

Gary Kuchar:

Divine Subjection: The Rhetoric of Sacramental Devotion in Early Modern England

Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2005

xii + 297 pages (index)

ISBN: 0-8207-0370-2

Price: \$58

Gary Kuchar's book, *Divine Subjection: The Rhetoric of Sacramental Devotion in Early Modern England*, sets out to examine "how the language of devotion performs socially symbolic acts" (p. 2), or, put differently, how the words of the "sacred rhetorician" alter the way in which worldly tribulations are experienced. The relationship between language and action constitutes, indeed, the most interesting rhetorical implications of the work.

Divine Subjection deals with both poetry and prose, and this is a highly welcome approach. Although Kuchar states that his "rhetorical [...] focus is relatively narrow" (p. 34), his definition of devotional rhetoric is broad in so far as it comprises written text dealing with a variety of ontological questions. Kuchar thus considers devotional writing, whether in verse or in prose, as one form of symbolic action. On a thematic level, however, he has chosen to concentrate on how "early modern devotional writers committed to a sacramental vision of the self" (p. 34).

The book is divided into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. There is also a considerable notes section, including bibliographical information, but the reader would have benefited from a proper bibliography as well. Kuchar states that the four chapters form two entities, each containing two chapters, one entity focusing on "the rhetoric of excess", and the other on the "processes of desacramentalization" (p. 33). Furthermore the two-fold division reflects the rather different contexts of Catholic and Protestant devotional rhetoric. From the point of view of rhetoric, this is a relevant distinction, which could have been emphasised even more. In fact, instead of elaborating on the applicability of rhetorical theory to modern texts (such as the films of David Lynch, pp. 162-163), it would have been more helpful if Kuchar had provided an even more detailed account of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious and political scene.

The introductory chapter, "Devotion and Desacralization: Writing the Sacramental Subject in Early Modern England" (pp. 1-35), offers an overview of previous studies in the field of devotional rhetoric. A number of different viewpoints are presented, which is a good thing. At the same time, given the fact that the word 'rhetoric' is actually mentioned in the sub-title of the book, one would have expected the Introduction to provide a clearer statement of the rhetorical perspective of the work. As it is, Kuchar places far more emphasis on literary theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis. This emphasis is particularly evident in the detailed discussion of the topics related to the subject of gender in early modern devotional writing (pp. 8-17).

Chapter one, "Southwell's Plaint: Subjection and the Representation of the Recusant Soul" (pp. 37-91), focuses on the Catholic context of the writings of the Jesuit priest and poet Robert Southwell (1561-1595). The structure of the chapter is well balanced. The chapter first provides an overview of the topic of recusant subjectivity as seen through a personal letter by Southwell. It then proceeds to examine the same topic through Southwell's *Mary Magdalene's Funeral Tears*. The third section of the chapter considers the theme of (spiritual) exile as a central topos in devotional rhetoric. Kuchar makes ample reference to Southwell's choice of diction and to

his use of the concept of style (pp. 71-73). Finally, he offers a detailed analysis of Southwell's perhaps most intensive poem, "A Vale of Tears". The analysis involves close linguistic scrutiny and includes frequent references to previous criticism.

Chapter two, "The Gendering of God and the Advent of the Subject in the Poetry of Richard Crashaw" (pp. 93-149), primarily deals with Crashaw's (1612-1649) representation of the "feminine", or "maternal" (p. 93), aspects of worship. In this context the introductory discussion of gender topics makes sense. The chapter offers a particularly fluent interchange between Aristotelian and Paulian attitudes, on the one hand, and Lacanian and Freudian ideas (pp. 114 ff.) as well as Derridean critique (pp. 126-127), on the other. The sub-chapter entitled "Crashaw's Non-Oedipal Rendering of Matthew 2:13-15" (pp. 119-124) introduces Oedipal interpretation as a critical tool for the reading of devotional poetry. Even though such readings may have limited relevance to the history of rhetoric, they do in fact offer versatile and innovative perspectives on the texts at hand. The strength of the chapter primarily lies in its attempt to show how "Crashaw's rhetoric provides a set of strategies designed to 'awaken' the reader to a sacramental vision" (p. 147). Among the sub-chapters, "Language as Sacrament" (pp. 100-104) and "Sweet Is the Difference: The Eucharist in an Epigram" (pp. 105-114) deal with the core matters of sacred rhetoric, namely the concept of the Word and the process of textualization.

When viewed together, the two chapters dealing with Catholic sacramental devotion envisage a community seeking "to accommodate feminine modes of spirituality" (p. 148). At the end of chapter two, Kuchar summarises these "modes" while at the same time smoothly introducing the theme of the next chapters.

The third chapter, "Representation and Embodiment in John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*" (pp. 151-179), initiates the discussion of 'desacramentalization' in Protestant devotion with Donne's (1572-1631) highly self- (and body-) centred account of his near-death experience. Kuchar presents the reading of the body – or, as he calls it, the "*liber corporis*" – as a rhetorical process of "formally mediating the passage from the material body to the immaterial soul" (p. 152). In this context Kuchar draws upon medieval/Galenic medicine as well as on alchemy. Given the fact that Kuchar has chosen to concentrate partly on Catholic and partly on Protestant writers, one would have expected him to discuss in more detail what the Protestant aspect of Donne's text consists in. However, the reader is only offered a reference to "particularly Protestant concepts of immanence" in the context of the language of embodiment (p. 155), and does not learn more about the specific theological implications and textual allusions.

The transition to chapter four, "'Organs of thy Praise': Body, Word and Self in Thomas Traherne" (pp. 181-218), which reconnects the topics of word and body (or language and action), is smooth and well presented. It both includes references to the preceding text by Donne and places the Protestant writer Traherne (1637-1674) in the historical and textual context. Later in the chapter, Kuchar also ties back to his previous analyses of Southwell, Crashaw, and Donne. The analysis of Traherne draws extensively on phenomenological theory, especially on A. Leigh Deneef and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Contrary to Donne's dread of bodily decay, Traherne's texts here mainly deal with bodily forms of praise. From the point of view of rhetoric, the most interesting arguments arise from the discussion of the epistemological implications of the rhetorical process.

Whereas towards the end of the second chapter, there was a conclusive discussion of the Catholic texts and writers, Kuchar offers no corresponding synthesis of the two 'Protestant' chapters. Instead, he moves directly on to the final chapter, which contains a more general conclusion. Perhaps Kuchar does not find the Catholic-Protestant division as interesting as does the present reviewer? It may be argued that the rather thorough introduction to the fourth chapter partly compensates for the lack of a conclusion on behalf of the Protestant issues. Yet,

from the perspective of the history of rhetoric it seems unfortunate that there is actually no record of the important shift that took place in early modern English devotional writing, from an authoritarian, Latin-based faith to a collective faith mainly expressing itself in the vernacular.

The final chapter, "Sacramental Rhetoric in the Time of the 'Wan Ghost': Excess, Subjection and Spectrality" (pp. 219-246), perhaps constitutes more of a chapter in its own right than the epithet "Conclusion" would suggest. The chapter begins with a somewhat brief account of the "transitional space" or the "sacramental liminality" (pp. 219-223) in the context of Southwell, Crashaw, Donne, and Traherne. After this, Kuchar offers a thorough discussion of Donne's *Holy Sonnet XIV*, "Batter my heart". This choice of text is interesting as it closes the arguments with a text in verse. Kuchar is primarily interested in the writer's arguments as such, regardless of whether this sacramental rhetoric is formulated in prose or verse. As in the preceding chapters, Kuchar provides a close analysis of the text at hand. However, the discussion of Donne's sonnet offers a more balanced presentation of historical, theological, and literary arguments than anything else contained in the book. At the same time, just as in his previous discussion of Donne's *Devotions*, Kuchar seems more interested in describing the general air of anxiety and dread in Donne's sonnet (which Kuchar terms the "most violent of penitential fantasies", p. 223) than in determining what aspects of Protestant textualization might have contributed to such manners of expression. Kuchar refers to a "spiritual fatigue" and an "anxiety of an unprepared heart in the strict Calvinist sense" (p. 239), which he reads as a suggestion that the speaker's soul "is ontologically dislocated from its origins" (ibid.). But with that observation, Kuchar's leaves the subject of Donne's sonnet.

The chapter – and the book – closes, rather abruptly as well, with a brief discussion on Louis Althusser's model of interpellation (and Judith Butler's critique thereof). Instead of these rather disconnected notes on "The Metaphysics of Subjection" (pp. 245-246), this reader would have appreciated a more general conclusion relating to the issues that have been up for discussion, preferably including a chronological presentation of the writers in view of the changing historical, theological, and political contexts. Such information would have been specifically welcome seeing that the preceding chapters focus on textual aspects and hardly take into account the writers' time and age.

Divine Subjection: The Rhetoric of Sacramental Devotion in Early Modern England is clearly affected by the fact, indicated in the Acknowledgements, that earlier versions of chapters one, three, and four have already appeared in journals, and that parts of the conclusions have been published in a volume of essays. As a result, each individual chapter provides a separate perspective or sub-topic, and the book would perhaps have benefited from more discussion in between chapters as well as from some statement as to what constitutes the general argument of the work. Likewise, in the concluding chapter, instead of presenting yet another textual analysis (of Donne's sonnet), Kuchar could have attempted to bring his previous arguments together. This said, the book is so clearly structured and each chapter so carefully presented that the result is actually very reader-friendly.

Moreover, throughout the book Kuchar works very closely to the text, making frequent references to etymology and highlighting the linguistic as well as the literary strategies of the writers. This philological-rhetorical approach offers great depth and strong reliability to the analyses.

To conclude, Kuchar's book gives a highly detailed and versatile interpretation of a delightfully broad set of texts, both poetry and prose. In Kuchar's presentation, the different subgenres of sacred rhetoric are seen to support each other in a particularly complementary way. While it touches on a great number of issues pertaining to the history of rhetoric, the scope of *Divine Subjection: The Rhetoric of Sacramental Devotion in Early Modern England* also clearly transcends the immediate concerns of those readers who are primarily interested in rhetoric.

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