with a common destiny of its members, directed soteriologically towards total communion with God.

Our work has as departing point Sacvan Bercovitch’s study, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975). In this study, Bercovitch pinpoints the difference between those who went to the New World placing their immigration within a laic history, subjected to the passing of time and recorded in various documents, and the Puritan community that placed itself beyond all that. While the former tried the re-creation of Europe by establishing colonies named New France, New Scotland, and New Spain, the Puritans were positive that the entire New World belonged to them by divine decree.

¹ In *The Idea of History*, published posthumously in 1946, Robin George Collingwood (1889-1943), British historian and philosopher formulated, regarding the understanding of a historical text, the “question-answer hypothesis”, which Hans Georg Gadamer would later compare with his “logic of question and answer”.

They were going to become thus the rightful inhabitants of this New Canaan as antitype of the people of Israel. Biblical history, temporality oriented eschatologically towards the Second Coming of Christ, the sacralization of the new territory as a site of the fulfillment of the salvific mission, establish the coordinates of the Puritan perspective on time and space delimiting this community from the others, contemporary with it.

The bibliography on Puritanism is particularly rich. Very much has been written, especially in the American academic milieu, from various perspectives, modernist as well as post-modernist. Lately there has been a blooming of feminist and psychoanalytical orientation which re-signify Puritan writings by presenting hypothesis that add new valences to the Puritan identity. The historical, sociological, and literary analysis in this direction cover a vast conceptual area applied to the puritan phenomenon. Among the most famous contributors in this field, we mention: Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, Darret Rutman, David Levin, John Coffey (history of Puritanism and its key concepts) Nancy Armstrong, Anette Kolodny, Peter N. Carroll, Richard Slotkin, Roderick Nash (Puritan imaginary, the concepts of *wilderness* and *frontier*) Kathryn Zabelle Derounian Stodola, Richard VanDerBeets, Cristopher Castiglia, Ivy Schweizer, Teresa Toulouse, Richard Breitweisser (Indian captivity narratives) Kenneth B. Murdock, Robert Daly, Daniel B. Shea, Alan Shucard (Puritan literature in general and Puritan poetics in particular).

The contribution that my paper brings in this field is related to the material approached, namely personal Puritan literature –captivity narratives written by the captive themselves, diaries, and poetry by authors that did not intend to publish their work – with the aim of identifying what is constant and what modifies in the perception of time as passing/history (individual and communal) and of space as an element which influences the disposition of the soul. Much has been written about the frontier, but especially on the concept that emerged starting with the eighteenth century, and about Puritan historiography, but mainly by approaching strictly theological writings. Our intention is to bring together the two coordinates –time and space- and to place them in the equation of the intellectual history of the Puritan individual. The emphasis on personal literature explains the fact that the present paper will not address various types of sermons, like the famous jeremiads, which constitute a great part of Puritan literature. Such writings were intended, by their intrinsic message and structure, for the public, while the texts that we selected are the result of personal spiritual exercise.

The approach that we chose for elaborating the thesis is that of the New Historicism because in Puritan literary productions the text is the very consequence of the context in which it appears, be it published or not, and it explains itself through this context. New Historicism rejects the New Critical view according to which texts are autonomous units that should be examined without bringing in what New Critics termed the "intentional fallacy" or the "historical fallacy." The aim of the New Historicism is reaching an understanding of writings through the historical context and of cultural and intellectual history through literature. The vision contained by captivity narratives, diaries, and poetry is directly connected to social and political transformations, to the political and religious context which determine the re-defining of the individual and of the community by applying the typological interpretation and the shaping of a cultural identity which is the seed of the North American one. The very nature of the text and its obvious ramifications ask for such an approach.

The Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is comprised of three parts. The first one – **The Puritan Perspective on Time and Space** – divided into two sections, A and B, deals with the general problematic of time and space in Puritan culture and gives a short description of key Puritan principles regulating the life of the non-conformist community: innate or total depravity, unconditional election (God's election, before the creation of the world, of certain people so that they would be saved regardless of the conditions related to them), "predestination", "preparationism" (preparing one's soul for meeting divinity, despite the limitative concept of "predestination"), "backsliding" and "covenant", which established a relationship in which divine intention of supporting the community met the human obligations which had to be fulfilled in order to assure the continuity of such a support.

In the first section (**Puritan New England. History as Ecclesiastic Perspective on Community Life**) we placed Puritan thinking in the cultural context of the seventeenth century showing that this community, with a corporatist spirituality based on practice and personal experience, is rooted in the intellectual refinement of the first generation which, in its turn, shaped up following the principles of the sixteenth century European Protestantism, as well as in those of Humanism and scholasticism. Time is

viewed here as history. That is why the emphasis falls on the Puritan perspective on the succession of events in both their community and their individual lives. Protestant historiography, which the Puritan one derived from, presents an apocalyptic type of historical thinking which viewed history as a temporal dimension subjected to prophecies. The Puritan reformist vision is consequently eschatological and stems from the correlation between Old Testament prophecies and secular history while placing the community within the perspective of a mindset marked by the perseverant waiting for Christ's Second Coming and by the "preparationism" needed for welcoming this fulfilling moment. In this key, up to the establishing of the true reformatory Puritan community, history had been a continuous sinking into perversion starting with the fall of Adam and Eve. The moment of the banishing of mankind's first couple from Heaven represents, as already mentioned, the entrance into history; Adam and Eve left eternity for a passing which shows human limitation. Having the certitude of their innate moral depravity, the Puritans did not however subject themselves to this passing of time; their history textbook and the document that testified for their existence marked by God's Providence was the Bible. From the moment of the Fall on, Christ had been preparing the way to the Reformation and the Puritans were the ones entrusted with the mission of re-establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. The fact that they did not succeed in doing this in England led to the desecration of the Britanic space and the transformation of New England into a refuge for the sacred remnants of the chosen people. In this new space, the Puritans on board of Arbela and Mayflower were going to accomplish their mission, namely that of establishing a model-community while waiting the fulfillment of the millennium. The great Puritan historians called the "Lord's Remembrancers" - William Bradford, William Hubbard, Daniel Gookin, Increase Mather, Cotton Mather, Edward Johnson and Nathaniel Morton, wrote histories being aware of the fact that God is the lord of history and its supreme author. From their perspective, the past represented only a period preparation for the cristalization of the Puritan community in New England. In this part we insisted more on William Bradford's *Of plymouth Plantation* and *Magnalia Cristi Americana* (The Glorious Acts of Christ in America), an ecclesiastic history of New England. Both writings place the history of the community which they stem from in the wider framework of the sacred history investing it with eschatological and soteriological importance. We also discussed Jonathan Edwards who, in the era of Enlightenment and of the emphasis upon the human agency in the historical process,

strongly supported the Puritan view on history according to which this was dependent upon God's redemptive activity as manifested in a series of revivals in time.

As regards the space in which the drama of Reformation was going to unreel and reach its climactic stage, we approach in the second section of the first part (**“Frontier” and “Wilderness” between Myth and Paradox**), the concepts as well as the concrete realities of the “frontier” and “wilderness”. In this chapter, we show that both are formative as regards the American myth and, perceived through Puritan lenses, become invested with paradoxical qualities, according to the dual view applied on them. Wilderness is both sacred refuge and devil's territory while frontier is both non-existent – the land was theirs by divine decree so that no border would seem coherent with such a plan- and a demarcating line between savagery and civilization. A case study comes to highlight the manner in which Puritans perceived what was beyond the frontier and how moral law functions on each side of the border which is viewed first of all spiritually and not as a physical reality. The case is that of Hannah Duston (Dustin in other texts) which was first recounted by Cotton Mather in *Magnalia Christi Americana* and also mentioned by Samuel Sewall in his diary. Hannah is captured by the Indians but takes revenge by applying the very method used by those who brutally tore her from her community – killing and scalping. She becomes thus a hero, a symbol of the Puritan resistance and perseverance, being the first American woman in whose honor a statue was erected. Her example shows that the territory beyond the frontier is viewed as a moral vacuum, a land of the unknown where the ethical is teleologically suspended.

The second part of the thesis, **Internalization of Time and Space in Puritan Literary Productions of the 17th Century**, is comprised of three sections, A, B, and C, each approaching a type of personal literature which reflects the relationship that the individual establishes with time and space. In the first section, **Time and Space in Captivity Narratives**, these writings are portrayed as ones that give an authentic account of the situation “in the field” so to say. The reality and challenges of the frontier are experienced directly and the status of the “in between” changes both temporal and spatial coordinates familiar to the captive. Because our concern is with personal accounts and the emphasis in this paper falls on the seventeenth century, the only example available in this respect is the famous and much analyzed captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson. As the first purely American literary genre, this type of narrative presents a synthesis of the

Puritan society and functions as an archetype creating a paradigm of personal and collective history that may be observed in the whole Puritan literature and later in the American literature. Mary Rowlandson's text is presented as a document of Puritan sacred history offering valuable information on how the individual saw his/her own history within the community and how it related to that of the group he/she was a member. We discuss here the concepts of "contact zone", "liminality", and "marginality", as well as that of "pilgrimage" as Rowlandson's narrative presents itself as an initiatory journey resembling the one described in *Pilgrim's Progress*, the correspondent, from over the ocean, of the best-seller of the New World. The divine *telos* is imposed on each secular event which interferes with the captive's life transforming thus personal existence in a mediator between the believer and the heavenly joy which will come in an eschatological future.

The second section, **Time and Space in Puritan Poetry**, dwells first on the paradox of the coexistence of the Puritans' need for images and fear of idolatry, a paradox solved by perceiving the world as an *a fortiori* argument for the beauty and goodness of God and by the characteristics of the Puritan poet who is only a discoverer, a mediator and not a creator, this latter function belonging exclusively to the divinity. We illustrated this fact by presenting the thought of the Puritan poets Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor centering on their perception of time and space in meditation (done in two steps: .the focus on the Bible as guiding the interpretation of the subject and providing models for meditation and the application to the self) as it appears in the poems of the two, as well as on their vision on history, doubly oriented, towards personal duration – a personal *eshaton*- and communal history. Whereas Taylor relentlessly looked for the perfect words in order to match God's greatness and prepare his own soul for the afterlife and the second wrote poetry because it was her personal way of relating to the passage of time with all that it entails – loss, death, birth – and placing all daily events within the interplay between this world and the next. Michael Wigglesworth's famous poem *The Day of Doom* is discussed only as a means of showing, by comparison, the difference between poetry written mainly as personal spiritual exercise, without the explicit intention of publishing, and poems being written for the use of the entire community. We thus pinpoint once again the relation between personal and communal history.

The third type of personal literature discussed in its relation to time and space is the diarist writing, approached in the section titled **Time and Space in Puritan Diaries** . According to the main orientation of their content, we divided diaries into those of personal experiences, viewed from the inside, which present time as *kairos* (the diaries written by William Wigglesworth Increase Mather, Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards) and those centered on *chronos*, the outer events as perceived by the authors, respectively John Winthrop and Samuel Sewall. In perceiving history and dealing with time so that it is used in the service of God and thus of one's soul, the authors follow almost the same spiritual formula based on severe and perseverant self-analysis and meditation on the works of Christ, differing however in intensity and sometimes even in scope. A third part in this section dwells on the image of New England as depicted in the discussed diaries, with its particularities, harshness and spiritual significance, namely that of testing the strength of the champions of the social and church reform.

The third part of the thesis (**American Literature through a Puritan Filter**) is a "bird's eye view" over the aspects linked to the continuity of the Puritan perspective on time and space in American literature with its emphasis on the literary productions of the 19th century, a century made, as regards our concern in this paper, the transition between the Puritan writings of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth and the literature developed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We established first a historical and cultural context for the Puritan tradition in the American literature and civilization (**Scholarship of the Puritan Legacy**) by mentioning the critical contributions which led to a reconsideration of the puritan culture and the founding of the "American Studies" through the writings of some great critics and historians as Kenneth B. Murdok, Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, Edmund S. Morgan, Yvor Winters and Roy Harvey Pearce. We then followed all the Puritan themes – wilderness, sacred history, exceptionalism, predestination, eschatology, Providence – in the American literature (**The Puritan Inheritance and Its Journey in the American Literature**) starting from that of the 19th century with representatives like Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James and continuing up to the apocalyptical and post-apocalyptical novels of the 21st century. We have tried thus to demonstrate the existence of a Puritan background of the collective character of the American civilization.

Conclusions

Returning to Robin George Collingwood and the emphasis that he places not on the answer that the text may constitute, but on discovering the essential question addressed to it, we have discovered that the literary productions analyzed are addressed most of the questions formulated by New Historicism. Thus the interpretation and the presentation of events are products of the culture of the author, e.g. Increase Mather's view on King Philip's war and John Winthrop's interpretation of the epidemic that struck the Indian population before the arrival of the immigrants. Also, we have noticed that the literary productions discussed either condemn or support various events, personal or communal, viewing them in religious key and always transforming what would seem secular into sacred history. Sometimes both condemning and supporting may be observed given the fact that one of the traits of Puritanism was that of harboring paradox. In captivity narratives, the violence of the Indians is condemned but captivities are also seen as spiritual trials by which faith is strengthened. The literary productions presented are also a part of a continuum with other texts of the same period, namely, theological treatises, sermons, biographies and auto-biographies which were not discussed here as this kind of writings was not the main focus of the paper.

Puritan personal literature offers the most authentic view, from behind the curtains as it were, of the Puritan mind and the most subtle mechanisms that gave way to the Puritan culture, a culture which proposed a concept of history that made people envisage trans-historicity as a superior spiritual level from which all existence, individual, communal, universal, became more clear regarding its cause, aim, and meaning.

Key words: Puritanism, eschatology, frontier, wilderness, personal literature