# Tenets of Puritan Poetry

Andreea POENARU*

**Key-words**: *meditation, Puritan author, Puritan poetry, space, time*

## 1. Puritan poetics – the Tension between the Word and words

"In the beginning were the Puritans" (Shucard 1988: 1). These are the words which Alan Shucard chose to open his book on American poetry. The statement, with its obvious biblical allusion, implies the idea of a Puritan legacy inscribed in the very structure of the American letters. But before talking about what it left behind, about influences and continuity, one should find out how, in the first place, a Puritan poetics was possible. In other words, how could the stern Puritans reconcile their (natural) need for imagery, be it visual or literary, with the fear of idolatry? Besides this tension there was the opposition of two existing traditions regarding the created world. On one hand, the sensible world was viewed by Gnostics, Manicheans and Cathari as essentially evil, utterly corrupt and corruptible, an illusion, and a prison for the soul, whereas on the other, following the Augustinian perspective, the creation was a book written by the finger of God to be read by man, a source of signs leading to the divine truth. The Puritan piety was, as Perry Miller argued, of Augustinian extraction, so as we will see, the world was to be used as type announcing the spiritual delights of heaven but there was still the fear of letting oneself drawn by its beauty.

What was for Puritans, and more important for our discussion, for the Puritan author/creator, an idol? In order to answer this question we should bear in mind two aspects. One is the related to Exodus (20: 4–5)[1], according to which idolatry implies both making and worshiping images. The other is linked to Puritan conception of the created world which maintained that God had made it and invested it with meaning. Moreover, the symbolical significance of the sensible world imposed upon man a moral imperative so that he had to read the invisible through the visible, things from the earthly world were to be used to understand and portray the heavenly one. In the words of Robert Daly, who discussed at length in his book the Puritan's manner of dealing with their fear of idolatry, "things not only meant, things meant God and salvation" (Daly 1978: 62). The *Shorter Catechism* agreed upon by the Westminster

* "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, Romania.

[1] "Thou shalt make thee no graven image, neither any similitude of things that are in the heaven above, nor that are in the earth beneath, nor that are in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them, neither serve them" (Exodus 20: 4–5, *The Geneva Bible* 1969: 190).



BDD-A1114 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:55:27 UTC)

Assembly in 1648, a reference book for Puritans, emphasizes on the worship rather than on the making of images, which is not even mentioned in the answer to the question regarding the interdictions of the second commandment: "The second commandment forbiddeth the worshiping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his word" (*The Shorter Catechism* 1857: 16). Hence the distinction between idol-like images and permitted images lay in the usage. This made possible the unproblematic coexistence of fear of idolatry and poetry. Still, while using the world as a ladder to heaven, the Puritan had to keep in mind the fact that it is also full of deceiving vanity. The theme of "contemptus mundi"[2] is present in all Puritan writings as means of expressing various degrees of dissatisfaction with worldly things. On the other hand, the world *per se* was viewed as an *a fortiori* argument for the beauty and goodness of God and a network of symbols meant to lead man to heaven. In other words, which are Roy H. Pearce's, the pattern of Puritan culture was worked out by reading the book of the world and the Bible (Harvey Pearce 1961: 33). Nevertheless, as Robert Daly asserts, there was no paradox ingrained in the Puritan world view, the fears of idolatry and poetry did not stem from the ability to hold in suspension ideas that contradicted each other, but rather derived from a distinction that was clear to the Puritans and lost for a time among the moderns who study their culture (Daly 1978: 49).

Going hand in hand with their vision on the role of the creatures, there came a specific use and understanding of poetic language. Figures were not created by man, were not forged by the rhetorician, but created by God and the poet was to find them in the world. By rejecting complicated resolution in favor of simple paradox, the Puritans adopted the middle way between what Daly calls "univocal anthropocentrism and equivocal agnosticism" (Daly 1978: 68); the difference between human beings and God was only one pertaining to degree. Furthermore, according to the Ramist logic, adopted by the Puritans, man understood the world and his place in it by using God-given powers, which in the version of the "visible saints" view meant a correlation between daily facts and the facts of revelation. Thus the word was made one with the thing and the idea was an argument for existence (Pearce 1961:32). By discovering the words and the symbols, man and especially the poet had a pre-tasting of the sweetness of heaven. Consequently, the rhetoric principle of *invention*[3] was central for the writer. *Inventio* comes from the Latin *in venire* which means to come upon, to discover, hence not to create. The composition followed the original "inventon", i.e. discovery; it was not creative. There arose thus for the poet a tension between the desire to make poems and the knowledge that he had neither the right nor the power to make anything. All he could do was through conjecture (Pearce 1961: 45). The emphasis fell on perception followed by articulation and not on creation; the writer was viewed as *vates* ("seer") rather than *poeta* ("maker"). Returning to what we earlier called the Puritan author/ creator, we would state that

[2] The concept comes from the work of Lothar of Legni (later Pope Innocent III), *De miseria humane conditionis* to which the scribes added the prefix *Contemptus Mundi*.

[3] According to the Ramist logic "invention" is the process of beginning with a concept and then looking for evidence in Scripture and every day events.



BDD-A1114 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:55:27 UTC)

from the inside of the seventeenth-century Puritan mind, the only authentic author was God and the world was a book whose meaning could be made understood by the human writer who was only a discoverer and a mediator and not a creator of words and figures. And he was to handle the God-given words with maximum care – if the writer had gone spiritually astray then he would have presented a danger for the entire community of readers. "Beware of a boundless and sickly appetite for the reading of the poems (…)" warns Cotton Mather, "and let not the Circaean cup intoxicate you" (Mather 1961: 17).

The poems had to contain equilibrium between the eternal and the temporal, they had to be utilitarian and bear communal message. "The deepest 'meaning' of a poem", Jeffrey Hammond asserts, "lay not so much in the text, as in the interaction of the reader with the text and with the Bible as the underlying Text to which the poem pointed" (Hammond 1993: 20). The beginning of Puritan poetry was marked by the publication, in 1640, of *The Bay Psalm Book* in which delight was subordinated to utility and the memorable to the memorizable. Fidelity was the chief virtue in translating the Psalms. The pleasure was not to come from man's workings, but for the words of God working in man's heart. The purpose of Puritan poetry was not primarily artistic also because it was rather of historical interest. The poet played the role of a mediator, a reporter, a historian as the aim of his poems was rooted in doctrine, event, and occasion, all of which revealed God's workings. Still, one should not infer that there is no delight in reading Puritan poetry as it was most of the times directly linked with the uses of language in meditation, a connection that suggests its capacity of making the reader delve into the profundity of the human soul. Furthermore, the Puritans viewed the sensible world in a positive way and the senses, though potentially dangerous, had a part in worship, hence, the use of sensuous imagery taken from the visible world in order to describe the invisible things of God in most of the Puritan literary productions.

Perry Miller asserts that for Puritans, beauty was postulated as reason and faith conjoined. The tenets of the latter did not allow a clear formulation of an aesthetic theory, but the spiritual practice of the Puritans included the establishing of analogies between beautiful objects and the perfect archetype that existed in the mind of God (Miller, Johnson 2001: 64). Still, there was a limit to what one may call poetry in the Puritan world. The handicap of the Puritan poet, as Kenneth B. Murdock calls it, was that of being faithful to fulfilling the duty of conveying sound doctrine in systematic and logically comprehensible words (Murdock 1949: 140). On the other hand, there were the limits imposed by the lack of means due to the poet's literary inexperience and that of his/ her audience to which the separation from religious art and theological reasons added. Nevertheless, the Puritan was the child of Renaissance and consequently loved and needed poetry. Murdock even states that "there is no more striking instance in history of the constant need of the religious mind for some sort of poetic expression than the Puritan's quest for poetry" (Murdock 1949: 149). From this need that grew deep inside the believer's soul, from



**BDD-A1114 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:55:27 UTC)**

the personalizing of his/ her faith and the recurrent exercise of meditation, sprung up the best lines of Puritan poetry.

**2. Meditation – the Encounter between Subjective Time and Timelessness and the Transfiguration of Space**

The Puritans left behind, in corrupt England, what they considered useless traditions that limited or conditioned the soul's movements by establishing only certain places and days as sacred. Prayer could spontaneously spring from the soul and that was a sacred moment as there was any place in New England heralded as the New Jerusalem, the holy land of God's chosen people. The New Englanders adhered to the reformed doctrine of time and space according to which the two main coordinates of experience and of human history were regarded as homogeneously sacred. Prayer and meditation represented gateways towards sacred time and space.

The non-conformists concentrated on two main thoughts regarding meditation: the scrutiny of Scripture and self-scrutiny with the aim of conquering the uncertainty regarding their predestined spiritual state. Meditation was a practice which aimed at keeping the individual in close connection with the workings of his/ her mind and soul. If we bear in mind Norman S. Grabo's assertion that "the art of Puritan devotion was basically a method for channeling emotions into verbal structures – a poetic method" (Grabo, apud Daly 1978: 71), then meditation is simultaneously a literary and religious exercise. Seventeenth century Puritans saw it as a duty, there is no doubt, but their need for words converted it into art. Self-scrutiny was a vital exercise for each and every member of the Puritan community, hence meditation entailing introspective intensity and keen psychological awareness became central to their spiritual life. Moreover, like the Protestants before, the Puritans developed a new vocabulary of religious experience and sanctification in order to express the movements of the soul.

The two steps through which meditation was accomplished clearly highlighted the relation between the Word of the Scripture and human soul: 1. the focus on the Bible as guiding the interpretation of the subject and providing models for meditation and 2. the application to the self. The Puritans inverted the latter process and worked on the application of the subject to the self; the location of the subject was in the self. That is why, in Barbara K. Lewalski's opinion, Puritan meditation did not give raise to poetry based on visual imagery and sensuous immediacy. Its purpose was not to stimulate the senses in order to recreate Biblical scenes, but to engage the mind in an effort to understand the motions and workings of the psyche, of the self as the embodiment of the subject meditated upon (Kiefer Lewalski 1979: 148–150). There was an interrelation between Biblical history and the Christian's own experience. The past was only a means for the edification of the present. Joseph Hall defined meditation as "nothing else but a bending of the minde upon some spirituall object, through divers formes of discourse, utill our thoughts come to an issue; and this must needs be either Extemporall, and occasioned by outward occurrences offered to the mind, or Deliberate, and wrought out of our owne heart" (Hall 1863: 48). Richard Baxter, in his famous *Saints' Everlasting Rest* (1650) gives



BDD-A1114 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:55:27 UTC)

practical advice seeing it as "a duty, by which all other duties are improved, and by which the soul digesteth truths for its nourishment and comfort" (Baxter 1831: 350). While having three possible starting points − the Word, the self and the creatures − meditation could be either extemporal i.e. occasional or deliberate. The Puritan was to either deliberately schedule a time and a place for contemplating God or let himself led by links that every day stimuli could create between the visible and the invisible. In both instances, the believer experienced a lapse which transported him beyond the ordinary, humanly perceived time and space.

The first full-fledged poets of New England, Anna Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, illustrated the ways in which the Puritans searched for God in meditation while yet living in the world. The ability of keeping one's mind in a place different from the one the body abides was essential for those who wished to taste the sweetness of the communion with God. Their meditative poems sprung from reflections on the theme of death, cyclicity, transience, and the disparity between this world which permanently sets challenges for the soul while at the same offering a second book of revelation (it is the internal eye of the beholder that directs the individual to one or the other of the two perspectives) and the world beyond, outside history, and at the same time present in it without being limited by its process.

## Bibliography

Shucard 1988: Alan Shucard, *American Poetry. The Puritans through Walt Whitman*, Boston,Twayne Publishers.

Baxter 1831: Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, sixth edition, London, printed for William Collins.

Daly 1978: Robert Daly, *God's Altar. The World and the Flesh in Puritan Poetry*, Berkley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press.

Hall 1863: Bishop Joseph Hall, *The Arte of Divine Meditation*, in Philip Wynter, ed., *The Works of the Right Reverend Joseph Hall D.D.*, Vol. 6, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 40-56.

Hammond 1993: Jeffrey A. Hammond, *Sinful Self, Saintly Self: The Puritan Experience of Poetry*, Athens, University of Georgia Press.

Kiefer Lewalski 1979: Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

Miller, Johnson 2001: Perry Miller, Thomas H. Johnson (eds.), *The Puritans. A Source Book of Their Writings*, Toronto, General Publishing Company Ltd.

Murdock 1949: Kenneth B. Murdock, *Literature and Theology in Colonial New England*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press.

Pearce 1961: Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

*The Geneva Bible. A facsimile of the 1560 edition with and introduction by Lloyd E. Berry*, Madison, Milwaukee and London, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969.

*The Shorter Catechism*, Edinburgh, printed by Murray and Gibb, 1857.



**BDD-A1114 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:55:27 UTC)**

## Abstract

The article gives an overview of the manner in which the Puritans approached poetry and the Puritan poet understood time and space. It touches as well upon the paradox of the coexistence of the Puritans' need for images and their fear of idolatry and the characteristics of the Puritan author/poet who was viewed, in Puritan culture, as a mediator who had the mission of discovering in nature, God's second book, the signs put there by the Author par excellence and making them known to the others. Consequently, even if considered a rather strict and even gloomy community, it seems that beauty was after all a real need and the Puritan poet met it through his/ her verse. The article also touches upon the perception of time and space in meditation. This spiritual exercise was for the practice-oriented Puritan a poetic method of relating to the world through the mind rather than through the senses. In meditation, one goes beyond the limitations of time and space and connects oneself to the essentiality of existence. Puritan poetry illustrated this leap beyond the "here and now" and demonstrated that art was no stranger to the Puritan culture.




BDD-A1114 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:55:27 UTC)