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Portent and Providence- An Investigation of the Puritan Habit of Deciphering the Will of God in the Natural and the Preternatural with Special Reference to "The Scarlet Letter" by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Milton Sernett

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, mcsernet@sy.edu

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PORTENT AND PROVIDENCE

An Investigation of the Puritan Habit of Deciphering the
Will of God in the Natural and the Preternatural
with Special Reference to The Scarlet Letter
by Nathaniel Hawthorne

A Research Paper Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
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by

Milton C. Sernett

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Approved by: _____

Advisor

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Our Puritan Heritage: Rediscovery and Reinterpretation

The shaping of American Protestantism is the story of a religious movement following the advancing frontier and subduing it. The initial foray into the American wilderness, aside from several economically motivated expeditions which were shortly abandoned, is credited to the Puritans of New England. In a situation utterly different from the Old Country, men like John Winthrop, the Cottons, and the Mathers sought to plant a "new Israel" in the wilderness, a "holy community" bound together by a common faith and covenant. For nearly six decades after the Great Migration of the 1630's, the Puritan experiment flourished, establishing a character and a climate that retained fervor until the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The Puritan's influence on the American mind and way of life has been a constant source for scholarly and not-so-scholarly debate. Sometimes the relationship is merely metaphoric. The term "Puritan" or "Puritanical" is frequently used in a derogatory manner by the supporters of the "new" sexual ethic, as propounded for example in Hugh Hefner's "Pigboy" philosophy." Others, who approach the Puritan more objectively and are not content with jousting at "strawmen," see a historical connection between

our later American heritage and the Puritan experience. In a recent study of the American mind, Max Sevelle views Puritanism as "firmly rooted in the American experience and in the emerging American mind of the eighteenth century." From New England as a center, "it has radiated its influence in American civilization, for good or ill, from that day to this; and the end is not yet."¹

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "filioipietistic" descendents tended to picture the Puritans as heroic souls who took their stand on civil and religious liberty and courageously sailed with a hope and a prayer into the wilderness of the New World. The first dissent from this point of view came from Charles Francis Adams (Massachusetts: Its Historians and Its History), who maintained that the salvation of Massachusetts lay in its eventual emancipation from Puritanism. Others, such as James Truslow Adams, were the creators of the widely-held opinion that New England's troubles were the result of a bigoted and tyrannical clergy.²

Prior to the Second World War a whole generation of historians, George L. Bear and Charles M. Andrews being two of the ablest, sought for the meaning of American colonial history in the full context of Britain's commercial and colonial expansion. Known as the "imperial school," these interpreters were reacting against the strong nationalistic flavor and the "shallow Puritan baiting" of their predecessors. One of the earliest evidences of this change

of mood was Samuel Eliot Morrison's Builders of the Bay Colony.³ Hardly had Prof. Andrews finished his magnum opum, The Colonial Period in American History, when the leadership of his "imperial school" was challenged by a new group of historians who felt that it was time to look at the colonies more closely "from within." These historians, led by Perry Miller of Harvard, sought to interpret the Puritan in his own light, with a marked emphasis on his intellectual life. Puritan literature especially came into focus, ~~especially~~ primarily in Perry Miller's The New England Mind: the Seventeenth Century and The New England Mind: from Colony to Province, which dominated the field. Prof. Miller showed that early New England literature is practically Puritan history and that our early national writers wrote under Puritan influence. A large number of literary critics, such as Randall Stewart, began to trace the Puritan influence on American thought during the "flowering" of New England literature which took place in the nineteenth century. Many concluded that the dominant figure of this period, Nathaniel Hawthorne, was virtually the symbol of Puritanism in American letters.⁴

The Puritan Dilemma and Nathaniel Hawthorne

This paper has something to do with both Puritan history and Nathaniel Hawthorne. As originally conceived it was entitled The Puritan Prolapsis: A Study in the Conception and Collapse of the "Holy Commonwealth," with

Special Reference to the Interpretation of Nathaniel Hawthorne. It was to have been an attempt to isolate the basis, both experiential and theological, for the "Holy Commonwealth" and to determine what undermined the colony, especially as to the tension between the individual and the society in New England. However, after a good deal of research, it was found that such a problem would force a consideration of all aspects of Puritan thought and life and ran perilously close to a survey of Puritan history not only in New England, but in England as well.

It was while reading about the attempts of the Puritan fathers to rekindle the "Holy Commonwealth" that the following statement concerning the Puritan belief in witches and the notorious trials at Salem in 1692 was encountered:

These beliefs the Puritans had brought with them from England. These they shared with all of Christendom. Folk superstition thus from the beginnings comprised not the hodgepodge of ignorant and fearful supposition for which it is often dismissed, but a body of deeply felt, culturally sanctioned symbols representing profound aspects of man's relation to the supernatural.⁵

Two words, "culturally sanctioned," of this statement, from Daniel Hoffman's Form and Fable in American Fiction, were found to closely parallel the observation made by F. O. Matthiessen in his critique of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter:

In the realm of the natural phenomena, Hawthorne examined the older world's common belief that great events were foreboded by supernatural omens, and remarked how "it was, indeed, a majestic idea, that the destiny of

nations should be revealed, in these awful hieroglyphics, on the cope of heaven."⁶

Both of these statements attempt to relate the faith of the Puritans to their encounter with the natural and the preternatural (prater naturam, beyond nature). The full ramifications of this Puritan characteristics are revealed in a study of both their theology and their way of life, which, for the most part, are inseparable. The portents, wonders, and witchcrafts of Colonial New England are documented in the records and writings of the Puritans. The question under study concerns the way in which the Puritans were able to interpret these events as revelations of divine Providence, an ability which will be shown to have strongly affected the nineteenth century writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The New England Context

In seeking to answer the above question, the context will be limited to the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay from the time of the establishment of the colony in the 1630's until the twilight of the oligarchy during the late seventeenth century. New England Puritanism has its origin in the "Vestarian" controversy of 1559-1567 in Old England. Following the lead of men like William Bradshaw and William Ames, many in the Anglican church of Elizabeth I and the Stuart, James I, sought to "purify" the Church of England of what they regarded as the corrupting remnants of the Roman connection.⁷

There has been much debate over the origin of Puritan theology. The common view is that it was brought back to England from Calvinistic Geneva following the Marian Exile. Leonard Trinterud, however, is an example of the minority opinion. He asserts that Puritan theology was already well-established prior to the Marian Exile and was brought to England during the reign of Edward VI by Rhinelanders who were deeply influenced by the Arminian thought of Zwingli, Bucer, Oecolampadius, and others in the area of Strassbourg. Grounded in the concepts of divine law and the covenant between God and man, as found in the writings of John Calvin, Puritan thought also expressed a strong dependence on Augustinian theology and piety.⁸

At the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, whatever differences in theological backgrounds there were now found common expression in the Puritan's request for greater latitude, in deviations from the Anglican service. Regarding their petitions as an impudent affront to his divine right and an attempt to subvert the doctrines and practices of the established Anglican Church, James I (1603-1625) told the Puritan leaders, "If this is all your party hath to say, I will make them conform or else herry them out of the land."⁹ From that moment on Parliament was set against its king. Although Charles I (1625-1649) handled himself with more regal dignity, he faired no better with Parliament. Finding it impossible to obtain the Puritan-controlled Parliament's financial support, he finally resorted to dissolving the

bothersome body and instituted his eleven year "personal rule," during which William Laud, who would become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, was the king's instrument for enforcing conformity and in fulfilling the threat of James I to "harry them out of the land."

Not all escape routes led to the same haven. Prior to the "Great Migration" of the 1630's, during which it is estimated that about sixty thousand people left England, the Separatists, represented by the Pilgrims who settled Plymouth in 1620, had already taken their leave.¹⁰ Levelers, Diggers, Fifth Monarchy men, and Quakers, or as they preferred to be called, the Society of Friends, led by George Fox (1624-1691), also belonged to the right-wing separatistic element. Many of the refugees settled in the West Indies, which at the time was one of England's most attractive colonial settlements. However, the majority of those in contention with James I remained. Civil war was to break out in 1640, in which they would see both the execution of the king and the formation of the Commonwealth, headed by Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658).¹¹

Unlike the Pilgrims and the other Separatists, a much larger and more powerful group of Puritans, "largely gentlemen holding estates of land and preachers who held university posts or great pulpits," did not wish to split from the Anglican church but only to "complete the Reformation."¹² Strong in the area of East Anglica, they were led by John Winthrop, Puritan squire of Suffolk, who came from an

influential family and attended Trinity College, Cambridge. It was here at Cambridge that the Massachusetts Bay Company was chartered on March 4, 1629. Having persuaded all those not intending to sail to America to sell their stock in the Massachusetts Bay Company, which was the heir of the Dorchester Company's dwindling fishing and trading enterprise in New England, Winthrop and his fellow Puritans boarded a great fleet of eleven vessels and on March 29, 1630, set sail for the New World.¹³ In ten years over twenty thousand members and sixty-five clergy would flee England for the Puritan colonies centered around Massachusetts Bay, each echoing the departing words of Pastor Francis Higginson, "We will not say, as the Separatists were wont to say at their leaving England, 'Farewell, Babylon!' ...but, ... 'Farewell, the Church of God in England!' ...We do not go to New England as separatists from the Church of England, though we cannot but separate from the corruptions of it."¹⁴

Footnotes

¹George M. Waller, Puritanism in Early America (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1965), p. v.

²Nelson R. Burr, A Critical Bibliography of Religion in America, in the Religion in American Life. Edited by James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), IV, 105-106.

³Ibid.

⁴William H. Cartwright and Richard L. Watson, Jr., editors, Interpreting and Teaching American History. Thirty-first Yearbook of the National Council for the Social Studies (Washington, D. C.: Department of the National Education Association, 1961), p. 86.

⁵Daniel Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 31.

⁶F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 276.

⁷Kenneth Scott Latourette, Christianity Through the Ages (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 192-193.

⁸Leonard J. Trinterud, "The Origins of Puritanism," Church History, XV (March 1951), 37-57.

⁹C. Harold King, A History of Our Civilization (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), p. 662.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 664.

¹¹Latourette, pp. 193-194.

¹²Jerald C. Brauer, Protestantism in America (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), p. 21.

¹³William Warren Sweet, Religion in Colonial America (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 84.

¹⁴Perry Miller, Orthodoxy in Massachusetts 1630-1650 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 137.

CHAPTER II

NATURE AND PROVIDENCE IN PURITAN THEOLOGY

New Eden's Holy Commonwealth

The foregoing survey of Puritan development in England is due to more than a mere antiquarian interest in the founders of Massachusetts Bay. It is important to differentiate in terms of background, character, and motivation these colonizers from those who came for economic reasons or in outright denial of their English roots. The Pilgrims "crossed the ocean to escape starvation, to raise tobacco, to grow rich and to run their own churches as pleased them."¹ Not so the Puritans of Winthrop's fleet. "If any come here to plant for worldly ends," wrote Thomas Dudley to the Countess of Lincoln, "he commits an error, of which he will soon repent him; but if for spiritual...he may find here what may well content him."² Despite the theories of Max Weber, Ernest Troeltsch, and Frederick Jackson Turner, the majority opinion is that the basic reason for the Puritan migration to America was a desire to reform completely the Church of England and to found a pure Church after God's design.³

On May 11, 1670, the Reverend Samuel Danforth preached an election sermon entitled, "A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness." The good minister of Roxbury was attempting to buttress the sagging walls of

the Puritan oligarchy, which after six decades already was showing signs of weakness, yet he provided a deep insight into the original motivation behind the Puritan settlement. Prof. Perry Miller of Harvard, who takes second-place to none as a student of New England history, made the decision as a youthful scholar to "expound what I took to be the innermost propulsion of the United States."⁴ A collection of his writings and lectures, which he calls "pieces," is entitled Errand into the Wilderness. Inspiration for the title came from Samuel Danforth's sermon, which like so many Jeremiaids of its time, was addressed to the sinful and unregenerate whom God was about to destroy. Yet in the fateful ambiguity of the word "errand" lies the fundamental question with which Perry Miller wrestled, "What was the underlying aim of the first colonists? Whose errand were they on?"

The Great Migration of 1630 was not simply a scouting expedition, says Perry Miller, but "an organized task force of Christians, executing a flank attack on the corruptions of Christendom."⁵ These Puritans did not flee to America; they went in order to work out the complete reformation which was not yet accomplished in England and Europe. Thus they were not so much on an errand of God, but they were, in the primitive sense of the word, on an "errand" for history. John Winthrop was aware of this when he exhorted the future colonists:

For wee must Consider that wee shall be as
a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are

upon us. ...He (God) will make us a story and a by-word through the world, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god and all professours for Gods sake.⁶

To this end the Puritans had entered into a covenant with Providence. As they embarked upon their adventure into what many considered to be not so much a New England as a New Eden, Richard Sibbes delineated the conditions of the Covenant of Grace, the basis for the "Holy Commonwealth," and the undergirding of the "New Eden":

It has pleased the great God to enter into a treaty and covenant of agreement with us his poor creatures, the articles of which agreement are here comprised. God, for his part undertakes to convey all that concerns our happiness, upon our receiving of them, by believing on him. Every one in particular that recites these articles from a spirit of faith makes good this condition.⁷

The Covenant of Grace would give rise to the Social Covenant, which spelled out the necessary good of society, and the Church Covenant, which substantiated the ordering and rule of God's house. The Puritans were determined "to practice," as Francis Higginson, one of the first pastors at Salem, said, "the positive part of church reformation."⁸

When Winthrop's flagship, the Arabella, sailed out of Southampton harbor in 1629, it had a precious cargo aboard -- the Charter. Most historians are of the opinion that Charles I was unaware of the Puritans' intention to carry their Charter with them. In a secret meeting at the residence of the Earl of Lincoln, near Sempringham, the Puritans bought out all stockholders who did not wish to leave England. Thus

the possibility that a group of stockholders, under the authority of the King, might later modify the policies of the Massachusetts Bay Company was eliminated.⁹ It was also true that John Winthrop and the other leaders felt obligated to carry their Charter with them. Had not Moses brought out the tablets of the Law from the wilderness? The Puritans firmly believed that God was now summoning them, as he had the Chosen of Israel, to make another "exodus." Later on, in the midst of the Antinomian crisis brought on by Ann Hutchinson and other adherents of the "Inner Light" theory, the Puritan divines made good use of this election concept. Edward Johnson, one of the founders of the village of Woburn, wrote a history of New England in 1650 entitled Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Savior in New England. With no equivocation, Johnson states:

As it was necessary that there should be a Moses and an Aaron, before the Lord would deliver his people and destroy Pharaoh, so now it was needfull, that the Churches of Christ should first obtain their purity, and the civill government its power to defend them, before Antichrist come to his finall ruine: and because you shall be sure the day is come indeed, behold the Lord Christ marshalling of his invincible Army to the battell.¹⁰

To the Puritan, it was a matter of faith that God had "sifted a whole nation" in order to plant his "choice grain" in the American wilderness.¹¹

A God Both Sovereign and Wise

The Puritan understanding of providence is based upon their idea of the Covenant and the "Holy Experiment." Perry Miller has documented the subtle but nevertheless real shift of emphasis in the Puritan concept of the Providence of God from that held by John Calvin. In the Covenant of Grace, God, observing the form, contracts with man as with a peer. If man fulfills his share of the mutual obligations of the Covenant then God must redeem him and glorify him.¹² In the Puritan "foedral" or covenant theology, the deus absconditus of Calvin, being bound to the stipulations of the Covenant, becomes, in the acting out of that Covenant, the Puritan's deus revelatus. In a "piece" entitled "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity," Perry Miller states:

The first effect of the doctrine was to remove the practical difficulty of conceiving of the Deity as a definite character. He might still remain in essence anything or everything, incomprehensible and transcendent. That no longer need concern mankind, for in His contacts with man He has, voluntarily, of His own sovereign will and choice, consented to be bound and delimited by a specific program. He was promised to abide by certain procedures comprehensible to the human intellect.¹³

The Puritan thought his history to be the record of God's providential management of the world.¹⁴ The Puritan had, in the words of John Cotton, a "panting, longing, eager desire" to find the revelation of God completed in himself.¹⁵

In an analysis of the climate and character of the Colonial period, Puritanism in Old and New England, Alan Simpson states:

It is the thesis of this book that the Puritans were elect spirits, segregated from the mass of mankind by an experience of conversion, fired by the sense that God was using them to revolutionize human history, and committed to the execution of his will.¹⁶

With this concept of their purpose and place in history, the Puritan mind sought out the sovereign will of God in the great and small things of life. Since God had entered into a "covenant" with them, he could be expected to act reasonably, not arbitrarily, in pursuing the cause of his "elect." Reason could be used to fathom the orderly providence of God. But it must be "Right Reason, the Imagination or Religious Perception that comes with Grace."¹⁷ "Right Reason" could be expected to fathom divine portent in natural law. Thus whatever might happen: plagues, Indian attacks, shipwreck, or a host of other natural catastrophes: all had a place in the providence of God. Perry Miller has said in an often quoted statement:

...the Puritan mind was one of the toughest the world has ever had to deal with. It is impossible to conceive of a disillusioned Puritan; no matter what misfortune befell him, no matter how often or how tragically his fellowmen failed him, he would have been prepared for the worst, and would have expected no better.¹⁸

One disillusioned band of settlers after another departed the American wilderness for the comforts of England and

Europe, but the Puritans stayed on. It was the will of God.

The Harmony of the Natural Order and the Divine Decree

Andrew Marvell, English contemporary of the Puritans, once was to have said, "Thrice happy he who, not mistook, Hath read in Nature's mystic book."¹⁹ Although they did not immerse themselves in mystical contemplation as did the later Transcendentalists, the Puritans of New England took it as a serious matter to peer "into Nature's Book." When the Reverend Samuel Danforth recognized the comet of 1667 both as a divine portent and as under natural law, he was acting in accord with the Puritan belief that there was an essential harmony of the natural order and the divine decree.²⁰ On the visit of Halley's Comet in 1682, Increase Mather preached two sermons entitled "Heaven's Alarm to the World" and "The Latter Sign." In a more elaborate treatise, Kometographia, he sought to prove that the appearance of "comets always portended remarkable or calamitous events."²¹ It was a useful occasion on which to point out to his contemporaries that "the Lord hath fired his beacon in the heavens...and his scythe whereby he doth shear down multitudes of sinful creatures."²² The Puritan was often a strange mixture of the theologian and the scientist.

As theologians, the Puritan divines believed, according to Samuel Willard, that "when God wrought the works of Creation, He had a design for every creature."²³ The

Puritan doctrine of Creation taught that God was the eternal creator of all things. His being filled all things. Although imperfect natural man could not fathom the will of the Lord in the heavens and the earth, the "laws of the Gospel" enabled man, with his imperfect and benighted sight, to see in nature the exhaustive and authoritative will of God. Like the Anglican, the Puritan believed that the will of God is exhibited in God's creation, but he differed in that he knew that "without the quickening insight, the subtle and inward genius," which comes from the experience of "regeneration," Nature remained a dark book.²⁴

With the assistance of both reason and grace, the Puritan mind sought to decipher the secret providence of the Almighty in the world created things. This is not to deny the observation that the Puritan theologian also realized that "natural knowledge" alone would never bring the Soul to Heaven's gate. However, contrary to the opinion commonly held of them, the Puritans did not totally disparage the value of "natural knowledge." They argued: "And tho' Man's Apostacy hath greatly beclouded Reason, and the exercise upon this account, yet those Principles are rooted in him, and cannot be totally obliterated."²⁵ In Puritan discourse, the "light of Nature" meant both the innate light that gives men naturally the glimmering ideas which in their perfection once constituted the image of God, and the body of ideas gathered from the physical

universe by induction and observation.²⁶ Using both Platonic and Aristotelian logic, New England theologians left no stone unturned nor any corner of the soul unsearched in their study of the "hieroglyphicks" of God.

Sermons in Brooks and Morals in Stones

Samuel Eliot Morison has analyzed the Puritan character in a study entitled The Puritan Pronaos, in which he challenges the judicative opinion that they were hostile or indifferent to science. As an example he produces a myriad of colonists who made a regular habit of peering through their "optick tubes." Although bound by the Ptolemaic system, they saw no reason for not observing the heavens.²⁷ Nor did they isolate themselves from the scientific revolution which was rapidly gaining adherents in England and the Continent. Several of the leading Puritans were members of the Royal Society, and in 1683 they founded a scientific club called the Philosophical Society. John Winthrop was a friend and correspondent of the English scientists Robert Boyle, the Earl of Clarendon, Sir Kenelm Digby, Prince Rupert, Sir Christopher Wren, and Samuel Hartlib. Among his continental associates were Glauber, Kepler, and Van Helmont.²⁸ The Mather dynasty, Increase, Cotton, and Nathaniel, made frequent use of the telescope at Harvard College. Colleges, schools, printing presses, libraries, and almanacs were used to dispense new intellectual findings to the public. Morison concludes:

"The 'warfare between science and theology' found no battle-ground in New England, where the clergy were leaders in liberalism and enlightenment, purveyors of new learning to the people."²⁹

Although Puritan "scientists" such as John Winthrop and John Cotton viewed nature with a reasoned and orderly scientific mind, yet the lessons they drew were obviously didactic. Cotton looked at nature "as a mappe and shaddow of the spiritual estate of the soules of men."³⁰ Perry Miller writes concerning him:

Every particular creature was held to contain a moral import over and above the scientific laws of its particular nature, and while the Christian should study the laws, he should endeavor to 'spiritualize the most Earthly objects that are before him,' because there are 'Numberless Lessons of Morality, which by the Help of Analogy between the Natural and Spiritual World...we may learn from them.'³¹

There were occasions when this tendency to allegorize led to the absurd. Perry Miller states:

Cotton Mather indulged this penchant for allegorizing to the point of absurdity, finding the symbol of a hypocrite in a piece of leather thrown into the fire, and of the damned in the dead coals, or even a memento more when he urinated against the same wall with a dog.³²

Not all those in "the Bay," as the colony in Massachusetts was commonly called, were endowed with Cotton Mather's eccentricities. They realized that they had come to America not simply to endure this "vale of tears" but to transform it into the Kingdom of God. It is with a greater degree of reasonableness that they interpret the signs of the Kingdom in nature. During the seventeenth century the common conviction was that God abided by his laws and almost without

exception would work for the good of men within the frame of nature and not do violence to it.³³

The Puritans were quick to see portents in the wonders of nature and to draw serious moral lessons from them. In 1684, Increase Mather wrote An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences, in which he defined the forms which the "illustrious providence" of God might take:

Such Divine Judgments, Tempests, Floods, Earthquakes, Thunders as are unusual, strange Apparitions, or whatever else shall happen that is Prodigious, Witchcrafts, Diabolical Possessions, Remarkable Judgments upon noted Sinners, eminent Deliverances, and Answers of Prayer, are to be reckoned among Illustrious Providences.³⁴

Every unusual event from severe storms to major pestilences and even wars summoned the Puritans to search for a message from Providence. In Form and Fable in American Fiction, Daniel Hoffman writes:

These wonders which Mather collected from his fellow-ministers, and which entire congregations witnessed and believed, served the Puritans in precisely the same way that similar exempla had served the Church for a thousand years. As one might expect, popular credulity continued, long after the decline of the Puritan theocracy, to invest supernatural power such natural phenomena as the Aurora Borealis, sudden storms, shipwrecks, or the illusion of phantom ships at sea.³⁵

Thus, even though the Puritans were living in and had contact with great scientific revolution which was going on in England and on the Continent, their first consideration was that "it should not sweep their feet off the ground of religious orthodoxy."³⁶ Despite what the new experimental method might deduce, nature would always hold meaning and contain the

"hieroglyphicks" of God's invisible power.

The chief Puritan chronicler of the wonders of nature was Cotton Mather. He delighted in interpreting them as providences of God. During 1674, the following wonder was experienced and duly recorded in Mather's great work Magnalia Christi Americana. It is quoted at some length as evidence of the Puritan's great penchant for seeing providence in portents:

Yes, and now we speak of things ominous, we may add, some time before this, in a clear, still, sunshiny morning, there were divers persons in Malden who heard in the air, on the southeast of them, a great gun go off, and presently thereupon the report of small guns like musket shot, very thick discharging, as if there had been a battle. This was at a time when there was nothing visible done in any part of the colony to occasion such noises; but that which most of all astonished them was the flying of bullets, which came singing over their heads and seemed very near to them; after which, the sound of drums passing along westward was very audible; and on the same day in Plymouth Colony in several places invisible troops of horses were heard riding to and fro. Now, reader, prepare for the even of these prodigies, but count me not struck with a Livian superstition in reporting prodigies for which I have such incontestable assurance.³⁷

From this "incontestable" evidence Cotton Mather deduced a portent of King Philip's War. He proved to be, in this case anyway, a prophet of truth. Within a year the Colonies would come to war with the Indians over the question of land rights.

God's Controversy with New England

By the year 1660, it was evident to many in New England that the "city set on a hill" was beginning to crumble. The

"Holy Commonwealth" was no longer "holy" nor was it a "commonwealth." For some reason the "errand into the wilderness" had gone astray. The rise of dissent by those who felt shackled by the Puritan oligarchy, struck at the very roots of the society. In 1646, Dr. Samuel Childs led a group of remonstrants in taking issue with the authorities over the question of admittance to the Lord's Supper. Roger Williams championed the Separatists in a dispute with the church at Boston because it allowed its members while in England to commune at the Anglican churches. Later the crucial issue would be the matter of church-state relations in "the Bay," which was finally resolved in a sense when Williams retired to Providence, Rhode Island, in 1639, where he founded the Baptist Church.

Roger Williams, the first to advocate complete religious freedom, was followed by a large band of rebels of all stripes and creeds. Among them were Thomas Morton, of the maypole of Merry Mount incident; Thomas Hooker, founder of Connecticut; Samuel Stoddard, who preached that the conversion experience was not necessary for admittance to the Lord's Table; Quaker missionaries from England, led by Mary Fisher and "mother" Ann Austin; and the antinomian prophetess, Ann Hutchinson. Ann Hutchinson, a "nimble witted, clever tongued woman,"³⁸ is a good example of how the individual spirit was beginning to challenge the concensus of Puritan society. Mrs. Hutchinson took to criticizing the sermons of the divines in her home, finally concluding that only John Cotton and John Wheelwright,

her brother-in-law, preached the Covenant of Grace. All others preached the Covenant of Works. John Winthrop made the observation that "more resort to her for counsell about matters of conscience than any ministers in the country."³⁹

An admirer of Anne Hutchinson is supposed to have said to Edward Johnson, one of New England's historians, "I'll bring you to a woman that preaches better gospel than any of your black-coats that have been at the University."⁴⁰

Such discontent with the "Holy Commonwealth" was no doubt at the root of the Puritan's troubles in the late seventeenth century. But natural calamities such as great sickness, war, economic hardships, fires and other natural calamities certainly contributed to the fall of the "Wilderness Sion." However, aside from the fact that in 1643 there were fifteen thousand people in the Bay colony, of which only 1,708 were citizens, the Puritans in their lists give no other "natural" reason than this of "Godless immigration" for the cause of the decline of their "Holy Commonwealth." The economic hardships and deaths caused by frequent shipwrecks; the havoc and destruction wrought by King Philip's War (June 20, 1673 to August 12, 1676), during which better than ten towns were put to the torch and a tenth of the fighting men killed; the numerous calamitous fires, especially that of the Second or North Church in Boston (1676) and the still greater fire of 1679 which destroyed more than eighty houses and most of Boston's business section; and the deadly smallpox epidemics, "long considered the most deadly of scourges in the arsenal

of a covenanted Jehovah"⁴¹ are not interpreted as causes of the "Holy Commonwealth's" failure but as portents from God that he now held New England in controversy.

When in 1684 the charter of Massachusetts Bay was revoked and it became a crown colony, the Puritan divines were further bolstered in their contention that God was angered at New England. "Were not the signs of this written also in the heavens?" asked Urian Oakes, in a sermon on Ecclesiastes 9:11, delivered at Cambridge on September 10, 1677. He gives a classic exposition of the Puritan attempt to reconcile divine providence with life's hardships:

God is much seen in Controlling the ablest Agents, & blasting their Enterprizes; ye more, many times, than in backing them, & blessing their Endeavors in an ordinary Course on Providence. Herein the Wisdom of God is much seen. It is best sometimes, it should be so, with respect to God's, Interest and Glory. His Power also appears in giving Check to the Ablest Instruments, and turning all their Designs another way than they Intended. His Mercy also to his People, is seen herein; for it is best for them, in some cases, to be defeated and disappointed.⁴²

Increase Mather also concluded that Providence was behind the catastrophes which had now befallen the "Holy Commonwealth." He looked for an explanation in the world about him, what Thomas Shepard called "the stately theater of heaven and earth."⁴³ Mather pointed to the "fearful sights and signs in the heavens" as warnings of the great calamities at hand and concluded, "For the Lord hath fired his beacon in the heavens...and his scythe whereby he doth shear down multitudes of sinful creatures."⁴⁴

Most observers feel that twilight began to fall on Puritanism in the 1650's and was brought about by the religious complacency of the second and third generations.⁴⁵ The beginning of tolerance and liberalism was expressed in the promulgation of the Halfway Covenant in 1657. To the Puritan divines the portents of heaven and earth gave testimony to the cause of their problems. The great natural catastrophes of the time were omens from God. New England was being punished because of its abundance of sin. The main complaint of the preachers was that the people had turned a deaf ear to the providence of God. Worse yet, the community had grown "sermon-proof":

We had as good preach to the Heavens and Earth, and direct our discourse to the Walls and Seats and Pillars of the meeting house, and say, "Hear, O ye Walls, give ear, O ye Seats and Pillars, as to many men in these Churches, that are deaf to all that is cried in their ears by the Lord's Messengers, and are indeed like Rocks in the Sea, not to be stirred and moved by the beating and dashing of these waters of Sanctuary, or by the strongest gust of rational and affectionate discourse that can blow upon them."⁴⁶

In spite of the realization that their congregations were no longer listening with the old enthusiasm, the Puritan fathers did not give up. Many of their "call-to-repentance" sermons are extant today. Michael Wigglesworth's sermon of 1662, appropriately entitled "God's Controversy with New England," is a good example:

Ah dear New England, dearest land to me;
Which unto God hast hitherto been dear.
And mayest be still more dear than formerlie;
If to his voice thou wilt incline thine ear.⁴⁷

Wigglesworth's plea was but one of many in the chorus of

Jeremiahs during the late 1660's and 1670's.

In the year 1679, the Puritan leaders gathered in synod to wrestle with the question of the meaning of the evils which had befallen Massachusetts Bay. They concluded that the recent catastrophes were caused by such things as "pride in heart and body, a spiritual falling away, excessive profanity, breakdown of family life, and the failure to observe the Sabbath."⁴⁸ They agreed upon the need for revival and reform and adopted the Savoy Confession of 1680 as a means of strengthening the community and rekindling the old ideals of covenant and commonwealth. Yet the next decades would see a further decline in orthodox religious fervor. The influx of Presbyterianism, the rise of liberalism at the colleges, and an ever increasing number of Anglicans in their midst compounded the Puritan's difficulties. After six decades of striving for the "New Zion," the ship of the "Holy Commonwealth" had run aground. Nature and Providence, according to several theologians, had decreed the inevitable failure of their experiment in the American wilderness. Yet it was with much reluctance that the Puritans in Massachusetts moved down the road from colony to province.

Footnotes

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³Jerald C. Brauer, Protestantism in America (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), p. 24.

⁴Perry Miller, Errand into the Wilderness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. viii.

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- ²¹Samuel Eliot Morison, "The Puritan Pronaos," Puritanism in Early America. Edited by George M. Waller (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1965), p. 73.
- ²²Wertenbaker, p. 266.
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- ²⁴Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, editors, The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), I, 41-55.
- ²⁵Miller, New England Mind, pp. 210-211.
- ²⁶Ibid.
- ²⁷Morison, p. 73.
- ²⁸Ibid., p. 71.
- ²⁹Ibid., p. 78.
- ³⁰Miller, New England Mind, p. 213.
- ³¹Ibid.
- ³²Ibid., pp. 213-214.
- ³³Miller and Johnson, Sourcebook, p. 732.
- ³⁴Daniel Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 25.
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- ³⁶Miller, New England Mind, p. 223.
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- ³⁸William Warren Sweet, Religion in Colonial America (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 92.
- ³⁹Ibid.
- ⁴⁰Simpson, p. 28.
- ⁴¹Perry Miller, The New England Mind: From Colony to Province (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), p. 346.

⁴²Urian Oakes, "The Sovereign Efficacy of Divine Providence" in The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings. Edited by Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), I, 366.

⁴³Miller and Johnson, II, 730.

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⁴⁵Smith, p. 188.

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⁴⁷Miller, From Colony to Province, p. 30.

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CHAPTER III

THE PRETERNATURAL AND PROVIDENCE IN NEW ENGLAND

Lessons from Another World

The Puritan mind could draw conclusions regarding the providence of God equally as well from the world of the supernatural, or preternatural, as from the natural. As stated before, Daniel Hoffman maintains that the Puritan beliefs about the supernatural comprised a "body of deeply felt, culturally sanctioned symbols representing profound aspects of man's relation to the supernatural."¹ The popular belief in witches, which will be discussed at length later in this chapter,² was a dogma with the Puritans. Witches were creatures whose existence was questioned by no one in his right senses. Even as late as the close of the seventeenth century hardly a scientist of repute would have doubted that certain phenomena were due to witchcraft.³ In colonial New England the reality of the supernatural was accepted as readily as that of the natural.

Cotton Mather, in his treatise On Witchcraft, thought of the supernatural world as the very domain of the Devil:

There is a Court somewhere kept; a Court of Spirits where the Devil enters all sorts of Complaints against us all; he charges us with manifold sins against the Lord our God. There he loads us with heavy Imputations of Hypocrisie, Iniquity, Disobedience; whereupon he urges, Lord, let 'em now have the death, which is their wages, paid unto 'em!.,.The Devil is a Do-Evil, and wholly set upon mischief.⁴

The world in which the Puritan lived was divided into two

distinct but closely associated realms - the visible or natural realm and the invisible or supernatural realm. Like the "mystic book of nature," the "dictionary of demonology" also held portents and omens. The Devil and his underlings were at war with God. Their task was to test the faith of his people, and, if possible, to break the will of even the most stalwart and bring them into the alien camp.

The ultimate origin of the supernatural was not of concern to the average Puritan, who had enough troubles with the very real spirits which surrounded him and his family and had little time for theological speculations. His beliefs in the devil and witchcraft came from England as part of his ancestral baggage. There is today a good deal of controversy over the origins of witchcraft, as it was defined in the Malleus Malleficarum, the bible of witchcraft lore, and practiced in Europe and the American Colonies. Most prevalent is the view that witchcraft comprised the Christian reinterpretation of the surviving traces of the once-universal nature cults.⁵ Daniel Hoffman writes concerning this apparent detritus of the pagan past:

Whether paganism lingered in its own right or was transformed by Christian theology and popular custom into the objectification of Satanic power, witchcraft provided mythopoetic representation of the demonic, the naturalistic and of the Antichrist.⁶

To the Puritan there was no question as to the purpose of the supernatural. Somewhere in it there had to be a meaning, a message of the providential will. The origin of witches

and demons became important for the Puritan only when he was confronted by them. Then the question was not the question of ontology or of origin; the question was a very practical one - "Where have I overstepped the boundaries of the will of God to merit this visitation?"

The Devil and Cotton Mather

Probably no one in Puritan New England was more obsessed with the supernatural than Cotton Mather. At least no one else documented his concern so well. He is a good example of the popular belief in the supernatural. Otto T. Beall, Jr. and Richard H. Shryock begin their book, Cotton Mather: First Significant Figure in American Medicine, with the statement, "Few American leaders have so suffered at the hands of posterity as has the Reverend Cotton Mather."⁷ They attempt to restore history's memory of Cotton Mather to a more balanced view. Scholars of previous decades, especially in the 1930's, had restudied the relationship between Cotton Mather and the witchcraft trials at Salem and concluded that he was but a "smug minister of God" and a "dour old man." Even as late as 1946, Mather was declared to be a "conscientious busybody" and a "pompous old theocrat." In the portrayal of Beall and Shryock, he takes on a more heroic stature, especially as he labored on behalf of the public health of Boston during the smallpox epidemics, and in his role as an amateur scientist, Cotton Mather made significant contributions to the study of medicine.⁸

The sympathetic treatment given to Mather by Beall and Shryock serves as a caution against the dangers of historical chiasma, especially in regard to the relationship between Cotton Mather and the Devil. Contrary to some interpretations, Cotton Mather was not the Devil incarnate.

The grandson of John Cotton, and of Richard Mather, the first minister of Dorchester, the son of Increase Mather, minister of North Church in Boston and President of Harvard College, Cotton Mather (1663-1728) "was born in clerical purple."⁹ Educated at home by his father, a student at Harvard at the age of twelve, and eventually colleague of his father at North Church, Cotton became a leader of orthodox opinion in eastern Massachusetts. A tireless worker, he published some five hundred books, tracts, and pamphlets. Those of most value for a picture of his belief in the supernatural are: Magnalia Christi Americana; or the Ecclesiastical History of New England; On Witchcraft, Being the Wonders of the Invisible World; and a sermon entitled "Wiles of the Devil."

To Cotton Mather the Devil was neither the doomed, but somewhat Promethean-like character created by John Milton in Paradise Lost, nor was he merely a type of poltergeist, a nuisance only and of no real danger. For Cotton Mather the Devil was the strange Adversary who came openly into God's presence, as in the story of Job, and challenged Him for the rights to the soul of man. Indeed, the Devil was contesting the Lord for all of New England. In On

Witchcraft, Being the Wonders of the Invisible World, published in 1692 at the height of the witchcraft frenzy in Salem, Mather wrote:

The New-Englanders are a People of God settled in those, which were once the Devil's Territories; and it may basically be supposed that the Devil was exceedingly disturbed, when he perceived such a People here accomplishing the Promise of old made unto our blessed Jesus, That He should have the Utmost parts of the Earth for His Possession.¹⁰

Mather believed that the Devil was commanding his legions to set upon the Puritans?

He has wanted his Incarnate Legions to persecute us, as the People of God have in the other Hemisphere been persecuted: he has therefore drawn forth his more Spiritual ones to make an Attacque upon us. We have been advised by some Credible Christians yet alive, that a Malefactor, accused of Witchcraft as well as Murder, and Executed in this place more than Forty Years ago, did then give Notice of, An Horrible Plot against the Country by WITCHCRAFT, and a Foundation of WITCHCRAFT then laid, which if it were not seasonably discovered, would probably Blow up, and pull down all the Churches in the Country.¹¹

Vernon Louis Parrington in an essay entitled, "The Twilight of the Oligarchy," analyzed such statements of Mather and concluded that "he was intensely emotional, high-strung and nervous, oversexed and overwrought, subject to ecstatic exaltations and, especially during his celibate years, given to seeing visions."¹² However valid or invalid this psychological interpretation of Cotton Mather may be, it does not alter the fact that his theological thought was constantly concerned about the relationship of the Devil to God's people. Mather looked at life and wondered, "Could it be that such was the omnipotence of God that the

Devil worked for him to examine the hearts of men and test the limits of their faith?"¹³

Buffetings From the Evil Spirits

In his Diary, Cotton Mather writes of the day when he lost the manuscript of three lectures. It was the work, he was positive, of "spectres, or agents of the invisible world."¹⁴ Later, the death of his infant was also seen as the work of the Devil. Cotton Mather's beliefs were not entirely the product of his own intensely emotional state, but reflect the fears common to the New England populace. It was an age in which sicknesses, both mental and bodily, were thought to be caused by evil spirits. Meric Casaubon, in a treatise called Supernatural Operations, noted that a "natural melancholy" was frequently attributed to the Devil.¹⁵ In their repeal for religious reform, the General Court of 1679 warned against the dangers of fashionable apparel and asserted that the Devil often afflicted the wearer with "loathsome diseases."¹⁶ Satan did not go unassisted in his devilish work. When Cotton Mather sat down to write his defense of the Salem witchcraft trials, he expected "not a few or small buffetings from evil spirits."¹⁷ In his book, The Tryals of Several Witches, Mather wrote of "an army of devils" who carry people "over trees and hills for divers miles together," and spread deadly diseases. He believed that in the form of imps, devils suckle young infants, hold ghostly meetings and sacrilegious rites, summon the spirits

of the murdered, and, in general, plot against God's people.¹⁸ All of this they did, according to Puritan theology, with the permission of God himself. And so Cotton Mather bemoans, "Are all other instruments of vengeance too good for the chastisement of such transgressors as we aee? Must the very devils be sent out of their own place to be our troublers?"¹⁹

The hand of God's chastising providence might appear anywhere. There was the case of Henry Bull and his wicked crew who, because they had "derided the Churches of Christ," were blown onto the rocky shore by a mysterious tempest and promptly slain to the last man by the Indians. It was clearly another example of the displeasure of God and a due recompense for their blasphemy. That the Indians should have a hand in dispensing God's justice must have seemed very fitting to the Puritans. It was a maxim of the Puritan faith that New England at one time was the dominion of the Devil. Thus the Puritans considered the Indians to "be at best Canaanites or at worst imps of the evil one with no rights which the chosen people were bound to respect."²⁰ They certainly did not have any claim to this land upon which God had planted the vine of his Chosen People. When Roger Williams, angered by the wholesale theft of property from the Indians, maintained that God had made of one blood all mankind and that for this reason the Indians had an equal title to God's favor as other men, the Puritan fathers found good reason to send him across the river. Nor did Williams' poetry make him popular:

Boast nor proud English, of thy birth and blood,
 Thy brother Indian is by birth as Good,
 Of one blood God made him, and Thee & All,
 As Wise, as faire, as strong, as personall.

By nature wrath's his portion, thine no more,
 Till Grace his soule and thine in Christ restore.
 Make sure thy second birth, else thou shalt see,
 Heaven ope to Indians wild, but shut to thee.²¹

What bothered the Puritans was that Roger Williams was more than hinting that they were no better than the very minions of Satan himself.

Thomas Wertenbaker writes in The Puritan Oligarchy that the New England clergy "were quite aware that the invisible world was their own field of activity."²² Thus they viewed the second and third generations' growing disbelief in the invisible world with some alarm:

Meric Casaubon, while not going so far as to say that those who did not believe in the existence of devils and spirits, sorcerers and witches were atheists, thought that it could not be denied that their views were 'very apt to promote atheism.' With this Cotton Mather was in full sympathy. "The old heresy of the sensual Sadducees, denying the being of angels either good or evil died not with them," he wrote. "How much this foul opinion has gotten ground in this debauched age is awfully observable; add what a dangerous stroke it gives to settle men in atheism is not hard to discern."²³

So it was that the Puritan divines correlated the increasing spiritual lethargy on the part of the people with their fading belief in the presence of the supernatural. Might not a good witch's scare have turned the tide and revived the old faith, not to mention filling the churches' coffers once more? It is a possibility worth considering.

The Weird Sisters of Salem

The Reverend Increase Mather, called the foremost American Puritan, was sent to England in 1688 to try to reobtain a charter for the "Holy Commonwealth." Even though Massachusetts, heartened by the news of the Glorious Revolution in England, had overthrown the royal governor, Sir Edmund Andros, who had been imposed upon them by Charles II in 1684, and had restored the old charter government, most of the citizens realized that it no longer had any basis for authority. When in 1691 the rumor reached the colony that their ambassador, Increase Mather, had been unsuccessful in his quest for a new charter, a dismal and despairing spirit fell upon the populace. God had certainly laid a heavy hand upon his chosen people.

There were in the service of the Reverend Samuel Parris of Salem village two slaves which he had brought home from a year's trading with the Barbadoes of the West Indies "the loutish John Indian and his consort, the ageless Titula, said to be half Carib and half Negro."²⁴ In the same household were two young girls, Abigail and Betty, who were often put under the direction of Titula the slave, and together the three passed the dull hours with stories of demons, witches, and numerous other supernatural lore which Titula had brought from her island home. Highly influencable, the girls soon began to tell the stories to their teenage friends and to bring them under the tutelage of Titula.

It was not long before they were joined by Ann Putnam, somewhat of a sickly, high-strung prodigy, who had read Edward Wigglesworth's Day of Doom and was obsessed with ideas of hell and damnation.²⁵ Ann Putnam became the leader of these girls, who suddenly began to exhibit symptoms of delusion and hysteria but claimed that they were possessed by demons. Demons, they said, had been sent to torment them by witches whom they proceeded to point out among the local citizenry.

It is evident now that the witchcraft trials of Salem during 1692 have been for the most part exaggerated beyond their real significance. Perry Miller writes in his monumental work, The New England Mind: From Colony to Province:

The most curious of all the facts in that welter we call Salem witchcraft is this: if you expunge from the record those documents that arise directly out of the affair, and those which treat it historically, like the Magnalia or Hale's and Calef's accounts, and a few twinges of memory such as appear in Sewall's Diary, the intellectual history of New England up to 1720 can be written as though no such thing ever happened.²⁶

Samuel Eliot Morison in "The Puritan Pronaos" states that the Salem witchcraft outbreak was nothing more than the unfortunate twist of a game the children were playing. He suggest a remedy that might have done them a lot more good than all the publicity they received from the town fathers and the "psychiatric" counseling provided by the clergy:

A group of girls aged from nine to nineteen began early in 1692 to simulate the physical jerks and shrieks that had been manifested by the Goodwin

girls in Boston a few years before. They accused Titula, a half-breed slave in the minister's family, and two poor old women, of having bewitched them. At this point a good spanking administered to the younger girls, and lovers provided for the older ones, might have stopped the whole thing. Instead the slave was flogged by her master into confessing witchcraft; and to save herself accused two ancient goodwives of being her confederates. The vicious circle was started.²⁷

Morison also points out that only twenty persons and, curiously enough, two dogs, were executed during the brief flurry of witchhunting in Salem.²⁸ That becomes less dramatic a number when compared to the estimated five hundred thousand who had gone to the stake in Europe and England in the period from 1500 to 1700.²⁹

Both friend and foe of the Puritans have dwelt so extensively on the Salem situation that it is sometimes forgotten that four years prior to the outbreak at Salem there occurred a number of witchcraft cases at Boston. In 1688 Cotton Mather, the local parson, was summoned to the house of a Boston mason named Goodwin. His children were taken with fits, "which the most experienced physicians pronounced extraordinary and preternatural."³⁰ An old laundress was accused. Quickly tried and convicted of being a witch, she was sent to the gallows. Although the younger of the four girls was "immediately, happily, and finally delivered from its persecutors" through a day of prayer and fasting conducted by the Mathers at the Goodwin house, the three oldest persisted in "barking like dogs, panting, complaining of blows with great cudgels, of being

roasted on an invisible spit, and shrieking as if knives were cutting through them."³¹

Once again we find Cotton Mather taking a leading role in the war against the wiles of the Devil. Somewhat of an amateur psychiatrist, Mather took the oldest girl, age thirteen, into his family, soothed her, prayed with her and most important, kept the names of the person she accused secret. In a short time she was "cured" and allowed to go home. Matters might have rested there except that Mather, elated over his success, gave a detailed account of the whole affair in a sermon entitled "Memorable Provinces," which was later published in 1689 as Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions. Instead of evidencing the power of God over Satan, the book, with its lurid details, "was seized upon by some of the more emotionally unstable as an exciting manual for the practice of witchcraft."³²

It is no mere coincidence that in the library of the Reverend Samuel Parrish at Salem there was a copy of Mather's Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcraft and Possession. The book had a wide circulation and prepared the ground for the outbreak in Salem. Together with the general current state of anxiety over the spectacle of pestilence, war, godlessness and disillusion, Mather's view that the visitations of witches and demons came as God's punishment on the wickedness of people caused the people of Salem to accept the testimony of the girls in the Parrish household

as a portent from Providence. Cotton Mather further buttressed this conclusion in his "Hortatory and Necessary Address," when he told the people, "Tis our Worldliness, or Formality, our Sensuality and our Iniquity that has helped this letting of the Devils in."³³ When word of this reached Salem, it made sense to a "parish that evidently had more than its share of neurotic women and hysterical children, and less than it needed of understanding leaders."³⁴

Public Reaction to the Witchcraft Trials

When the leaders of Salem, chosen by Governor Phips, assembled in court to try those who had been accused of witchcraft, the main question bothering those who sat in the judgment seats was that of "spectral evidence." William Stoughten, who presided at the Court of Oyer and Terminer, where the trials were conducted, maintained that an innocent person could not, under God's providence, be represented by a specter, and thus those who exhibited "spectral evidence" were thereby proven guilty. "Spectral evidence" is as old as the phenomenon of witchcraft itself. It consisted of reports by "afflicted" persons of events invisible to others, such as seeing the accused in the likeness of a witch, sometimes of an animal, who as a delegate of Satan executed his behests by attacking them or destroying their property.³⁵

Although at the time of the Salem witch trials,

"spectral evidence" was still legal in England, there is no evidence that any of the ministers of New England had explicitly taught it. Rather than preserving justice, it really served to convict the innocent and free the guilty. In a letter dated October 8, 1692, written at the height of the trials to a friend in England, Thomas Brattle said, "the condemned went out of the world not only with as great protestations, but also with as good shows of innocency, as men could do."³⁶ When the accused professed their innocency, it was taken as a sign of their guilt, but when they freely confessed that they were in league with the Devil and repented of their sin, they were let go, but usually not before they had with impunity indicted several innocent citizens. Mary Easty, the last of those tried for witchcraft, resolutely maintained her innocence and with unusual courage told the court, "I would humbly beg of you that Your Honors would be pleased ... to try some of these confessing witches."³⁷

It may be justifiably asked as to what the local citizenry, especially the intellectual class, was doing while innocent people were being condemned. J. B. Palfrey in his History of New England observed that New Englanders have an "ingrained reverence for law as such."³⁸ On the whole the people of "the Bay" kept silent. Even though they knew that justice had gone astray, they did not want it to seem that their judges and the government were fools by exposing the trials for what they really were.

Cotton Mather wrote after the Salem frenzy:

I was always afraid of proceeding to convict and condemn any person, as a confederate with afflicting Daemons, upon so feeble an Evidence as a spectral Representation. Accordingly, I ever testified against it, both publickly and privately: and in my letters to the Judges, I particularly besought them that they would by no means admit it...Nevertheless, on the other side, I saw in most of the Judges, a most charming Instance of Prudence and Patience, and I knew their exemplary Piety...³⁹

In October of 1692, Thomas Brattle wrote "A Full and Candid Account of the Delusion called Witchcraft, which Prevailed in New England; and of the Judicial Trials and Executions at Salem, in the County of Essex, of that Pretended Crime, in 1692," in which he gives an account of a typical trial:

The afflicted persons are brought into the court; and after much patience and pains taken with them, do take their oaths, that the prisoner at the bar did afflict them; And here I think it very observable, that often, when the afflicted do mean and intend only the appearance and shape of such an one, say G. Procter, yet they positively swear that G. Procter did afflict them; and they have been allowed so to do; as though there was no real difference between G. Procter and the shape of G. Procter. This, methinks, may readily prove a stumbling block to the jury, lead them into a very fundamental error, and occasion innocent blood, the innocentest blood imaginable, to be in great danger. Whom it belongs unto, to be eyes unto the blind, and to remove such stumbling blocks, I know full well; and yet you, ⁴⁰ and every one else, do know as well as I who do not.

Leaders of the time such as Cotton Mather or Thomas Brattle, who recognized the dangers inherent in admitting "spectral evidence," but who either held their peace in respect for the judges or veiled their warnings in double-talk, have been regularly condemned, but it must be remembered that had they challenged the authority and sanctity of the Court,

they very likely would have found themselves hanging from the gallows as confederates of Satan. Fear makes strange bedfellows.

Nevertheless, as the enormity of the witch frenzy became evident, several of the leaders saw that it was no longer excusable to keep silent. Increase Mather wrote a manuscript entitled "Cases of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits," in which he affirmed his belief in witches and the good character of the judges, but then said, "This notwithstanding, I will add; it were better that Ten Suspected Witches should escape, than that one Innocent Person should be Condemned."⁴¹ Signed by twelve of the most influential ministers, the manuscript was used to pressure Governor Phips into outlawing "spectral evidence" as a means of convicting the accused. Without "spectral evidence," the trials soon fell through, accusations were dropped, and those who recanted were let free. When the court adjourned in September, 1692, there were five condemned in prison awaiting the gallows, along with one hundred and fifty others who were awaiting trial. At least two hundred more had been accused.⁴²

By ending the trials the authorities spared numerous lives and put a halt to the madness of witchhunting, with the exception of a minor incident in 1693 at Boston which Cotton Mather solved via the "home treatment" method. Nevertheless the activities in Salem left a dark blot on the history and memory of the Puritans. Five years later, Samuel

Sewall, perhaps the noblest of those who sat on the judges' bench, rose in church to make public confession for his part in the crimes against justice and to make atonement for the sins of Salem. In the Massachusetts State House in Boston, there hangs a mural by Albert Hooker which depicts the public repentance of Judge Samuel Sewall. With bowed head and bended knee, Sewall, along with the whole congregation, is pictured sorrowing over what was the most disastrous consequence of the Puritans' identification of the supernatural with the providence of God.⁴²

Footnotes

¹Supra, p. 4.

²Infra, p.

³Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), II, 734-735.

⁴Cotton Mather, On Witchcraft (Mount Vernon, New York: The Peter Pauper Press, n. d.), pp. 42-43.

⁵Daniel Hoffman, Form and Fables in American Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 31.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Otto T. Beall, Sr., and Richard H. Shryock, Cotton Mather: First Significant Figure in American Medicine (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1954), p. 1.

⁸Ibid., pp. 5-7.

⁹Miller and Johnson, I, 162.

¹⁰Mather, p. 14.

¹¹Ibid., p. 15.

¹²Vernon Louis Parrington, "The Twilight of the Oligarchy," Puritanism in Early America. Edited by George M. Waller (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1965), p. 47.

¹³Marion L. Starkey, "The Devil and Cotton Mather," Puritanism in Early America. Edited by George M. Waller (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1965), p. 80.

¹⁴Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, The Puritan Oligarchy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), p. 253.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 254.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰William Haller, Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 154.

²¹Ibid., pp. 154-155.

²²Wertenbaker, p. 257.

²³Ibid., pp. 257-258.

²⁴Marion L. Starkey, The Devil in Massachusetts (London: Robert Hall Limited, n. d.), p. 22.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 29-30.

²⁶Perry Miller, The New England Mind: From Colony to Province (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), p. 190.

²⁷Samuel Eliot Morison, "The Puritan Pronaos," Puritanism in Early America. Edited by George M. Waller (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1965), p. 75.

²⁸Ibid., p. 76.

²⁹Chard Powers Smith, Yankees and God (New York: Hermitage House, 1954), p. 213.

³⁰Wertenbaker, p. 269.

³¹Ibid., pp. 269-270.

³²Miller and Johnson, II, 735.

³³Starkey, p. 83.

³⁴Miller and Johnson, II, 735.

³⁵Miller, From Colony to Province, p. 194.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., p. 198.

³⁸Quoted in Morison, p. 76.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Miller and Johnson, I, 736.

⁴¹Thomas Brattle, "A Full and Candid Account of the Delusion called Witchcraft, which Prevailed in New England, and of the Judicial Trials and Executions at Salem, in the County of Essex, of that Pretended Crime, in 1692" in The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings. Edited by Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), II, 760.

⁴²Morison, p. 77.

⁴³Starkey, pp. 176-177.

CHAPTER IV

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE: INTERPRETER OF THE PURITAN MIND

The Literary Approach to an Understanding of Portent and Providence in Puritan New England

A discussion of the correspondence between portent and providence in the life and thought of the Puritans could have ended with an historical event, the loss of the Massachusetts Bay Company Charter in 1684. After that time, there were few in New England who realistically believed that the "Holy Commonwealth" could be revived, although the preachers spent many words on the cause for a good while longer. History records that the Puritan "errand" came to an end officially in 1684. For an understanding of the Puritan belief in portent and providence, however, it is of value to examine the nearly incalculable influence of this Puritan characteristic on a later age. An examination of what might be loosely called Puritan "tradition" in a subsequent era also affords, in turn, a deeper insight into orthodox Puritanism itself.

No other American writer has felt so closely connected with the Puritan past or researched it so carefully as has Nathaniel Hawthorne. It does not matter that he accepted neither the creed of the Puritans nor their polity. The true significance of Puritanism to Hawthorne is well-stated by Kenneth Murdock (Literature and Theology in Colonial New England):

In Puritan theology Hawthorne found a set of concepts indispensable as the framework for his allegorical or symbolical presentations of moral drama. ...Their emphasis, their consciousness of the adventurous struggle involved in spiritual development, and their taste for expressing the ideal in images and symbols of earth gave him not only his most characteristic themes but suggestions as to the best means of expressing his concern for the inner life.¹

The rationale behind Hawthorne's use of the Puritan past is succinctly stated by Miles Coverdale, the Protagonist of "The Blithedale Romance," a minor story of the Brook Farm experiment (a short-lived socialist community of which Hawthorne had been a member):

No sagacious man will long retain his sagacity, if he live exclusively among reformers and progressive people, without periodically returning into the settled system of things, to correct himself by a new observation from that old standpoint.²

Hawthorne's love for reality and his sense of history influenced his literary technique to such an extent that R. W. B. Lewis (The American Adam) has described it as "the return into time."³ Disillusioned with the idealism and optimism of his transcendentalist friends and with their unquestioning devotion to Emerson and Thoreau, Hawthorne sought to strike that perfect balance between historical experience and art by studying the Puritan past.

Among the Ancestors in Salem

Born in Salem, Massachusetts, July 8, 1804, Nathaniel Hawthorne was only five generations removed from his Puritan American ancestors. After a brief sojourn

in Maine, Hawthorne enrolled at Bowdoin College in Salem, graduating in 1825. For the next twelve years he lived in semi-seclusion in order to prepare himself to be the chronicler of the antiquities and the spiritual temper of Colonial New England.⁴ In 1828, Hawthorne published the unsuccessful novel, Fanshawe, an abortive story of Bowdoin life. Thereafter he was more cautious, content with writing short stories for magazines and gift books. From 1839 to 1841, Hawthorne held a position in the Boston Custom House, where among the ancient records he exercised his intense interest in American antiquity. Sophia Peabody brought something of the Transcendentalist philosophy into his life when Hawthorne married her in 1842. After seven months in the socialistic cooperative experiment, Brook Farm, Hawthorne elected to return to the world with his bride and settled down in the Old Manse, Emerson's ancestral home in Concord. From 1846 to 1849, Hawthorne was once again back in Salem as a surveyor in the Custom House. When the Whigs came to power in the next election, he lost his job along with a good number of other Democrats.

Hawthorne's life took a turn for the better in 1850 with the publication of The Scarlet Letter, "which made his fame, changed his fortune, and gave to our literature its first symbolic novel, a year before the appearance of Melville's Moby Dick."⁵ Several other moves across the face of New England brought him, in the years that followed, into contact with much of the local history. Upon appointment

by President Franklin Pierce, a onetime classmate and college friend, Hawthorne held a four-year consulship at Liverpool. After the completion of his duties in England, he traveled in Italy, but soon returned to England and remained there to write The Marble Faun in 1860. After an absence of eight years, Hawthorne finally brought his family back to Concord, where he spent his remaining days. Death came on May 19, 1864.

In a study of Hawthorne's art, many historians feel that his life story must be regarded as causative. The editors of the Literary History of the United States have stated:

Fixed from birth in his Puritan attitudes, he would, we may believe, have been Hawthorne had he lived for many years upon the rive gauche or the banks of the Mississippi. It was so in Rome; Italy failed to alter the underlying mechanisms of his Puritan mind. For he was completely integrated, until his fiftieth year, with the soil and spirit of a New England which had bred and indoctrinated his introspective forebears.

The Puritan forebears of Hawthorne are an interesting lot. His first American ancestor was William Hathorne, who came to Massachusetts from England as part of the Great Migration of 1630. He rose to some distinction, becoming a member of the House of Delegates and a Major of the Salem militia. In "The Custom House," the prologue to The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne refers both to his stay in Salem and to his early ancestor, William Hathorne:

This old town of Salem - my native place, though I have dwelt much away from it, both in boyhood and maturer years - possesses, or did possess, a hold on my affections, the force of which I have never realized during my seasons of actual residence here. ...The sentiment is probably assignable to the deep and aged roots which my family has struck into the soil. It is

now nearly two centuries and a quarter since the original Briton, the earliest emigrant of my name, made his appearance in the wild and forest-bordered settlement, which has since become a city.⁷

Hawthorne readily admits in The Scarlet Letter that this figure of his first ancestor, a "grave, bearded, sable-cloaked, and steeple-crowned progenitor, who came so early (to New England), with his Bible and his sword," often caused his boyish imagination to wander from present reality to the distant past.⁸

A stronger influence on Hawthorne, which is deeply reflected in his writings, came from Magistrate John Hathorne, a son of William, the original settler. A contemporary of the Mathers and the Cottons, he sat on the Court of Oyer and Terminer which tried the accused during the witch-hunts at Salem in 1692. Perry Miller, in The New England Mind: From Colony to Province, relates that it was John Hathorne "who had conducted the high-handed preliminary interrogations."⁹ Both of Hawthorne's ancestors, William and John, are mentioned in The Scarlet Letter as intolerant souls, with pointed emphasis on the latter's participation in the travesty of justice which took place at Salem:

He (William Hathorne) was a soldier, legislator, judge; he was a ruler in the Church; he had all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil. He was likewise a bitter persecutor; as witness the Quakers, who have remembered him in their histories, and relate an incident of his hard severity toward their sect, (an account found in Hawthorne's story, "The Gentle Boy"), which will last longer, it is to be feared than any records of his better deeds, although these were many. His son (John Hathorne), too, inherited the

persecuting spirit, and made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood¹⁰ may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him.

Although Hawthorne passes off his Puritan ancestors with a quip to the effect that they were duly rewarded for their iniquities by having had to include in their family tree, "after so long a lapse of years," at its topmost branch, "an idler like myself,"¹¹ he was nevertheless deeply bothered by their deeds and states at one point: "At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them...may be now and henceforth removed."¹²

In addition to being influenced by the deeds of his own ancestors, Hawthorne also found a wealth of material for his stories in the writings of other early Puritanism. Brief mention should be made of Cotton Mather's The Wonders of the Invisible World (1693), with its lore on witchcraft, which Hawthorne would put to good use not only in The Scarlet Letter but also in stories like "Young Goodman Brown"; the Annals of early Salem, available in the Salem Athenaeum, where Hawthorne spent many hours employing his finely-developed antiquarian talents; and the English Puritan writers, Bunyan, Milton, and Spenser. Thus Nathaniel Hawthorne, haunted by the ghosts of his ancestral past and steeped in tradition, came to respect the realistic faith of the Puritans far more than he did the nebulous wanderings of his transcendentalist friends.

The Scarlet Letter: Portent and Providence
in the Natural World

Writing The Scarlet Letter in the post-Unitarian and Romantic age of the mid-eighteenth century, Hawthorne returned in time to place the account in the great heyday of Puritanism. Although he suggests that the story took place some fifteen or twenty years after the Great Migration of 1630, internal evidence shows it to cover a span of seven years from 1642 to 1649, the latter date being determined by the death of Governor John Winthrop as recorded in chapter twelve.¹³ Hawthorne brooded for a long time on the theme of his masterpiece. The kernel of it seems to appear, according to several critics, in the story "Endicott and the Red Cross," which Hawthorne wrote in 1837.¹⁴ In this tale the heroine wears an embroidered letter "A," made of scarlet cloth, on her breast. There is a reference in Hawthorne's American Notebooks to another woman, who, because of alleged adulterous behavior in the Plymouth colony, was forced to wear a scarlet-colored "A" on her dress.¹⁵ In 1849, while working at a custom house in Salem, Hawthorne is porported to have found an actual scarlet letter among some old documents. Sometime later he wrote:

Certainly, there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sesibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind.¹⁶

It was not long before Hawthorne fathomed the meaning of this

portent, the result being The Scarlet Letter. On the surface, at least, it is the story of a wronged husband, the aged Roger Chillingworth; his beautiful and spirited wife, Hester Prynne; her lover, the young Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale; and the evidence of their breach of the Puritan code, the "elf-like" child, Pearl.

Beneath the surface, The Scarlet Letter is a portrayal of the dramatic struggle between the stringent and stultifying power of the Puritan community and the procreative romantic spirit of the individual. In the opening scene, Hawthorne sets a throng of bearded men and hooded women in front of a wooden edifice with a heavily timbered door. It is the town prison, ~~§~~inside of which, Hawthorne will reveal later, is Hester Prynne, accused of adultery. For the present, however, Hawthorne contents himself with describing the heavy oaken door of the prison and the unkempt variety of foliage before it. Among the burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and other such "unsightly vegetation," there is a rose-bush, wild and wonderful. Hawthorne describes it as follows:

This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history; but whether it had merely survived out of a stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally overshadowed it,--or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door,--we shall not take upon us to determine.¹⁷

The rose-bush, of course, represents the primal spirit which Hester possesses, shackled perhaps, but not diminished. In the description of the rose-bush Hawthorne uses allegory

to destroy the absolute certitude of the reader and illustrates well his method of multiple choice or "formula of alternative possibilities," as Yvor Winters has termed it.¹⁸ By offering several possibilities which any given phenomenon, wonder, or providence may be believed to represent, and by attributing to each of these a tenable claim to absolute belief, Hawthorne undermines the dogmatic monism of allegory itself. Thus in his account of the rose-bush, there are two possibilities: the rose-bush is found at the prison door simply because "it is the fittest that survive," or it is there because Ann Hutchinson, the persecuted prophetess of a former day, once crossed the prison threshold as a result of her own struggle with the authorities.

By the use of the "formula of alternative possibilities," Hawthorne is able to give expression both to the Puritan tendency to see spiritual significance in every natural fact and to maintain his own critical attitude towards what F. O. Matthiessen has described as:

...the habit of mind that saw the hand of God in all manifestations of life, and which, in the intensity of the New England seventeenth century, had gone to the extreme of finding "remarkable providences" even in the smallest phenomena, tokens of divine displeasure in every capsized dory or runaway cow.¹⁹

Hawthorne's desire to provide a neutral ground where the actual and the imaginary may meet permits him to be both dubious and affirmative. According to Daniel Hoffman, Hawthorne is able to "stand amused tolerance, or dubiety," thereby affirming "neither the absolute claims of Puritan

dogma nor the absolute claims of right reason."²⁰ Another example of the "formula of alternative possibilities" is found in the eighteenth chapter of The Scarlet Letter, where Dimmesdale, the young Puritan cleric, and Hester are sitting in the forest, which in both Puritan thought and Hawthorne's story represents the domain of the Devil in contrast to the ordered and civilized village. Pearl, "the symbolic offspring of the untamed elements of human nature, and hence akin to the forest,"²¹ is playing a short distance away. Hawthorne writes:

A wolf, it is said - but here the tale has surely passed into the improbable - came up, and smelt of Pearl's robe, and offered his savage head to be patted by her hand. The truth seems to be, however, that the mother-forest, and these things which it nourished, all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child.²²

Here again Hawthorne leaves the reader to make the decision. The idea which Hawthorne is trying to portray is clear enough, but the embodiment of that idea, this portent in nature, is something only the Puritan mind would believe to have spiritual significance. In chapter twelve of The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne writes about the Puritan belief in the portents of nature:

Nothing was more common, in those days, than to interpret all meteoric appearances, and other natural phenomena, that occurred with less regularity than the rise and set of the sun and moon, as so many revelations from a supernatural source. Thus, a blazing spear, a sword of flame, a bow, or a sheaf of arrows, seen in the midnight sky, prefigured Indian warfare. Pestilence was known to have been foreboded by a shower of crimson light. We doubt whether any marked event, good or evil, ever befell New England, from its settlement down to Revolutionary times, of which the inhabitants had not been previously warned by some spectacle of nature.²³

From this summary statement, it is evident that Hawthorne shared the majestic idea that the destiny of nations and individuals alike should be revealed in the "hieroglyphics" of nature.

No object in The Scarlet Letter carries with it as much portent as the "ignominious letter 'A'" which Hester Prynne is condemned to wear. Both the natural and spiritual worlds come to meet in this scarlet letter so fantastically embroidered and illuminated on her bosom. Throughout the progress of the story, the scarlet letter takes on new meaning. In the opening scene, when Hester steps out of the prison into public view, her appearance, "with Pearl at her breast and the letter 'A' and all," resembles "the image of Divine Maternity."²⁴ Later the reader is told that "the scarlet letter had not done its office."²⁵ Hester spent so much time, even though she was made to live in a cabin on the outskirts of the village, helping the sick that some in the community began to believe that the letter "A" stood for "able."²⁶ Others saw in the mark which Hester bore a close resemblance to a cross on a nun's bosom, endowing Hester with a kind of sacredness.²⁷ Pearl, the "elf-child," fashions herself an "A" from grass in the forest, but her mother warns her that it is the mark of the Black Man.²⁸ While on a forest rendezvous with Dimmesdale, Hester removes the letter and immediately regains her beauty and youthfulness.²⁹ At one time the spectral shape of the scarlet letter is seen on

the horizon, signifying the judgment of God upon the whole community.³⁰ Perhaps the most striking revelation of the meaning of this symbol takes place in the climatic scene in which Dimmesdale, having mounted the scaffold upon which Hester and Pearl stand, confesses his love for Hester, and tearing open "his ministerial garment," reveals as Hawthorne states, "a SCARLET LETTER - the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne - imprinted on his flesh."³¹

Hawthorne's presentation of the various ramifications of the scarlet letter is thoroughly grounded in the Puritan doctrine of Providence. First, it was the belief of the community that not they, but God himself had condemned Hester and decreed that she should forever bear the sign of her iniquity. Second, Hester herself comes to view the letter on her bosom, not simply as evidence of Puritan moral intolerance, but as the concrete result of her departure from the law of Providence. Third, Pearl is predestined to become both physically and mentally "the scarlet letter in another form," and finally for Dimmesdale, "the symbol is diverted from its normal course and emerges obliquely as the psychosomatic mark on his breast."³²

Hawthorne, in the latter instance, suggests that certain spectators of the scene during which Dimmesdale confesses his love for Hester and then dies, saw no mark at all upon his breast.³³ Matthiessen writes in a brilliant study of Hawthorne, the American Renaissance:

He (Hawthorne) spoke at one point in this story of how "individuals of wiser faith" in the colony, while recognizing God's Providence in human affairs, knew that it "promotes its purposes without aiming at the stage-effect of what is called miraculous interposition." But he could not resist experiment with this dramatic value, and his imagination had become so accustomed to the wierdly lighted world of Cotton Mather that even the fanciful possibilities of the growth of the stigma on Dimmesdale did not strike him as grotesque.³⁴

By using the "formula of alternative possibilities," Nathaniel Hawthorne manages to live in two worlds, or better, he is able to bring the reader into those worlds, that of the Puritan and that of Hawthorne himself. In the one, it is a tenant of faith that all of nature is a map, filled with portents of Providence; in the other, there is only "a half-sarcastic condescension towards man's wishful belief in a divine interference in his affairs."³⁵ By the use of symbolism, Hawthorne brings the two worlds together.

The Scarlet Letter: Protent and Providence
in the Preternatural

Although the world of the preternatural is not as explicitly portrayed in The Scarlet Letter as in several of Hawthorne's shorter tales, for example, "Young Goodman Brown," it is nevertheless essential to an understanding of this novel, which D. H. Lawrence has described as a portrayal "of the myth of the fallen Puritan psyche in the New World."³⁶ The supernatural elements in The Scarlet Letter are concentrated in the forest, which is the domain of the Black Man, a popular designation of the Devil among the Puritans.

It is in the forest that Hester and Arthur first flouted the morals of the Puritan community, and it is to the forest where they come for a moment's togetherness. At one point Pearl, who because of her elf-like behavior and questionable origin was thought to be a demon offspring by the Puritans, asks her mother to tell her about the Black Man:

...how he haunts this forest, and carries a book with him, - a big, heavy book, with iron clasps, and how this ugly Black Man offers his book and an iron pen to everybody that meets him here among the trees; and they write their names with their own blood. And then he sets his mark on their bosoms! ³⁷

Hester, Hawthorne tells us, recognizing a common superstition of the period in Pearl's question, admits to her, "Once in my life I met the Black Man! This scarlet letter is his mark!"³⁸ The common superstition which Pearl revealed was the Faust-like belief that a human could contract with the devil for the sale of his soul.

Of all the characters in The Scarlet Letter, the two most closely associated with the supernatural world are Mistress Hibbins, the witch-sister of Governor Bellingham, and Roger Chillingworth, the aged doctor who persistently haunts Arthur and Hester. From the very beginning Hawthorne describes Roger Chillingworth in demonic terms. It is even cautiously suggested that he is the Black Man himself. Skilled in the black arts Chillingworth is well-suited to the alchemy of torturing souls. Initially, the aged doctor, charming and educated, is well respected by the townspeople and is a frequent companion of the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. However,

*From
the
scarlet letter
age of the
black arts
Hibbins*

by the end of chapter nine, many persons of sober and practical observation note a change in Chillingworth.

Hawthorne writes:

At first, his expression had been calm, meditative, scholar-like. Now, there was something ugly and evil in his face, which they had not previously noticed, and which grew still more obvious to sight, the oftener they looked upon him. According to vulgar idea, the fire in his laboratory had been brought from the lower regions, and was fed with infernal fuel; and so, as might be expected, his visage was getting sooty with the smoke.³⁹

The task of Chillingworth is that of "Satan himself, or Satan's emissary...to burrow into the clergyman's intimacy and plot against his soul."⁴⁰ Hawthorne tells us that it is by "divine permission" that "personages of especial sanctity, in all ages of the Christian world" are haunted by the representatives of the supernatural world.⁴¹ There is but a small difference between Cotton Mather and Arthur Dimmesdale. Each shares the popular rumor and fireside tradition that Providence allows Satan to try the souls of men for a season.

If Roger Chillingworth is the liegeman of Satan, or perhaps the Black Man himself, Mistress Hibbins is his servant. On her first appearance she pleads with Hester to accompany her to the forest and sign her name in the Black Man's book; on her second, she is described as that "venerable witch lady" who hears Dimmesdale's outcry from the scaffold and interprets it, Hawthorne says, "as the clamor of the fiends and nighthags, with whom she was well

known to make excursions into the forest."⁴² The third time Mrs. Hibbins appears in the story she encounters Dimmesdale in the forest and hails him as a fellow communicant of Satan. Hawthorne writes:

She passed him on with her aged stateliness, but often turning back her head and smiling at him, like one willing to recognize a secret intimacy of connection.

"Have I then sold myself," thought the minister, "to the fiend whom, if men say true, this yellow starched and velveteed old hag has chosen for her prince and master!"

The wretched minister! He had made a bargain very like it! Tempted by a dream of happiness he had yielded himself with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin. And the infectious poison of that sin had been thus rapidly diffused throughout his moral system.⁴³

Mrs. Hibbins, like Dimmesdale, knows of the connection between the supernatural and Providence's judgment on sin. She has, as we find in the fourth reference to her, an intuitive knowledge of the sinful nature of the whole community: "Many a church member saw I walking behind the music, that has danced in the same measure with me when Somebody was fiddler, and, it might be, an Indian pow pow, or a Lapland wizard changing hands with us."⁴⁴

The Puritan community which Hawthorne portrays is haunted by "the noise of witches, whose voices at that period, were often heard to pass over the settlements or lonely cottages, as they rode with Satan through the air."⁴⁵ Many times Hawthorne shades his picture of the supernatural in The Scarlet Letter with a hint that it may be more hallucination than fact. Yet he holds strongly to the

to the Puritan concept of portent and Providence. For Hawthorne witchcraft is not the forest's nature; it comes into being when man repudiates God and chooses Satan. As Daniel Hoffman concludes in his Form and Fable in American Fiction, "the forest having no moral will, can shelter either the spirit of the Maypole (the reference is to Hawthorne's story "The Maypole of Merry Mount") or the coven of the Prince of the Air."⁴⁶

A more complete consideration of The Scarlet Letter could develop further the connections already made between Hawthorne's literary creation and the historical framework in which it is placed. The preceding discussion has in no way been an attempt at a literary analysis of The Scarlet Letter or even of its most basic themes. It has tried, however, to isolate those specific elements which shed light on the Puritan understanding of portent and Providence, both in the natural and supernatural worlds. There are numerous questions which could still be addressed. Most basic would be the question as to whether the natural and supernatural portents in The Scarlet Letter are real or simply creations of the characters. One conclusion is certain - everywhere bordering on Puritan New England there was another land, whose geography human beings imagined but could not chart.⁴⁷

Footnotes

¹ Kenneth B. Murdock, Literature and Theology in Colonial New England (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 195.

² Quoted in Vernon Louis Parrington, The Romantic Revolution in America: 1800-1860 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), p. 442.

³ R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 110.

⁴ Sculley Bradley, Richard Croom Beatly, and E. Hudson Long, editors, The American Tradition in Literature (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1956), I, 466.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Robert E. Spiller, and others, editors, Literary History of the United States (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946), I, 41.

⁷ Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, in The American Tradition in Literature. I. Edited by Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatly, and E. Hudson Long (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1956), p. 561.

⁸ Ibid., p. 562.

⁹ Perry Miller, The New England Mind: From Colony to Province (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), p. 201.

¹⁰ Hawthorne, p. 562.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 589.

¹⁴ Q. D. Leavis, "Hawthorne as Poet," Hawthorne. Edited by A. N. Kaul (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 43.

¹⁵ Bradley, Beatly, and Long, I, 558.

¹⁶ F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 243.

¹⁷ Hawthorne, p. 590.

¹⁸ Yvor Winters, "Maule's Curse, or Hawthorne and the Problem of Allegory," Hawthorne. Edited by A. N. Kaul (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 21.

- ¹⁹Matthiessen, p. 243.
- ²⁰Daniel Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 174.
- ²¹Winters, p. 22.
- ²²Hawthorne, p. 698.
- ²³Ibid., pp. 663-664.
- ²⁴Ibid., p. 595.
- ²⁵Ibid., p. 671.
- ²⁶Ibid., p. 668.
- ²⁷Ibid., p. 669.
- ²⁸Ibid., p. 679.
- ²⁹Ibid., p. 696.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 664.
- ³¹Ibid., pp. 598-737, passim.
- ³²Charles Fiedelson, Jr., "Hawthorne as Symbolist," Hawthorne. Edited by A. N. Kaul (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 67.
- ³³Hawthorne, p. 733.
- ³⁴Matthiessen, p. 277.
- ³⁵Spiller, and others, p. 430.
- ³⁶D. H. Lawrence, The Symbolic Meaning. Edited by Armin Arnold (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), p. 155.
- ³⁷Hawthorne, p. 684.
- ³⁸Ibid., p. 685.
- ³⁹Ibid., p. 644.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., p. 645.
- ⁴¹Ibid.
- ⁴²Ibid., p. 659.
- ⁴³Ibid., p. 709.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 722.

⁴⁵Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), p. 514.

⁴⁶Hoffman, p. 183.

⁴⁷Matthiessen, p. 431.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Summary

This study of portent and providence in New England has used three separate approaches, each of which reflects the methodology of a particular school of interpreters. In the discussion of the Puritans' background (Chapter I), the "imperial school" technique was employed. This was an endeavor to discover the unique characteristics of the Massachusetts Bay Colony which conditioned its concept of portent and providence. One of the most important considerations was the distinction between the Separatist groups and the Puritans. Dissatisfaction with the remnants of Roman Catholicism in the Anglican Church and discontent occasioned by the "Vestarian" controversy of 1559-1567, moved both the Separatists, chiefly represented by the Pilgrims, and the Puritans, who formed the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1629, to emigrate. While the former sought to secede entirely from the church of James I, the latter desired to maintain a degree of continuity. The Puritans felt that God had summoned them not to separate from the Anglican Church but to complete its reformation. Thus they, like the Israelites of the Old Testament, felt compelled to move across a great sea to the Promised Land.

The methodology of those who counteracted the "imperial school" was extensively relied upon in those chapters which discussed portent and providence in Puritan life and theology on the New England scene (Chapters II and III). Special attention was given to the "errand" concept of Prof. Perry Miller of Harvard. Samuel Danforth's sermon had provided the key to this interpretation. The Puritans, according to Professor Miller, were on an "errand" for history. They wanted to establish "a Holy City upon a Hill" that it might serve to inspire others to pursue their own "errand into the wilderness." Undergirding the Puritan "errand" were the theological doctrines of the "Holy Commonwealth" and the "Covenant of Grace," in which God had bound himself to operate by the providential management of history. The world of nature, therefore, was believed to contain the "hieroglyphicks" of the deus revelatus and the fingerprints of the hand of Providence. It was readily apparent (Chapter II) that no phenomenon in the natural world was exempt from theological interpretation if the Puritans chose to take notice of it. Nature's "mystic book" might contain the prophecy of the future equally as well as the judgment of God on sins of the past. Comets occasioned moralistic preaching no less than did shipwrecks and Indian raids.

Too great a distinction should not be made between the realms of the preternatural and the natural in Puritan thought. It is doubtful that the Puritan mind operated with such a schizophrenic distinction. For the purposes of this

investigation, however, the preternatural, or supernatural, phenomena and the portents contained in them were treated separately (Chapter III). Like the "mystic book of nature," the "dictionary of demonology" contained an abundance of heaven-sent messages. The Puritans did not bother to ask questions of ontology in regard to devils and witches; they accepted their reality and sought to live with them. Cotton Mather is the best source for discovering the basic Puritan beliefs about the supernatural, despite his alleged neurotic tendencies. Even though he was a scientist of sorts, Cotton Mather readily accepted the then common view that the Devil, and those who assisted him, had as their mission the destruction of the "Holy Commonwealth" and the capture of men's souls. A particularly severe onslaught by these satanic forces happened, according to the Puritan divines, during the Salem witchcraft trials. The hand of God's chastising providence was especially seen in the increased activity of the Devil and the great destruction he wrought towards the end of the 1660's when the "holy Commonwealth" was beginning to show signs of passing into history.

Finally, the methodology of the literary critics was employed in the discussion of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (Chapter IV). Hawthorne's New England environment and his rejection of the transcendentalist philosophy caused him to seek a setting for his writings via a "return into time." The Scarlet Letter, his most successful novel, reflects Hawthorne's ambivalence toward

the Puritan acceptance of portents in natural and supernatural phenomenon. Yet Hawthorne also portrays accurately the habit of the Puritan mind of deciphering the meaning of Providence in all manifestations of life, be they the peculiar appearance of a rose among a clump of weeds or the devilish change in the physiognomy of Chillingworth. By using the "method of alternative possibilities," Hawthorne reflects the Puritan's belief in portent and providence without necessarily committing himself to their particular Weltanschauung.

Conclusions

Several specific conclusions can be drawn from this study other than the preceding summary statements. A fair and balanced picture of the Puritan can be drawn by combining the several approaches which were outlined in Chapter I and employed at various times throughout the study. The "imperial school" method avoids the dangers of a strongly nationalistic or filio-pietistic approach. Here it is evident that the Puritans of New England cannot be accurately understood apart from an examination, at least in part, of their particular and peculiar roots in England.

The technique of interpretation used by Perry Miller and others, avoids the fallacy of viewing the Puritans of New England as just another instance of colonial expansion on the part of Europe. The citizens of Massachusetts Bay must be understood in their own light. No other approach

would be able to fathom the rich and varied influences which the "wilderness" had on the ideals of covenant and commonwealth. Finally, the methodology of the literary critic enables the student of Puritan life and thought to reflect on the "golden age" of Puritanism from the standpoint of history. He thus gains the benefits of the perspective of a significant interpreter of a subsequent era, who like Hawthorne, may not be entirely in agreement with the beliefs of Puritanism but at least gives them a sympathetic hearing.

Portent and providence in Puritan thought are inseparable ideas. In the present day context, the Puritan habit of reading the will of God into natural and preternatural phenomena may seem to be the fruit of a superstitious mentality, unequipped to handle those things in life which were not readily understandable. Such a judgment, however, is invalid for it seeks to read back into seventeenth century America the canons of truth and reality which are prevalent today. In the context in which he lived, Cotton Mather, like many other Puritans, had no reason to distinguish between the secular and the sacred. Both worlds were one. His understanding of natural and preternatural facts was governed by his theology. Because the Puritan mind functioned with the presupposition that God, having contracted to do so in the "Covenant of Grace," would operate within the realms of the natural and supernatural to reveal his will for the "select of God," it was not superstition but theology that gave rise to the habit of deciphering portents.

If the twentieth century critic desires to challenge the seventeenth century Puritan, then it should be done on the basis of theology not on an alleged naivete. Far from disdaining intellectual pursuits, the Puritans were the earliest of Americans to apply reason to the world about them. American science owes much to the men who gathered around the "optic tube" at Harvard in those early days. Yet in spite of their many associations with the scientific revolution in England and on the Continent and in spite of their own discoveries in the laboratory of Nature, the greatest Puritan thinkers never dared to question the fundamental theological maxim that God revealed his providence in the portents about them.

The Puritans did not have the modern desire to demythologize life. It would of course be pure speculation to suppose that if he did the moving force behind the colonization of Massachusetts Bay would have dissipated and New England would not have been settled. Yet it is not without foundation to conclude that the religious fervor with which the men, women, and children under the leadership of Johnathan Winthrop undertook the Great Migration of the 1630's provided them with the capacity for enduring the uncertainty of the voyage and the hardships of the first few decades in the wilderness. No one in those early years questioned the belief that the Puritans were the People of God on a great exodus. Just as the Israelites had a pillar of fire and the cloud to guide them, so the Puritans of New

England had their portents in nature and the supernatural.

Implications for Further Study

This study has also suggested several avenues open to additional investigation. It would be of value to consider in greater depth the relationship between the New England belief in portent and providence and the Old World context out of which it came. This would entail a further analysis of Puritan theology and its Calvinistic origin. An interesting and challenging study might involve a critique of the hypothesis that with the domestication of the American wilderness the staunch orthodox belief in portent and providence in New England began to diminish. Validization of this would involve an analysis of the writings of such eminent Puritan divines as Johnathan Edwards.

The use of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter to provide further insight into the Puritan concept of portent and providence also contains certain implications for further study. In regard to The Scarlet Letter itself, the question of the real or imaginary quality of the various omens might be considered. The same analysis of portent and providence could be conducted with several of Hawthorne's other stories, e. g. "Young Goodman Brown," or "The Blithedale Romance." Since Hawthorne is not the only representative of the Romantic Realist in American literature, similar studies of the Puritan influence on other writers, such as Herman Melville, could be made.

The most significant result of this or any study of our Puritan heritage should be that neither filioipietistic platitudes nor shallow Puritan-baiting does our American forefathers justice. Neither do ~~they~~ they offer anything of value to contemporary man. The twentieth-century student who realizes that the Puritans did not live in such a compartmentalized world as he does but viewed the sacred and the secular worlds as an inseparable unit, can proceed to respect and validly interpret a most significant chapter in our American heritage.

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