

Displacing the Divine: The Minister in the Mirror of American Fiction, and: Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life.

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Displacing the Divine: The Minister in the Mirror of American Fiction, and: Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Displacing the Divine: The Minister in the Mirror of American Fiction. By Douglas Alan Walrath. Religion and American Culture Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 380 pages. \$55.00.

Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life. By William A. Dyrness. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 352 pages. \$26.00.

The disconnection of spiritual practice from theology by so many who claim to be "spiritual but not religious" continues to be an important focus for theologians and practitioners in the field of Christian spirituality. Two recent books address this trend through the lens of the arts and within the framework of the Calvinist Reformed tradition that is so ingrained in North American culture and religion. In *Displacing the Divine: The Minister in the Mirror of American Fiction*, Douglas Walrath looks to portrayals of ministers ("divines") in American fiction to show how traditional belief in the "Divine" is "displaced" in the popular mind by cultural trends such as disestablishment, the growth of the frontier, industrialism and modernity. He finds in popular fiction expressions of a frustrated yearning for authenticity in religious leaders and institutions. In *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life*, William Dyrness reflects theologically on "affective practices" or secular activities that seem to be displacing religion as sources of spiritual satisfaction and wholeness in contemporary culture. He proposes a "poetic theology" **[End Page 256]** that can help us to reconnect God to "the poetics of everyday life." Together, these studies offer provocative insights into the relationship between culture, religion and spiritual practice in our time.

Walrath's literary historical study develops a typology of views of the ordained minister—the "'divine'—in American fiction." His reading engages three major trends in North American culture and religion: the growing importance of popular approval (as opposed to religious credentialing) which comes with the disestablishment of Calvinist churches in the early nineteenth century; the valuing of action rather

than orthodoxy of belief, as the standard to measure a minister's authenticity, and finally, the questioning of faith itself with the secular revolution, which "challenges the minister's primary source of authority—the reality of God" (299). Various literary "types" emerge from Walrath's practice of reading together a number of popular novels that come from the same historical era and classifying the protagonists. For example, his account of the "vulnerable divine" as a literary type in mid-nineteenth century novels catalogues a number of minister-protagonists in popular fiction who are "victims of their own believing," i.e. whose human lives and relationships are stunted because they adhere to a belief system now increasingly seen as too far removed from real human experience. Fiction from the era of the social gospel movement exposes rifts between professed belief and actual concern for the poor, and we meet fictional divines who are typed as "entrenched reactionaries," "social ministers" and "social activists."

Sometimes longer on plot summary than on literary analysis, Walrath's approach is most useful where a typology drawn from contemporary popular novels illuminates a classic. His catalogue of "vulnerable divines," for example, provides a fresh context for understanding Hawthorne's Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*, while his subtle distinction between "social ministers" and "social activist" types illuminates his reading of Charles Sheldon's social gospel classics, *In His Steps* and *The Crucifixion of Philip Strong*. Similarly, his recognition of the "anachronistic divine" as a type in early twentieth century fiction deepens his appreciation of Harold Frederic's classic *The Damnation of Theron Ware*.

The novels studied here illustrate a steady decline of status and respect accorded to "divines" as the culture loses respect for the "Divine" that they and their churches are supposed to embody and preach. The cultural shift is demonstrated in the ministers' internal struggles to align belief with action alongside frequent failures to do so. Walrath's Protestant frame does have its limitations: a more nuanced discussion might include minister-figures from African American fiction, such as John Pearson in Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, or the

an English grocer; the book ends abruptly, but significantly, with Jesus' pathetic, wounded body being covered once more with the veil of allegory.

McNamer acknowledges that allegory is not necessarily inimical to an affective response, yet in the case of Richard Hill's lyric, as in the book's assessments of other devotional works, the presence of allegory functions to disqualify the text's affective efficacy. In differentiating Bonaventure's *Lignum vitae* from the *Meditationes*, for example, McNamer argues that in the former text, "Realism is constantly disrupted by allegory and exegesis, which prevents any sustained emotional engagement with the literal level of the narrative" (90). In light of the extraordinary insights that McNamer provides into the cultural variability and historical contingency of emotion in the book, and her own trenchant reminder that literal and figurative modes of expression often overlap, it seems warranted to consider further whether our own understandings of, and emotional responses to, allegory and realism are reliable guides to the way these texts were experienced affectively by medieval readers. Taking the argument of the book as a whole, it may be objected that an overly restrictive notion of "affect" has governed the selection of texts, with the result of streamlining some of the complexity and contradiction of medieval affective Passion meditation. Nevertheless, the power of this book lies in McNamer's exemplary readings of the texts that she does choose, and to which she brings a keen ear for their poetry, ambiguity, and emotional resonance.

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Displacing the Divine: The Minister in the Mirror of American Fiction and Poetic Theology

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