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Daly's "God's Alter: The World and the Flesh in Puritan Poetry" - Book Review

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GOD'S ALTAR: THE WORLD AND THE FLESH IN PURITAN POETRY. By Robert Daly. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978. Pp. ix + 253. $12.00.

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Even the casual student of Puritan poetry is familiar with some, if not all, of the following critical generalizations: The Puritans as a group were hostile to art; individual poets ignored the physical world and concrete imagery, avoided sensuous and sensual imagery, rejected symbolism; of the poets, Edward Taylor is atypical and a notable exception. In *God's Altar*, Robert Daly tests these assumptions by examining the actual practice of both major (Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor) and minor (Richard Steere, William Wood, Samuel Danforth) seventeenth-century American poets.

Instead of an otherworldly poetry filled with religious abstractions, Daly discovers a body of verse expressing appreciation for and love of the natural world created by God. He finds, too, that Puritan poets "often used sensuous and even sensual language to illustrate spiritual states and religious doctrine" and that "they believed symbols capable

of bridging the gap between the visible world of creation and its invisible Creator."

The major part of Daly's book is devoted to explaining the seeming contradiction between such poetic practice and the "poetics Puritan theology appears to imply." He constructs a kind of Puritan *ars poetica* through analysis of diverse sources: Puritan sermons, the *Shorter Catechism*, Samuel Willard's *Compleat Body of Divinity*, Richard Baxter's *Saint's Everlasting Rest*. He discusses and often clarifies the topics, themes, and influences which are central to the study of Puritan poetry: Ramist rhetoric, the *contemptus mundi* tradition, typology, and religious meditation. Daly concludes that the Puritans' world view was "positive, symbolic, and therefore far more conducive to the production of poetry than the world view imputed to them in popular critical generalizations."

The final chapters of the work include lengthy discussions of Bradstreet and Taylor. Daly's sensible readings of Bradstreet's verse offer a corrective to recent critics such as Ann Stanford who have viewed Bradstreet as a rebel against Puritan dogma. The extensive groundwork laid in the early chapters allows Daly to read Edward Taylor's poems as something other than the radical departures from Puritan orthodoxy which previous critics have designated them. Taylor differed from his fellow Puritans not because he used sensuous and sensual imagery while they did not, but because he recognized the inadequacy of all metaphor to figure the divine, a belief which caused him to "push earthly metaphors to the limits of language." In between his discussions of Taylor and Bradstreet, Daly makes a useful distinction between the naturalist poets--Steere, Bradstreet--who celebrated the natural world, seeing the sacred in the secular, and the Gnostic poets--Michael Wigglesworth, Philip Pain--who rejected the sensible world and the metaphors supplied by it. The mistake of early critics, Daly asserts, was in identifying Wigglesworth as the typical, rather than the atypical, Puritan artist.

For students and teachers of Puritan poetry, the most useful feature of this work may be its appendix, in which Daly offers a succinct bibliographical essay on the critical reception of Puritan poetry from 1793 to the present. The story is a fascinating one, involving such critics as Perry Miller, Harold Jantz, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Hyatt Waggoner; and Daly manages to describe their contributions accurately while successfully advancing his own thesis.

One of the virtues of this book is that, while Daly's research leads him to discuss a wide range of sources and influences, he never loses sight of the centrality of the Bible to the Puritan artist. Although he occasionally fails to point to the obvious biblical relationships of a metaphor--as when he compares a Puritan's statement about the wind making request "with sighs which cannot be expressed" with Wordsworth's correspondent breeze but not with Romans 8:26--Daly correctly emphasizes throughout his study the poet's dependence on Scripture as precedent for and source of metaphor and symbol.

It is remarkable that we have waited until now to see the first book-length study of Puritan poetry; we are fortunate that it sets high standards of thoroughness, accuracy, and provocativeness for future studies to follow.