THE AMERICAN PURITAN ELEGY

Jeffrey Hammond’s study takes an anthropological approach to the most popular form of poetry in early New England – the funeral elegy. Hammond reconstructs the historical, theological, and cultural contexts of these poems to demonstrate how they responded to a specific process of mourning defined by Puritan views on death and grief. The elegies emerge, he argues, not as “poems” to be read and appreciated in a postromantic sense, but as performative scripts that consoled readers by shaping their experience of loss in accordance with theological expectation. Read in the framework of their own time and place, the elegies shed new light on the emotional dimension of Puritanism and the important role of ritual in Puritan culture. Hammond’s book reassesses a body of poems whose importance in their own time has been obscured by almost total neglect in ours. It represents the first full-length study of its kind in English.

JEFFREY A. HAMMOND is Professor of English at St. Mary’s College of Maryland. He is author of Sinful Self, Saintly Self: The Puritan Experience of Poetry (1993) and Edward Taylor: Fifty Years of Scholarship and Criticism (1993).
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THE AMERICAN PURITAN ELEGY

A Literary and Cultural Study

JEFFREY A. HAMMOND
For my parents

Jeanne Weldon Hammond
and
Evan Ronald Hammond
The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones,

And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry.

And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest.

Ezekiel 37:1–3
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Preface

Like many books, this one began in frustration. A few years back, while pruning the bloated first draft of a study of American Puritan poetry, I removed a three-chapter section dealing with the funeral elegy. It pained me to do so: I was pursuing a cultural reading of Puritan verse, and regretted omitting a full discussion of the most popular poems of the era. Still, I couldn’t get these strange old poems out of my mind. There remained something more compelling about them than their wooden surfaces could explain, and since they both repulsed and attracted me, it seemed important to understand why. Accounting for the repulsion was easy enough. Like others of my professional generation, I had been trained to value poems that differed radically from these repetitive, predictable laments for the Puritan dead. Accounting for my attraction took more probing, but three reasons finally emerged. First, the Bible-centered Protestantism that stamped my earliest years probably made these poems less alien to me than they seemed to other readers, at least if the commentary surrounding them was any indication. Second, these poems, for all their deviation from modern taste, articulate the larger relationship between language and loss, between words and the absence that their use inevitably invokes. Nowhere does the issue seem more real – less glibly theoretical or aridly intellectual – than in elegiac texts, which exist precisely because their human referents are gone. Third, I believe that an important function of literary history is to recuperate neglected or misunderstood texts, an impulse that David Perkins has called “chivalrous” (33). There are worse labels, certainly, for a literary historian to bear. Moreover, chivalry toward the dead is a familiar impulse among early Americanists, veterans of a longstanding struggle to get our period and our writers taken seriously. Puritanists in particular have come to know what it is like to root for underdogs. Critics often judge Puritan poetry by postromantic artistic, psychological, and moral standards, and even though Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor seem
marginally able to hold their own in the face of anachronistic readings, such has definitely not been the case with other seventeenth-century New England poets, especially the elegists. Indeed, no other form of Puritan poetry seems more in need of historical and aesthetic contextualizing.

Given current constructions of art and mourning, it is difficult to approach Puritan elegies without expecting a type of literary performance in which the poets themselves – and the mourners they sought to comfort – had little interest. In this study I have tried to describe another kind of performance that the poems embodied, a ritual performance consistent with how they were experienced by their original writers and readers. What Puritans experienced in elegy was, at root, the power of a cultural myth and the satisfactions of a verbal performance that allowed them to enter that myth. The central trope of the Puritan elegy, when read in light of the literary codes of its time and place, is not the enduring monument, the treasured urn, or nature weeping in sympathy with survivors. The central trope is resurrection – a trope that emerges perhaps most clearly in the unforgettable image of a regathered and revivified Israel set forth in Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones. When the divine voice asks the prophet, “Son of man, can these bones live?” Ezekiel replies, “O Lord God, thou knowest” (Ezek. 37:3). Speaking resurrections for the dry bones of the Puritan dead was central to a verbal ritual that early New England’s elegists repeatedly and tirelessly performed. The image also suggests what a literary historian faced with the dry bones of forgotten poems might hope to achieve.
I have been assisted in this book by my English Department colleagues at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, whose varied reactions and diverse enthusiasms kept me trying to make these old poems as interesting to them as they are to me. In particular, Andrea Hammer led me toward deeper insights into the cultural and historical implications of what I was trying to do; Sheila Sullivan helped me clarify my methods and theoretical positions; and Michael S. Glaser gave a poet’s critique, at once sharp and kind. Elizabeth Bergmann-Loizeaux of the University of Maryland offered thoughtful responses to the project in its earlier stages, as did David Kuebrich of George Mason University, a good friend whose example continually reminds me of the moral dimension of our teaching, writing, and lives. Edward Lewis, former president of St. Mary’s College, and former provost Melvin Endy granted a sabbatical in which I wrote the first draft. Edward A. Strickland of Catholic University kindly checked my renderings of Latin poems and saved me from several gaffes; because I occasionally gave my rusty Latin free rein despite his advice, he is not responsible for any slips that might remain. I am also grateful to Anne Sanow, Terence Moore, Robyn Wainner, and Raymond Ryan of Cambridge University Press, who saw possibilities in what might strike some as an unappealing subject, and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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