BERNARD THE WRITER

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Language and Style

Writing about the exquisite literary quality of The Life of Macrina—a biographical treatise on the death of his sister by the great Greek Church Father, Gregory of Nyssa—its translator Lowther Clark observes: “Should this treatise have been written in the fourth century before rather than in the fourth century after Christ, it would doubtlessly have become one of the world’s classics.”

A similar statement could be made with regard to the work of Bernard of Clairvaux, in particular his chef-d’oeuvre, The Sermons on the Song of Songs. Surely, as we shall see, Bernard’s literary qualities have been acknowledged as such, but that does not mean that he has been has been awarded a place in the literary pantheon together with the likes of Augustine, Dante, and Petrarch. Interestingly, this lack of appreciation is not primarily to be found in an anti-religious bias on the part of literary historians, although traces of such prejudice are not to be dismissed out of hand either. It is first and foremost the predominance of classicist normativity as part and parcel of Roman Catholic rhetoric itself—ever since the Counter-Reformation—that has been in the way of taking Bernard for the literary genius he is. Thus Bernard’s 19th-century biographer, writing from a decidedly ecclesiastical point of view, more or less dismissed his hero’s literary status by qualifying the 12th century as “an age in which literary taste did not reign supreme,” thereby meaning, I suppose, that measured against the laws of classical-humanistic criteria, Bernard’s prose was deemed to be too wild, too associative, and too disorganized to qualify as high literature. Conversely, where Bernard may have been lacking in literary taste and restraint, he could be seen to abound in devotion. It is this emphasis

on saintliness and devotion that, in line with the historical and hagiographical picture of Bernard as it developed since the late Middle Ages, has been so strong and predominant as to diminish attention to his literary qualities. In modern times this tendency has both persisted and been corrected. It persisted insofar as, for modern interpreters focusing on Bernard as primarily religious, attention to his devotional qualities remained paramount even though, in more modern terms, it increasingly took on the guise of admiration for his psychological acuteness and depth of mind. It has been corrected insofar as, more than ever before, the rhetorical and literary dimensions of Bernard’s work have become the object of scholarly scrutiny. In the process it proved hard to reconcile the devotional Bernard with the rhetorical one, as if from the religious perspective he had to be excused for his literary playfulness while, in turn, his rhetorical fireworks needed to be supplemented with elements of devotion. Thus the great Bernard scholar Jean Leclercq, who has done more than anyone else to restore Bernard’s image as a writer, can be seen on the one hand bringing to the fore the qualities of Bernardine style while, on the other hand, stressing the saint’s sincerity in playing his literary games; it has all to be seen and assessed as serving a higher purpose: “There is more. Bernard is not a man of letters who writes to please his contemporaries and to cultivate his reputation; he is a man of the Church and he exercises his teaching duties. He does not compose literary fiction; he takes sides vis-à-vis problems of doctrine and moral action…”

This urge to distinguish between “literary” and “doctrinal,” outward rhetoric and the drive of inner devotion, may run the risk of being anachronistic. As Peter von Moos has pointed out in an article about the occulta cordis, the secrets of the heart, “the concept of the occulta cordis—the invisibility of the interior I either as a given fact or as a requirement—constitutes in the Middle Ages a model of behaviour that first and foremost highlights silence with regard to the self and self-control,” the importance of confession notwithstanding. That the self and its sincerity could be assessed from the outside is part of a later development (as of the 13th century) culminating in the “pathetic

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