

Michael P. Winship. *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment.*

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

FOR MANY YEARS the intellectual history of Puritan New England during the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries have been analyzed almost in total isolation from the wider ideological trends taking place in England. In this regard, Michael P. Winship's study, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment*, is clear evidence of the growing efforts by historians to explore Puritan Massachusetts in light of "transatlantic cultural trends" (88) and ideological transformation which took place in England, as can be seen for example in Reiner Smolinski's important study of Cotton Mather, *The Threefold Paradise of Cotton Mather* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995).

Focusing "on the hermeneutics of Massachusetts Puritans' providentialism"—the believers' belief "that all that befell them came from a loving, if often angry, God"—the author attempts to place the "providential discourse," or "the culture of wonders," in New England "within the context of the suppression of Puritanism and the Puritans' providentialism within English learned culture in the second half of the seventeenth century" (1–2). And since "changes within Puritan culture in Massachusetts closely paralleled changes within Puritan culture in England" (4), the author claims, with the failure of the 'Puritan Revolution,' Puritans in England "found themselves in a position of increasing intellectual marginalization" (3), and Puritan "orthodoxy in Massachusetts" found itself "as part of a losing side in English learned and cultural politics" (5).

The author's ultimate goal in this study is to analyze the decline of 'providentialism' in Puritan Massachusetts, especially in Cotton Mather's thought. Accordingly, the book is organized around eight chapters; the first deals with the development of "providential divination" and the "culture of wonders" in Massachusetts (10, 29); the second treats the decline of Puritan providentialism in England after the Restoration, when the "learned community" in England "rejected close readings of special providences and an extraordinarily intervening" of deity in the world (43, 59). The third chapter is devoted to Increase Mather's "dark enchanted providentialism" (72), which stood in contrast to the "norms of learned culture" in England, such as "mechanical philosophy" and "mechanical universe" (70). The major part of the book, however, is devoted to Cotton Mather's "providentialism"; his increasing "appeals to reason" in interpreting "the hand of God" (74, 87); his "involvement in the transatlantic world of science" which led him to abandon "much of his Puritan universe to the fringe of legitimate knowledge" (109–10); his views concerning the "true powers of devils" in face of "English learned culture" which was shifting against "prodigies, wonders, and judgments" (122–23). Finally, in the last chapter, "Farewell to Wonders," the author claims that "the educated discourse of later-eighteenth-century Massachusetts provided only limited room for seventeenth-century providential sensibility," hence, "the disappearance of providentialism paralleled the disappearance of Calvinism itself" (151–52). Thus, "the God" who "brought the Puritans" to America in the early seventeenth century "was in retreat from Massachusetts orthodoxy, driven out by the cultural politics of the seventeenth century" (152).

The main problem with Winship's study is clearly the overall thesis, which is loosely defined, poorly argued, and lacks a clear coherence. In addition, there are serious questions regarding the discrepancy between the book title and its content; the discussion of 'Puritan providentialism' does not take into account the wider

context of Christian and Protestant providential divination; the overt 'Whig' interpretative approach regarding the decline of religion and the inevitable triumph of 'reason'; the inadequate treatment of the relationship between religion and science; and finally, the analysis of Cotton Mather's 'providentialism' which suffers from many self contradictions.

Sometimes a book's title is narrower than its real content, but very often the title of a book suggests something far broader than its content. Such is the case with Winship's study, which has nothing to do with 'Restoration England,' and much less with the world of the 'Early Enlightenment,' as the book's title suggested. This study deals primarily with Cotton Mather (out of eight chapters five are dedicated to him), and not at all with the larger spheres defined by the title. There is no serious discussion of providentialism in Restoration England and almost nothing regarding the Early Enlightenment (only ten pages in Chapter 5). To the contrary, the English context is discussed in a superficial and eclectic way, and generally examined only in light of New England Puritan writings, thus serving only as an illustration of Puritan culture in New England. For example, the very term 'English learned culture,' against which the author repeatedly measured the failure of Puritan providentialism, is never defined, thus leaving the impression of an 'invented category' standing for an historical phenomenon which never changed.

A more serious problem, however, is the overall thesis of the book concerning Puritan "providential divination" (9, 28). Not only does the author fail to provide a well-defined and convincing argument regarding Puritan providentialism, analyzing it as if it were totally divorced from the rich Christian and Protestant 'culture of wonders,' but he exhibits it as a uniquely New England Puritan tradition. The author further claims it originated solely in Calvin's thought (10–15), thus ruling out any change in Puritan thought over a century and a half since Calvin's time. Yet, it is really not clear, and the author in fact never provides a clear and irrefutable proof, that Puritans borrowed their concept of "providential divination" (7) directly from Calvin. And since he is familiar with R.T. Kendall's study (*Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, Oxford UP, 1979), which rejected the most-often association between Calvin and Puritanism, the author should be more cautious.

Another serious problem is the superficial treatment of the Early Enlightenment. There is no serious discussion of this important intellectual movement, along with the Scientific Revolution, which profoundly influenced Christian—and not only Puritan—attitudes toward 'providentialism.' For example, the crucial transformation from Thomas Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle's principles inherent in nature as powers instilled there by God, which God used in his providential work—hence, God *cooperated* with natural powers—to the mechanistic philosophy of the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century which rejected Aristotle's and Thomas's understanding of nature by claiming that matter is passive—hence God imposed laws of nature on the world. Furthermore, with the profound changes taking place in early eighteenth century—the transformation from the religious vision of a theocratic universe ruled by God's divine providence to the Newtonian mechanical theory of a clockwork universe directed by natural laws, the rise of Deism, and the triumph of the Enlightenment and secularism—Christian providential divination underwent profound transformation through the growing breach between religion and history, and the gradual exclusion of deity from the course and progress of history.

A further serious issue is the author's overt Whig Interpretation (the classical definition is in Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* [London, 1964]). His tendency to view the course of history in light of a constant struggle between the forces of 'reason' and 'religion' and the gradual 'liberation' from 'Puritan

providentialism,' leads eventually to the wrong conclusion that the "learned culture" in England was constantly opposing Puritans' 'culture of wonders,' or *vice versa*. This approach, however, is based upon an unwarranted dichotomy between reason and religion, something very far indeed from the "learned" minds of the Early Enlightenment in England, such as Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton.

The whole study is marked by many self-contradictions. For example, on one page the author claims that Cotton Mather's "involvement in the transatlantic world of science" led him to abandon "much of his Puritan universe to the fringe of legitimate [sic] knowledge" (109–10), but on another he argues that in fact "Mather's illuminatory providentialism changed very little" (138). Throughout, the author describes the gradual yet inevitable decline of the 'culture of wonders' and 'providential divination,' yet at the very end he claims that "Puritanism" in fact "actively resisted Max Weber's" thesis of the "disenchantment of the world" (148).

Failing to recognize the wider context of the Christian and Protestant universe of thought, Winship's study is too narrow and limited to provide an adequate analysis of New England Puritan providentialism. Thus, ironically, the same author who attempts to place Massachusetts in the wider transatlantic context, ends up rather strangely with a reconstruction of a peculiarly New England Puritan culture of providential divination.

Avihu Zakai  
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Milton T. Wolf and Daryl F. Mallett, eds.  
*Imaginative Futures: Proceedings of the 1993 Science Fiction  
Research Association Conference, June 17–19, 1993.*

San Bernardino, CA: SFRA Press, 1994. 364 pp. \$41.00 (cloth); \$31.00 (paper).

IN SCIENCE FICTION CRITICISM, as in most fields of scholarly endeavour, conference proceedings are notoriously eclectic. But in assembling the proceedings of the 1993 Conference of the Science Fiction Research Association, Milton Wolf and Daryl Mallett have elevated the principle of editorial eclecticism to new heights. Its 24 essays encompass such diverse topics as the fantastic golems of Leilah Wendell, the paucity of Basque SF, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, feminism and psychic healing, the "premodernism" of Kim Stanley Robinson, and the postmodernism of John Fowles. Elsewhere one finds essays on database visualization, virtual reality, the abortion controversy, research on artificial intelligence, and the electronic book—all of which bear at best indirectly on the focus readers might reasonably expect of such a collection: science fiction and its criticism.

Indicative of the peculiar juxtapositions of topic and tone that characterize *Imaginative Futures* are the titles Wolf and Mallett have attached to the four sections within which these essays uneasily reside: "Infosurfing and Virtual Reality: The Imaginative Future of Database Storage and Retrieval," "Cybercerebralism and Hyperlearning: The Imaginative Future of Education Research, Bibliography, and Criticism," "A Klingon, a Ferengi, and a Monk Walk into a Bar . . . : The Imaginative Future of Interpersonal and Technohumanoid Relationships: Gender, Cyborgism, Science/Humanity, and Sexualism" and (most appropriately) "Imaginative Miscellany: The Imaginative Future of Literature: Censorship, Humor, Imagery, Characterization." Throughout the volume, like a Greek chorus commenting obliquely on the

proceedings, various SF writers ruminate on diverse topics. Fredrik Pohl ponders futurology and science fiction, "the sovereign prophylactic against future shock" (12); Lisa Goldstein frets about the "dismal" (75) current state of imaginative literature; James Gunn reviews the interrelationship of SF and science; Poul Anderson probes problems facing current SF writers, notably censorship in the form of political correctness; and Kim Stanley Robinson argues that the trope of the urban-industrial "city world" so prevalent in current SF is irrelevant and outmoded, "an act of fantasy rather than extrapolation" (355). Among the most stimulating contributions to the book, these short, informal reflections hover uneasily amongst the tangle of the 24 primary essays.

Had most of these 24 essays lived up to their ambitious titles, *Imaginative Futures* would be a significant, wide-ranging intellectual cornucopia. In the event, though, it more closely resembles a grab bag. Alongside a few insightful gems one finds altogether too many transcribed talks, trivial pursuits, insufficiently developed ideas, and odd fragments of larger works. The latter are particularly frustrating because they promise so much more than they deliver. In, for example, the provocatively entitled "Surprises in the Heinlein Bibliography," Marie Guthrie Ormes offers not a discussion of Robert A. Heinlein's works but rather a description and promotion of her as-yet unpublished bibliography, itself a part of a (presumably forthcoming) "definitive work on that author" (340). Similarly, Anne Balsamos promises a discussion of "Signal to Noise: On the Meaning of Cyberpunk Subculture." But she undermines her project of "discuss[ing] aspects of this new youth subculture from a perspective informed by cultural studies" (217) by repeatedly off-loading interesting subtopics to a "longer essay" (223) to which, alas, we do not have access. Such incompleteness often results when a critic must truncate an essay in order to accommodate the draconian strictures of verbal conference presentation; the problem is that apparently Ormes—and many other contributors to *Imaginative Futures*—neither restored nor reworked their essays for publication.

Other contributions flounder on the inherent triviality of their topic or approach. It's hard to become exercised about the clarion call sounded by Paul Joseph and Sharon Carton in "Perry Mason in Space": "The lawyer in television science fiction series is, too often, little more than a clone of the American lawyer in the twentieth century. We call for a more inventive portrayal of lawyers in television science fiction series" (311). While Joseph and Carton offer some thoughtful ideas about how to deal with this less-than-urgent aesthetic crisis, they trivialize these ideas by contextualizing them with episodes of *Star Trek* and the late but unlamented *Battlestar Gallactica*. Similarly, one is more irritated than enlightened by reading "Humor in Science Fiction," in which author Fiona Kelleghan eschews analysis and critique for a "haphazard stroll along the highways and byways of SF" (264). In a woeful attempt to marry form to content, Kelleghan adopts an excruciatingly colloquial authorial voice that undermines insights even as it fails to amuse. Thus her introduction: "A proper study of humor dissects the *corpus* and extracts all the juice from it. Folk of your caliber deserve a scholarly report full of allusions to Todorov, Bakhtin, old Cigar Freud, etc. And I know you expect the Politically Correct niceties: the sensitivity to the minority majorities, the retaliatory feminist critiques against the vaginally challenged, the ecological retro-readings, the New Age romancing the noble savages, and other white-break revisionisms. However, what you're getting is . . ." (263). A final example must suffice to illustrate the many things that have gone awry in this book. Joanna Pransky opens "Social Adjustments to a Robotic Future" with several awkwardly constructed pseudo-SF dialog snippets intended to illustrate the problems and potentialities of the penetration of Asimovian robots into homes of the

---

EDITOR

Lyman Tower Sargent, Political Science, University of Missouri-St. Louis

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Raffaella Baccolini, Università degli Studi Bologna

MANAGING EDITOR

Chrystalla Ellina, University of Missouri-St. Louis

EDITORIAL BOARD

Peter Fitting, New College, University of Toronto

Naomi Jacobs, English, University of Maine

Carol Kolmerten, English, Hood College

Lise Leibacher, French, University of Arizona

Arthur O. Lewis, English, Pennsylvania State University

Timothy Miller, Religious Studies, University of Kansas

Tom Moylan, English and American Studies, George Mason University

John T. O'Connor, History, University of New Orleans

Jean Pfaelzer, English, University of Delaware

Kenneth M. Roemer, English, University of Texas at Arlington

---

*SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION:*

*Utopian Studies* is published by the Society for Utopian Studies and is included with membership in the Society, together with the Society's newsletter, *Utopus Discovered*. Membership categories are \$45.00 for regular membership, \$20.00 for students, retired, and unemployed, and one may become a Sponsor for \$100.00, a Benefactor for \$150.00, or a Patron for \$250.00. At present there is no additional charge for institutions or for overseas members. Please send membership dues to Lyman Tower Sargent, Society for Utopian Studies, Department of Political Science, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO 63121-4499, USA. Telephone 314-516-5849 or 314-516-5521. Fax 314-516-5268. E-Mail SUTOPIA@UMSLVMA.UMSL.EDU.

Copyright © 1996 by Society for Utopian Studies.

All rights reserved.

ISSN 1045-991X

*CONTRIBUTOR INFORMATION:*

Please send four double-spaced copies of contributions to Lyman Tower Sargent, Editor, *Utopian Studies*, Department of Political Science, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO 63121-4499, USA. *Utopian Studies* uses the most recent MLA style guidelines.

Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in the MLA International Bibliography, HISTORICAL ABSTRACTS and AMERICA: HISTORY AND LIFE.

This journal is a member of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals.

*Utopian Studies* is published with the support of the University of Missouri-St. Louis and the Centro Interdipartimentale di Ricerca sull'Utopia, Università degli Studi Bologna.

# Utopian Studies

## Journal of The Society for Utopian Studies

Volume 7, No. 2 1996

---

Published by the  
Society for Utopian Studies