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## **PURITAN SELF-EXAMINATION Solitude and Relationship in the Devotional Literature of the New England Puritans**

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PURITAN SELF-EXAMINATION  
Solitude and Relationship in the Devotional Literature of the New England Puritans

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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## INTRODUCTION

The New England Puritans of the seventeenth century were not a neutral people, and they do not provoke a neutral response. As a people, they held passionate convictions, followed a large vision, humbled themselves mournfully, and celebrated wholeheartedly. While not every Puritan exhibited the same religious intensity, these characteristics predominated in American Puritan communities. They harnessed every aspect of life to support their goal: pure worship of God. Why did they live with such consistency? And, putting aside the issue of their severity with outsiders, why were they so strict on themselves?

The piety, eloquence and intelligence of the Puritans, combined with the intensity of negative modern portrayals, attracted me to these questions, and I found a key to unlock their culture in their copious literature. The focused purposefulness of the American Puritans, who wrote with the same singleness of heart with which they lived, makes their literature unique and powerful. They believed that nothing is neutral, no matter how small a matter it may seem. While it is perhaps their greatest strength, purposefulness is also the source of what can be seen as a Puritan fault: severity toward self and others.

Of the critics who are sympathetic to Puritans, I encountered none who have singled out self-examination for extended discussion. I read critics who initiated the field of American Puritan studies starting in the 1930s, such as Perry Miller, Edmund Morgan, and Kenneth Murdock, eminent later critics like Sacvan Bercovitch, and their modern descendants, including Michael Colacurcio. They explain the New England brand of covenantal theology, Puritan debts to Augustinian piety and to Thomistic scholasticism,

Puritan literary theory, and the significance of the migration to America. These scholars' presentation of Puritan complexity furnished me with material to construct a reliable view of Puritan culture.

Some critics focus on self-examination as incontrovertible proof of the isolated nature of the Puritan self. These scholars take a psychological approach that seems an inappropriate lens for interpreting a devout religious culture. For example, in "Literary Reflections of the Puritan Character," Cynthia Wolff asserts that the Puritan character is divided by an extreme sense of isolation within the sinful self and an intense longing for acceptance in the community of the elect. This divide leads to anxiety and despair, which can also be turned outward to condemn others. In reference to self-examination, Wolff argues that the Puritan self is isolated by secret devotional practices; private and public are irreconcilable. She claims, "No matter which direction the punishing Puritan conscience takes, the man whose character is defined by it will inevitably be isolated from the comforting society of his fellows; and the injunction to keep a diary tends to reinforce the habit of isolation" (22). Wolff's connection of self-examination and isolation surprised me. In Puritan primary texts, I saw just the opposite—self-examination as a relational practice.

The unifying theme of this thesis is the juxtaposition of an isolated self and a relational self. By isolated self, I mean a person who is inwardly focused to the exclusion of other concerns, cut off from communion with God and others. He attempts to change himself but, because of human depravity, lacks the power to achieve transformation. On the contrary, though self-examination is often a solitary practice—that is, performed while physically separate from people—I argue that the Puritan self is definitively not

isolated. For instance, poetess Anne Bradstreet describes a period of self-examination while her husband is away. She says to God:

And Thy abode Thou'st made with me;  
With Thee my soul can talk;  
In secret places Thee I find  
Where I do kneel or walk. (“In My Solitary Houres” 9-12)

The reality of secret devotion is companionship with the Lord; in the “secret places” of private prayer, God is there. The speaker is solitary but not isolated.

A re-evaluation of the devotional exercise in light of its relational aspects contributes to a fuller understanding of the American Puritan experience. In the term “relational,” I comprehend Puritan notions of union with God, dependence on God, sanctification, communion, and covenantal community. The Puritan self is defined by relationships: the soul’s relationship with God and the believer’s relationship with his community. Meditative memory, focused on God’s mercy and personal experience, is the glue for these relationships. Through substantive meditation, a person examines himself in relation to God and community so that the person can fulfill the terms of the covenant and move toward God.

Augustine’s *Confessions* is my source for the main argument of this essay—the non-isolated, relational nature of American Puritan self-examination—and for the chapters’ categories, which explore different aspects of the Puritans’ aim to look beyond self. Augustine is an appropriate source, because his influence on American Puritan devotional practices is widely acknowledged, and *Confessions* began the tradition of spiritual autobiography in which the Puritans followed. I draw a central argument from



*Confessions*: self-examination is a way of moving beyond self. Augustine claims that the purpose of confession is to see God, not just oneself (5). While looking intently within his soul, Augustine continually looks beyond. Therefore, self-examination is primarily concerned with the soul's relation to God.

The themes of my first few chapters correspond with themes in *Confessions*. First, Augustine confesses God's mercy and greatness alongside confessions of sin. Likewise, Puritan self-examination consists of remembering divine mercies as much as condemning sin, hence my discussion of self-examination in terms of memory. Second, because God is the greatest good, even lesser goods can detract from enjoyment of him. Augustine observes, "He loves you less who together with you loves something which he does not love for your sake" (202). This attitude, evident in Puritan writings, explains their willingness to submit to painful examination of inner motives.

Third, *Confessions* allowed me to see a "devotional sequence" in Puritan personal writings, that is, the prayer process of which self-examination is only a stage. I explained Augustine's formulation as "mercy-sin-mercy." Mercy is given for one to be able to see sin. Seeing the sin, one calls out to God, who mercifully reveals himself. Seeing him, one is transformed. Passive voice is key: all action in this process is on God's part. By mercy God draws a person to him and, in light of his perfection, reveals the person's sinfulness. Augustine writes, "You set me before my face so that I should see how vile I was, how twisted and filthy, covered in sores and ulcers...you thrust me before my own eyes so that I should discover my iniquity and hate it" (144-45). Self-loathing is a necessary step to receive mercy. Sacvan Bercovitch cites Augustine as the origin of the Puritan formulation "self-versus-God" (17). After realization of sin, the second mercy in

“mercy-sin-mercy” is God’s work of healing and transformation. It is God alone who works the transformation, which I emphasize in the chapter “The ‘Self.’” Augustine ends with hope, not despair (220), because in God he experiences a “strange sweetness” beyond all else (218). Though Puritans did not always share Augustine’s certainty of salvation, a similar hope—and even the word “sweetness”—is prominent in Puritan writings.

With Augustine in mind, I read a selection from *Gods Determinations*, a long poem by American Puritan Edward Taylor, and reformulated the devotional sequence in terms of Taylor’s language. The sequence shows that self-examination is not an end but a means to commune with and glorify God.

This study is based on selections from myriad Puritan diaries and collections of devotional poetry, two genres that complement one another: “The story that in prose gets told in private diaries, in poetry is told in personal or religious lyrics” (Salska 111). I term these selections “personal writings” or “devotional literature.” Personal writings show the Puritan character perhaps better than the other forms of writing. They record individuals’ struggles for proof of salvation, their earnest and disciplined lives, their abhorrence of sin, and their delight in God’s revelation. I recognize that New England Puritan personal literature flows from the pens of a few influential, exemplary Puritans and may not represent the entire New England population. Nevertheless, supported by a historical understanding of the high literacy level and the unified religious life of church members, the literature can justify conclusions about New England devotional practices. Devotional manuals are also an evident source for Puritan devotional practices, because they were highly influential among the New England population. However, I have

avoided direct use of Puritan devotional manuals, because I prefer to draw from individual Puritans' experiences in implementing the manuals' principles. Nevertheless, I have drawn on critics who studied these manuals extensively, in particular Gordon Wakefield, Charles Hambrick-Stowe and U. Milo Kaufmann.

This paper deals at length with the nature and context of American Puritan self-examination and then briefly surveys its operation in Puritan society and literature. The sequence of the argument is as follows. After defining self-examination, I will explore the concept and content of the practice, particularly its relation to memory. Next, I will connect self-examination to Puritans' life purpose and to the larger devotional context, which point beyond self toward union with God. As long as the believer does not succumb to the danger of extended sin-focused melancholy, self-examination leads to delight in God. Through the study of context, we see that the "self" of self-examination is a soul in communion with God and with Puritan covenantal community, not the self-fashioning entity of modern psychology. The following section, therefore, will address the psychological language used by some critics and my search for appropriate terminology for religious self-examination. Finally, I will look more closely at the communal identity of the early American Puritans and, in particular, the role of words in preserving group memory and encouraging self-examination. Discussion of solitary and community-wide devotional practices will prove that Puritan self-examination, understood in context, draws the self-examining subject out of himself through meditation on God, enjoyment of the divine presence, remembrance of purpose, and responsibility to the covenant community.

## WHAT IS SELF-EXAMINATION?

Self-examination is a thorough examination of one's motives, attitudes, decisions, and behaviors against Biblical standards of holiness. Daily, Puritans evaluated how they had lived that day, sounded their hearts' current state toward God, or set vows for the day to come. In this study, self-examination is an exercise of remembrance, of bending oneself toward a larger purpose, and of submission to divine transformation. Because the practice is abstract and spiritual, I turn to English Puritan Thomas Watson's definition, in which he uses several apt metaphors to describe self-examination.

First, Watson writes, "It is a setting up a court of conscience and keeping a register there, that by a strict scrutiny a man may see how matters stand between God and his soul" (371). Self-examination as a court trial reveals the severity of Puritans toward their sin. Sacvan Bercovitch notes that even the term "self-examination" is negative: the self is under examination as a criminal in a court trial (17). Puritan Charles Chauncy employs the phrase "Self-Trials before the Sacrament" (qtd. in Hambrick-Stowe, *Practice of Piety* 170). I noticed the recurrence of courtroom metaphors in my own readings. The process of examining involves "keeping a register," which for many Puritans means a spiritual journal. Texts are not only records of self-examination; they are an integral part of the ordeal. In Meditation 39, Edward Taylor asks God to "be my Advocate" (44). Similarly, Roger Clap "put himself 'upon...Trial'" (qtd. in Hambrick-Stowe, *Practice of Piety* 7). Cotton Mather, examining his soul during a private "day of humiliation," finds himself "most wofully guilty before the Lord" (Mather 16). The Puritan wants to condemn, sentence and execute the depraved self.

Watson continues, “Self-examination is a spiritual inquisition, a heart-anatomy, whereby a man takes his heart, as a watch, all in pieces, and sees what is defective there” (371). The methodical, surgical tone of these metaphors communicates Puritans’ relentless intensity in self-examination. Nothing could be allowed to escape their attention: “The Puritan’s life was to be above all else the scrutinized one” (Wakefield 75). Puritans were soul-searchers, uncovering every attitude, motive, and secret. Perry Miller writes, “The duty of the Puritan in this world was to know himself—without sparing himself one bit, without flattering himself in the slightest, without concealing from himself a single unpleasant fact about himself” (“Puritan Spirituality” 10). This highly disciplined exercise does not come naturally to human beings, so Puritans develop “helps” to self-examination, especially memory helps or textual aids, both of which will be explored in detail in this paper.

Finally, Watson describes self-examination as “a dialogue with one's self, Ps. lxxvii.6, ‘I commune with my own heart’” (371). This “self-dialogue” is the sticking point for critics, who label it as “schizophrenic,” as I will address in a later section. It would seem that self-dialogue would enclose a person in isolation. Moreover, it would appear that this isolation is anguished, because the Puritan attitude toward self-examination reflects a negative view of self as sinful flesh.

Though self-examination is a painful, harsh concept in itself, its Puritan manifestation is set in a context of religious purposefulness. Self-examination is a means to an end that is positive, joyful and meaningful for the Puritans. Self-examination is about relation with God and coming out of self toward God; it is about executing the self to make room for new life and the greatest joy. Multiple aspects of self-examination

show that it is ultimately meant to pull the self out of its isolation and condemnation.

These aspects include the following three elements: (1) memory, (2) purpose, and (3) the goal of union with God. Through primary source examples, I will explore each of these three in detail in the following pages.

## SELF-EXAMINATION AND MEMORY

Self-examination is, in content and practice, a serious act of remembering. Understanding self-examination in terms of memory highlights the substantive, relational nature of Puritan meditation. Meditation consists of purposefully filling the mind with a spiritually edifying truth and thus engages the mind's powers of focused remembrance. Self-examination and meditation are closely related, for Puritans were expected to meditate upon each idea, memory, sermon, or Biblical precept and then apply it to an examination of their spiritual state. In *The Pilgrim's Progress and Traditions in Puritan Meditation*, U. Milo Kaufmann identifies several forms of meditation employed by the Puritans: meditation on exemplary history, meditation based on reason and logic, heavenly meditation, meditation upon one's conversion, occasional meditation, and meditation on experience. The existence of numerous, distinct categories of meditation suggests the importance of contemplative practices, including self-examination, for the Puritan devotional life. Meditation on experience is particularly relevant to this study because reflections on personal experience appear frequently in the literature under discussion. Further, this type of meditation furnishes examples of self-examination as remembrance of the past.<sup>1</sup>

Meditation on experience is "formal meditation upon the individual's past" and involves remembering past providences, as well as one's purpose and identity (197). Kaufmann sees Scripture as the primary basis for Puritan meditation, but personal experience is like a "secondary Scripture," an authority that communicates God's voice

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<sup>1</sup> In a fuller exploration of memory in self-examination, I would also discuss Scriptural meditation, typology, and the structure of Puritan history. The Puritans' unique perspective on past and present, the passage of time, and the role of communities and individuals would further illumine the connection of self-examination and remembrance.

and shows his involvement in human affairs (211). Kaufmann explains, “In reviewing his past experience, then, the Puritan was discerning the shape of the divinely ordered whole which his life was becoming” (200). Isaac Ambrose urges fellow Puritans to “gather” experiences: to mark and observe events of life, and “to treasure up, and lay in these observations, to have in remembrance such works of God as we have known and observed...and thus, would we treasure up *Experiments*, the former part of our life would come in to help the latter.... This is the use of a sanctified memory” (qtd. in Kaufmann 206). Memories of past experience prompt present transformation.

Samuel Danforth’s 1671 election-day sermon, “A Brief Recognition of New-Englands Errand into the Wilderness,” spells out the connection of self-examination and meditation on experience.<sup>2</sup> According to Danforth, self-examination is the solemn remembrance of divine deliverance, life purpose, and past actions and the application of these memories to one’s present spiritual condition.

Following the Puritan sermon model, this influential pastor expounds upon a short Gospel passage, from which he draws lessons, examples, and applications for the congregation. He selects a text concerning the abatement of the Jews’ original fervor to hear John the Baptist preach, because it mirrors the abatement of New Englanders’ zeal for religious purity. When John began his ministry, the people had flocked to the wilderness to “see that burning and flaming light, which God had raised up” (6). Their zeal, however, soon expired (1). The congregation’s inconstancy is a recurring scriptural pattern: The people go into the wilderness to worship God, and then, forgetting “their Errand into the Wilderness,” they lose their urgency for the things of God.

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<sup>2</sup> The “errand” was the Puritans’ mission to establish a community in the American wilderness as a model of religious purity.



Like the Jews of John the Baptist's day, the Puritan settlers came to the American wilderness with a weighty sense of their mission and with a pure fervor for God. Since then, Danforth claims, the settlers' fervency for God has waned (5). Self-examination is the remedy for spiritual inconstancy: "When men abate and cool in their affection to the pure Worship of God, which they went into the Wilderness to enjoy, the Lord calls upon them seriously and throughly to examine themselves" (8). The call to self-examination is a call to examine oneself in light of memory.

Self-examination consists of serious, active remembrance, for which Danforth identifies three topics. The first subject of meditation is God's gracious deliverances, or "the serious consideration of the inestimable grace and mercy of God" (8). This topic, especially, is a cure for fading religious affections. For the wayward ancient Israelites, God had prescribed "calling to remembrance Gods great and signal love in manifesting himself to them in the Wilderness, in conducting them safely and mercifully, and giving them possession of their promised Inheritance.... The Lord...[brought] to their remembrance his deliverance of them out of Egypt" (8-9). Similarly, the Puritans are to remember God's grace in choosing them, loving them, and bringing them to New England. Further, each individual should remember God's mercies throughout his life, both in salvation and in physical situations, such as deliverance from disease. Meditation focuses on gratitude to God more than the failures of self.

Second, Danforth encourages his Puritan congregation to remember why they came to the New World, for it is "of solemn and serious Enquiry to us all in this general Assembly, Whether we have not in a great measure forgotten our Errand into the Wilderness" (9). Puritans must examine their attitudes and actions against their initial

purpose. While looking at the self, they are bending the self toward a purposeful identity that encompasses God, community, and eternity. This mode of self-examination is the opposite of closing in upon oneself.

Third, self-examination leverages the memory of former joy and spiritual diligence to evaluate the soul's current state. Danforth cries, "Let us call to remembrance the former days, and consider *whether it was not then better with us, then it is now*," through a "strict and rigid examination of our hearts." The people must consider their current situation in contrast to the spiritual passion of their recent past. "Now let us sadly consider," Danforth pleads, "whether our ancient and primitive affections to the Lord Jesus, and his glorious Gospel, his pure and Spiritual Worship and the Order of his House, remain, abide and continue firm, constant, entire and inviolate" (10). With rhetorical power, he glowingly describes the details of their former zeal. After vividly restoring their memory, Danforth piercingly questions the congregation's current state: "Doth not a careless, remiss, flat, dry, cold, dead frame of Spirit, grow in upon us secretly, strongly, prodigiously?" (13). Such a contrast generates urgency to return fully to God and experience revival of spiritual warmth. Meditation on one's spiritual past—the fervent prayers, humble frame of mind, and delight in God's presence—moves one toward God with renewed zeal. Anguished self-examination is thus a stage that leads to joyful spiritual communion.

The link of memory and self-examination is important in understanding that Puritan self-examination consists of serious meditation on substantive realities. The Puritans meditated on God's mercy, human purpose, and past religious experiences in order to productively spotlight their present lives. Therefore, the exercise pulls

individuals out of—or beyond—themselves. While some wallowed in dark contemplation of sin, Puritan teaching called for movement toward union with God and fulfillment of His purpose for their lives.

## SELF-EXAMINATION AND PURITAN PURPOSE

Self-examination needs to be understood in context of Puritan life purpose for three reasons. First, Puritan purposefulness explains the New England communities' intolerance for sin and their willingness to undergo painful, rigorous soul-searching, both of which are mysterious phenomena to modern eyes. They engaged in these practices in order to remember and live by their God-given identity and overarching purpose (recall that purpose is one of Danforth's substantive topics of remembrance). Second, a strong purpose pulls the Puritans out of themselves, toward God. Puritan self-examination does not end in looking at the self. Individuals do not want to find their own, separate identities; they want to glorify and enjoy God by losing their selves in Him. Third, due to New England communities' unique unity of purpose, self-examination was a shared practice that was frequently recorded or spoken, an implication that will be developed in the final section of this thesis. Because self-examination was woven into the fabric of Puritan purposefulness, this devotional practice was neither isolated nor solely self-focused.

The substantive self-examination exhorted by Danforth results in liberation from complacent mediocrity, from an automatic, even-keel, do-what-you-want existence. As such, this painful practice was not a punishment for the Puritans. Rather, Danforth's call to rigid examination was a kindness, because it was the only way to preserve and achieve the Puritans' life purpose. Each thought, experience, activity, relationship, or response has to feed one's spirit and glorify God. In self-examination, every impurity must be rooted out of the heart, and every attitude aligned with revealed truth. Why were the Puritans so insistent in this uncomfortable exercise?

From the tone and subject matter of their writings, it is evident that Puritans did not have a twisted pleasure in torturing themselves; rather, they were peculiarly single-minded in a community-wide, clearly defined purpose. Individual life purpose was drawn, most broadly, from the Calvinist conviction of human purpose; then, from the English separatists' concern for religious purity; and, finally, from a shared covenantal identity among New England Puritans.

As Calvinists, the Puritans upheld a well-known principle in the Westminster Catechism: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever" (Schaff 676). The two purpose clauses—"glorify God" and "enjoy him"—are important to the devotional context of self-examination, as I will explore later. Within the Calvinist branch of Protestantism, English Puritans were named for their special concern with preserving the purity of worship. Establishing pure religion was the way to glorify and enjoy God.

The passion for religious purity propelled a few determined groups of Puritans across the Atlantic to New England, where they hoped to establish an ideal society of purified religion. The New England Puritans believed they were a chosen people, like the ancient Israelites, and they united as a people to accomplish God's will. This assembly is distinctive in that, as one unit ("Body"), they poured all their effort into purity of religion and did not tolerate a single element that could taint their worship. Danforth reminds his congregation of their original aim:

You have solemnly professed before God, Angels and Men, that the Cause of your leaving your Country, Kindred and Fathers houses, and transporting your selves with your Wives, Little Ones and Substance over the vast Ocean into this

waste and howling Wilderness, was *your Liberty to walk in the Faith of the Gospel with all good Conscience according to the Order of the Gospel, and your enjoyment of the pure Worship of God according to his Institution, without humane Mixtures and Impositions.* (9-10, italics original to text)

While liberty of conscience was a powerful motivation to leave England, the positive vision of what they would establish in their new location seems to have been the stronger stimulus. The Puritan migration gives the impression neither of frantic escape nor of aimless drifting. A community uniquely bound by religious covenant made a deliberate, thoroughly examined move.

As individuals and as a society, the New England Puritans were in covenant with the Almighty. Of the covenant, Perry Miller observes, “The essential point was that it made possible a voluntary relation of man to God, even though man’s will was considered impotent and God’s grace irresistible” (*New England Mind* 382). The voluntary quality of the covenant requires action from man: “Man does not recline and say, ‘Let God do it,’ but he reflects, ‘I am engaged by my own consent, I must try to make good my word’” (384). A Puritan, though drawn irresistibly by God’s grace, was fully responsible for his religious action—or inaction.<sup>3</sup> Devotional exercises such as self-examination were crucial practices whereby Puritans could uphold their end of the deal.

The covenantal communities in New England spared no effort to preserve religious purity. Edmund Morgan, in *Visible Saints*, writes, “A church should rest on a

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<sup>3</sup> The paradox of irresistible grace and the voluntary covenant is at the center of Puritan theology. Not only did Puritan ministers and theologians expound upon this knotty issue, but non-Puritan critics and historians have also written tomes about the Puritan theological system. My brief description of the issue, included here to explain Puritans’ intense religious self-discipline, is a necessary but overly brief simplification of Miller’s remarkable, lengthy analysis in *The New England Mind*.

covenant, voluntarily subscribed to by believers, and should exclude or expel all known evildoers” (31). We mostly associate Puritan religious purity with the expulsion of “evildoers,” and this connection rests on truth. However, purity of religion is not primarily a negative goal—one focused on *exclusion*. Rather, it is primarily a positive goal, focused on attainment of an ideal, an ideal that simply does not coexist with certain opposing elements—most notoriously, heretics.

The main enemy to purity is not heretical belief, but spiritual lukewarmness within believers’ hearts. In a lengthy diatribe against *inner* enemies of purity, Samuel Danforth addresses only two sentences to protection from *outer* enemies. More than outside elements, the Puritans were concerned about sin and hypocrisy within themselves. To purify his soul, a believer submits to God voluntarily and through self-examination tries to expel the “evildoers,” such as the devil and sinful impulses. Puritans were so insistent in self-examination because they longed to eradicate all the fleshly enemies of purity within themselves.

To the Puritan mind, nothing is neutral.<sup>4</sup> Every motive or action, however small, either magnifies God’s glory or offends God’s holiness. Cynthia Wolff elaborates upon

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<sup>4</sup> Writing is never neutral, which is why the texts of the Puritans are so unfrivolous. They wrote very little of what we think of as “literature”; they produced sermons, histories, biographies, diaries, spiritual autobiographies and devotional manuals. Colacurcio, writing of the “big books” of the first generation (Bradford’s *Plymouth*, Winthrop’s *Journal*, Johnson’s *Wonder-Working Providence*, Shepard’s *Autobiography*, Hooker’s *Poor Doubting Christian*, and Cotton’s *Rejoinder*), justifies Puritan literary studies in the preface to *Godly Letters*. Though the Puritans did not often set out to write literature, their works are expressions of a culture that “assigned an extraordinarily high place to the life of words” (xiii). The works are “quite good enough to be read through, in their entirety, by all who imagine themselves capable of taking pleasure in the way human tones reveal themselves in a language once vividly expressive but available to us now merely as writing; and in the way writers invent or arrange their own structures of thought in order to encompass other structures of thought, equally human in origin, whether Scriptural or merely systematic, and so to express and transmit the results of their private meditation and social conversation on the most serious of human subjects. To be read...by any critic who has ever wondered...whether there is more to literary life than ‘Poems and Stories’...” (xvii).

the Puritan concern for “lesser” sins: “Indeed, the Puritan was even more concerned about the apparently harmless bodily functions than he was about the problems of lust—perhaps because these lesser transgressions were more elusive and more difficult to control” (17). The Puritan carefully watched against overeating and excessive sleep. All the forerunners of a great sin were considered equivalent to that sin (c.f. the Sermon on the Mount). In *Puritan Devotion*, Gordon Wakefield explains the Puritan belief that “the perfect heart is the single heart,” that is, the Puritans associated spiritual perfection with a single focus on Christ. In practice, this conviction translated into a commitment to “honour the least of God’s commandments” and a prohibition against loving anything—even family—more than Christ (138). The Puritans were careful to examine all attitudes of the heart, even impulses that appeared holy. Wakefield concludes with an encapsulation of the Puritan perspective: “Life is a serious business. It is not a game for us to play” (139).

As a passionately purposeful teenager in the 1720s, eminent pastor Jonathan Edwards questioned every habit, attitude, and idle tendency in his life and aimed to cultivate godly virtue. Edwards's "Resolutions," a long list of personal spiritual goals, serves as a portal into the Puritan perspective on self-examination. At the end of every day, week, month, and year, he meditates on his spiritual condition, duties, successes, and sins. As he seeks full obedience, Edwards leaves no aspect of his life unexamined.

Purity was not an empty goal: the Puritans felt an urgency to attain a holy focus on Christ. Like Augustine, they believed that God is the greatest good, and all lesser goods detract from enjoyment of him. Anne Bradstreet cries, “The world no longer let me Love, / My hope and Treasure lyes Above” (“Upon the Burning of our House” 52-



53). Missionary David Brainerd observes, “Whenever my mind is taken off from the things of this world and set on God, my soul is then at rest” (131). Far from mere self-torture, strictness against sin is considered necessary to clear away lesser pleasures and rest in Christ.

Therefore, the Puritans constantly warned each other against and searched themselves for fleshly considerations that would hinder worship. As a community, they engaged in a fervent pursuit of holiness by means of self-examination. Through exhortation to spiritual disciplines, pastors such as Danforth sought to move themselves and their congregations from lukewarmness to a burning love for God. They refueled interest in godly pursuits by remembering God’s grace and their life goals.

The unique communities in New England, unified by covenant, a common errand, and Calvinist theology, exhort themselves and each other to remember their goal of religious purity. Danforth reminds his congregation that they did not come to the New World for “ludicrous Levity.” He chides,

Then let us not be *Reeds*, light, empty, vain, hollow-hearted Professors, shaken with every wind of Temptation: but solid, serious and sober Christians, constant and stedfast in the Profession and Practice of the Truth, *Trees of Righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified*, holding fast the profession of our Faith without wavering. (16)

To glorify God with “solid, serious and sober” lives, Puritans must daily purge sins and obstructions through self-examination. In this way, they can live pleasingly to the holy God; they can glorify and enjoy him. They focused a remarkable intensity of purpose on matters of eternity, as Gordon Wakefield observes: “We must acknowledge the

tremendous intensity, and high seriousness of the greatest Puritans, who wrote and spoke as though they had witnessed the first creation and had companied with Christ the whole way of his life from His Birth to His Glory” (163). Purity of soul in every aspect of life is the high Puritan standard, and rigorous self-examination is a means to reach the ideal. As explained in the next section, joyful communion with God is the more immediate goal of self-examination.

## THE DEVOTIONAL SEQUENCE

A focus on Puritan purpose not only explains Puritans' subjection to self-examination, but it also supports the premise that Puritan self-examination does not end in looking at the self and its sin. In this section, I will show that this practice does not terminate in self-focus; rather, it is an initial step in a larger religious experience. Because self-examination uses memory and points toward God, the practice enables one to see beyond self in order to "glorify God" and "enjoy him."

The sin-focused part of self-examination is set in a larger devotional sequence that leads to enjoyment of God. God first reveals His holiness, which unveils the horror of human sin; in the light of God's holiness, the self-examining believer finds himself hopelessly guilty; by grace, Christ heals him from the spiritual malady of sin; and, united with God, the believer experiences intense spiritual delight. In their accounts of the process, Puritan writers refer not only to God's awe-inspiring, terrible holiness, but also to His beloved, delightful, fatherly tenderness. When a believer wallows in the initial, sin-focused, conflict-driven stage of self-examination that magnifies God's wrath, he succumbs to extreme melancholy, the danger to which Puritans were most susceptible. I will emphasize that, when executed as part of the devotional sequence and with a balanced view of God, self-examination does not plunge Puritans into despair. Rather, it pulls Puritans them out of themselves into a positive religious experience. Anne Bradstreet's "The Flesh and the Spirit" sets up the need for self-examination, and Edward Taylor's "The Lillie of the Vallies" describes the full sequence.

The central conflict that animates self-examination is the struggle between flesh and spirit. Anne Bradstreet characterizes the two struggling entities in "The Flesh and

the Spirit.” In her creative dramatization, “two sisters”—Flesh and Spirit—dispute in a “secret place...by the Banks of Lacrim flood,” that is, near the flood of the speaker’s tears during her private meditations (1-2). Flesh, the sinful self, “by old Adam [was] begot” (46), whereas Spirit claims to come from God: “My arise is from above, / Whence my dear father I do love” (47-48). The Flesh tempts her sister with the riches, fame, and pleasure of the world, using wily tactics of flattery, wheedling, and even scorn. The Spirit responds firmly:

Be still thou unregenerate part,  
 Disturb no more my settled heart,  
 For I have vow’d, (and so will doe)  
 Thee as a foe, still to pursue.  
 And combate with thee will and must,  
 Untill I see thee laid in th’ dust. (37-42)

Puritan intensity was directed toward defeating sinful self, the “flesh” or “unregenerate part,” which would draw them toward the world. The spirit had been given new life from God; it was “regenerate.” Even after salvation, the struggle continues. As Paul describes in Romans,

Now then there *is* no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus, which walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.... For they that are after the flesh, savor the things of the flesh, but they that are after the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.... And if Christ be in you, the body is dead, because of sin, but the Spirit *is* life for righteousness’ sake.... For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die; but if ye mortify the deeds of the body by the Spirit, ye shall live. (*1599 Geneva Bible*, Rom. 8.1, 5,

10, 13)

The passage reveals that the struggle depicted in Bradstreet's poem—flesh vs. spirit—is the struggle of every Christian. The “flesh” is the unutterably sinful nature that is at enmity with the holy, sinless God. It desires the things of the world, such as material goods, fame, and earthly pleasures. As distinguished from flesh, the “spirit” is God's spirit that dwells in saved persons. The Spirit enables them to fight against sinful desires and maintain an eternal perspective.

Throughout the discussion of Puritan devotion, I draw examples from poets Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, because devotional poetry explains the struggle of self-examination with unique power. First, a devotional poem, which is a personal poetic expression of an individual Puritan's religious devotion, is both intensely individual and enduringly universal. For instance, “The Flesh and the Spirit” depicts both Bradstreet's struggle and the Christian struggle of everyman. I use the term “Bradstreet's struggle,” because Puritan devotional poetry tends to nearly merge poet and persona. In artistic endeavors, Puritans highly valued truth in accordance with religious doctrine, so they were more likely to versify true experience than to fabricate a fictional persona. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that a poem is not a diary, and one cannot assume that the poetic persona fully represents the authorial self. In fact, the distance created by the poetic persona, in contrast to the “I” of a diary, may make this literary form more accessible to readers. As exemplified in “The Flesh and the Spirit,” the poetic form has the capacity to express universal devotional experience. Second, religious experience requires poetic language to express ideas that are beyond physical. Kenneth

Murdock explains that Puritan prose and verse must employ imaginative, poetic devices to capture the inner life of the soul:

True religious experience, a sense of God, a faith in divine beauty, a vision of essential Christian holiness, demand more for expression than logical structure and the accurate use of words in literal meanings.... Insofar as religion is a matter of inner experience, of faith as opposed to mere knowledge, it requires imaginative means for its full expression. (9)

Metaphor illumines the intangible act of self-examination in a necessary way, which is the reason I initially defined self-examination through Thomas Watson's metaphors of courtroom, surgery, and watch repair.

Puritan devotional poetry not only describes self-examination; it invites readers to examine their own hearts. These poems are material for active self-examination. Critics agree that Puritan poems were printed for reader affect, as catalysts for soul-searching. Barbara Lewalski, writing of the seventeenth century Protestant religious lyric more generally, notes that these poems drew heavily on scripture (language, tropes, typology, lyric models, etc.) and on Protestant conceptions of the role of art (425). "Protestant poetics," she observes, "provided a powerful stimulus to the imagination by promoting a profound creative response to the written word of scripture and inviting a searching scrutiny of the human heart" (426). The poems I use as examples, then, while they originate as personal reflections on an individual's devotional life, extend to all individuals in the covenantal community. From these poems, I observe patterns about Protestant, as well as particularly Puritan, approaches to devotional practices.

Bradstreet's "The Flesh and the Spirit" demonstrates the interior feud of flesh and spirit that generates distress in self-examination. The flesh-spirit conflict is thus the starting point for the devotional sequence. Puritans can overcome this daily struggle by seeking God's aid through self-examination and by prompting memory of their religious priorities. After seeing God's glory and examining one's own sins, the Christian is healed and transformed by God and may enter a state of peaceful delight.

I emphasize the full sequence (as outlined in the previous sentence), because there is a tendency among scholars, teachers, and other readers to cut short the process. The unanimous halting place is the woeful stage of self-examination: one sees the anguished Puritan weeping night and day, confessing his abject state before the congregation, and cataloguing his minutest sins in a journal. This stereotype is propagated because it has a basis; refusing God's full grace was an error made by some pious Puritans. It is also propagated because Puritans more frequently kept written records of anguish than of celebration, as Murdock observes (106). The texts may not accurately reflect the balance of joy and angst in Puritan life, since Puritans did not as often write down their joy. They certainly were not continually focused on sin and death. Perry Miller points out that there is very little "hell-fire" in seventeenth century New England sermons:

Puritan ministers did not bludgeon their people with the bloody club of damnation because their eyes were fixed upon the positive side of religion, upon the beauties of salvation, the glory of God, and the joy of faith. The worst they could imagine for the reprobate was not physical burnings and unslaked thirst, but the deprivation of God's spirit. ("Puritan Spirituality" 12-13)

Puritans feared distance from their Lord, and they emphasized the positive goal of solitary communion with God. Gordon Wakefield cites Puritan sources, including Robert Bolton, who “goes so far as to say that spiritual joy in contrast with carnal is ‘ordinarily most free, full and at the highest in solitarinesse, soliloquies, and the most retired exercises of the soul’” (Wakefield 67).

While internal conflict is evident in Puritan writings, Puritan doctrine moves believers beyond anguish to a relational delight in God’s presence.

Edward Taylor, in his meditation “The Lillie of the Vallies,” sets self-examination in the context of the devotional sequence, balancing consciousness of his sinfulness with an experience of Christ’s sweetness and hope. The following couplet encapsulates the devotional sequence: “Yea Christ the Lilly of the Vallies shall / Be to mee Glory, Med’cine, Sweetness, all” (29-30). Christ’s “Glory,” first, reveals the soul’s diseased state; the “Med’cine” of Christ cures the spiritual illness; and His “Sweetness” is the present reward of spiritual union. The final word (“all”) could emphasize that Christ fills all three of the preceding functions, or it could indicate that Christ is “all in all” to the saved person.

Taylor wrote his *Preparatory Meditations* during over forty years as a minister, composing one meditation prior to every Communion Sunday. These meditations were an integral part of his personal devotions, and he never intended for them to be made public. “The Lillie of the Vallies” is part of Taylor’s Canticles series, which set forth key metaphors for “Christ the Bridegroom,” such as rose of Sharon or lily of the valley. According to Lewalski, the metaphors “serve both to praise Christ and to extend to the



speaker the properties these tropes signify (grace, cure, relationship)” (418). Grace, cure, and relationship are precisely the elements of the poem that demonstrate the relational nature of the devotional sequence.

As a result of a revelation of God’s glory, the speaker recognizes that his soul is ruled by revolting “Spirituall Maladies.” Self-examination always occurs in the light of Christ’s holiness—looking to God’s perfection, one sees one’s own imperfection. The glory of the “Lillie,” i.e. of Christ, “shews I’m filthy” (23). While the savior is presented in the Biblical metaphor of purity, the lily of the valleys, the speaker is like a decomposing organism set amongst the white lilies: “Soule Sickneses do nest in mee: and Pride. / I nauseous am: and mine iniquities / Like Crawling Worms doe worm eat on my joys” (10-12). Christ’s beauty and sweet fragrance disclose, through contrast, the speaker’s own nauseous sin-sickness. Wakefield notes the correspondence between beholding God’s glory and seeing one’s own vile nature:

Contrition and humiliation...arise out of adoration, and of the consciousness of the infinite gulf between God and man.... The remembrance of His majesty begins each prayer. Thus the meanness of our nature is revealed, and our desert of punishment. (73)

Recognition of one’s sins results from awareness of God’s majesty. In the devotional sequence, self-examination begins with remembrance of divine glory.

Divine glory both reveals the diseased human estate and points to the remedy. Christ, whose supernatural beauty exposes human disease, is himself the “Med’cine” that purifies the soul’s filth and heals the soul’s sickness. “Its Healing Virtue shew I’m sick:

yet rare / Rich Remedies I'st in this Lilly finde," muses the speaker (27-28). Overcome by the mercy of Christ as "Med'cine," he exclaims:

But, Oh! the Wonder! Christ alone the Sun  
Of Righteousness, that he might do the Cure  
The Lilly of the Vallies is become  
Whose Lillie properties do health restore. (19-22)

Christ is the cure for the disease of sin, and his purity restores the health of the soul.

After healing, the speaker experiences the "Sweetness" of Christ's presence, as well as the pleasure of taking on Christ's properties. The "Beauty, Odour, Med'cin, Humble Case" of Christ "begrace" the speaker's soul (35-36). The speaker is completely transformed from a "Nauseous Stinck" to "beautifull, fully." Through the speaker's surrender and Christ's healing, a fuller relationship is born: "Then I am thine, and thou art mine indeed. / Propriety is mutuall..." (38-39). Taylor emphasizes nearness of relation to Christ, who is the bridegroom.

Christ infuses the speaker with sweetness and, in turn, the speaker poetically sings God's praises on a "Well tun'de string." A poem that had begun with a doleful cry—"Dull! Dull! my Lord, as if I eaten had / A Peck of Melancholy"—ends in a blissful, triumphant note of praise (1-2). While self-examination often involves melancholy emotions—and even anguish—about sin, its purpose in the devotional sequence is to prepare the individual for delightful union with God.

I have emphasized "cure" and "grace," but "relationship" is the other aspect of the poem that clarifies self-examination. Simply put, the comfort sought through self-examination is found in relationship with God. Just as Taylor found solace in "mutuall

propriety,” so in Bradstreet’s times of meditation, she loves to belong to God. Her soul unburdens itself to the all-seeing deity and then reposes in the dearly loved, fully present Father. Bradstreet emphasizes the personal, relational aspects of God rather than His power, truth, and holiness. Her consolation is not in Christ as creator and master, but in the more intimate ties to which He invites her. In a prose meditation, she writes, “Thou art my Father, I thy child..... Christ is my Brother.... But least this should not bee enough, thy maker is thy husband. Nay, more, I am a member of his Body; he, my head” (“Meditations”). God is more precious than all family members combined, for He supplies the place of father, brother, and husband.

As the full title suggests—“Meditations When My Soul Hath Been Refreshed with the Consolations Which the World Knowes Not”—the comfort of the personal God is incomprehensible to outsiders. Christ’s delight is a mystery known only to those who own Him as Lord, father, husband, and head, and who can say with Bradstreet, “In Thee Alone is more then All” (“In My Solitary Houres” 31). The intense delight of nearness to God seems reserved for those who seek Him through secret prayer and self-examination.

The devotional sequence, made necessary by the conflict of flesh and spirit, leads the believer to a resolution of this conflict. The devotional sequence does not terminate in self-focus but in remembrance of God and one’s identity in relation to Him. Conflict resolution and remembrance are just parts of a complete transformation that is accomplished by Christ. According to Taylor’s poem, which is a reformulation of the Biblical and Augustinian devotional sequences, Christ mercifully reveals himself; the Puritan is responsible for examining his sin; and then Christ heals the Puritan, freeing

him from sin to enjoy divine communion. By grace, the Puritan is cured from sin for that time and can rest in a near relationship with his God.

## THE DANGER AND DELIGHT OF SELF-EXAMINATION

At least one New England Puritan, the meditational poet Edward Taylor, recognized the dangerous tendency inherent in self-examination. The main danger is the magnifying of one's sins to the point that God's grace appears insufficient. Unbalanced self-examination focuses on the sinful self, severing self-examination from all that would draw the person beyond self. In particular, skewed self-examination suppresses two critical elements: (1) remembrance of God's mercies and human purpose, and (2) a balanced understanding of God. The unbalanced attitude manifests as an inordinate focus on God's wrath and a drawn-out grief for one's failures. As seen in the primary texts, a sin-focused state tends to result in isolated self-examination, rather than Christ-focused self-examination. Conversely, when the Puritan writer testifies to a realization of God's grace, expressions of delighted gratefulness usually follow.

As a preface to Taylor's poem about danger and delight, David Brainerd is a useful case study for the purposefulness of self-examination, as well as what can happen when the devotional sequence is not completed. His diary shows that single-mindedness can become a weakness and lead to extreme melancholy. Excessive melancholy comes from halting in sin-focused self-examination, rather than following the devotional sequence. Though Brainerd succumbed to extended melancholy, the progression of his diary shows him lifted out of himself and experiencing sweetness in God. A contemporary of Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth century, Brainerd is nonetheless a prime example of the Puritan mind. Brainerd was a highly educated, passionately religious young man who sacrificed his health to live and preach among the American Indians. Brainerd is particularly pertinent to this study, because his diary records

discoveries during daily self-examination. He is complex, because he tends toward excessive melancholy but overcomes it regularly for delight in God. Brainerd demonstrates both the ideal of the devotional sequence and the danger of wallowing in sin-focused self-examination.

Brainerd was among the more fervent Puritans, who were careful to examine all attitudes of the heart, even impulses that appeared holy. So faithful were the Puritans to “grace alone” that pious practices—if performed from self-exertion and to earn salvation—could be considered sinful acts of pride. Brainerd poured his life into prayer, fasting, and other exercises for years, but he gained no assurance of salvation. He realized later that these were all selfish acts. Because he lacked reliance on grace, the more he tried to be holy, the deeper he was mired in sin:

I saw it was self-interest had led me to pray, and that I had never once prayed from any respect to the glory of God....I saw that I had been heaping up my devotions before God, fasting, praying, pretending, and indeed really thinking sometimes that I was aiming at the glory of God; whereas I never once truly intended it, but only my own happiness. (68)

In the above passage, Brainerd reveals the Puritan attitude toward behavior: the underlying motivation is what matters. Judging his former prayers by this standard, Brainerd saw that he had desired his own happiness above the true purpose: God’s glory. Miller observes, “Guilt or innocence consisted not in what was done but in what was intended” (*New England Mind* 52). To be secure in salvation, one must understand that salvation depends on grace, not on the outward appearance of devotional practices. Since intentions cannot be judged from outside, and judging one’s own motives is a tricky

business, Puritans navigated soul-searching by using Bible-, memory- and prayer-based methods of self-examination.

The danger is that, if Puritans lose sight of divine grace, they pervert self-examination into an extreme focus upon their sins. Confronted with the hideous mountain of his own failings, a believer feels trapped in perpetual, hopeless condemnation. His inner world closes in on itself. Puritan writing is most remembered, perhaps, for passages written by believers in this state. For example, on January 23, 1743, as Brainerd prepared for his first missionary venture, he recorded, “I scarce ever felt myself so unfit to exist as now. Saw I was not worthy of a place among the Indians, where I am going, if God permit.... Indeed I felt myself banished from the earth, as if all places were too good for such a wretch” (113). On April 8, Brainerd is overwhelmed by recollection of past sin:

Its vile nature and dreadful consequences appeared in such odious colors to me that my very heart was pained. I saw my desert of hell on this account. My soul was full of inward anguish and shame before God.... This day was almost wholly spent in such bitter and soul-afflicting reflections on my past frames and conduct.  
(119-20)

And again, on January 1, 1744, “Saw myself so vile and unworthy that I could not look my people in the face when I came to preach. Oh, my meanness, folly, ignorance, and inward pollution!” (146). Such declamations contribute to the stereotype of the severe, self-punishing Puritan who bewails spiritual infirmities and incessantly catalogues his sins.

In the Preface to Brainerd's *Life and Diary*, Jonathan Edwards acknowledges that excessive melancholy is Brainerd's one weakness. After lauding Brainerd's Christ-like example, Edwards admits, "There is one thing in Mr. Brainerd, easily discernible by the following account of his life, which may be called an imperfection in him...and that is, *that he was, by his constitution and natural temper, so prone to melancholy and dejection of spirit*" (Brainerd 45-46, italics in original text). Edwards describes Brainerd's disposition as "the disease of melancholy" (47), which "operated by dark and discouraging thoughts of himself, as ignorant, wicked, and wholly unfit for the work of the ministry, or even to be seen among mankind" (48). Edwards's admission of this "imperfection" or "disease" proves that prolonged melancholy was not the normal Puritan way, but was an exception or excess.

Brainerd's diary shows a progression from exceeding despair over sin and a focus on his feelings, to increasingly frequent times of delight, revelation, or concern for others' salvation. After Brainerd's salvation, which was a sublime experience during a walk in the woods, he is still dogged by sin-provoked misery for a disproportionate amount of his time. Eventually, the balance tips, and he experiences more frequent consolation in prayer. This shift was considered a realistic, desirable indication of spiritual progress. Hambrick-Stowe observes, "The gradual development of the ability to pray followed precisely the redemptive order, with prayers of confession predominating during the preparatory stages and prayers of thanksgiving and petition increasing as the devout made progress" (H-S178). Brainerd's spiritual development shows that the melancholic Puritans were neither intended nor doomed to remain discouraged.



David Brainerd at last obtained assurance of salvation. Even after salvation, though, piety fully depends on Christ's work. Brainerd continued to be aware of human motives and God's grace throughout his life. For example, he later wrote,

Had some intense and passionate breathings of soul after holiness, and very clear manifestations of my utter inability to procure, or work it in myself; it is wholly owing to the power of God. Oh, with what tenderness the love and desire of holiness fills the soul! I wanted to wing out of myself to God, or rather to get a conformity to Him. (*Life and Diary* Part V)

Contrasted to the first quotation of this section, the entry above shows a shift from selfish to selfless piety. He is thrilled by his helplessness and God's sufficiency. His phrase "wing out of myself to God" is significant. Aflame with desire for holiness, he longs to be freed from old desires and grow more like God. Moving from self toward God is the same as being conformed to God. Conformity with God—and the side effects of "tenderness," "love," and "desire"—is the goal of self-examination.

If Brainerd's melancholic writings are deeply anguished, his joyful writings are even more deeply ecstatic. In fact, one of the most repeated words in the diary is "sweetness," a term applied to Brainerd's secret devotional experience. In Puritan writings, the relief from anguish is real and is followed by intense delight in spiritual things. Brainerd records a "sweet" surrender to Christ:

God was pleased to make it a humbling season at first, though afterwards He gave me sweetness.... At night, God enabled me to give my soul up to Him, to cast myself upon Him, to be ordered and disposed of according to His sovereign pleasure.... My soul took sweet delight in God; my thoughts freely and sweetly

centered in Him. Oh, that I could spend every moment of my life to His glory!

(83)

Again he observes, “I found divine help and consolation in the precious duties of secret prayer and self-examination, and my soul took delight in the blessed God” (Oct. 13). God thus fills the believer with an ineffable delight in his ways that far surpasses other enjoyments.

Brainerd illustrates an exemplary religious life aimed at deeper union with God. Though tainted by a common Puritan tendency to melancholy, his writings were not dominated by anguish. His intensity and sin-consciousness inclined him to condemn himself very harshly and passionately, but his times of surrender to Christ became richer and more frequent. Brainerd grew toward the goal of self-examination as he learned to meditate more hopefully on God’s grace. This growth was marked by fervent longings to lose himself in Christ and to be instrumental in others’ salvation; thus, self-examination balanced by grace and delight meant that Brainerd focused less on self.

In an excerpt from his long public poem *Gods Determinations*, Taylor dramatizes the need for self-denigrating Puritans to accept God’s grace. Taylor’s speaker shows that a negative mindset, such as found in some of Brainerd’s despairing diary entries, is a dangerous, deplorable lack of faith. When God reveals His grace and fatherly love, hope produces delight and thanksgiving in the speaker’s soul.

In a section titled “The Souls Groan to Christ for Succor,” the speaker confesses his tendency to magnify his sins and lessen God’s grace. During a session of self-examination, the speaker is his own courtroom accuser: “For in my soul, my soul finds

many faults” (4). Another accuser is present, though—the devil. This enemy tempts Taylor to “mount” his sins, or pile them higher than they actually are (7). Writing in the form of a prayer, the speaker complains that the devil labors “Thy grace to lessen, and thy Wrath t’inhance” (9). The devil raises his sins before his eyes, until they obscure the greatness of God’s grace. The speaker recognizes his vulnerability to this subtle temptation and, overwhelmed by the accusations, he cries to God, “I do Condemn myself before thy Grace” (6). The sentence of condemnation is false, for it contradicts the forgiving verdict of God’s grace.

In the following segment, “Christ’s Reply,” Christ dispels the dark accusations with a consoling presentation of His grace. Rather than appearing as a God of great wrath, Christ speaks as a benevolent father. He comfortingly responds with assurances, as to a tiny child: “Peace, Peace, my Hony, do not Cry, / My Little Darling, wipe thine eye” (1-2). The content of his message is even more comforting: “I smote thy sins upon the Head” (31) and “I’ll put away the Guilt thereof” (34). After removing blame, he emphasizes the patient, kind nature of God: “I dare the World therefore to show / A God like me, to anger slow” (79-80). What a contrast to the voice of the “enemy,” which had magnified the guilt! This God “frowns with a Smiling Face” (84), which is the Puritan paradox: a people who, like their God, are serious and joyful, severe and tender. The merciful Christ promises future aid to the speaker: When you find in prayer “a wandering minde, / In Sermons Spirits dull” (98-99), these are faults of your tempter; come to my grace and you will find “a pleasant face” (108). Christ reverses the verdict: Not guilty. He delivers the kind judgment not in the guise of omnipotent Judge, but in the tender role of Father.

In this portrayal of the speaker and of Christ, Taylor pinpoints the tendency shared by Puritan contemporaries: to believe a guilty verdict that has been nullified by Christ. Taylor's poem urges believers to recognize the falsity of harsh accusations—whether made by their own souls or by the devil—and to accept only God's gracious verdict. Puritans who tend toward melancholy would benefit from Taylor's presentation of Christ. Humans so easily forget God's goodness, Taylor knew; this poem was a reminder to Puritan readers.

When Christ illumines His grace and love, gratitude and delight overwhelm the speaker's soul. In the final section of the sequence in *Gods Determinations*, titled "An Extasy of Joy Let in by this Reply Returnd in Admiration," even the metrical scheme communicates Taylor's desire to thank God. Each quatrain begins with five feet in the first line, then four, four and three. Human words fail to express adequate thankfulness, so lines have fewer feet as the stanza progresses. Significantly, each stanza ends with three feet: a trinity, or symbol of divine completion and perfection. The form mirrors the speaker's remembrance of God's perfection.

A reading of this poetic excerpt identifies a rule of Puritan self-examination: Memory of God's mercy must follow meditation on sin. Without both topics of meditation, self-examination hobbles on one leg. The person's soul is crippled, never allowed to soar out of self toward God. In a widely read devotional manual, John Downname taught:

Wee are not to bend all our thoughts to meditate and call to mind all our sins... The huge cloud of our sinnes being neere our eyes, will hide from our sight the shining beames of Gods mercy and Christs merit.... As soone as wee cast one

eye upon our sins for our humiliation, let us cast the other presently upon Christ Jesus, who hath payd the price for our redemption, and suffered all the punishment which we by our sins have deserved. (qtd. in Hambrick-Stowe, *Practice of Piety* 167)

As Gordon Wakefield notes in *Puritan Devotion*, Puritans espoused Downname's principle of meditating simultaneously on sins and on Christ. Influential Puritan John Owen enumerates two "things to be aimed at in prayer": first, "the spiritual intense fixation of the mind, by contemplation on God in Christ, until the soul be as it were swallowed up in admiration and delight, and...it returns again into its own abasements, out of a sense of its infinite distance" and, second, "the inexpressible rest and satisfaction which the will and affection receive in their approaches unto the eternal Fountain of goodness" (qtd. in Wakefield 89). Wakefield emphasizes that these things are "gifts of God, not the achievements of devotional technique" (89). Through grace, Puritans turned their eyes toward God as self-examination proceeded. Wakefield further observes, "The Puritan was not for ever stirring up the cesspool of his iniquities" (75). They shared the heart of Richard Baxter, who wrote, "I should look oftener upon Christ and God and heaven, than upon my own heart" (75). The aim is to focus on Christ's worthiness, not just on one's own unworthiness.

In contrast to David Brainerd's sin-mired negativity in the early diary entries, Taylor's speaker in *Gods Determinations* follows through to the goal of self-examination. He looks to Christ, and Grace casts the mountain of sin into a sea of forgetfulness. God easily displaces what had before seemed devastatingly insurmountable and fills his eyes with a soul-satisfying view of God's fatherly love and beautiful holiness. Taylor's poem

shows the balance required between memory of one's own failings and memory of God's character and works. The poem also reveals the Puritan struggle to achieve this balance—to move beyond their sins and accept Christ's verdict to the elect: Not guilty.

## WHAT IS THE “SELF” IN SELF-EXAMINATION?

To show that the act of self-examination is solitary but not isolated, we first defined self-examination through metaphors and then in terms of memory. Memory of one’s religious purpose is especially crucial to the Puritans and explains their seriousness in self-examination, which results from a vision larger than themselves: a community-wide desire for purity. Further, the religious purpose of glorifying and enjoying God is directed out of self toward God. As a means to deeper communion with God, self-examination is relational rather than isolated. Even when one is alone in prayer, the spirit is present, working a transformation in the self. This section recounts the process of choosing words to convey the transformation of the Puritan self-examining self.

Students of the Puritans inevitably encounter difficulties of terminology. Does one use the Biblical phrases the Puritans used, but which have been colored by multiple theological traditions and are not as familiar today? Does one use jargon from a modern field to be understood by academic audiences? Conflicting concepts of the self’s inner transformation raised a difficulty of terminology in this study.

Because of its evolution throughout modernity, “self” is a particularly ambiguous term. As I first became interested in self-examination, I read “self” simply as the individual person performing the soul-searching. However, after reading various critics and comparing them with the texts, I noticed a distinction between Puritans’ and critics’ formulations of the self’s role in self-examination. On the one hand, the Puritans base their view of self upon the Biblical formulation of the Christian life. As described in previous chapters, the self is locked in the conflict of “flesh” and “spirit,” but Christ’s power vanquishes sinful flesh, and by His grace the soul lives in holiness. On the other

hand, some Puritan scholars adopt a psychological view of self, which proposes an entity that “remakes” or “fashions” itself through its own inner will.<sup>5</sup> This concept of “self” negates dependence on God and, thus, negates my premise that self-examination moves believers beyond self to relation with God and community. The two concepts—Puritan and psychological—are mutually exclusive: transformation during self-examination is either the work of God or of the autonomous self. New England Puritan authors repeatedly define the transformation of the self-examining self as a work completely performed by God, who causes the sinful flesh to die and animates the regenerate soul to live unto God.

In the Puritan perspective as expressed in early New England texts, the sinful self is transformed by divine power, but modern critics sometimes assume that the person must transform himself. The action in the salvation process is God’s: He calls, draws, convicts, redeems, heals, and sanctifies. The individual, for his part, does nothing. Even the ability to respond does not originate within him; it, too, is a gift of God. Illustrating this principle, David Brainerd recorded in his diary, “Had some intense and passionate breathings of soul after holiness, and very clear manifestations of my utter inability to procure, or work it in myself; it is wholly owing to the power of God” (129). The entire journey of faith resulted from God’s work in the soul. In secret devotions, God provided the content of the exercise (Scripture) and the will to perform it; human ability played no role in devotional practice (Hambrick-Stowe, *Practice of Piety* 45). Puritans favored the apt metaphor of horticulture, casting God as the Gardener of their souls (80). In contrast

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<sup>5</sup> For one example, see Margo Todd’s article “Puritan Self-Fashioning: The Diary of Samuel Ward” (*The Journal of British Studies* 31.3, Jul. 1992, 236-264).



to the psychological self that can remake itself, the Puritan self prays to be uprooted, sown afresh, and cultivated by a divine work of grace.

I made note of the terminology choices of several twentieth century critics. Perry Miller tries not to use clichéd religious terms, so he sometimes turns to Platonic language. The result is a rather impersonal-sounding, non-Puritan God: “the principle of universal harmony and the guide.” Sin becomes a “disharmony” rather than disobedience. Regeneration of the soul is the carrying of “supernal beauty...across the gulf of separation” (*New England Mind* 33). Throughout is a glaring absence of the name of Christ, the center of Puritan salvation doctrine. Nevertheless, Platonic language is effective in this instance: “[Regeneration] joined God and man, the whole and the particle. God reached out to man with His grace, man reached out to God with his faith.... All men seek the good, but only those who in unforgettable moments are ravished by it ever come to know it” (9). At other times, Miller employs psychological terms. For instance, “Puritanism would make every man an expert psychologist, to detect all makeshift ‘rationalizations,’ to shatter without pity the sweet dreams of self-enhancement in which the ego takes refuge from reality” (“Puritan Spirituality” 9). The sermons were “exposing...the abysmal tricks which the subconscious can play” (10). These phrases ably communicate the concept of self-scrutiny, but I am concerned that the words carry modern connotations that do not belong to the Puritans.

Bolder uses of psychological language better illustrate the contrast between seventeenth century Puritan thought and modern criticism. The Puritan diary, writes Cynthia Wolff, is an “*alter ego* or an objectified embodiment of self” (16). She references “psychological energy” (36) and the “two selves” of each Puritan, which are

the source of anxiety and despair (20). Unlike Miller, Wolff carries her terminology to its natural conclusion: the Puritan self is a psychologically instable, frustrated ego. Kenneth Murdock sees devotional writing as a confessional outlet for anxiety (104). He writes, “Whether we choose to phrase the fact in psychological or in theological terms, it seems plain that many men and women need some way of escape from the strain of inner conflicts and emotional disturbances” (102). He chooses psychological terms, especially “tension” and “suppression.” The language changes the understanding of the devotional act: it is a temporary escape from anxiety, not a resolution of conflict that draws the believer to communion with God.

Sacvan Bercovitch, too, subtly employs psychological terminology to discuss the New England Puritans. I choose to focus on Bercovitch because my insights about self, soul, and Puritan theology are highly indebted to this eminent scholar, one of the founders of Puritan studies. His seminal works discuss Puritanism and its effect on the development of America; he demonstrates understanding and respect for the New England Puritan culture. Bercovitch articulates Puritans’ conception of human nature, debts to the Reformation and Renaissance, and longing to lose the self in Christ. He understands that the Puritans denounce man’s ability to save or even alter himself. Therefore, I was particularly intrigued to discover signs of psychologically-based assumptions in his analysis.

While Bercovitch recognizes Puritan beliefs about human insufficiency, he attributes to the Puritans an underlying, almost hypocritical, reliance on themselves. In self-examination, the Puritan had “somehow to reconstitute himself, still relying on the resources of the internal will” (23), and “communion meant...transforming oneself

completely into His image” (14). The active structure of these sentences makes clear that the Puritan devotee, not God, is the sole actor in the devotional process. The Puritan transforms and reconstitutes *himself*, relying on internal resources. Ironically, this isolated, self-dependent process is Bercovitch’s definition of “communion,” a word that denotes intimate communication with God.

When one uses the psychological view to understand the Puritans, the result is unresolvable contradiction. Bercovitch shows that a Puritan’s effort to “reconstitute himself” was futile, because Puritan doctrine teaches that man has no internal resources for such a feat. Due to fallen human nature, the Puritan must begin self-examination by “admit[ting] his impotence” (23). Further, the Puritan self is contradictory, Bercovitch argues, because self-examination calls upon the self to engage in an analysis of its own person, thus feeding rather than destroying the self’s pre-eminence. In other words, “The militancy they hoped would abase the self released all the energies of the self” (18). The process escalates into a “self civil war,” in which the self attempts to devolve into nothingness but is actually strengthened through examination (19). In Bercovitch’s view, the tension between the focus on self and the desire to “die to self” is irreconcilable and causes the violent anguish evident in some Puritan texts.

Puritan divines argue—and certain personal devotional texts show—that no contradiction exists, because Christ’s healing power and grace are sufficient. Christ cleanses the sinful self and frees the anguished soul to glorify and enjoy Him. This sequence remains the Puritan belief, even though not all Puritans experienced its completion—rest in divine grace. However, Bercovitch assumes that the relief of Christ’s grace is a psychological invention of the Puritan mind—“a schizophrenic single-

mindfulness” (23). Instead of taking their experiences of “sweetness” and “ecstasy” at face value, he thinks that in these peaceful moments Puritans are making “a temporary truce with themselves” (20). This hopeless vision of the Puritan interior life destroys the possibility of reading the Puritans as they saw themselves. Bercovitch has subtly undercut the purposefulness of the Puritan way of life: Without the hope of deliverance by and union with Christ, the Puritans’ spiritual passion, sacrifices, ponderous studies, hours of prayer, tears and groans, feasts of thanksgiving, and even their literary works, were in vain. In a psychological formulation, Bercovitch is justified using the descriptor “schizophrenic” (23), for the Puritan self is all that exists, battling itself in an exhausting, interminable struggle. Because Bercovitch underemphasizes the joyful goal of self-examination, he may have missed the heart of the Puritan devotional experience: holy union with Christ and community.

Reading the Puritans through the psychological lens can rob the texts of the richness of certain Puritan concepts, such as covenant, community, delight, and a concern for God’s glory. In the end, I chose to retain the word “self” but to define it in terms of Puritan theology, which presents self as an entity in relationship with God and others. A relational definition of self clarifies the purposefulness and context of Puritan self-examination. In fact, my main argument centers on this issue of terminology: the distinction between isolated self and relational self. The relational self, transformed by divine power, employs self-examination as a means to draw near to God and to others in the community. In the next section, I will survey the communal and linguistic context of self-examination.

## COMMUNITY AND TEXTUAL MEMORY

The transformation of self, as we have seen, is part of a devotional sequence that reaches beyond self to God. Self-examination is therefore relational: the dependent relation of the self upon God, the sinner upon grace, the child upon the Father. Among the American Puritans, self-examination was relational in a human sense, as well. Puritan self-examination was a community experience. The self-examining individual was not cut off from the world; though solitary, he was participating in a widespread practice and a public conversation about fulfilling the covenant. Due to their common covenantal responsibilities, the individuals of the community pursued this practice, and they used their high level of literacy to publicly exhort each other to deeper self-examination. Two corollaries follow: self-examination was limited to neither public nor private spheres, and Puritans circulated texts encouraging the practice in order to preserve communal identity.

The Puritans engaged in self-examination as a community because of their responsibility to uphold two covenants: their individual covenant with the Lord and the church covenant. The individual covenant, which a person enters during salvation, Perry Millers terms “the Covenant of Grace.” In this covenant of individual and God, one promises to perform duties to other men as well as to God (*New England Mind* 445). As a result, self-examination involves soul-searching not only for acts against God but also for sins against one’s neighbors. The individual covenant was almost inseparable from the community covenant, for Puritans required public profession of personal faith and binding oneself by covenant (449). When one enters the Covenant of Grace, one is expected to enter the public church covenant. Miller points out that these two covenants

mirrored each other: “In their church polity they identified the Covenant of Grace, which was of the soul, with the covenant of the church, which was of the community” (461). With this double bond, Puritans united in an aim to establish pure religion (457). The pious Puritan individual—and his self-examination—must therefore be understood within his church congregation, within the Church covenant.

It is necessary to emphasize that, though solitary individuals and church congregations both engage in self-examination, there is no significant public-private divide in the devotional practices of Puritan society. Critics have promoted an understanding that separates public and private spheres. In *The Practice of Piety*, Hambrick-Stowe writes, “The means of grace were technically divided into two groups, ordinances of public worship and private devotions” (93). The Puritans themselves apparently made this distinction, which can be helpful for determining the number of people present for worship. Hambrick-Stowe qualifies the distinction: “The unity of public and private devotion was indeed characteristic of Puritan spirituality” (100). However, Agnieszka Salska sees a more radical “polarization of their writings into public and private or, still deeper perhaps...the cultural polarization into public and private self” (117). She defines private as something that responds to an individual need or experience, while public expresses a cultural convention (118). These separate identities can lead to a rigidly divided self, Salska posits, and private poems express the experience of one half—the inner man—as distinguished from the social self (119). Salska’s view propagates the stereotypes of an unending cycle of Puritan anguish and an isolated, self-examining self. I argue that public and private do not appear at all incompatible in Puritan texts. Puritans were individualists, but they were conventional individualists.

Because of the New England covenants, individual identity was wrapped up in shared religious purpose and covenantal responsibilities. As a result, individual and societal devotional practices are interwoven.

As the Church covenant is a larger reflection of the individual covenant with God, so church-wide devotional practices mirror individual and family practices. Because Puritans thought of themselves both as individuals and in terms of the covenantal church, believers slid easily among private and public devotional practices. Further, because words were the media of devotion and remembrance, texts moved easily among secret and social spheres, impacting all levels of life. In *The Practice of Piety*, Hambrick-Stowe lists the settings of Puritan devotion: the church gathering; the small prayer meeting; a “conference” with another believer; family devotion; and individual, “secret” prayer time. As I read primary texts, I found that these settings were not neatly separate in Puritan society. Rather, they formed a web-like system of communication about how to live piously. Again and again, I encountered references to influence among the spheres, such as a private Scripture reading begetting a minister’s sermon or, conversely, a sermon influencing a church member’s secret prayers. Personal and social lines were blurred, because at all levels, individuals were pursuing the same goals together.

The devotional sequence—from humiliation of sinful self to the delivered soul’s praise of God—was mirrored in public and private Puritan practice. A town’s covenant-making day was commonly a “Day of Humiliation,” and covenant-renewal was always performed in conjunction with a fast day. Fast days were also held in response to crises or as preparation for important events (*Practice of Piety* 100). These serious occasions were balanced by appointed Days of Thanksgiving, proclaimed after public evidences of God’s

mercy, such as a good harvest.<sup>6</sup> Hambrick-Stowe notes that days of humiliation and thanksgiving were observed by families as well as by the entire congregation. In individual devotions, the same pattern manifests, notably in Cotton Mather's *Diary*. At about age 18, he one day awakened to his sin of pride, so he set apart a day of humiliation. On his day of humiliation, he examined himself and found himself "most wofully guilty before the Lord" (16). He recorded reasons, prayers and his hope in God's assurances. Four days later, he held a day of thanksgiving, during which he recollected and recorded Mercies, praised God on his knees for specific things, considered how he would show gratitude in future actions, and recorded the entire experience in systematic plain style. The pattern of humiliation and thanksgiving is consistent with the devotional sequence; remembrance of God's mercy must always follow self-examination.

Besides days of humiliation and thanksgiving, Puritans designed their societal structure to aid religious memory. Because depraved humanity needs reminders of truth, Puritans wove repetition and remembrance of duties into the fabric of life. Remembrance of truth prevents believers from submitting to the "flesh" or from acting upon false concepts of God and one's identity and purpose. In "An Errand Into the Wilderness," Samuel Danforth refers to a daily devotional structure that reinforced memory in personal, family and social settings. The written Scripture and the hearing of sermons were the two main pillars supporting the devotional structure. Danforth reminds the congregation of their former fervor to remember the Word, which they manifested by:

Gleaning day by day in the field of Gods Ordinances, even among the Sheaves,  
and gathering up handfuls, which the Lord let fall of purpose for you, and at night  
going home and beating out what you have gleaned, by Meditation, Repetition,

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<sup>6</sup> This practice is the origin of the "First Thanksgiving" at Plymouth.



Conference, and therewith feeding your selves and your families. How painful were you in recollecting, repeating and discoursing of what you heard, whetting the Word of God upon the hearts of your Children, Servants and Neighbours? (11)

The forms of memory in this passage—meditation, repetition and conversation or discourse—are based on language. The passage also shows that the Puritans are not just concerned with their own self-examination. Shared covenantal purpose incurs a responsibility to encourage others toward fulfilling that purpose. Each is responsible for aiding the memories of the nearest community members—their children, servants and neighbors.

The memory structure revolved around the Sabbath, the culmination of a weekly celebration of the salvation drama. Hambrick-Stowe explains that the Sabbath was devoted to spiritual disciplines: “It was a day of rest from all secular work and a day for the spiritual work whereby the soul could find rest” (97). Three hours in morning and three in the afternoon were spent in the church, at which attendance was required (99), besides weekday lectures. At each meeting, the pastor renewed the congregation’s vision in a long sermon. During the dinner interval at home, a Puritan father would lead a discussion resuming the points of the sermon, sing a psalm, and catechize his children. Then they returned to afternoon church, applying both sermons to their hearts in secret prayer. Gordon Wakefield writes, “The Lord’s day with its union of public and private worship was the grand climax of Puritan household religion” (63). Much of private and familial devotion was preparation for the Sabbath-Day sermon or personal application of the sermon afterwards (65). For instance, Edward Taylor wrote a poem before every Communion Sunday during his over forty years as a minister. The poems did not

physically pass out of Taylor's personal sphere (he never published), but in actuality they were integral to the public sphere. According to Salska, these meditations were both preparation for and the emotional continuation of sermon writing and the Lord's Supper; Taylor did both together as a complete devotional discipline (112).

During the week, the structure of memory was equally disciplined. Besides attending weekday lectures, most Puritans established individual prayer times at least twice a day, as well as daily family worship (Wakefield 68). In family worship, they renewed purposefulness, studied the Bible, and challenged each other to pursue holiness. In secret prayer, they meditated on God's Word, remembered his nature and his commands, and often recorded diaries or journals, especially of their spiritual examinations. Diaries functioned both as present aids in prayer and as material for later reading, to renew memory or evaluate progress. The weekly structure of remembrance was a repetitive linguistic framework of Sabbath sermons, religious conversation with family and fellow believers, and personal interaction with the Bible and one's diary.

Samuel Sewall's diary is an example of the seamless movement of a self-examining individual among personal prayer, community devotion, and other social situations. Interestingly, "the most pious men and women still spent more time at business than in devotional exercises," writes Hambrick-Stowe (191). On many pages, self-examination is visibly intertwined with accounts of community relationships and secular business. With his integrated life, Sewall sees no conflict in recording spiritual doubts next to a report of a neighbor's visit or a house fire. Written over the course of fifty-six years, the diary is a candid portrayal of daily colonial life, encompassing all arenas of a man's concerns—from Cotton Mather's preaching to children teething to the

wooing of a widow to the state of his salvation. Specifically, in February 1677/8, Sewall recounts his spiritual encouragement through Scripture, which came to mind while praying; his impressions after listening to preaching (“Death never looked so pleasingly on me as Feb. 18 upon the hearing of Mr. Thachers 3 Arguments”); and his experience while reading sermons (God showed him his sinfulness and hypocrisy through a sermon he “found accidentally in Mr. Norton’s Study”). Words from the community enter Sewall’s solitary prayers in the form of printed or publicly delivered sermons. Three different media—the Bible, the pulpit, and printed sermons—affect his private devotional experience in a single day.

The Church covenant bound the New England Puritans to common religious goals, which the devotional sequence enabled them to fulfill. Devotional practices, from solitary prayer to congregational fast-days, were based on language. Writing and speaking functioned as the means to record the terms of the covenant, to measure oneself against it, and to exhort one another in obedience to its terms. Therefore, Puritan texts encourage readers to be faithful in devotional practices and, especially, to examine themselves using memory.

Because humans are fallen, the Puritans believed, people could not trust themselves to remember what is right and good and live according to their purpose. The only way to preserve the society’s common identity was through a common cultural memory. But how do people remember? They write important thoughts to read later, they publish accounts, or they transmit ideas orally. The New England Puritans used texts—written and spoken—to remember their purpose and evaluate their condition. Texts were essential to Puritan religious life, observes Kenneth Murdock:

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.... The emphasis which the Puritan put upon learning and literature proves that in this view they were not decorations for the Christian life but essentials of it. (1-2)

Puritan literature, then, is inseparable from Puritan devotion. Through words, Puritans remember their purpose, methodically examine their souls, and preserve their common identity.

My conclusions about New England devotional practices are based on the primary texts, which, of course, represent only those whose written records have survived. These authors tend to be the elite of New England society—church leaders, governors, or wives of influential men. Historian Charles Hambrick-Stowe admits that our dependence on personal writings, primarily “the product of social elites,” can pose problems for historical analysis. Nonetheless, he argues:

Evidence suggests that in seventeenth-century New England the gap between elite and popular culture was not wide. In many areas of religious life, clergy and populace inhabited the same cultural world. The private writing that survives pertinent to devotional practices is, I have good reason to believe, broadly reflective of common experience. Glimpses into the religious experience of folk, as recorded, for example, in the confessions of faith of individuals joining the Cambridge Church, show it to be of a piece with the personal religious experience

of their pastor, Thomas Shepard himself, or of Anne Bradstreet and Cotton Mather. (vii)

The “unity” of their “cultural world” means that all Puritan church members were expected to engage in self-examination and that most families structured their devotional lives in a similar way. Further, because the society was extraordinarily literate, the majority of the church community participated in the exchange of words concerning self-examination.

Puritan church members use texts both to encourage themselves personally and to contribute to the spiritual health of the entire community. Individuals desire to aid both their own memories and the communal memory by recording their private self-examination—not for their own glory, but for the glory of God, thus bringing to mind man’s divinely decreed purpose. Mary Rowlandson’s *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* is a personal experience of self-examination published for the glory of God and the benefit of her covenantal community. In 1675, during the bloody Puritan-Indian conflict known as Metacom’s War, Pequot warriors sacked the town of Lancaster and carried off Mary Rowlandson. In her captivity narrative, Rowlandson not only chronicles the terrible events, but also candidly shares developments within her soul—fear, suffering and anguish, as well as hope and deep communion with God. While she is honest about discouragement, homesickness, and grief, Rowlandson sees her times of solitude with the Indians as an opportunity for spiritual growth: “Now had I time to examine all my ways” (13). Rowlandson exposes her weakness and doubts and then measures her thinking against the Bible’s precepts.

Puritan individuals like Rowlandson write down their experiences first for their own memory and encouragement. Because they are not a people inclined to draw attention, they usually resist publishing. For instance, Cotton Mather decided to publish his *Bonifacius* anonymously, because his purpose is the glorification of God rather than himself (Cavitch 46). Anne Bradstreet's volume of poetry, *The Tenth Muse*, was published without her knowledge, and she subsequently composed a poem expressing her embarrassment. Edward Taylor shared his devotional poetry with no one; *Preparatory Meditations* was published centuries after his death.

Rowlandson was no exception: she only published when convinced that her account would glorify God and help others to fulfill their Christian purpose. In recording violence, bereavement, solitude, and fear during the bloodiest war of New England, Rowlandson's ultimate aim is to set down God's mercies, especially in sustaining and encouraging her through Scripture. The work's title, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, reflects this goal. Her account of deliverance will help both her and others to meditate on God's mercies, one of Danforth's topics of self-examination.

Many Puritans overcame their hesitation to publish, because they saw great religious value in making personal texts public. For encouragement to share one's private experiences with others, Kaufmann cites Puritan leaders Richard Sibbes and Isaac Ambrose. According to Sibbes, publishing personal texts would result in "the quickening of the faith of Christians." Ambrose exhorts, "Let us communicate our own Experiences to the good of others.... Conceal not within our bosomes those things, the communicating whereof may tend to publike profit.... We finde in Scripture that sometimes a personal *Experience* was improved to an universal advantage" (223). One Christian life was a

model for others facing the same struggle of flesh against spirit; one example of faithfulness prompted pious readers to examine themselves.

The motivation of encouraging other Christians was a powerful reason for Rowlandson to publish her memoir. Like most Puritans, she hoped that her experience would help another struggling soul to conquer sin, trust in God's grace, and live holily. The narrative's title page reads: "Written by Her own Hand for Her private Use, and now made Publick at the earnest Desire of some Friends, and for the benefit of the Afflicted." First, she wrote the narrative as a devotional exercise for her own memory of God's providence; then she extended her experiences to others. Rowlandson intends for readers to appropriate her memory of deliverance for their own spiritual benefit. She concludes the volume by describing her personal devotional use of the preceding narrative, as a guide for readers to meditate on her experiences. For this purpose, the final chapter lists "remarkable providences" and spiritual lessons, such as, "I have learned to look beyond present and smaller troubles, and to be quieted under them." Significantly, Rowlandson remarks, "If trouble with smaller things begin to arise in me, I have something at hand to check myself with, and say, why am I troubled?" The statement suggests that readers, too, should apply Rowlandson's experiences to examine, or "check," their souls.

Owen Watkins explains that individual Puritans wrote about their personal religious experiences not because they were wonderful examples, but because they hoped their unique experience would help others in the same weaknesses. As believers, Puritans were connected by a common experience but functioned as individuals: "God was consistent in his dealings with men throughout history, but since He called everyone individually, each saw some aspect of His glory that was hidden from others" (2). As an

individual believer, then, Rowlandson could share the valuable insight that God had given only to her, through her unique captivity experience.

Like Rowlandson, Anne Bradstreet records her deliverance from “a sore fitt of fainting” in order to ballast her own memory and encourage others. She explains:

I dare not pass [it] by without Remembrance, that it may bee a support to me  
when I shall have occasion to read this hereafter, and to others that shall read it  
when I shall possesse that I now hope for, and so they may bee encouraged to  
trust in him who is the only Portion of his servants. (“Meditations”)

In this entry, dated July 8, 1656, Bradstreet records a divine deliverance so that she and other readers can meditate on it later. Like most Puritans, Bradstreet does not trust herself to remember; she needs the words to remind her frail heart of God’s goodness and strength. Memory of her deliverance is a powerful aid that will strengthen her own faith and the faith of readers.

Bradstreet and Rowlandson reveal how strongly individuals identified with the larger Puritan society. These two women’s personal experiences of self-examination and deliverance, once published, would influence numberless Puritans’ secret and public prayers. Because of the conflict of flesh and spirit and the shared Puritan covenant, one Puritan’s self-examination or deliverance could aid other Puritans’ devotional lives. Personal texts made public are thus another manifestation of the “mirroring” of Puritan society. Puritan individuals, families and churches could use the published texts as mirrors during their own self-examination. They could measure themselves against Rowlandson’s constancy in Scriptural meditation, or they could remember God’s character through his mercies to Bradstreet. These examples demonstrate the role of



words in preserving individual and communal memory and thus encouraging self-examination.

Though not included in devotional literature, Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* serves societal functions similar to those of the above deliverance testimonies: preserving group memory and encouraging self-examination. Mather published this monumental work, a combination of history, biography and jeremiad about the founding of New England, to give God glory and, especially, to preserve the society-wide memory of the settlement's purpose. Keeping Puritan group identity firm and instilling it in their children was a difficult task. Therefore, Mather and other New England leaders devoted many words to strengthening community identity. In the "Attestation" to *Magnalia*, Salem pastor John Higginson (1616-1708) lists ten reasons for *Magnalia*'s importance. Several show this work as an aid to group memory and, thus, to self-examination:

1. *Record the "True Original and Design of this Plantation," that it may be known and remembred for ever.* Mather's work reminds readers of why they came to New England. As Danforth said, self-examination is measuring yourself against your purpose. In this case, Puritan readers would evaluate their lives against the original Pilgrim purpose of religious purity.
2. *Render glory to God for what He did for the colonists.* Like Rowlandson and Bradstreet, Mather recounts God's deliverance in order to glorify Him. Again, remembering God's mercies is one of Danforth's topics for meditation.
3. *"Embalm and preserve" the names of "Eminent Persons" for posterity to imitate.* Readers can examine themselves against the example of holy men.

4. *Provoke remembrance among the present generation of God's Providences in the wilderness.* The word "remembrance" is significant. Here Higginson is especially concerned about group memory. The "present generation" is the second generation, the children of the original settlers. They need to be "reminded" of a covenant vowed before they were alive.
5. *Cause genuine belief in God among the generations to come, that they "may serve him with a perfect Heart and willing Mind."* Mather and Higginson want the communal memory to last beyond their own lives. They share a multi-generational concern for purity of soul, or "a perfect Heart."

Higginson's reasons further develop the correspondence of memory, purpose, and self-examination that I have tried to illumine in this study. The aim of Mather's massive historical undertaking—the *Magnalia*—was to preserve an accurate religious memory of the New England errand, the Puritan church covenants, the great men of faith who founded New England, and the mercies of God to the unique Puritan colony. These memories, Mather believed, would form pure religion among the next generation, as they examined themselves against their forebears. Through his profuse literary output, Mather wished to "flood the towns and homes of New England with pious literature" (*The Practice of Piety* 161). The writings of Mather, Rowlandson, Bradstreet and others would revive the people's memory and stir them to self-examination. Self-examination, in turn, would result in holy lives transformed by God for His glory.

By retelling the New England story or recounting individual believers' experiences, Puritan texts served as communal memory within the blurred public and private spheres of Puritan society. Because of the near association of individual and

church covenants, public and private were not significantly separated. Devotional writers often published their works, and, of course, pastors expounded publicly each Sabbath. Even strictly private works, like Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations*, were part of the devotional fabric of communal worship. With occasions for both sin-focused self-examination and Christ-focused praise, the memory-based societal structure reflected the devotional sequence. Self-examining individuals, as part of a society in which private devotional practices are continuations of those performed in public, cannot be considered isolated or utterly conflicted. Even when alone in their "prayer closets," they were connected to social ties through the tools they used to aid self-examination: memory of others' past experiences and meditation on community purpose, recent sermons, printed testimonies, and their own diaries, which may eventually be made public. In the tightly bound New England Puritan covenantal community, self-examining individuals joined together—in person and through printed texts—to glorify and enjoy God.

## CONCLUSION

The personal writings of the early American Puritans reveal that the practice of self-examination, though individually applied, does not consist of the isolated self looking at itself. Self-examination is not a manifestation of morose psychological repression. At its most basic, self-examination is scrutiny of one's inner life. Puritan self-examination is a complex, fully relational act that draws the believer beyond self.

From Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, which was widely read by the Puritans, I identified ideas that naturally attach to self-examination: memory of one's identity, purposefulness toward purity, and devotion as a means to focus on God and others. These three elements of self-examination involve looking outside of or beyond oneself and thus support the thesis of the relational Puritan self. First, self-examination depends heavily upon memory and is thus meditation on substantive reality. Second, self-examination is justified by the intensity and consistency of Puritan purpose. Third, the devotional sequence moves the believer past mere self-scrutiny to communion with Christ. Taylor's formula of Christ—"Glory, Med'cine, Sweetness, all"—shifts the primary attention from the self to Christ.

Particularly, the focus of self-examination rests on an understanding of divine grace. Without remembrance of grace, self-examining Puritans like David Brainerd tended to halt prematurely at self-loathing. With a realization of grace, however, a believer moved from self-condemnation to a selfless love for Christ and community (Brainerd's desire to "wing out of myself into God" and to intercede for others) or to grateful delight in Christ, as illustrated in *Gods Determinations* by Edward Taylor. In the Puritan conception of the self, the emphasis is on Christ's gracious work of

transformation, not on human resources (or lack thereof). Through the discussion of devotional sequence, the relationship of self and God takes on a complex but non-contradictory double nature: the guilty facing the stern Judge, as well as the child embraced by a loving Father.

Nor was self-examination just about self and God, for it concerned the success of the entire Puritan errand into the wilderness. It was a means to preserve purity of religion and send a bright, clear beam from the “city upon a hill.” Uniquely bound together by covenant, the Puritans examined themselves against a common purpose. God did not call them only to a private union that would exalt individual souls with divine ecstasy; he called them as a covenantal community that would come together to worship him. Further, the Puritans communicated about their devotional experience. Even the most private spiritual exercises were public, because of the mirroring of public-private practices and the flexible role of words in society. Puritans wrote and spoke to preserve group identity and encourage one another to fulfill the covenant—and self-examination was the means to keep their side of the covenant.

Besides illuminating the reasons that Puritans wrote, this study has clarified why we study their literature. Combined with superior learnedness and the interesting nature of their “errand,” the New England Puritans’ distinctive culture resulted in a compelling body of work. Randall Stewart wrote of seventeenth century American literature:

For in that first century, primitive conditions of life and the Puritan culture conspired to produce a literature distinguished by closeness to fact, energy and vividness of expression, and at times a soaring imagination. Rarely has the mind worked with greater vigor and penetration than in the early New England

community; rarely has the written word been used more effectively; rarely has the human spirit burned with an intenser, brighter flame. (341-42)

The intense purposefulness of the Puritan spirit, as revealed in their personal writings, infuses their literature with magnetism. This magnetism can still be felt today, if the force of Puritan ideals is not weakened by distortions. A proper understanding of self-examination, I believe, contributes to a wider effort begun by Perry Miller et al. to present the Puritans in their full complexity. As scholars continue to study the Puritans in the context of their religious tradition, respect for Puritan primary texts will grow.

An expansion of this study of American Puritan self-examination could include a historical survey, tracing the influence not only of Saint Augustine, but also of medieval mystics, Renaissance humanists, and contemporary Reformers. A historical study would identify the distinctiveness of Puritan self-examination in light of the historical tradition of religious meditation. This project may also benefit from a comparative study of the literatures of the English Puritans and the French Huguenots, as well as the writings of non-Puritan devotional authors like George Herbert.

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## VITA

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