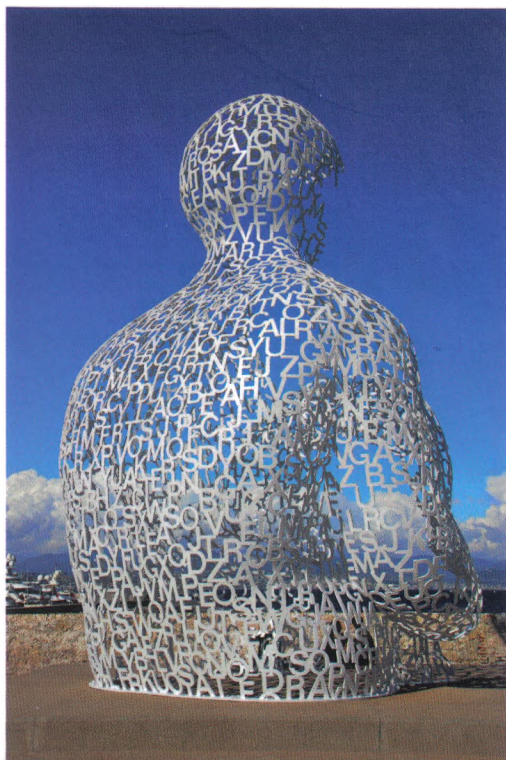


Ludmiła Gruszevska-Blaim /  
Merritt Moseley (eds.)

# Academia in Fact and Fiction



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Natalia Vysotska

## 'Mortal Combat with the Forces of Evil and Sin' on the Campus: Functions of Puritan Intertext in Francine Prose's *Blue Angel*

**Synopsis:** In her novel *Blue Angel* (2000) set in a small New England college Francine Prose involves her readers in the ingenious postmodern play with preceding cultural texts, including Puritan intertext central for the novel's cluster of meanings. Arguably, it unfolds primarily along the following trajectories: socio-political (the code of political correctness/witch-hunt), cultural/psychological (the code of [unsatisfied] desire), and literary/epistemological (the code "fiction-reality"). Based on the ideas expressed by Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Catherine Belsey, Sacvan Bercovitch and others, the paper seeks to explore the implications of Puritan "text" in Prose's university novel. It is argued that 'Puritanism' operates there as a metaphor for certain features in American intellectual and moral life of the past decades that the writer views as utterly negative, due to their perilous impact on the educational environment.

Critical responses to the eleventh novel by the acclaimed author Francine Prose, *Blue Angel* (2000), abound in allusions to America's Pilgrim Fathers. One review mentions the "Puritanical mood on campus today" (Rosenthal "*Blue Angel*"), another speaks of "a new strain of sexual Puritanism" (Tobias), the third remarks that "reading *Blue Angel* you would think we were living in a Puritanical world" (Rosenfeld "Review"), while Richard Price's dust jacket praise for the novel refers to American culture as "increasingly Puritanical." The novel itself declares unequivocally: "Puritanism's alive and well" (Prose 22). What kind of recent socio-political developments in the US provide grounds for such statements, and how does Prose's novel fit into the picture?

*Blue Angel's* plot can be encapsulated in one sentence: 47-year old writer Theodore Swenson teaching creative writing at a small college and experiencing a severe writer's block is engaged in a complicated professional and personal relationship with a gifted student Angela Argo that leads to an accusation of sexual harassment entailing devastating consequences for

his career and family life. The text's architectonics is centripetal and almost Neo-Classical in its conformity with the unities of time (several weeks) and space (university campus). The story is related by a third-person narrator but focalized exclusively through Swenson's subjective and unreliable consciousness. The linear structure is interspersed with fragments from students' assignments, including Angela Argo's novel. The text is rhythmically organized by reiterating narrative elements – weekly fiction-writing workshops where students discuss one another's creative work. The use of the present tense enhances the effect of readers' involvement in the events presented as contemporaneous with the process of reading. The text's principal strategy consists, in my opinion, in the crafty use of current literary tools and practices aimed at their ironic debunking. It is also funny prose on par with the finest specimens of social comedy of manners in terms of the author's keen, sometimes merciless power of satirical observation in exposing absurd details of the university life.

The novel's numerous intertextual allusions justified by the humanistic academic setting are exemplified, first and foremost, by the title – in addition to a 'heavenly' connotation, it also refers to the popular 1930 movie directed by Josef von Sternberg and starring Marlene Dietrich and Emil Jannings. The film, in its turn, was shot after Heinrich Mann's novel *Professor Unrat, oder das Ende eines Tyrannen* (1905). The story of a respectable schoolteacher's moral and social degradation, caused by his uncontrollable passion for a cabaret star, performs in the text the function of archetypal matrix. Prose repeatedly plays upon its title and plot in a kind of *mis-en-abîme* technique (in addition to her own book, Swenson's novel bears the same title, with Angela also making use of it later.) Thus, the writer involves the readers in a sophisticated postmodern play of signifiers. Rewriting the 'texts' of preceding culture, she places them within a system of mirrors built into her own text and generating additional dimensions. One of the novel's intertexts playing a very significant part in its semantic field deals with America's Puritan past resuscitated on the present-day campus. The paper aims at exploring the ways it operates on multiple levels: sociopolitical (the code of 'political correctness'/'witch-hunt'), psycho-cultural (the code of desire), and literary-epistemological (the code 'fiction-reality'). While the first of them is apparently informed by the aura emanating from the stern first settlers, in the other two the Puritan connection is less obvious,

though discernible. In addition, Puritan/religious imagery is a meaningful component of the text's rhetoric.

### Code of 'political correctness'/'witch-hunt'

The parallel between the excesses of so-called political correctness in the US academic milieu at the turn of the century and the notorious witch-hunts in late 17<sup>th</sup>-century colonial America forms the novel's ideological axis. As is well known, political correctness as a constituent of the policy of multiculturalism was first introduced on university campuses in the 1970s and still causes fierce debate. The problem is that a fair and legitimate demand that the universities should provide beneficial and friendly educational environment for all students irrespective of their race, ethnicity, gender or class sometimes resulted in the opposite – intolerance, self-segregation of certain groups, limitations imposed upon freedom of speech and thought. Criticism was targeted at misapplications of p.c. principles leading to cases of ungrounded charges with ensuing grave, and sometimes even tragic consequences for the 'violators' (ostracism, loss of jobs, court proceedings – up to suicides). It is no wonder that a psychological climate allowing for absurd and unwarranted accusations, collective hysteria, loss of common sense, and mutual mistrust gave rise to analogies with Puritan lack of tolerance and, especially, with its climax – the Salem witchcraft trials of the 1690s. As Marina Tsehelska points out, "by the late eighties political correctness has come to be seen by many as at best nit-picking and over-sensitive and at worst *Puritanic* and repressive and as a potential enemy of freedom of thought and expression. It was considered to be a new kind of bigotry, which might become as pernicious as the prejudices it means to overcome. By the early nineties use of the term was almost always pejorative" (67, emphasis added). In particular, the notion of 'sexual harassment' was grossly abused. It is this kind of atmosphere that makes possible the chain of tragicomic occurrences constituting the plot of Prose's novel and determining the centrality of Puritan intertext in its unfolding.

The metaphor of witch-hunt got ingrained in Americans' cultural thesaurus long before Prose; it was used to describe public pursuit of dissenters coupled with mass hysteria, pulling out true and false confessions, self-incriminations, as well as informing. No doubt, persecution of women

believed to have intercourse with the devil is by no means a New World phenomenon. But for the relatively young American national consciousness the nightmarish Salem experience must have meant more than for Old Europe accustomed to historical shocks. Therefore, the witch-hunt topos surfaces in the US every time the American public senses that its democratic freedoms are in jeopardy. In the early 1950s it became a catch phrase in liberal circles for McCarthyism when, under the pretext of fighting the communist threat, everyone who had (or might have had, according to the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee) the slightest relation to leftist forces or persuasions came under vicious attack. In 1953 Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* – the historical play about Salem trials, and his contemporaries had no problem recognizing in it the symptoms of social affliction threatening the America of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. According to the drama critic Harold Clurman, the play showed how “a ... social trauma may fester into a sadistic fever to which an entire community succumbs. It leads to superstitious hysteria and to the abandonment of all moral scruple and intelligence” (xvii). This pronouncement, albeit on a smaller scale, goes for Prose’s fictional college as well (in fact, the writer herself mentioned Miller’s play relating the episode of her friend’s dismissal due to an accusation of sexual harassment that, albeit in part, must have driven her to write *Blue Angel* [Prose “Hers”]). However, unlike her predecessor Prose does not withdraw into the 17<sup>th</sup> century but remains within temporal and spatial boundaries of a contemporary campus, inducing her readers to draw historical parallels and to see “Salem return on the quaint grounds of American universities” (Tobias).

A good point of entrance to the novel’s Puritan intertext is provided by anthroponyms, i.e., protagonists’ names bearing transparent religious connotations – Theodore (“God’s gift”) and Angela (“angelic”). The setting is also appropriate – somewhat dilapidated, but still elitist Euston College in North Vermont, “in the heart of the stony hearts of Puritan New England” (25). Rumors go that the university founded by a venerable member of the Puritan community is visited by the specters of his daughters perceived in the novel’s context as an emanation of militant feminist element, “spooky Puritan ghosts” who are simultaneously “restless female spirits, floating up through the centuries, wailing” (307).

At the novel's 'entrance' and 'exit' loom two historically marked buildings, "lieux de memoir" (Pierre Nora) – the unfriendly Founders' Chapel where once the reverend Jonathan Edwards "on the hell-fire circuit, the Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God Tour, terrified his listeners with descriptions of the damned cast into the flames and roasted, screaming, to ashes" (20), and no less forbidding Cabot-Hall – "a monument to anti-instinct, a grim multipurpose Puritan hell" (268). The first is the venue for faculty briefing on sexual harassment (the beginning of the novel); the second – for Swenson's 'case' hearing (the last pages). Due to this symbolic framing, the novel's inner structure resembles the Puritan model of sinner's progress – warning about inevitable punishment, its neglect for the sake of sinful pleasures, and, finally, severe retribution. This interpretation, however, is somewhat belied by Swenson the sinner's state of mind in the end – realizing the absurdity of his stay at the university he feels relief instead of suffering: if not for this story, he would have never understood "that he was in hell. He's not being fired [a pun, of course, with "being fired" meaning not only "dismissed," but also stake-burning and burning in hell], he's being promoted from the inferno to purgatory" (313). Thus, "the sinner's progress" model is profaned ending not in eternal torture and repentance, but in the prefiguration of "salvation" symbolized by a doe, "a sign of hope, of possibility, and forgiveness" (313).

The cited quotations make it abundantly clear that the text parodies and deflates Puritanical/religious rhetoric. The mode of incorporating allusions is predominantly ironic, which is, on the one hand, psychologically justified by the mindset of the narrator – a contemporary liberal-thinking scholar – and on the other, expresses the author's attitude to self-appointed moralists. In contrast to the Puritan ancestors, integral and earnest in their faith, the college administration fears not the hell fire, but potential litigations that might undo the institution. Dean Bentham, a refined Englishman, intentionally fashions his speech as a travestied Puritan sermon. Exchanging sly glances with Edwards' portrait, he assures his audience that, unlike their distinguished forefather he does not mean to scare them. "But one needs to know it's warfare, lest we poor settlers be ... ambushed. Clearly there are still witch-hunters ready to burn one at the stake.... Sermon ended" (23). His parodic homily offers a mixture of images associated with different aspects of early American experience – Indian threat and religious intolerance.

The bitter irony consists in the fact that the same skeptical Bentham, who sees current university atmosphere as a "terribly amusing symptom of ... hangover from Puritan repression" (21), would later assume the part of the chief 'witch-hunter.' The 'witch' story-line reaches its climax in the tragicomic scene of Swenson's 'trial' where he sees his colleagues' faces unmasked and recognizes in them Jonathan Edwards, Cotton Mather, and Torquemada. "Swenson's crime involves sex, so the death penalty can be invoked. No evidence is inadmissible. They're hauling out the entire arsenal for this mortal combat with the forces of evil and sin" (310).

For me, the most intriguing part of the novel's 'witch' code is that satirical and publicist discourse contains arch play with traditional gender roles. In the first place, as is known from history, the victims of mass witch-hunt psychoses were mostly women, with gender being "a crucial component of the intellectual preoccupations mediated by demonological inquiries" (Wilkin 14). This misbalance is accounted for by factors such as Christianity's ambivalent view of the 'second sex,' and even earlier tradition of misogyny in European culture. Moreover, owing to presumed female 'co-genesis' with the devil, women were ascribed special proclivities for entering into pacts with him (Makhov 113). In current feminist theory the cases of witch-hunt are cited as a vivid proof of oppression inflicted upon women by patriarchal culture. Contrary to this, present-day 'witches' hunted at the American universities are prevalently white middle-class males.

The reversal of gender roles is further represented by Swenson's regularly trying out female subjectivity. His 'feminization' starts in a comically phantasmagorical episode of failed lovemaking – the novel's only 'erotic' scene. A strange thought occurs to the confused protagonist: "He could be one of those unfortunate girls who manage to get pregnant while convincing themselves they're not really having sex" (169). Angela definitely takes the lead as testified by syntactic structures: "She pulls him across the room, steers him round, pushes him down on the bed" (169). Both the position chosen by her ("woman above"), and Swenson's subjective feelings evidence the inversion of sexual roles: "Isn't it how girls used to feel when Swenson was in high school...? Once more he feels the way the woman's supposed to as Angela lowers herself onto him and he thinks, What about foreplay?" (170–71). The scene ends in Swenson's total fiasco – when it comes to the climax, his tooth filling comes out (throughout the text we were reminded



that it was loose in what looks like Prose's version of Chekhov's famous "gun on the wall"). Thereafter self-association with female perspective stays with the hero for good: "That's the trouble with loving. It makes you act like a girl" (187); "He has turned unto the heroine of Angela Argo's novel" (262); "He needs his fifteen minutes of playing Hester Prynne" (266). This reads like the writer's ironic commentary on the aggressive militancy of some varieties of feminism resulting in men's loss of masculinity that impoverishes women, too. When at the novel's close Swenson hears the bells tolling to celebrate the Faculty-Student Women's Alliance's victory over him, another 'male oppressor,' as the next step towards a 'glorious future,' he feels relief over not belonging to this future. The author seems to share this emotion.

### Code of (unsatisfied) desire

Moving from social issues to another textual level, Prose's novel may be read as a story of seduction where woman, in accordance with her Biblical function, plays the active part – Angela seduces Swenson in the hope that he would help get her novel published (at least, this is one of possible readings). According to Baudrillard, for religion seduction has always been "a strategy of the devil, whether in the guise of witchcraft or love. It is always a seduction of evil" (1). For the Puritan world this maxim's veracity was unchallenged and final. In Belsey's words, desire is "the location of resistances to the norms, proprieties, and taxonomies of the cultural order" (6), and for a theocratic society compliance with them is the condition *sine qua non* for its existence. It is no wonder that the classical narrative of Puritan intolerance, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), is the story of expiation for the satisfaction of desire. In Prose's book the topos of desire is introduced by a quotation from Angela's novel dealing with things that the narrator "shouldn't have wanted, and longed for, and finally got." Swenson's desire, on the contrary, remains unfulfilled – he realizes that "what he wants will never happen." The metaphor of unsatisfied desire is relevant for post-modernist *Weltanschauung*, since it "registers basic non-finiteness of the unfolding of the system's creative potential" (Mozheiko 995). Its creative productivity is corroborated by Prose herself in her book *The Lives of the Muses* (2002) exploring artists' relations with their "muses":

[T]he power of longing is more durable than the thrill of possession. Perhaps what makes unsatisfied desire thrive in the jungly climate of the creative psyche is the artist's insistence on retaining access to the emotions and perceptions of childhood and adolescences, stages at which romantic fantasy is safer than, and even preferable to, erotic gratification. And unrequited desire may itself be a metaphor of art, for the fact that a finished work so rarely equals the initial impulse or conception, thus compelling the artist to start over and try again. (17–18)

In Prose's treatment of the subject, sexual desire is tantamount to textual; actually, it is the same desire, just in line with post-structural theoretical tenets. "Desire in Western culture is inextricably intertwined with narrative, and the tradition of Western literature, in its turn, is permeated with desire" (Belsey ix). It is not only about the omnipresence of love as favorite literary subject; it is also about transferring the properties of the object of desire upon the text, about its erotization and corporatization.

The writer uses specific textual strategies to transform current theoretical pronouncements into elements of imaginative literature. A point is made of Angela's lack of female attractiveness – she is "the least seductive person" Swenson knows who seems resolute to "eliminate anything that might elicit desire" (135). But, as Baudrillard remarks, "the feminine seduces because it is never where it thinks it is or where it thinks itself" (6). In this particular case it exercises its subversive effect between the lines of Angela's novel – temptation may celebrate its first victory with Swenson's pleasant surprise upon reading her first chapter and finding it talented. Further on his longing for more text and for its author increase proportionately. Swenson's deliberations: "There is something sexy about reading someone's work: an intimate communication takes place" (301), echo postmodernist dictum on generation of textual meaning by sensual practice of reading. In Barthes' saying, "the text is a fetish object, and this fetish desires me (27), while 'to read' means to desire the text. Prioritizing incomplete text of bliss over finite text of pleasure, Barthes defines the former as "the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts ... unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories ..." (14). This is exactly what Angela's novel featuring a teenage girl's crush on her teacher (the situation mirroring the novel's textual reality) does to Swenson. And, like any text of bliss, Angela's 'text' (her

novel, as well as her personality) will remain forever unfinished both for her professor and for the readers.

When it first occurs to Swenson that "he might ... be developing the tiniest bit of a crush on Angela Argo. He's certainly been thinking about her, looking forward to seeing her" – this realization is immediately transferred to her text: "No. What he is looking forward to is reading more of her novel" (106). And, vice versa, when he acknowledges, "The plot's got me hooked," it becomes clear that it is the girl that "got him hooked." After the abortive attempt at love making Swenson is quite sincere in believing that "he wasn't faking enthusiasm just to trick Angela into bed. In fact it's quite the reverse. He began to like Angela *because* he liked her novel" (173). But his self-recriminations – "he shouldn't let himself blur the distinction between literary enthusiasm and sexual attraction" – miss their point because it is exactly this blurring that brings about his 'fall.' The situation is brutally but correctly summed up by Swenson's wife: "You didn't fuck a student. You fucked a book" (254).

The author's slant on this code seems to be predicated upon her ironic attitude towards current theoretical concepts which, she assumes, tend to downplay natural human impulses. Behind trendy terms, such as 'seduction,' 'desire,' 'power,' one can sense the sincerity of feelings that for one reason or another we have come to be ashamed of and concealed by academic jargon: "But this wasn't about power. This was about desire. Mutual seduction, let's say that at least. He's too embarrassed to let himself think, *this* was about *love*" (245, emphasis added).

This interpretation enables deeper insight into the essence of Puritanism as perceived by Prose. What does she mean by stating, "Puritanism's alive and well"? Not solely the witch-hunt, which is but a symptom of a graver ailment. In Prose's view, it appears, Puritanism epitomizes unnaturalness, loss of capability for human emotions, fear of them, that under the guise of combating amorality results in the weirdest perversions (it is no accident that many of Swenson's students write about having sex with animals – "It spares them the complications of love for their fellow humans" [201]). In its attempt to regenerate 'romantic fantasy' the text rethinks the key categories of Puritan faith: 'sin' and 'grace,' 'inferno' and 'paradise.' The gravest sin here is the loss of love, something that Swenson and his wife Sherry let happen to them in the routine of their family life, so that now

they “balance on the point between hellish recriminations and the purgatorial silence” (27). Is it not the cause of a red spot appearing on Sherry’s forehead – the sign of sin that zealous parishioners in *The Scarlet Letter* would rather see on Hester Prynne’s face, instead of her breast? The highest grace in this system of values is love as evidenced, for one, by elevated religious diction used to describe a couple of lovers in a restaurant where Swenson and Sherry are discussing their relationship that has gone awry: the couple “retreated into their cocoon of perfection and light and grace, of chosenness, of being singled out and granted the singular blessing of being allowed to live in a world, in which what’s happening to Sherrie and Swenson will never happen to them” (256). This is the language of a theological treatise reconceptualized in the spirit of a (Neo-Platonic?) ‘religion of love.’ As a result, parodic debasement of religious and Biblical allusions – one of the novel’s basic stylistic techniques – does not entirely sweep out their original sacrosanct meaning. Eventually, categories of sin and grace first invoked by Swenson in jest tend to be treated by him more seriously. Early in the novel he ironically thinks of himself as a “Euston saint” worthy of canonization for never dating students. But as soon as he loses the right to boast such ‘saintliness,’ Swenson is close to believing that after death he will actually burn in hell. After calling Angela, instead of returning his daughter’s call, the miserable professor decides: “There is no angry God, it seems, waiting to hurl Swenson into the circle of hell reserved for fathers who care about crazy students more than their own daughters” (150); later he catches himself at addressing this non-existent God almost in earnest: “O Dear God, I’ve fallen in love” (200). In this manner the writer conveys the impression that no matter how strong rationalism and skepticism of modern man might be, it is incapable of completely destroying the deeply seated rudiments of faith – not the Puritan, rigorous and anti-humanistic faith, but the one based primarily on love.

### Code “fiction-reality”

The postmodern principle of “radical epistemological and ontological doubt” (Bertens) is not only implemented, but also thematized in the novel. However, unlike postmodernist texts Prose’s work does not arouse readers’ doubts with regard to its own ontological status; boundaries between

different levels of 'reality' get erased exclusively within the fictional world causing the text's self-reflexivity. The Puritan connection in this case arises from the prominence of fiction (in particular, "America microchrista" mythology developed by Pilgrim Fathers and their progeny) in the formation of the new nation. Bercovitch even suggests that American identity should be regarded as rhetorical, rather than historical (132), emphasizing the role played by 'words' in its shaping. Therefore, the problem of discursivity as a potent factor in constructing (and misconstruing) reality has come to play a considerable part in American theorizing.

In Prose's novel, the very first pages reveal the anxiety caused by the impossibility of drawing a clear-cut demarcation line between fiction and reality. With his awakened interest in Angela (and/or her work), Swenson is constantly trying to read her fiction as if it were autobiography, and racking his brains in futile attempts to isolate truth from fiction. Are incestuous overtones in her poetry based on something that really happened? Did she really provide phone sex services? Did she really have an affair with her schoolteacher? But the textual "Angela" resists these attempts being the novel's locus of epistemological indeterminacy – it is not without reason that Swenson always sees her "out of focus," with her image blurring ("the edges of things buckle and shimmer lightly" [11]). In his relationship with Angela, Swenson permanently conflates reality and fantasy, with sensory illusion so strong that "it takes a few scary seconds to realize he hasn't done it" (116). "Thinking isn't doing"; "fantasies aren't actions" (124), the hapless lover assures himself, but he is wrong – his unrealistic, romanticized assessment of the situation ("adolescent fantasy of romance") brings about consequences that are much too real. Did he not know that fictions tend to turn into life – "stuff like that happens ... You write it, and then you live it" (151)?

Like each and every story line in the book, this one, too, culminates in the scene of trial, where Angela's internal evasiveness is materialized as her external metamorphosis – from a punk girl ("a skinny, pale red-head with neon-orange and lime-green streaks in her hair and a delicate, sharp-featured face pierced in a half-dozen places ... wears a black leather motorcycle jacket and an arsenal of chains, dog collars, and bracelets" [8]) she is transformed into a modest student ("neat khakis, a red velour sweater, ordinary college-girl 'good' clothes" [272]). Her behavior and body

language have undergone similar transformations. Maybe she was merely playing out roles and situations she would later put into her books? "Was Angela just doing research? Was Swenson research for the character of the music teacher? Hasn't he learnt his own lesson about maintaining the distinction between fiction and autobiography?" (293). Finally, she makes a meaningful Freudian slip – speaking of Swenson, she refers to him by the name of the character from her novel: "I thought Professor Reynaud really liked my book ..." (307). For Swenson it is a revelation: "The girl can't see the difference between living humans and the ones she's invented. It proves she's a raging psychotic" (308). Throughout the episode the protagonist is tormented by the desire to find out which Angela is real – he needs it "to retain his grip on the truth, on his version of the story. A grip on recent history. On reality." It is noteworthy that all these categories – "truth," "story/history," "reality" lose their absoluteness in postmodern paradigm, becoming relative and subjective. Both Swenson and the readers will never find out the truth about Angela's identity – whether she is a heartless career girl who "Julien-Soreled" (188) the poor professor to get her novel published, or a pathological liar, or a sick person incapable of distinguishing between fiction and reality. Or maybe she is just a signifier without a signified, a void, on which Swenson projects his fantasies? And though acknowledgment of all truths and values as relative on the level of the plot ruins the protagonist, on the existential level he celebrates indeterminacy as a source of new meanings and, possibly, new inspirations: "what a relief it is to admit, even just for one moment, how much he will never know" (314).

To sum up, turning to the Puritan 'text' of the national culture Francine Prose does not aim at reconstructing its complex and heterogeneous set of assumptions and practices in their totality. In her novel, 'Puritanism,' retaining but isolated features of its historical prototype, functions as a metaphor for certain developments in American intellectual and moral climate over the past decades which she detests. Allusions to the Puritan past marked by bigotry, intolerance, hypocrisy, and unnaturalness enhance her satirical take on their present-day manifestations that she deems socially and personally pernicious ("It's as if a nasty bubble of Puritanism has risen to the surface and burst" [Prose "Hers"]). Her critique is launched on all textual levels, covering political, moral, and epistemological ground, and undertaken for the sake of exonerating the "human, all too human" in men and women.

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