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Abstract
Book review

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W.B. Gerard, ed. *Divine Rhetoric: Essays on the Sermons of Laurence Sterne*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010. 284pp. US$62.50. ISBN 978-0-87413-063-8.

Laurence Sterne's oeuvre is small, and a significant proportion of it is found in his forty-five sermons, a genre foreign to most literary critics. Following the publication of Melvyn New's monumental Florida Edition of the sermons (1996), there has been a steady trickle of studies. W.B. Gerard's introduction offers a graceful history of the sermons' critical reception, establishing the well-known terrain to be covered in this collection. Together, the essays collected in *Divine Rhetoric* restate many of the questions surrounding the sermons—primarily the complementary issues of plagiarism (Sterne borrowed frequently from other sermonists) and orthodoxy (his reputation as a bawdy novelist always precedes the reading of the sermons). If there is an editorial bias here, it is against theoretical, non-contextual readings, leaning instead towards the school of New, which insists upon a thorough grounding in Anglican theology before Sterne's sermons can be properly read.

The four essays collected under the heading "Theological Contexts" provide such a grounding and also carry a polemical argument about the importance of this context for Sterne studies. As New has insisted (for more than forty years now, but especially in the introduction to his edition of the sermons), Sterne was an unexceptional Anglican preacher. Christopher J. Fauske, by attending to key passages of the Thirty-Nine Articles, and Martha Bowden, by examining William Rose's 1762 anthology of sermons (which included three by Sterne), follow New by explaining that Sterne was fully consistent with the mainstream in his theology and preaching practice: like every other Anglican minister of his day, Sterne insisted that theological mysteries remain unexplained while emphasizing practical ethical questions. Both Fauske and Bowden argue that modern critics who approach the sermons by way of *Tristram Shandy* misread these mainstream characteristics as evidence of flouting religion and writing merely "moral essays." Jack Lynch's contribution similarly calls for a more historically accurate understanding of genres. The danger in this insistence on Sterne's ordinariness is that it begs the question of the value of reading Sterne's sermons at all. The ironic—perhaps Shandean—manifestation of this danger in Gerard's collection is that the reader finds himself a full third of the way into the book without having encountered a single sustained engagement with any of Sterne's actual sermons.

In the fourth essay, we hear from New himself, who offers advice on attending to the liturgical occasion of each sermon as an essential

interpretative context. This results in the conclusion that "most Anglican preachers probably differ as much from themselves on different occasions as from one another when they preach on the same occasion" (102). Reading Sterne's sermons in isolation (and drawing conclusions about their Shandean uniqueness) is, therefore, "an essentially flawed pursuit" (102). If this is not sufficiently discouraging, the reader is admonished in a footnote: "At a very minimum, before we make any critical observations about Sterne's sermons or his publishing of them, it behooves us to read the combined ten volumes of Foster and Seed [two eighteenth-century sermon writers]" (115). If the editor of the present book had applied this rule to his own contributors, I suspect it might have been a very slender volume indeed.

Of the three essays included as studies of "Sources and Influences," James Gow's (the first to offer sustained close attention to Sterne's sermons) is the most successful. In answer to the "New school," he makes a convincing argument, based on the use of source material, that the sermons are legible as uniquely Sterne's: they characteristically simplify, personalize, and moderate their sources. By demonstrating Sterne's extremely creative use of his sources (especially in the volumes he himself published), Gow provides a way of approaching the sermons as pieces of writing composed by an individual about whose characteristics one might venture to make an informed critical judgment.

Also in this section, Geoff Newton offers a comparative study of light imagery in Sterne and the Neoplatonists in order to show Sterne's adherence to the Anglican balance of reason and revelation (defending him against charges of deism). Given the prefatory grounding of the collection, it is interesting to find Arthur Cash's 1964 essay on the sermon in *Tristram Shandy* reprinted here: his is a wholly secular approach, grounding Sterne's ethics in the Lockean psychology of self-knowledge as it functions (or fails to function) with the assistance of classical morality (reason) and Christian religion (revelation), with an emphasis on the former. Although it is no longer necessary to defend Sterne against charges of frivolity, Cash's key point is worth restating: "The court of conscience is ever present in the fiction of Laurence Sterne" (178).

Part 3 collects four essays that study "rhetorical and affective techniques." Two, by Robert A. Erickson and Madeleine Descargues-Grant, take up the traditional comparison of Swift and Sterne as sermonists. Descargues-Grant offers a study that wisely places Sterne at both the centre and the vanguard of Anglican centrism, quietly asserting that we can read Sterne's sermons as texts with unique approaches and effects. Although Swift and Sterne share a common view of humanity, namely that the passions are "the stumbling-block of all rationally based efforts at improving human nature" (207), Sterne

is not as stern as Swift, and this allows him to deploy the passions as a part of his rhetorical program to persuade his audience to Christian virtues. This is a handy and honest answer to the "New school," for it acknowledges a fundamental doctrinal commonality while pointing out how very different Sterne's approach to this commonality is from that of a key predecessor. By attending to the interpenetration of sermon and fiction (in both forms), Descargues-Grant suggests that, for Sterne, "secularization" means the diffusion of religious meanings throughout his culture, not their negation.

As in the first four, the final two essays are less focused on Sterne himself. Michael Rotenberg-Schwartz cites a wide range of eighteenth-century sermons in order to explore the depiction of violence, war, and heroism in the sermons of Sterne and his contemporaries. Donald R. Wehrs deploys a postulate derived from cognitive science that "conceptuality rests upon metaphorical extensions of bodily experience"—to explain "the convergence of the literary and the ethical in Sterne's sermons" (249). This wide-ranging essay provides a cognitive theory of Christian theology, but only towards the conclusion does Wehrs suggest how this might apply to Sterne's sermon-writing. Wehrs propounds a theory of everything, and it would be more surprising to find something his theory does not explain than that Sterne fits into it.

Overall, this collection is at its best when attending closely to the details of Sterne's sermons. Unfortunately, such engagement is infrequent. Although understandable (as it must be the most read of Sterne's sermons), the sermon in *Tristram Shandy* seems to get a disproportionate amount of attention. Finally, mention must be made of the recording included with the book. Patrick Wildgust's reading of "The Case of Hezekiah and the Messengers" is gentle yet not dull, not emphasizing rhetorical pyrotechnics, but insisting on clarity of statement: a fine tribute to its author, and to his humane vision.

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