# The Puritan Origins of the American Self

Sacvan Bercovitch

New Haven and London Yale University Press

Library of Congress catalog card number: 75-327691
International standard book number: 0-300-02117-8

Designed by John O. C. McCrillis
and set in Baskerville type.
Printed in the United States of America.

15 14 13 12

For Gila and Eytan

# Preface

Broadly considered, my subject is the development of a distinctive symbolic mode. In particular, I wish to demonstrate the richness of the seventeenth-century New England imagination through a study of what I take to be a central aspect of our Puritan legacy, the rhetoric of American identity. I have set the discussion in a comparative European-American context, so as to specify the unique qualities of the colonial outlook; I have emphasized certain rather technical Puritan terms, because I believe they can deepen our understanding of persistent forms of thought and expression; and I have centered my analysis on the interaction of language, myth, and society, in an effort to trace the sources of our obsessive concern with the meaning of America, the long foreground to the astonishingly comprehensive ideal of the representative American, with its proportionately comprehensive claims and anxieties.

As my scope is wide, I have chosen a narrow focus: Cotton Mather's title to his Life of John Winthrop—"Nehemias Americanus," "The American Nehemiah." I use it somewhat in the Puritan manner of "opening" a scriptural text. To unveil its full import is to reveal, I trust, the complexity, the intricacy, the coherence, and the abiding significance of the American Puritan vision. My argument follows the logic of Mather's phrase, which moves from the personal to the historical (Nehemiah to the New World) and, in doing so, links the biblical hero, the New England magistrate, and the enterprise at large in an emphatically American design. The first chapter deals with the Puritan view of the self, the second, a study in contexts and definitions, with the role of the individual in history, and the third with the idea of national election, which for the Massachusetts Bay settlers involved both personal and historical redemption. In the fourth chapter I examine the formal and conceptual implications of the approach that eventuates in Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*. The last chapter, which extends those implications into the nineteenth century, devolves upon Emerson as the major influence upon the American Renaissance. My intention here is neither to reinterpret the period

nor to present a full-scale revaluation of Emerson (these are the subjects of a separate forthcoming study), but to outline the process by which Puritan themes, tensions, and literary strategies were assimilated into American Romanticism.

I would like to thank the American Council of Learned Societies and the Columbia University Humanities Council for grants that enabled me to complete this book, and the friends who improved it in various ways: H. M. Bercovitch, Leo Braudy, Ann Douglas, Lyndall Gordon, Peter Hawkes, Myra Jehlen, Karl Keller, James McIntosh, Richard Reinitz, Ormond Seavey, Peter Shaw, Kenneth Silverman, and Michael Wood. Materials from chapters 3, 4, and 5 appear as essays in *Early American Literature* (1974), *Canadian Review of American Studies* (1975), and the English Institute Essays for 1975.

As a rule, I have limited my notes to works directly cited, and to a minimal commentary on issues that most needed clarification. In several chapters I've allowed myself to interpret "minimal" somewhat freely—either to indicate the range of materials under consideration or to offer examples of the kind of detailed analysis American Puritan literature requires—but I have consistently (and severely) restricted myself to representative texts. An adequate list of "works consulted" would cover primary and secondary sources in literature, history, and theology since the Reformation. All references to Mather's Life of Winthrop are from the Appendix to this study.

# Contents


| | |
|---|---|
| **Preface** | **ix** |
| **1 Puritanism and the Self** | **1** |
| **2 The Vision of History** | **35** |
| **3 The Elect Nation in New England** | **72** |
| **4 From Hermeneutics to Symbolism** | **109** |
| **5 The Myth of America** | **136** |
| **Appendix: Cotton Mather's Life of John Winthrop** | **187** |
| **Notes** | **206** |
| **Index** | **247** |

# 1

# Puritanism and the Self

Cotton Mather, who had something of a passion for epitome, found an especially apt title for his Life of John Winthrop. "Nehemias Americanus" pays tribute to the first governor of New England as a saint, as a model magistrate, and as the leader of a great enterprise. Nehemiah, we recall, led the Israelites back from Babylon to their promised land. As the first governor of their restored theocracy, he inspired them to take up once again the burden of their covenant. He revived their sense of destiny, ensured their protection against heathen neighbors, organized further migrations from Babylon to Judea, reformed civil and religious abuses, and directed the reconstruction of Jerusalem from a wasteland into a city on a hill. His successors ranked him with Jacob, Moses, and David. Surely, Mather could have chosen no parallel more fitting for the man who directed the settlement of New Canaan, no clearer way to indicate his hero's role in the epic venture celebrated in the *Magnalia Christi Americana.*

Mather's title is compelling in still another sense: it offers an epitome of his biographical technique. Winthrop as Nehemiah conveys the hagiographical "exemplar" of which the *Magnalia*'s readers have often complained; Winthrop as American, the magistrate in his specific time and place, indicates the kind of historical portrait that has made the *Magnalia* a source-book for the study of colonial New England. The conjunction of terms suggests Mather's eclectic method. It also suggests a far-reaching effort at synthesis. For in fact Mather's hybrid American Nehemiah conforms neither to the principles of hagiography nor to those of secular biography. He is not, like the medieval saint, a man whose divine call sets him apart from others; nor is he, like the Plutarchian hero, a man made great by worldly achievements. Moreover, Mather deliberately blurs the image of the Old Testament leader by comparing Winthrop to a wide range of exemplary figures, from the epic

champion to the Reformation martyr. In effect, he transforms all of these parallels, and the biographical norms they imply, into a distinctive concept of the representative American saint.

## EXEMPLUM

The obvious connection between the terms of Mather's title lies in the hero's public role. "Nehemias" recalls Winthrop's function as magistrate; "Americanus" indicates his service to the New World state. This essentially historical view is what first strikes us about the biography. Mather's account of Winthrop tells of the man in his time with the homely detail of early colonial art. It describes the governor's plain style in dress and conversation, his aversion to drinking toasts (though he kept a bottle of good wine handy for visitors), his easy relations with his inferiors, even while he maintained a strict sense of class prerogatives. It records several instances of his quick wit and, at some length, a number of his most important speeches. Nor is the portrait entirely flattering. We learn that the clergy had to rebuke Winthrop for excessive leniency, that he incurred grave financial debts, that many eminent persons disliked him, that his controversial policies brought him to an "ignominious hearing" before a general assembly, and that near the end of his life he was wracked with self-doubt bordering on terror.

All this is obvious enough to any reader. It is necessary to point out the obvious because of the persisting belief that Mather's biographies are an exercise in filiopietism. This view ignores, first, the sheer bulk and diversity of information he provides. The best modern study of colonial medicine, for instance, draws upon his discussions, in Winthrop's Life and others, of tumors, circulatory ailments, hypochondria, and the effects of tobacco. Historians have also profited from Mather's critical observations. His comments on Winthrop's shortcomings have frequent parallels in other biographies of magistrates; and his descriptions of what might be called clerical melancholia—William Thompson's psychosomatic distempers, Nathanial Mather's suicidal depressions, Ezekiel Rogers's morbid sense of isolation from man and God—may well have influenced Hawthorne's portraits of the Puritan minister. Moreover, the charge of filiopietism overlooks the *Magnalia*'s occasional bantering tone. Winthrop's "cure" for wood-thieves, which Mather

records at some length—the governor's decision to share his wood-supply with the poor so that they need not resort to stealing—is typical of the numerous anecdotes that enliven the work, the sometimes memorable repartee, and the tongue-in-cheek humor.[1] The "merry disposition" he attributes to Winthrop is not inapplicable to Mather himself. Furthermore, the critics' reduction of the biographies to pious *exempla* obscures Mather's concern with worldly accomplishments. Among his other qualities, Winthrop is a responsible businessman; he is commended for the fact that "his children all of them came to fair estates and lived in good fashion." For them as for many of the *Magnalia*'s heroes, Puritanism opened the way to material as well as spiritual prosperity; and in at least two Lives, those of Theophilus Eaton and Sir William Phips, Mather's delineation of the rise from rags to riches makes him worthy of the title of father of the American success story.

Finally, the current pejorative view of the biographies underrates their value as chronicle history. Mather amassed documents of all sorts in the *Magnalia*, published and unpublished. In particular, the Life of Winthrop surveys most of the major political issues of the time: the uneasy diplomatic negotiations between Old and New England, suggested in George Cleve's report to King Charles and in the accusations leveled by Thomas Morton of Merry Mount; the internal dissensions of the 1630s, as evidenced by the machinations of the Antinomians and the mutiny of the town of Hingham; the early problems between Plymouth and Massachusetts, exacerbated by the rigid separatism of Ralph Smith and Roger Williams; the dispute between the merchant Robert Keayne and the Boston widow Goody Sherman, which led to the formation of the bipartite General Court. Mather recurs to these conflicts in other Lives, as well as in the *Magnalia*'s narrative sections, thus linking his heroes sequentially, in the framework of an ongoing historical enterprise. Throughout the work, his selection of key events shows a marked sensitivity to the nature of New England's development.[2]

Mather's historicism reflects the temper of the age. Significantly, he was the first American to use the term "biography," associated from its appearance in the late Renaissance with the revolt against panegyric.[3] With his contemporaries, he advocated a direct, detailed investigation of personality and events, praised the methods of the classical biographers, and denounced hagiography for its

gross partiality and neglect of evidence. "Whether I do myself commend," he assures us, "or whether I give my reader an opportunity to censure, I am careful above all things to do it with truth." His biographies abound in records of all kinds: speeches, judicial briefs, letters, and sermon extracts in the Life of Winthrop; in other Lives, selections from diaries, genealogical and financial accounts, inventories relating to private as well as public matters. How much should men "fear the judgment of posterity," he remarks, "if historians be not allowed to speak the truth after their death"! No danger of our finding hyperbole or fancy in *his* work—"what *should* have been, rather than what really *was*." His Lives are "impartial," "Truth from first to last," and report everything with an "exact veracity" which heeds no party but that of conscience.[4]

It need hardly be said that Mather protests too much. His Lives report mainly what serves, or can be made to serve, his didactic ends. But then the same reservation applies to biography throughout the eighteenth century. Exceptions may be found, but by and large the art of biography from Roper through Walton to Johnson forms a transitional mode between hagiography and modern biography. Though it insists on details, it forces them into the framework of the ideal. Its aim is to teach by use of examples. It rebels against medieval allegorization without really allowing for realism, in our empirical sense of the term.[5] This transitional mode—we might call it exemplary biography—suggests Mather's place in the main currents of English biography of his time. His concept of Winthrop as individual and as *exemplum* follows from his belief that the discrete fact and the moral generality could complement one another. This holds true for even his briefest, most impersonal biographies, those which lend themselves most plausibly to comparison with medieval hagiography. In fact, the proper comparison here is with the Character, the abstract rendering of a certain social or psychological type, which (as it became popular in Restoration England) reinforced the didactic trends in biography. Mather's brief Lives share many traits with those of the leading Character-writers, especially Thomas Fuller and Joseph Hall. So also do a number of his longer biographies, some of whose titles seem to designate Virtuous Characters: *"Scholasticus,"* "A Man of God," "Early Piety Exemplified," even "Nehemias Americanus."

We must return, therefore, to the divergent implications of Mather's title. Winthrop's American aspect, we might say—his association with a particular enterprise—emphasizes his position as governor in order to reveal the individual; his aspect as Nehemiah renders him, as an individual, the *exemplum* of statesmanship. In this sense, the parallel wrenches him out of time. Insofar as the New Englander *is* the Hebrew governor, his actions extend beyond any particular situation to demonstrate the principles of just government. Nehemiah serves here as archetype, an organizing metaphor which allows Mather to vaunt a host of similar parallels that universalize Winthrop's accomplishments. History is invoked to displace historicism. The temperance of Plato's guardian, the courage and diligence of Plutarch's Cleomenes, Cicero's eloquence and Cato's integrity, the fortitude, wisdom, and piety of King Asa and of Macarius the Great—what seems a baroque plethora of allusions is really an effort to blur the specific into a composite ideal of civic authority.

The process of shaping the ideal gives form and direction to the Life. As the biography moves forward, the generalities increase in proportion to the details. The more we learn about Winthrop the more inclusive the outline grows. Gradually, the actual magistrate expands into an abstraction. Winthrop is chosen governor of the infant colony: he is another Moses in the wilderness. Winthrop suppresses Anne Hutchinson and her Antinomian followers: quotations from Virgil link him to Aeneas battling the elements stirred up by vindictive Juno. Winthrop's courage shows him to be a lion in adversity: he is worthy of Solomon's robes and scepter. Winthrop is generous to the destitute, no less to his defeated opponents than to the poor and sick: his behavior follows the best tenets of Roman law, it issues in the kind of altruism that led William of Paris to oppose Catholic misrule, and it takes rise from the biblical precepts concerning the exemplary magistrate (Prov. 14 : 26–34) who protects the chosen people, ensures their place of refuge, and exalts them by his righteousness.

The passage from Proverbs calls attention to a broader meaning of Mather's concept of *exemplum*. "A true Nehemiah," Mather explains, turns the old heathen virtue of patriotism to the service of God. Like the biblical saint Winthrop is more than an ethical leader: he is one of the elect, in the tradition of Reformed

biography "greatly imitable as a Christian." This tradition, we know, grows out of the medieval Saints' Lives; it also reflects certain basic premises of the Puritan outlook. Perhaps the most familiar of these is the twofold concept of calling, the inward call to redemption and the summons to a social vocation, imposed on man by God for the common good. In keeping with their militant this-worldliness, the Puritans laid special emphasis on vocation. Predictably, they drew their standards for the magistrate from the familiar Renaissance treatises; but they made one further, quintessentially Calvinist demand. Invoking various scriptural models, they distinguished the merely good ruler from the saintly ruler, and insisted that the saintly ruler reflect his inward calling in his social role. Faith, indeed, was crucial to the proper execution of his duties. As his vocation was a summons from God, so his belief led him to do well in public office.

In affirming this connection between legal and spiritual calling, the Puritans extended the *exemplum* perforce beyond the Good Magistrate to encompass the whole man. They found a biographical precedent in the early Christian funeral orations. Specifically, the Life of Winthrop alludes to Ambrose's orations for Valentinian and Theodosius, in which Ambrose praises each of these Roman emperors as the exemplar of all *Christian* rulers. Over and again Mather echoes Ambrose's phrases: the refuge of the poor and the erring, magnanimous towards his enemies, faithful to his friends, humble before his critics, the pattern of sainthood and secular authority alike. The influence of these eulogies upon Mather, and upon colonial literature in general, is considerable.[6] It extends even to matters of structure. The standard form established by Gregory Nazianzus (to whose orations Mather several times refers) leaves its impress upon the Life of Winthrop: an opening encomium, a description of endowments, a list of achievements, and a rendering of the death scene, followed by a public exhortation.

It would be misleading to single out this influence above others. What seems certain is that Mather makes use of the funeral oration to integrate the Puritan concept of calling with the Renaissance ideal of just government. We need read no further than the first page or two to learn that Winthrop was self-effacing and magnanimous, that he came from a family of means, that his decisions were

"exquisitely" tempered by wisdom and guided by a code of moderation. As for his piety, he would have preferred, writes Mather, to have devoted himself to the study of Calvin. When heaven decided otherwise, summoning him to civic administration for the common good, he "so bound himself to the behavior as a Christian as to become exemplary for a conformity to the laws of Christianity"—a conformity that carried beyond the statehouse, beyond even church and home, to the privacy of his heart. Thus Mather recasts the good works of the administrator into the *visibilia* of the saint. In effect, he heightens the implications of Nehemiah as archetype, so as to elevate the American into a Christian Everyman. New England's Winthrop, he would tell us, resembles Israel's Nehemiah as a believer seen temporally in the vocation of governor. We read that Winthrop's impartiality stems from his abhorrence of idolatry; that his humility shows him to be a suffering servant of the Lord; that he is another Job in his compassion, causing "the blessing of him that was ready to perish to come upon him, and the heart of the widow and orphan to sing for joy."

The allusion to Job is characteristic of Mather's technique in this regard. Appropriately, the passage he selects concerns Job's exemplary justness.[7] But since it is the suffering Job who speaks those words to the Comforters, the scriptural context invests the social action with the atemporal meanings of the psychomachia. Justice, patience, and humility are only virtues; justice, patience, and humility as Job practiced them are attributes of the redeemed soul. In these terms Mather traces New England's tribulations under Winthrop directly to Satan, whom God has permitted, now as in Job's time, to test His saints. In these terms, too, he imposes the image of saintly affliction upon each stage of his hero's career: the hardships Winthrop experienced (yet "with how much resignation") in leaving England, crossing the Atlantic, adjusting to a strange land, and there enduring the calumnies of various tempters. In these terms, finally, Mather sums up Winthrop's trials (near the end of the biography) by way of, successively, his estate, his family, and his personal condition (cf. Job 1)—adding that amidst all this the governor had to suffer the rebuke of false comforters. The cumulative effect is to render the American Job-Nehemiah, in one of Mather's recurrent epithets, a lesson of our Lord, teaching us that

every believer must endure conflict and temptation, as Christ did. It is a lesson that not only transcends the ideal of the Good Governor but transmutes history itself into a drama of the soul.

To transmute history does not in this case mean to reject or submerge historical details. It does mean that the "real facts" become a means to a higher end, a vehicle for laying bare the soul—or more accurately, the essential landmarks in the soul's journey to God. And the journey of the soul thus abstracted provides a guide for every man—of any age, any culture, indifferently past, passing, or to come—in the choices he must face, the war he must engage in between the forces of evil and good in his heart. Hence the parallel between Nehemiah and the American. Secular realism tells us what is different, unique, about the individual; Mather uses detail to convert *historia* into *allegoria*. He makes the particular events of Winthrop's life an index to the hero's universality.

## EXEMPLUM FIDEI

The concept of the soul's journey is a Christian commonplace, of course; but Mather's application of the concept suggests a sweeping distinction between Reformed and medieval Catholic thought. Whereas the Reformed biographies leap from the individual to the universal, the Catholic hagiographies begin and end with the extraordinary and the unique. To be sure, they offer practical instruction, and sometimes urge us to follow in the saints' way. But the saints' way cannot really be ours. Even when we acknowledge their occasionally vivid personal traits, they impress us not as models for emulation but as objects of veneration, intended (in the words of one medieval writer) as a means between God and man.[8] The difference between this kind of Life and Mather's appears most clearly in terms of their common source—the life of Jesus and, by extension, the *imitatio Christi*, through which believers made their sainthood manifest.[9] *The Golden Legend*, after 1200 the standard medieval collection of Saints' Lives, reveals the *imitatio* partly by way of the saints' virtues and acts of martyrdom. But above all it stresses the supernatural feats they perform: the miracles which demonstrate their sainthood, and which expressly recreate the biblical pattern. In the course of *The Golden Legend*, the *imitatio*, so

considered, comes to repeat each of Jesus' miracles many times over—the healing of the sick, the blind, and the lame; the resurrection of the dead; the multiplying of the loaves of bread; the casting out of the devils; the epiphanic descent of the dove and of the angels.[10]

The Reformers' objections to all this may be simply stated. Setting aside the problem of credibility, it was both naive and pernicious to base the *imitatio* on Christ's miracles. In the first place, His miracles were *prima facie* what Luther called "external events"; that is, they affected the outward state of particular persons, in a certain time, in a specific place. To offer them as the substance of belief was to lower the Christ-event to secular history, rather than lifting men from secular concerns to Christ. Secondly, the true import of His miracles was spiritual, not literal, and as such they could be repeated by all believers. To raise the dead was in itself of no avail; the point was to preach the Resurrection to the spiritually dead, and *that* required no supernatural intervention. The *imitatio* should provide a framework for experience. Miracles by definition violate the nature of experience: they "conform to no laws but occur by a special divine inspiration wherein God breaks the law."[11] Finally, from all these perspectives, the emphasis on miracles (whether as *Acta Sanctorum, Passiones,* or *Martyria*) suggested that merit follows upon performance. Thus the Catholics were distorting the very essence of belief, barring mankind from even the prospect of hope; they were inducing Christians to expect salvation from works rather than faith.

The Reformed alternative was the *exemplum fidei.* Formulated by Luther in the course of his attack on the Catholic saints, it proposed a mode of *imitatio* that emphasized the spirit rather than the letter of the deed. In this view, the miraculous pattern of Christ's life unfolded in organic stages of spiritual growth. The anomaly did not matter, only the common truths which the anomaly signified in context: the process of calling, temptation, and salvation shared by all believers. What Christ performed "God hath done for the Soul of the Least Saint." Any Christian's life opened, as did the New Testament, into "a volume full of temptations: . . . A wonderful History, because a History of such experiences, each one whereof is more than a Wonder." Such wonders implied no merit on the performer's part. The power and the glory were God's; His

kingdom belonged to those who did His will rather than their own. "I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I," Paul said (1 Cor. 15 : 10). So it was with Christ also; in these terms His experiences lighted the way to the kingdom for all believers. There were "no greater acts than their obedience, both Active and Passive," in accordance with the spiritual pattern of His life.[12]

Luther's formulation rests on one of the furthest-reaching tenets of the Reformation: the principle of *sola fides,* which removes the center of authority from ecclesiastical institutions and relocates it in the elect soul. Of course, the Reformers never questioned the inviolability of the church per se. They pointed out, following Augustine, that the church could be understood either as the temporal hierarchy, represented by the pope, or else as the eternal invisible church, the sum total of those predestined, for reasons and by means no man could fully determine, to life everlasting. Augustine seems to have wavered between the two in defining the true church. The Reformers had no doubts. They identified the temporal hierarchy as the seat of Antichrist and turned instead to the relationship between the believer, *exemplum fidei,* and the community of the elect, the universal society of *exempla fidei,* from Abel through Nehemiah to the present, whose members, perceptible by faith alone, were all one in Christ. In this view, the norms of the good life were eschatological, not institutional. Behind every experience of the saint stood Jesus Himself, *exemplum exemplorum* for both the believer and the organic body of believers. The way to salvation lay in an internalized, experiential reliving of His life.

This eschatological consciousness shapes much of Reformed thought, and of Puritan thought in particular. No doubt it tended to fragment the movement, to encourage the chaotic proliferation of sect upon sect. The concept of *exemplum fidei* may best be seen as a counter-reaction to that fragmentation. It was a giant effort at cohesion and control, expressly opposed to the outburst of individualism that marks most of the other intellectual movements of the Renaissance. For as the Reformers condemned the institutional Catholic *imitatio,* so also, and just as virulently, they condemned the humanist doctrine of *imitatio hominis,* with its flaunted freedom of the intellect, its pagan tributes to the splendor of the human body, and its extravagant claims for self-determination. Those tributes and claims rested on the vision of man as microcosm; the Reformers

required a higher authority, an external absolute. "Every man, individually, is an epitome," they agreed; but they proceeded to distinguish between the natural and divine meanings of the term: "every natural man (who in a natural consideration is called *microcosmus,* an epitome of the world), in whose conscience God hath his throne . . . may be called *microchristus,* the epitome of Christ mystical." [13]

The distinction is a crucial one. Both humanism and Protestantism shift the grounds of private identity from the institution to the individual; and it has been said of each movement that its concept of *imitatio* makes every man his own church. But the humanists considered the true church to be a macrocosm of the self-fulfilled individual. The Reformers demanded that every individual reconstitute himself by grace a reflection of the church. That "every man is a *world* in himself," they argued, simply proved mankind to be Adam's progeny. The world was "all of red earth . . . a rednesse that amounts to a shamefastnesse, to a blushing at our . . . sinnes, as red as scarlet." The notion of microchristus, on the contrary, according to which every believer "hath *a Church* in himself," required Christians to surmount their bloodstained commonality with mankind.[14] Erasmus, Luther's great humanist antagonist, exulted in man's "natural gifts." Luther's reply was that the only gifts of value, the only identity worth aspiring to, lay utterly beyond man's powers.[15]

The humanists differed from the Reformers neither in their worldliness nor in their optimism, but in their individualism. Whether they saw man as the quintessence of dust or as the paragon of creation, a very god in action and apprehension, it was the microcosm that held their attention. Indeed, one major strain in their thought excludes the divine altogether from the ideal of self-fulfillment. The tradition of humanist personal literature, extending from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries—from Petrarch's *Letter to Posterity* to Cellini's ebullient autobiography, Jerome Cardan's melancholy *Book of My Own Life*, and, most fully, Montaigne's *Essays*—is concerned exclusively with the autonomous secular self. Leaving the question of sainthood to theologians, each of these writers declares the primacy of the single separate person, and justifies his self-study on its intrinsic merits, without pretense at religious or even moral instruction. He assumes that what he has