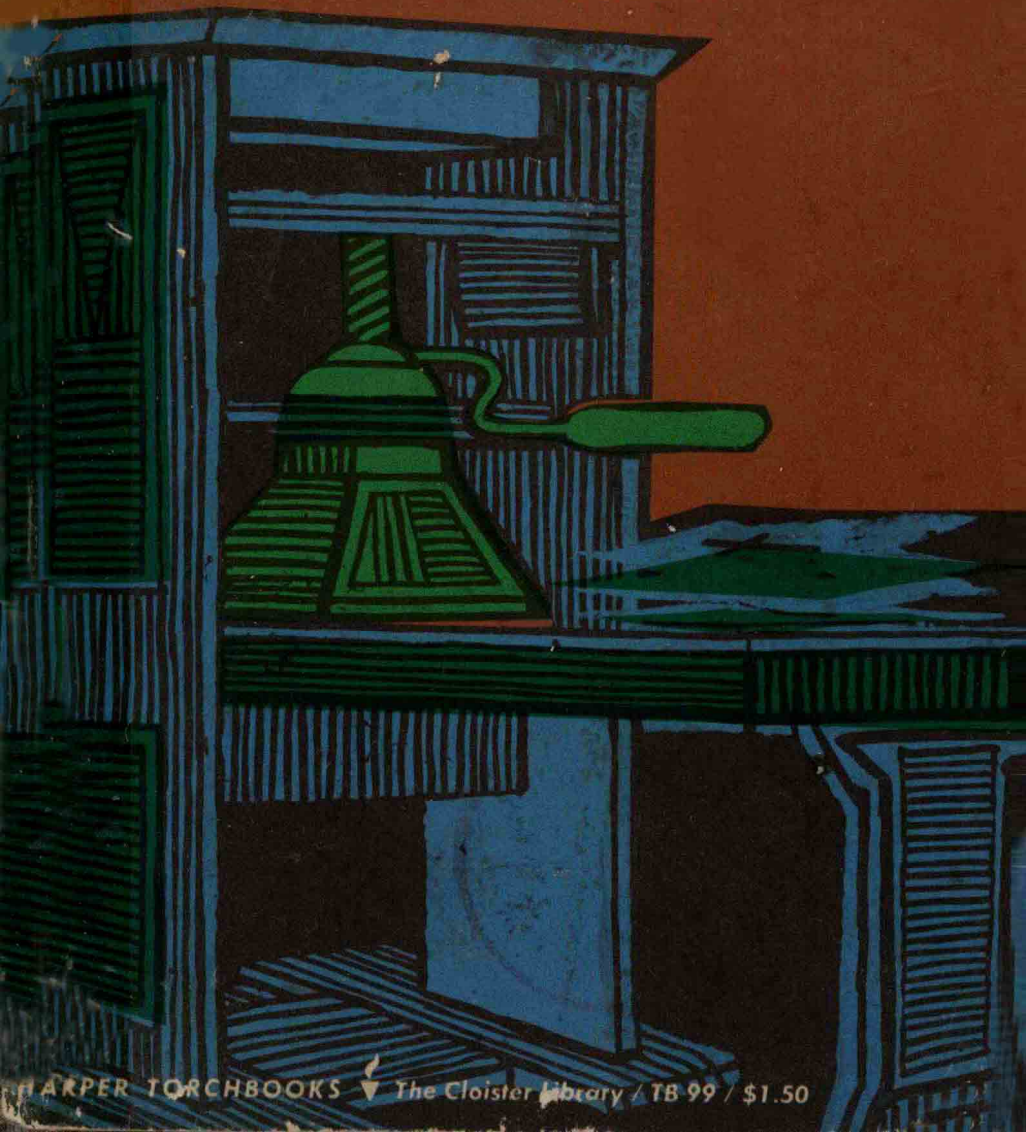
LITERATURE & THEOLOGY IN COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND

KENNETH B. MURDOCK



HARPER TORCHBOOKS ▼ The Cloister Library / TB 99 / $1.50

LITERATURE & THEOLOGY IN COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND

KENNETH B. MURDOCK

HARPER TORCHBOOKS·THE CLOISTER LIBRARY
HARPER & ROW • NEW YORK AND EVANSTON

LITERATURE & THEOLOGY IN
COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND

Preface

THIS BOOK attempts to outline the relation between the New England Puritans' fundamental theological ideas and their literary theory and practice. It is neither a treatise on Puritan theology nor a history of Puritan literature, and it makes no attempt to go deeply into the origins of Puritan methods and principles or the earlier influences which helped to determine their seventeenth-century form. It is primarily an essay on some of the ways in which ardent supporters of a particular set of doctrines sought in an important historical period in literature to express them; it deals with the colonial Puritans' successes and failures as, to use the word in its most general sense, artists. Like most honest men of ardent religious convictions they were eager to communicate their beliefs to others, and like all such men they faced the problem of finding appropriate artistic means. Puritan methods of solving the problem were to some extent peculiar to Puritans because they were dictated by their special religious and philosophical tenets. I have attempted no apology for them, and this book is not a defense of Puritan literary theory or practice. Indeed, my own view is that the principles which Puritan authors chose to follow, as well as the conditions under which they worked, commonly prevented their achieving artistic successes comparable to those of reli-

gious writers of other schools of thought. I have tried, however, to show that, for better or for worse, the Puritans followed a reasoned and mature literary theory, deliberately chosen in preference to others because it seemed to them adapted to the needs of their audience and in harmony with their whole intellectual scheme. Judged comparatively, by a reader whose religious and artistic sympathies are non-Puritan, the results were sometimes good and sometimes bad; but the concern of this book is less with praise or blame, although neither is excluded, than with an attempt to describe Puritan literary theory, to show how it worked, and to point out the relation between the special characteristics of colonial Puritan literature and those of Puritan thought. Such a study should bear directly on the fundamental question of how religious ideas are to be given adequate artistic expression — a question as old as theology and as modern as next Sunday's sermon.

Since my major interest here is in that question I have made no effort to go deeply into the theological intricacies of New England Puritanism. Those have been thoroughly explored in Perry Miller's *The New England Mind. The Seventeenth Century*, to which I am deeply indebted, and I have not tried to summarize his careful analysis or to rehash much of the material on Puritanism accessible in the work of other scholars. For my purposes it has seemed enough to stick to the theological fundamentals, ignoring many of the thorny technicalities which delighted Puritan ministers in their studies or in their public debates with their colleagues.

In so doing, I think I have done about what those ministers did themselves. Their religious system was the intellectual pattern of their universe; for the scholars among them every detail of it was fascinating; but the writings that impressed most readers, and probably seemed to their authors their most useful labors for God, treated not scholarly minutiae but a body of truth essential to every man who looked to God for life. The typical Puritan divine wrote more often for plain men than for pundits.

The substance of this book was presented in a course of lectures given for the Lowell Institute in King's Chapel, Boston, in March and April 1944, as one of the Institute's annual series on "Current Topics in Theology." My theme is, I believe, actually a "current topic," even though my material is the thinking and writing of men who lived more than two centuries ago and, for the most part, held ideas radically unlike ours. The problem of finding adequate literary expression for religious values is, as I have said, perennial; moreover, the Puritans' special approach to the question has in some ways, I think, affected the attitude of their successors. Furthermore, it seems to me plain that the times which produce major literary works on religious themes are those in which religion and theology are most alive. Conversely, when religious writing is flat, with none of the qualities of great art, when it is merely sentimental or sensational or deals largely in genteel platitudes, the age which fosters it is likely to be one in which religion is more a matter of sterile convention

and surface emotion than of convinced faith. If this is true, an examination of the extent to which, for all their shortcomings, the ardently devout Puritan pioneers of New England succeeded as artists should serve to test not only some of their religious values but also certain of the qualities of current religious thought.

My debt to *The New England Mind* I have already mentioned. *The Puritans,* an anthology of Puritan literature, edited with introductions by Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, has also been especially useful. William Haller's *The Rise of Puritanism* deals with English Puritans, but I have drawn upon it freely and gratefully, and much that I have written does no more than apply to colonial New England, and illustrate from it, the conclusions he has reached about the Puritan literary tradition in England. The other books which have contributed most are named in notes, which are intended not merely to show the sources of my material but to acknowledge my thanks to the scholars who have made it accessible.

The quotations in my text follow the cited sources except that in printing extracts from early writers I have not kept the long "s," have modernized "u" and "v," and have occasionally changed spelling and punctuation in the interest of intelligibility for modern readers.

It is a pleasure to express my thanks to the Trustee of the Lowell Institute in Boston, Mr. Ralph Lowell, for permission to use my lectures for the Institute as the basis of this book; to Eleanor W. Casey, Ellen Wiggins,

and Edith A. Warren for their secretarial help; to Sterling Lanier for reading the proof; to Perry Miller for invaluable criticisms and suggestions; and to my wife for her constant aid in the preparation of both the lectures and the book. Finally, I have a special debt to Mark Schorer. He read and criticized my manuscript for the lectures, and his scholarship and literary expertness saved me from many errors I must otherwise have made. He has not seen the finished book, but any virtues it may have are, I feel sure, largely traceable to his patience in keeping me on the right track in the initial stages of its composition.

K. B. M.

Boston, Massachusetts
October, 1948

Contents

I

THE BACKGROUND: THE GOLDEN AGE OF ENGLISH RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

THE Puritans who dominated the intellectual life of New England for the first century after the British settlement of Plymouth and of Massachusetts Bay achieved their domination and influenced later generations largely through the spoken and written word. They conceived of their colonial venture as a crusade to establish a commonwealth of God, and they saw that if they were to succeed they must find means to keep their supporters strong in the faith, to persuade the doubters, and to arouse the unawakened. Throughout history, literature, in the broadest sense of the word, had been an indispensable adjunct of Christian thought and life. No literature, of course, could by itself make a religion or give validity to a theology, but the Puritans must have recognized that no religion or theology had ever made itself a force among men without a literature of some sort. What would Christianity be without its Bible? Or Christian worship without words? Or the preacher's zeal with no means of communicating it? In their prayers the pious needed verbal symbols by which to express their feelings, and even those who held that God's grace might so work in a man's heart as to reveal

the truth to him directly, even the great mystics rapt in a sense of immediate personal communion with the Divine, had, it appeared, often tried to clothe their visions in words. The emphasis which the Puritan put upon learning and literature proves that in his view they were not decorations for the Christian life but essentials of it.

Inevitably, then, the New England Puritan read and wrote, and inevitably in so doing he ran into the old problem of how to give in words proper expression to divine truth. He failed often, he had his full share of weaknesses and blindnesses, and as an artist he faced special handicaps in the rigors and limitations of his life as a colonist. But he kept at his task, studied diligently both books and men, and ultimately created a body of literature which was, considering the circumstances, extraordinary in bulk and contained many pages of genuine artistic excellence. The best writing of early New England testifies both to the intellectual and moral strength of its authors and to the wisdom with which they chose, and the skill with which they used, rhetorical methods admirably adapted to express their conception of the essential beauty of holiness. That conception was in many ways too narrow to satisfy artists of other faiths, but even so no fair-minded critic can overlook the merits of the best writing in which the Puritans revealed it, nor will anyone at all interested in the methods of religious art fail to find illumination in their work. They were determined to communicate both the truth by which they lived and the beauty they saw in it, and they

must have realized that prose or verse which was careless or clumsy could not serve. Certainly they seem to have schooled themselves in a way of writing which was neither. Their work even apart from its intrinsic merits is therefore indispensable material for any study of how far and by what means theological ideas and religious emotions may be conveyed through art.

From the point of view of such a study an understanding of the colonial Puritan writer involves first of all some recognition of his attitude toward English religious literature in his time. Some of it he read and approved, much of it he suspected or disliked, but he knew a good deal about most of it. It fixed a kind of standard for his own work, since he could not refute the books he found bad if he wrote more carelessly than their authors and since he naturally took the works he admired as models for content and style. What he chose to learn from contemporary English writers and what he liked and disliked in them are clues to the principles he most steadfastly upheld.

The seventeenth century — more specifically the first fifty years or so after the settlement of Plymouth — was, in England, "the age of clergymen, the apogee of the pulpit and of the great divines," [1] the "golden age" of religious literature. The reasons why were many and complex, and a full exploration of them would be irrelevant here, but some appreciation of a few of them is central to understanding any religious writer of the period, Puritan or Anglican, Londoner or Bostonian.

For one thing, the seventeenth-century artist was still

under the spell of the Renaissance. Its aesthetic stimulation, so splendidly displayed in the great Elizabethan poets and dramatists, still warmed him; he shared something of its excitement in the classics, and his temper of mind marks his kinship to the experimenting and inquiring humanist scholars of the Renaissance, English and Continental. He felt himself to be both the heir of the ages and a dweller in a period which could, as Francis Bacon put it, "far surpass that of the Graecian and Roman learning." He had confidence that what he could discover of truth for himself might be better than, or at least as good as, anything handed down to him from an ancient philosopher or delivered to him by the authority of any institution old or new. He agreed with Bacon that he should "esteem of the inquisition of truth as of an enterprise." [2] Since the "inquisition of truth" could not exclude "divinity" there was a new curiosity about the bases of theology, and, as an immortal by-product, a magnificent new English translation of the Bible.

With the humanism, the pagan love of beauty, and the intellectual curiosity of the French and Italian Renaissance, was blended, once the channel was crossed, a new spiritual seriousness. The English Renaissance was strongly tinctured by the mood of the Protestant Reformation. Obviously, then, the artist turned often to religion, and what he wrote — the King James Bible of 1611 or the seventeenth-century prayer books, the sermons of John Donne or Jeremy Taylor, Marvell's poems or the epics of John Milton — might mingle a

Renaissance delight in beauty with the Protestant reformer's zeal for religious truth.

Even more fundamental is the fact that the seventeenth century began in unshaken confidence that the universe centered on God and that religion was the heart of life. Theology was, therefore, the noblest of sciences. "Much of that curiosity about the world" which was strong in the Renaissance and "now sends intelligent people to psychology, science, philosophy, or biography was then satisfied within the field of religion." [3] When an artist wrote on religious themes he knew that his work was rooted in life, and his words had "the poise, the easy substance and assurance, of work moving in the main stream of its time." His books gained thereby "robustness" and "breadth," for which, says Helen White, "one often searches in vain in later religious literature." "Here is no thin diagram of possibility but the full round of a dominant view of the world." [4]

Another immensely important reason for the seventeenth century's becoming the great period of English religious literature is the fact that in a very real sense it was the time of the actual English Reformation. The separation of the English church from Rome under Henry VIII had been rather political than religious, and from Elizabeth's reign until the end of the seventeenth century England faced the problem of what English Protestantism was to be in polity and creed. High church Anglicans were content to stay close to the tradition of Rome; more moderate Church of England

men went farther toward Protestantism in doctrine and in liturgy, but believed they should build not only on the Bible but on whatever in Catholicism seemed rationally justified and proved good by the experience of the past. But no Anglican could be complacent, for he had always at his heels a vociferous group of more extreme religious reformers, radical Protestants, who insisted that all that smacked of Rome was bad and that the Bible alone must determine all matters of polity and belief. These men differed among themselves about theological details and forms of worship and church government, but their hatred of Rome and their insistence on the exclusive authority of the Bible united them on major principles. They were the men whom we call, using the word in its most general sense, Puritans. The Puritans who settled Plymouth represented one sect; those who made the great migration to Massachusetts Bay, another; the Presbyterians who for a time were a dominant party in English seventeenth-century politics, a third. Some Puritans never deserted the English Church but tried to reform it from within. Others, like the settlers at Plymouth, separated themselves completely from it. But however much one Puritan group differed from another, all agreed well enough on some essentials of an extreme Protestant position to be critical both of Rome and of Canterbury. The result, of course, was tension and a stimulus to probe into the bases of essential Christian doctrine. In trying to define its Protestantism, Protestant England had to reckon with profound social and political cleavages, since both the

established church and the established government were involved. Only a man virtually blind and deaf could sit apart in smug indifference to theological and ecclesiastical debate. Henry Osborn Taylor once wrote: "The spiritual force animating a new religious movement attracts the intellectual energies of the period, and furnishes them a new reality of purpose." [5] English Protestantism in the early seventeenth century was still in a sense "a new religious movement," since its final form and goal had not been settled and experiment and controversy were rife. And Mr. Taylor's statement is true, probably, not only for religious movements which are "new," but for any that are active. Whatever else religion and theology may have been in the decades after 1600, they were certainly active — so active that they helped to bring on and carry through a great Civil War, to populate a large part of a new continent, and to remodel the lives and thought of thousands of Englishmen. Small wonder that they attracted "the intellectual energies of the period" and that most of the best minds of the time, and most of the best artists, turned at least on occasion to writing of religion.

Thence came volume after volume of controversy, Biblical exposition, verse, pious meditation, and sermons. Of the whole mass, of course, much failed artistically. Theological controversy and exposition then as now were written with an eye to clarity rather than to beauty, and there were then as now plenty of devout and learned men deeply moved by faith who never found words for what they felt. But, on the other

hand, a surprising number of Englishmen in the seventeenth century preached and wrote with such richness of literary effect that their books are alive even though many of their specific doctrines are forgotten or have fallen into disrepute.

The transplanted Englishmen who preached and wrote on the shores of Massachusetts Bay were, it must be remembered if they are to be understood at all, extreme reforming Protestants — Puritans, in common parlance — and it is just as important to remember that most of what now seems best in the religious literature of their day in England was written by devotees of the English church. The Puritan in Boston might protest, and did, that he was not separating himself from that church, or the best of it, but in fact his opposition to the Laudian high-church movement and to what seemed to him its Arminianism made him distrust Anglican ritual, a good deal of official Anglican doctrine, and, naturally, most of what Anglican writers wrote. The New Englander, therefore, commonly could not appreciate — and did not emulate — the best "divine poems" or "holy prose" of his day in England. Instead, the current English books he turned to most often were those of the English Puritans, and those books usually differed markedly from the work of the seventeenth-century Anglican or Catholic.

They did so in large part because of the difference between the Catholic and the Protestant attitudes toward the senses, toward material objects which appeal strongly to them, and toward the use of such objects in worship.