

Nature in Early American Writing: English 255
Oberlin College
May 16, 2003

Watering With Words:
Children and Nature in Puritan Educational Literature

Someone once told me that all education is environmental education. Although schools tend to have separate settings for learning about nature -- studying ecosystems for science class or writing a poem outside in spring for English -- all disciplines invariably teach children something about the natural world around them and their relationship to it. Our particular moment in history calls for critical examination of the ways rhetoric shapes our views of ourselves and of the world around us, even when it is not consciously or visibly trying to do so. This is important not only in obvious contexts, like the media during a time of war, but also in more subtle contexts, such as the way education molds children's views of their own nature and of the natural world. As we try to help education meet the needs of the current ecological crisis, it is important to examine not only our conceptions of nature, but also the origin of those conceptions. We can do this not only by reflecting on our own personal pasts, but also on our collective history. By exploring the educational literature of a founding civilization of modern American society, this study lends insight into the Puritans both for their own sake, and for the sake of drawing connections between education and concepts of nature -- a vital connection to make in our own time.

In consideration of these ideas, this study explores the educational literature written for Puritan children in New England in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and what that literature says about the relationships between children, nature, education, and language. I take the word "nature" to mean not only the natural world of forest and field, but also human nature, as well as the relationship between the two. This approach will further an understanding of the rhetorical methods utilized to indoctrinate children, as well as the spiritual and philosophical role of children in the Puritan plantation.

The following study makes use of an extended metaphor, supported in the primary texts: the Puritan child is a sapling growing in the Plantation, out Earth's sinful soil. Parents, ministers, and teachers water the child with education from the Bible, which acts as a rain

trough collecting God's revelation from Heaven. If the sapling successfully absorbs this nourishment, it will grow closer to God and ensure its own salvation; it will bear fruit, and yield a healthy harvest for both its parents and the entire Plantation. However, juxtaposed to the Puritan adults is a competing source of water: Satan. While the Puritans collect water from Heaven, Satan fills his bucket of lies, swears, disobedient words, and unholy books from a well in the ground. If the sapling accepts *this* nourishment, God's ax of death -- always poised and ready -- will strike, and the young tree will burn at the Satan's hearth.

The central element of the child-as-sapling metaphor is that the young tree is not left to the whims of weather; rather, it is watered by learning. Education -- primarily in the form of catechisms, sermons, and school primers -- causes positive growth, and allows children to assume their roles as both benefactors and beneficiaries of the Plantation. The act of watering through education sheds light on both Puritan methods and motives for teaching, and on integral elements of Puritan culture. After discussing catechisms, primers, and sermons as a kind of nourishing water, this study extends the education-as-water metaphor to discuss human nature, earth, Satan, family, language, and nature itself in Puritan society. It concludes with thoughts on what lessons Puritan education may offer to our own time.

The image of the child as a growing plant appears often in Puritan educational literature. In *A Little Book for Little Children*, Thomas White writes:

Therefore, my dear Child, go on, be of good Courage, for thou art that little Plant that God hath lately set it in his Paradise, and thy tender little Branches being full of Fruit, shall be taken more notice of, than much more in Old Men, they pritty littel hands lifted up in Prayer, are very beautiful in the eyes of God (Chapter II).

As young additions to the Plantation, children occupied a special place in God's sight; White sees their piety and sincerity as worth more than that of older members of the Plantation. Quoting an oft-cited Biblical verse, Cotton Mather writes: "It is a passage worth noting; Psalm LII, 8, 9. *I am like a Green Olive Tree in the House of God. I will wait on thy name, for it is Good before the Saints. Verily, all the Saints Rejoyce in it, as a very Good Thing, when they see a Young & Green Olive Tree, in the House of God*" (*The Wayes and Joys*, 21). In his diary, Mather gives another instance of this image, referring to his own children:

My Family is now getting into a Model extremely to my Satisfaction. I have an Opportunity to pursue numberless and exquisite projections, for the Growth

of my Olive-Plants, in all that is excellent. Every work will produce new and fine Essayes to render my House a School of piety (265). The 'Model' of Mather's family depends on the growth of his children, whom he refers to only as 'my Olive-Plants.' The concept that the general welfare of the community depends on the successful education of children repeats throughout Puritan educational literature, and will be discussed throughout this study.

The image of the child as a plant emphasizes the origins and goals of the Plantation itself. For the Puritans, the word 'Plantation' -- in contrast to common connotations of a southern estate -- signified the *planting* of a civilization in the wilderness by the hand of God. The earliest settlers had "left a Pleasant Land, and Fathers' houses to follow the Lord into a wilderness, into a Land which was not sown"(I. Mather, *Pray for the Rising Generation*, 18). America was not only 'not sown' agriculturally; it was also 'not sown' spiritually. Indeed, the Puritans were more concerned with the spiritual harvest than with reaping actual grain and leading Puritans depict people -- adults as well as children -- as the crop of God's garden. Increase Mather writes: "Some of New England's Children have been eminently blessed by the Lord; he hath poured his Spirit upon them richly, Plants of Renown have sprung up here that have been the glory of the Lord wherever they have had their Education..."(*Pray...*, 17). Thirty-three years later, Mather describes the entire Plantation less optimistically, but with similar imagery: "Ah! *New England, New England*, thou wast Planted a Noble Vine, wholly a right Seed, how art thou Degenerate!"(*An Earnest Exhortation...*, 35). While Puritan leaders describe adults and the community as plants in God's garden, their children were the primary crop. The successful growth of children was the only thing that could lead to the success of the entire Plantation, and it was the role of parents, ministers, and teachers to administer to this growth (although only by the grace of God would they succeed). Thus, Cotton Mather's desire to turn his family into a center of religious piety is not merely an attempt to bring order to his own household; it is part of the greater task of farming the next generation of trees in the Plantation.

As Mather implies, the home was a primary location for watering children; and catechisms were a primary component of this water. A series of questions and answers to basic Christian doctrine, catechisms were an interactive tool to help parents and children practice religious education at home. Graham describes "weekly lessons from catechisms,

with children first learning religious precepts by rote, and then gradually, as they were able, learning to understand the meaning of the questions and answers they had memorized" (Graham, 91). The conception of catechisms as a kind of water is clear in their titles. In 1657, John Fiske of Chelmsford, Massachusetts wrote a catechism entitled *The Watering of the OLIVE PLANT in Christ's Garden. Or, a Short Catechism for the first entrance of our Chelmsford Children*. The title of the more famous catechism by John Cotton, *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes, Drawn from the Breasts of Both Testaments*, expands on the concept of catechisms as nourishment. For Cotton, the Bible is a breast-feeding mother, whose words are nothing less than milk for an infant, as essential and as nourishing.

This image reflects the role parents played in catechizing. While the Bible and Christ were the ultimate source of all educational water, it was the job of parents to hold the watering can over the minds of their children. In the section of *Cares About Nurseries* entitled "Offering Methods and Motives for Parents to Catechize their Children," Cotton Mather writes, "While you are *Teaching* your *Children*, and causing your *Doctrine* to Distill as the *small Rain upon the Tender Herbs*, it may be the *Spirit* of God will fall upon them to make them the *Children* of God"(33). Without parents' efforts, not one drop of grace will reach the roots of the child, but parents themselves do not make their children *Children* of God; they can only cause their "doctrine to distill" and hope that the rain of catechisms will fertilize the sapling with God's blessings. This emphasis on the power of God over human endeavor reflects the general Puritan worldview that all blessings are brought by God, and all curses by human failing. While God is the ultimate bestower of blessings, a parent has the power to deprive a child of divine grace by depriving him/her of religious education.

Watering at home also included unwritten language. In sermons directed at parents and children, encouragement of prayer is an omnipresent theme. Thomas White proposes prayer as a verbal vehicle children may use to reach God before they are literate: "Use oftentimes Secret Prayer, go alone every day one quarter of an hour... God will teach you how to pray;... I do not advise you to take a Book, though I by no means forbid you, but would have Children use to go alone to Pray before they could either read or speak plain"(*A Little Book for Little Children*, 17). In *The Well Ordered Family*, Benjamin Wadsworth describes the influence of home prayer in the Plantation: "Family Prayer is one method very proper to

spread and propagate true Religion; and those who neglect this Duty, seem little or nothing concerned for the Spiritual Good of their Families or for the maintaining of God's cause in the world"(9). Prayer is one way to water children with words, and this watering is of consequence not only for the health of the child, family, and Plantation, but for "God's cause in the world."

Watering children at home did not only happen during the relatively formal rituals of catechism and prayer. Wadsworth adds that "When you are dressing or undressing your Children morning and evening, you might very properly say something to them about religion"(*The Well Ordered Family*, 63) and that parents might offer "small rewards and Incouragement, to quicken [their children] in learning the truths and duties of religion"(64). Home education was an integral component of the greater watering can, and parents needed to be active waterers not only during designated times, but also during seemingly inconsequential domestic moments. Puritan leaders also urged parents to be aware how their behavior impacted their children, even when they are not consciously intending it to do so. After a sharp criticism of the "doleful degeneracy appearing in the face of this generation," Increase Mather stipulates, "Hence Parents should be careful how they approve themselves for their poor Children (as well as for their own sake)"(*A Call from Heaven*, 20). He expands his warning to parents' religious faith: "But if you be unconverted, and Christless, what a case are your Children in?"(20). Puritan parents watered their children both consciously and subconsciously, and this act was fundamental to the welfare of the entire Plantation. In his introduction, Wadsworth summarizes the Puritan outlook on the importance of family education and order in securing the general welfare:

I believe the Ignorance, Wickedness (& Consequent Judgements) that have prevailed & are still prevailing among us are not more plainly owing to any one thing, than to the neglect of Family Religion, Instruction, and Government; and the reviving of these things would yield as comfortable a prospect of our future good, as almost any one thing I can think of(*The Well Ordered Family*, 1)

The diverse rhetorical methods of home education reflect the importance of family as a nexus of religious instruction. Catechisms were unique among educational texts in that they offered a range of interactions with their reader; a child could memorize by having someone else read to them, or by reading and answering the questions themselves. In either case, the text demanded a direct and dynamic interaction. This integrative approach continued

in prayer, which contained an element of intimacy that published catechisms could not allow. In addition to formal verbal education, parents were pressed to engage their children during casual moments of instruction in ways that would reach them as individuals. The methods of watering children in the home, and the emphasis Puritan leaders place on this act of watering, testify to the centrality of the family in Puritan society, and to the prominent role of education in parent-child relationships.

Watering also occurred at school. Having emigrated from England and other Protestant nations where one needed basic Biblical literacy in order to lead a respected life (Hawke, 69), the Puritans placed primary importance on early reading instruction¹ and supported education more than any other section of the English population (Morison, 59). In *The New England Primer: A History of its Origin and Development*, Ford writes of the Puritans:

No mass or prayer, no priest or pastor, stood between man and his Creator, each soul being morally responsible for its own salvation; and this tenet forced every man to think, to read, to reason... Unless, however, man could read, independence was impossible, for illiteracy compelled him to rely upon another for his knowledge of the Word; and thus, from its earliest inception, Puritanism, for its own sake, was compelled to foster education (2).

Without the hierarchy of the Catholic church, Puritanism obligated its adherents to have their own personal relationship with the Bible. Without education, children would be ignorant of the fundamental beliefs of their religion and deprived of reading -- the main tool for engaging in a pious life. Within this context, the Massachusetts Act of 1642 required masters and parents to teach their children to read; five years later the General Court of Massachusetts required every town of fifty families to hire a teacher, and every town of one hundred families to establish a grammar school (Graham, 109). Morison notes that "In New England, the village school was as easy to set up and maintain as the village church, or town meeting, [because] the entire population dwelt in a relatively compact group; every child could walk to school" (Morison, 63). Reading instruction in these schools generally began with the Hornbook,² a simple printed alphabet with a few one syllable words and the Lord's

¹ In early America, knowledge of reading did not imply knowledge of writing. Reading was necessary for both women and men in order to have access to the Bible and civil law. Writing, however, was the craft of penmanship -- not composition -- and was viewed as necessary only for commerce. Although some girls attended writing schools from the 1690s on (Davidson), writing was male-dominated in early America. Significantly, this implies that women who did not sign their wills probably could read (see Davidson for a full discussion of this topic).

² Its name derives from a sheet of 'horn' that protected its surface (Morison, 79)

prayer. Once a child acquired basic reading skills he/she graduated to a primer, a longer and more diverse collection of reading exercises and religious instruction. The importance of primers to Puritan society can hardly be overstated; according to Ford, "The New England Primer may truly be entitled 'The Little Bible of New England'(1) and "copies... were as much a matter of 'stock' in the bookshops of the town and general stores of the village as the Bible itself"(18).

At school, primers were the principle source of water for the Plantation's children, and early American primers saw themselves as both academic instruction and spiritual nourishment. The first page of a Boston edition of *The New England Primer* exhibits a picture of children and a teacher in a schoolroom, with a quotation beneath: "Children, like tender osiers, take the bow,/ And as they first are fashioned always grow; For what we learn in youth to that alone,/ In age we are by second nature prone."³ In opening this book, children were not only continuing their instruction in the mechanics of reading; they were embarking on an educational career that meant to shape them as one shapes a malleable willow branch. The primer aimed to improve their very natures, to influence their behavior and religious beliefs.

Unlike the separation between secular academia and religious instruction most Americans experience today, Puritan children reading a primer experienced a lesson which seamlessly interwove religion with reading instruction. In *A New Primmer*, a section on punctuation entitled "Points of Distinction, to be observed in Reading and Writing, for keeping the sense"(Pastorius, 18) directly precedes a section entitled "The Names and Orders of the BOOKS in the BIBLE, which (being a Greek word) signifieth book, and it is indeed the best of Books [sic] ever were written or Printed by Man's hand"(20). Thus, explanation of an element grammar comes strategically close to an explanation of the ultimate rationale for learning to read. This rhetorical tactic attempts both to inspire learning, and to steer the focus of that learning in the correct course. Similar transitions appear later in *A New Primmer*. A list of "Some Proper Names out of the Holy Writ, Alphabetically placed, with their signification in English"(67) comes directly after a general

³ The earliest known original copy of *The New England Primer* is dated 1727 (Morison, 81) and thus this specific quotation may not have appeared in earlier additions in Puritan New England. However, the sentiments it portrays are consonant with the Puritan views of children's nature and the role of education.

list of vocabulary words. After the Biblical names comes “Serviceable Remarks concerning Numbers, Time, Weights, Measures, and Money”(73), the last paragraph of which asks children to “walk... every moment in the fear and dread of the Almighty, true, and living God, who by his everlasting Word and Wisdom in six days created the World...”(84). Through this combination of verbal and religious instruction, primers make their objective clear: they are watering children with the skills of reading so that they might “in age [be] second nature prone” to the religious ideals expounded among the lessons themselves.

The blend between religious and literary instruction also appears in examples such as the alphabetical list of sins in *A New Primmer* (24), and *The New England Primer*'s pictorial alphabet. In the latter, an illustration and rhyme accompany each letter of the alphabet, and of the 26 letters in the Boston edition,⁴ nine contain references to Biblical stories, two address the importance of books or the Bible itself, and five contain images of death. As a sequel to the hornbook, *The New England Primer* uses pneumatic devices to reinforce familiarity with the written characters and communicate religious and societal values. With succinct and memorable phrases like “Thy life to mend, God’s Book attend”(11), “Job feels the rod, Yet blesses God”(12), and “Xerxes the Great did die, and so must you and I”(14), the pictorial alphabet by itself may deserve the title “The Little Bible of New England”(Ford, 1). Similarly, the primer’s “Alphabet of Lessons for Children”(15) offers children a chance to practice reading while absorbing tenets of proper Puritan behavior: “A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother. BETTER is a little with the fear of the Lord, than a great treasure, and trouble herewith. COME unto Christ... and he will give you rest...”(15). In their unique method of watering, primers engaged children with rhymes, pictures, and poems, and clearly expressed their rhetorical goal of teaching children the tools and values of Puritan religion.

Like primers, Puritan leaders did not hesitate to highlight the connections between education, religion, and the role of the child within the Plantation. In *The ABC of Religion*, Cotton Mather succinctly captures this concept: “It would be a Sad Thing, if any Child of seven years old, should be so Uncultivated, as to be unable to say the Ten Commandments”(11). In a funeral sermon for a respected school teacher, Mather extends

the cultivation metaphor: “It is *Hard Work* to keep a School; and hardly ever duly

⁴ The rhymes and pictures varied slightly over the years and in different locations of printing .

Recompensed. I suppose, it is easier to be at the *Plough* all day than at *School*. But it is *Good Work*: it is *God's Plough*, and *God speed it!*"(Corderius Americanus, 12). Teaching is a kind of ploughing, and thus the uneducated child is like an uncultivated plant. Since the Plantation's reason for existence is cultivation of a wilderness, watering children at school is vital -- not because it teaches children how to read for readings' own sake, but because it allows them to read Scripture, learn religious doctrine, and ultimately absorb the "*Spirit of God*" (C. Mather, *Cares about Nurseries*, 33) that will "distill" upon him/her through the efforts of parents and teachers. Mather draws on biblical history to emphasize the importance of schooling for the Plantation:

I remember the Jewish masters had a dispute about the Reasons of the Destruction of Jerusalem. And among the rest the Judgement or R. Menona was; *It had not been destroyed but for their not minding to bring up their Children in the School*. Verily, there cannot be a more Threatening Symptom of *Destruction* upon us than there would be in this thing; if we should fall into the Folly of *not minding to bring up the Children in the School*"(Corderius Americanus, A3).

Neglecting education does not only put the individual child at risk of damnation; it threatens the entire community. Like watering in the home, watering in the school is nothing less than essential to the survival of civilization.

Given its role in securing a healthy Plantation, it is not surprising that watering occurred in the church as well as the home and school. As the center of the religious community -- the structural embodiment of God's garden of the wilderness -- churches offered an unparalleled rhetorical opportunity for education. During sermons, ministers demanded the utmost attention from their congregants, and the absence of a visual written word allowed the minister's personal passion and charisma to affect his listeners. While a published sermon does not preserve the fervor of its original delivery, early American ministers' use of italics and capital letters allow modern readers to imagine the affects and emphases of spontaneous speech.

Sermons directed at parents and children are also unique among educational literature in their rhetorical goals. Not only do they set out to reinforce the watering of religious doctrine; they also attempt to galvanize parents and children into their respective roles as waterers and recipients of water. These injunctions often take the form of statements clearly directed at parents or children. In his *Pray for the Rising Generation*, Increase Mather pleads, "Let me exhort Children that are here before the Lord this day: O

do you go home, and pray earnestly for converting Grace. Beg for your lives that the God of your Fathers would pour this Spirit upon you: Young ones hearken! In the Name of the Lord I speak to you..."(22). Cotton Mather also exemplifies this tactic. In the middle of a lengthy funeral sermon he asks the "Little Ones" in the audience to "give a great attention" and listen to a story about a pious man. After the tale he adds, "And if any of *them* are not Attentive, I hope you that are their *Tutors*, will afterwards Repeat unto them the Admonitions which are now provided for them"(Corderius *Americanus*, 15). Parents are the subjects of similar direct addresses:

O think with your selves, if you that are Parents should any of you perish, and your miserable Children follow you to hell, how will they curse you there? If thy Children perish through thy evil Example, they will follow thee up and down in the ever burning Lake, crying out, Woe to us, that ever we were born of such Parents! (I. Mather, *A Call from Heaven*, 21).

In petitioning parents to take spiritual responsibility for their children, ministers often used the tactic of quoting children's cries. In an even more desperate plea for religious instruction, Mather writes:

PARENTS: These are the Cries, which the Souls of your Children make in your Ears; *My Head, my Head!* Oh! That you would fill *my* Head with the *Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures!* *My Heart, my Heart!* It will be a very *Dungeon of Wickedness*, if you do not by the *Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, purify it!(Corderius *Americanus*, 14).

Sermons' singular oratory style, in which the speaker stands directly in front of his audience and believes himself to be a messenger of God's word, permitted a level of urgency that the contexts of school and home could not allow. In their ardent addresses, ministers do not hesitate to make important rhetorical moments clear to their audiences, and they offer a rich imagery and voicing that is absent or more removed in catechisms and primers.

While the above quotations hint at water as a nourishing substance -- God *pours* his spirit upon children, and parents *fill* children's heads with knowledge of Scripture -- the image of water in the Puritan consciousness extends further. *Pray for the Rising Generation* focuses around the Biblical quotations "Until the Spirit has poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful land"(Isaiah 32:15) and "I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring"(Isaiah 44:3). According to Increase Mather,

[t]his expression doth imply *that the graces of the Spirit are fitly resembled unto water*; so much is intimated by the Metaphor of pouring, which alludeth unto the Clouds, pouring down Rain upon the Earth. Water is of a purifying nature, so the waters of the Spirit, sanctifying grace doth clean, and purifie

the souls of men (*Pray...*, 8).
This vivid image of “spiritual waters” (*Pray...*, 6) mirrors Baptism, a central Puritan sacrament.

Cotton Mather exhorts parents:

As soon as ever you can, inform them, that they have been *Baptised!* and beget in them an awful Sense of their *Baptismal Obligations*. *Tell them, Now my Child, you must be a Servant of a Glorious CHRIST and be afraid of defiling yourself with Sin since you have been washed in the Name of the most Holy Lord*” (*Corderius Americanus*, 10).

Baptism, a physical contact with water, marks a child’s entrance into the community; it is a “planting or ingrafting into Christ, [a] begetting, breeding and bringing forth of the womb of the church, [which] do proceed our nourishment and growth therein” (Fiske, 45). This conception of baptism testifies to both the Puritan view of the child as a sapling, and to the tangible power of words in Puritan culture: a child is *planted* in the church and *cleansed* by a word. As the youngest plants in God’s Plantation, children went on to be nourished by water in the form of verbal education – a continuation of their initial physical and symbolic bath in the name of God.

As evidenced in the example of baptism, the metaphor of education as watering illuminates important elements of the Puritan worldview; an extension of this metaphor also elucidates Puritan conceptions of human nature. The phrase that opens *The New England Primer’s* pictorial alphabet, “In Adam’s Fall, We Sinned All” (11), is a succinct description of Puritan beliefs about human nature. The Biblical “fall” from Eden – a result of Adam disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil – was not the mistake of some remote ancestor; rather, “The actual sin of Adam in eating the forbidden fruit, is made ours by imputation, thence procedeth original sin, as an effect from the cause, hence actual as an act from the habit” (Norton, 6). Indeed, every catechism contains some version of this message. In *Spiritual Milk*, children recite “My corrupt nature is empty of Grace, bent into sin, and onely [sic] into sin, and that continually” (Cotton, 2), and the “Olive Plants” of Chelmsford repeat: “Quest: *In what part is thy Nature corrupted? Answ: In every part*” (Fiske, 7). In exploring the Puritan approach to children’s education, modern scholars must take care to abandon the contemporary notion of children as the epitome of human innocence. In the Puritan worldview, children were in immanent danger of corruption because, like all human beings, they had inherited Adam’s original sin but, unlike adults, they had not yet absorbed religion’s cultivating influences.

Children's souls had the potential to become fruit-bearing trees in the Plantation of Christ's garden, but only after education had offered its cleansing waters; until then, they belonged wholly to the sinful soil.

The Puritan's belief that people are all "Children of Wrath" by nature connects to their concept of the nature of earthly existence. Since the Puritans believed spiritual salvation occurred only after death and only as the result of a pious life, their educational literature highlights the benefits of spiritual grace over material or earthly gain: "Truly if God pours his Spirit upon our Children, he doth more for them than if he bestowed all the good things in the World upon them"(I. Mather, *Pray...*, 10). This applies to ministers and parents as well: "If you that be godly Parents lay up a stock of prayers for your Children, it may stand them more in stead than if you should leave them never such an inheritance as to the things of the world[;] when you are dead your prayers shall live"(I. Mather, *A Call from Heaven*, 24). In regards to his own profession, Cotton Mather echoes, "The Conversion of *One Sinner* unto an *Orderly Walk* by his Ministry, This would bring more *joy* to a true Minister of God, than if the Richest Farm in the Country were bestow'd upon him"(*Wayes and Joyes...*, 26). This negative attitude toward material possessions extends to a dismissive attitude toward Earth as a whole. On the relative importance of secular and religious knowledge, Cotton Mather writes that "the Knowledge of the Godly Doctrine in the words of the Lord Jesus Christ is of a Million Times more Necessity for them; without that Knowledge, our Children are miserable to eternity"(*Cares About Nurseries*, 13). With a similar attitude, he bemoans, "My brethren, to be plain with you, I ought to tell you Weeping, what a walk I see taken by our children, who Mind nothing but Earth, and seem as if their minds were to hasten to Hell as fast as they can"(*Wayes and Joyes...*, 31). Clearly "Minding Earth" is a major step on the path to the wrong place after death. Earth itself is nothing more than a uncomfortable but mandatory stop on the journey to eternity.

Given the corrupt nature of the earth, education alone did not have the power to fully free a child from sin: "Christians, when you *Water* the *Olive-Plants* about your *Tables*, tis God alone that can give you the *Increase*; By *Prayer* you must ask God for it"(C. Mather, *Cares about Nurseries*, 27). Similarly, in a sermon "wherein it is shewed that the children of Godly

Parents are under special advantages to seek the Lord,"(title page) Increase Mather

⁵ This phrase occurs in many texts.

highlights the state of human nature, and the respective roles of human and divine actions in salvation:

Yea, it is true concerning Children of Godly Parents as well as others, *we are by nature the Children of Wrath even as others...* [T]hey [Children of Godly Parents] do not derive that grace from their Parents and therefore it is not natural but supernatural, when any of the Children of sinful men are made gracious (*A Call from Heaven...*, 2).

Even saplings sprung from the purest of parental seeds remain rooted in sinful earth, and only God can complete the task of salvation that education begins. Since the children of the most spiritually superior families were not naturally saved, this passage also underlines the urgent need to properly water all the Plantations' children.

Parallel to their conception of an immanent God who could bring salvation, the Puritans believed that Satan played a direct and menacing role in daily life. Thomas White warns children, "Play not on the Lord's day, nor at Sermon, for if thou doest, the Devil is thy playfellow" and "They that go to Bed without Praying, the Devil is their Bedfellow"(20). With this supernatural threat added onto children's already corrupt nature, the Puritan leaders felt in direct and heated competition with Satan:

You can't begin with them Too Soon. They are no sooner wean'd but they are to be taught... Are they young? yet the Devil has been with them already... They go astray as soon as they are born... Satan gets them to be proud, profane, reviling and revengeful... Why should you not be aforehand with him?"(C. Mather, quoted in Graham, 61).

In a similar vein, White employs the metaphor of children as plants to emphasize early education's role in managing sin:

It is true, there are in thee the Seeds of all Vices, but before these Seeds have taken root, they may be easily destroyed, or as soon as they have taken root, they may be easily pulled up; but to have Weeds grow up before the Wheat be sown, it will be but ill with the Wheat. It is true, Weeds grow up with the Wheat, but let them grow not before (13).

As a character in children's everyday actions, Satan's main passtime was discouraging youth from accepting the water from their parents, teachers, and ministers, and offering instead a contaminating concoction of lies, swears, disobedient words, and unholy books. In *The New England Primer's* "A Dialogue Between Christ, A Youth, and The Devil," the Devil encourages the Youth:

Thy parents always disobey,;/Don't mind at all what they do say,;/And also proud and sullen be,;/ And thou shalt be a child for me,;/ When others read be thou at play,;/Think not on God, don't mind to pray, Nor be though such a silly fool,;/ To mind thy book, or go to school,;/ But play the truant; fear not, I/ Will

straightway help thee to lie(55). White also speaks to children about the connection between language and Satan, calling attention to the threat that may lurk in one's own playmates: "Take heed of playing with the Devil's Children... those that will Swear and Lie, and speak filthy things, and sing filthy songs... Thou wilt quickly learn to do as they do"(24). Similarly, Increase Mather admonishes children, "you no sooner begin to speak, but you begin to sin"(*An Earnest Exhortation...*, 59). The spoken language children used was one measure of the success of Puritan watering; in the struggle to beat Satan to the watering can, words were both a weapon and a measure of victory.

This obsession with language is characteristic of Puritan culture in general. In addition to teaching how and why to read, educational literature addressed methods of reading itself. White offers an example of a pious boy who "as he read any book that he might have liberty to do, he marked those places which he found most refreshing, and took most notice of, which were places very serious and remarkable..."(59). Completing the rhetorical lesson, White fills the next pages with 84 examples of passages the boy chose to mark. Giving a glimpse of the function reading and writing played in his own home, Cotton Mather wrote in his diary:

There is hardly any Thing, that would more contribute unto a Religious and excellent Education for my Children, than to revive my cares to have them fill their blank Books, with agreeable and valuable Things. I would therefore first of all, settle an Hour with them, have a stated Hour, that shall be for this Purpose constantly kept unto (149).

Perhaps the heart of the Puritan preoccupation with language is their belief in a deity whose Word created the universe. The Puritans believed in the necessity of bringing this essential Word to their children, in the form of the Bible: "The *Enlivening Word* of God must be applied unto them. We must apply the *Lively Oracles* of the Word, unto the *Mouths*, and *Eyes*, and *Hands* of the Children"(C. Mather, *The ABC of Religion*, 2). For the Puritans, God is none other than "the Author and Worker of true Faith, Love, and Obedience"(Keith, 4); the world itself is a book written by the Word of God, and the language thus holds immense power in the cultivation of the Plantation.

While education as water reflects language's power in the Puritan Plantation, it also testifies to the Puritan view of death as an omnipresent threat. *The New England Primer* is

full of references to childhood death, and the lethal consequences of sin. The pictorial alphabet warns "Youth forward slips,/ Death soonest nips"(14), and "As runs the Glass,/ Man's life doth pass"(12); the lengthy poem of John Rogers' burning at the stake asks children if they too would be willing to die for Jesus; and in the Dialogue, Christ cautions that if the Youth listens to Satan "in wrath I'll cut thee down,/ Like as the grass and flowers are mown"(58). These images and others foster an awareness of death's proximity, and the subsequent need for children to absorb their education. This threat of death is a major theme in both home and church education as well. Upon hearing about the death of a child, Wadsworth suggests that parents say: "What would have become of you, if you had been thus suddenly snatched away?... Would your Soul have gone to Heaven or to Hell; which of them? Well, prepare speedily for death"(66). In church, Cotton Mather offers a particularly scathing image to his young listeners:

Disobedient Children who decline the *Way of Truth* ; you kill your Parents; You are *murderers of your Parents*. What you Do, At the Last, At the Last, it [has] your own *Remorse* upon it, it will *Bite Like a Serpent, and Sting like a Basilisk*. Yea, God will order *Furies* worse than *Snakes* to fall upon you: In the *Place of Dragons* they will fearfully crawl and coyle about you: You shall feel the Everlasting Stings of what you have done. But oh, *how Intolerable, how Intolerable...* Do not bring upon you the Sorrow, that will never have and end!"(1562, 54)

Through warnings of the real possibility of death and the terrors involved in dying without salvation, Puritan leaders sought to inspire children to accept the nourishing waters of the education that, if hearkened to, could help save them from Hell. Ministers used a slightly different tactic on parents. Wadsworth warns that in the wake of a child's death, a negligent parent will mourn "Alas they are dead, they are gone to an Endless Eternity and I know not whether to Heaven or Hell; I have not diligently taught and governed them... as I should have done"(59); however, a parent who has duly guided their child "may part with [his/her] children when Death comes, and that with Peace and Comfort"(Wadsworth, 89). While fears of death may have terrified children⁶ into receiving educational water, the promise that a good waterer could part with a child in peace may have helped parents deal

⁶ There is evidence that these threats inspired real fear in children. Thomas White had read of "one [child] who, when he was tempted, he used to put his finger in the fire and not being able to endure it, would say to himself 'If I cannot endure one of my fingers in the fire, how shall I do that which will bring both Body and Soul to be burnt in Hell-fire?'"(White, 89). Samuel Sewall writes of comforting his daughter who "told me [she] was afraid [she] should go to Hell, was like Spira, not elected" and "can hardly read her chapter for weeping"(quoted in Graham, 71).

with the loss of a son or daughter in a world where more than one in ten children did not reach age twenty (Purvis, 174).

The roles of waterers and recipients of water also helped define the ideal family roles of parents and children. Citing Biblical verses (here omitted), *A New Primmer* describes the model behavior for parents as a mix of strict and gentle guidance:

If parents: they bring and train up their children in the way they should go, in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, not provoking them unto Wrath or Anger, lest they be discouraged, love them, by chastening them betimes, not withhold correction from them, but beating them with the Rod, instruct them in the Truth, and give them good gifts (Pastorius, 33).

While the holders of the watering can needed to be governors with a strong will, it was just as important that the plants of the garden adhere to the superiority of their gardeners: "If Children: They honour and reverence their Father and Mother, are subject unto them, obey them, in all things, do not mock, despise, nor curse them, but honour and assist them when old and poor"(Pastorius, 33). The benefits of this mutual relationship extended to spiritual welfare. While parents helped their children reach salvation, children would repay their parents in kind: "our children, if we can pray down the Spirit of the Lord upon them, will continue to pray for us whilst we are with them in the World. O what a blessed thing is that, for a man to have the Children that come out of his own bowels, praying for him continually?"(I. Mather, *Pray...*, 19). Cotton Mather uses the character of Jesus to synthesize these aspects of the parent-child relationship. In a sermon entitled *The Will of a Father Submitted To* he relates "that our Blessed Jesus with a most *Patient Submission*, took the *Cup of Grievous and Bitter Suffering*, which His Father appointed for Him"(14). Mather portrays Jesus, the focus of Puritan devotion, as the epitome of the dutiful son who drinks the cup his parent offers him. This rhetorical tactic draws on Puritan reverence for and familiarity with the figure of Jesus to exemplify the proper behavior for children, who are asked to accept the cup -- another metaphor of sustenance -- their parents offer them, even if it tastes "grievous and bitter."

The metaphors of the child as tree and education as water also, and perhaps most importantly, illuminate the Puritan conception of nature itself and of the human place within it. As evidenced by their educational literature, the Puritans cared about teaching their children how to go to the right place after death; they were unconcerned with

fostering a familiarity with the realities of the natural world around them. One could argue that the prevalence of nature imagery in children's educational literature indicates a Puritan identification with the natural world: children are young trees; a Plantation is a vine; and, just as dry earth is softened by rain, people are softened by God's showers of blessing. However, it is significant that these nature images exist within "Christ's garden"⁽⁴⁵⁾, the realm of God's cultivation. Even when childhood death is compared to the cutting of a plant -- as in Christ's warning to the Youth in *The New England Primer's* "Dialogue" -- it is an act of God, in retribution for some sin in the garden. The different kind of nature -- the unsown wilderness outside the Plantation, the "lovely spring" in which the Youth "resolve[s].../ In sports and plays to spend [his] time"⁽⁵⁵⁾ -- exists outside God's garden; it is the "howling wilderness"⁷ where Satan replenishes his bucket of contaminated water. The Puritan identification with plants implies no solidarity with this natural realm.

Nature is also a positive image where it aides in reaching God. Again, the *New England Primer's* pictorial alphabet offers an important insight. While the alphabet begins with "In Adam's Fall/ We Sinned All" (accompanied by an etching of a naked Adam and Eve reaching for the fruit that would cast humanity out of paradise), it ends with "Zaccheus, he did climb the tree/ His Lord to see"(accompanied by an etching of a boy in a tree top). A tree, whose fruit drives humanity out of God's garden and into an existence of original sin, becomes a ladder humanity can climb to reach God again. In educating their children, the Puritans were attempting to plant new Trees of Knowledge which would bear "this excellent Fruit of the Spirit"(Pastorius, 29), or "first fruits"(I. Mather, *Pray...*, 16) in the wilderness of America; in essence, they were trying with all their might to turn America into Eden, to plant their children as God's trees and recreate the paradise they had lost at the beginning of human history. In instilling their children with an obsession with the afterlife, the Puritans turned nature into Satan's lair at worst and God's garden at best. While nature was a positive entity when it helped one to reach God, it was also inevitably the source of sin. These two juxtaposing views of nature, inherent in the image of the child-as-sapling, suggest to a Puritan worldview that denied Earth as a home, and highlighted the importance of education in helping children reach Heaven -- the home that mattered.

⁷ see Richard Dorson "Early American Writing" in *America Begins* for a discussion of the "garden" and "howling wilderness" images of nature.

In understanding the origins of our own views of nature, it is vital to recognize the heritage these founders of modern American civilization have left us. When Zaccheus climbs the tree, he is not looking at a vista of New England's forests and fields; he is looking for God. Puritan education did not nurture children with the hope of making them knowledgeable citizens of planet Earth, or even of America; it nurtured them with the hope that they might grow to be healthy Olive-Plants in Christ's Garden, and that they might have "a True Faith and its Good Fruit found upon [them]selves" (C. Mather, *Cares About Nurseries*, 58). As the current global ecological situation demands a critical examination of our own methods of education and the ways in which rhetoric influences views of our place in the natural world, we can look to the Puritans for guidance in the choices we make in watering our own children. Unlike the Puritans, we must begin to educate our children to be fully conscious citizens of both America and planet Earth. As Puritan literature demonstrates, education that does not seek to teach about nature can -- and usually does -- give children messages about their own nature, the natural world, and their relationship to it. As the Puritans knew well, every act of relating to our children is an act of education. Given the contemporary ecological condition, we need to take the next step and recognize that every act of education is a kind of environmental education: we teach a child not only in science class, but in the kind of building that science classroom is in; not only by demonstrating how to rake a yard, but by the kind of vegetation we chose to include and exclude in that yard; not only by a trip to the natural history museum, but by the vehicle we use to get there. In order to make the right choices in watering our own children, we must begin to realize that, like the Puritans, we water them not only during moments of conscious schooling, but during moments of assumption and tacit decisions in every context.

For the Puritans, the survival of their civilization hinged on correctly educating their children. They saw the great crisis of their age as a spiritual battle between the gardening forces of God and the savage forces of Satan, in which education was their main implement of defense. In our age we face a very different crisis, but the importance of education remains the same. In a society where schools are isolated from the rest of children's lives and academic learning often feels irrelevant and removed, the Puritans remind us that the right kind of education -- not only in school, but in every interaction with children -- is an

act of nourishment, important to the well-being of both the child and the entire community. In a world where anthropogenic actions affect local and global ecosystems, our choice of water for our saplings is as vital to the survival of our Plantation as the Puritan's was for theirs. In our future journey to remake the way we relate to the natural world, the Puritans offer an example of the power of language to shape a worldview. In watering their children with words, they remind us of the responsibility we have to chose our own water wisely.

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