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Realities of the Sermon: Some Considerations for Editors

WILSON H. KIMNACH

The word “sermon” derives from the Latin *sermo*, indicating a talk or discourse. That definition endures, with the historical narrowing of the term to the proselytizing public addresses of representatives of religious faiths. Metaphorically, of course, the term is applied to any exhortation of a more or less formal nature that resembles such homiletical efforts. The important point is that the sermon is an event in time that inevitably terminates when the oral discourse ends. As Richard Weaver has observed, “every speech which is designed to move is directed to a special audience in its unique situation”;¹ ultimately, this reality militates against all attempts at preservation or reproduction,

perhaps even in the age of recordings and television.

In the past the ephemeral nature of the sermon itself was a given, and many famous sermons are only remembered as events or reported with varying attention to literality by auditors. Indeed, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the ancient prophet-preachers seem to have made a point of not leaving any record beyond the sound of their voices evanescent upon the air — a strategy that has clearly proved to be very effective, by the way — and the Bible’s account of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount pretends to little more than an accurate auditor’s summation. Since those early days, the sermon has evolved as has the

profession of the preacher; the talk has become formalized according to the precepts of an astonishing variety of styles, theories, and schools. Still, as late as the 17th century some of the greatest preachers, such as John Cotton and Thomas Hooker, seem to have considered the sermon to be primarily an event and left record-keeping to their auditors.²

Over the past three or four centuries, however, overwhelming evidence has accumulated that the sermon is also a *thing*, i.e., a document or literary text.³ The exact relationship between the sermon document and the sermon event is always problematic, although some factors can be enumerated which may illuminate a range of probability. For instance, the sermon preached in the pulpit has always been delivered in one of three ways: *extempore*, *memoriter*, or *recitare*. In the first case, the preacher simply speaks, although as the sermon form grew more complex he would ordinarily be allowed minimal notes or an outline which would hardly constitute a text. Such preaching was considered to be the “purest” form by American Puritans, and as late as the early 18th century Solomon Stoddard was militantly insisting upon it as essential for good preaching.⁴ Both the *memoriter* and the *recitare* delivery involve a prepared literary text (although the effect of the sermon event in the case of *memoriter* preaching is generally indistinguishable from *extempore*, satisfying Stoddard), a text which presumably parallels the oral discourse very closely. Of course, as auditors’ notes have revealed, there may be significant discrepancies between the written and oral texts, either through lapses of memory in the *memoriter* delivery or through intentional modifications carried out *ad libitum*, even in a read text. Finally, there were many variations, too numerous to catalogue here, such as that of the eminent divine who delivered his oral sermon more or less *extempore* and then wrote out the sermon in its entirety immediately after.⁵

By the eighteenth century in New England — the place and period of my immediate concern — the term *sermon* could apply equally to the event or to the literary document. This might not have mattered if the document had always been at least a general reflection of the event; however, the evolution of a distinctive literary form in the sermon which had no particular relationship to time made the two avatars of the sermon structurally independent. The sermon event was like a football game, conducted in so many minutes; the sermon document was like a baseball game, having so many innings regardless of time. The preacher had his designated period in the pulpit and when the time was up the sermon was done; however, as an author in a distinctive literary form having a fixed structure consisting of a biblical text and its explication, a doctrine and its reasons, and an

application with its uses, the preacher was obligated to work out his thought within the logic of the form regardless of duration. The practical solution for preachers such as Jonathan Edwards was simple enough: they preached their literary sermons in installments like magazine serials.

This duality of the concept of the sermon during the eighteenth century is preserved in contemporary documents. For instance, Edwards’ former student and disciple, the Rev. Samuel Hopkins, edited some of Edwards’ sermons for posthumous publication.⁶ Hopkins transcribed the documents in the approved modern mode of the diplomatic transcription, and except for spelling out shorthand and abbreviations and adding punctuation, he did not intervene editorially as nineteenth-century editors were to do. The result is a volume presenting eighteen numbered sermons; however, the reader who is familiar with the sermon form will note that there are only six complete literary units. One who assumed he was dealing with a volume containing separate sermons or some sermon series and chose one sermon at random to read would likely encounter a “sermon” that begins nowhere and ends up in the air. In preparing his own sermons for the press, as in the case of the lengthy *Pressing into the Kingdom of God*, Edwards simply omitted the divisions and transitional material between the units in which he preached the sermon.⁷ Other preachers of the period sometimes note in the preface to a printed sermon that only a portion of the literary text was preached upon the occasion of the sermon because of time limitations, thus giving primary ontological status to the sermon document, an apparent historical reversal of sorts.⁸

What can be concluded from consideration of these historical factors is that the sermon is both an oral event and a literary text. The first publication of the sermon is clearly the event, whatever the method of the preacher. Yet it is also clear that only the literary work is actually recoverable, whatever the method of the preacher. The sermon event can and should be discussed as a historical context for the sermon document since every sermon is at its inception occasional, but the editor can never be certain that any particular word or words were actually published during pulpit delivery unless they are verified by auditors’ notes (an unlikely recourse for more than a few sermons, and even in such cases the auditor may be rephrasing on his own and should be checked by a second!).

In the case of Jonathan Edwards’ sermon manuscripts which I am editing, the matter of preparing sermons for their first publication as literary documents is complicated by the presence of those factors which are entailed in the sermon event. There are, in fact, two texts superimposed: the literary text, and the notations

and devices required for pulpit delivery. A differentiation of the two avatars of the sermon involves first a recognition of those aspects of the manuscript that are determined by the requirements of the initial oral publication.

Edwards' earliest sermons are written in octavo booklets consisting of an eight-leaf quire. This apparently coincided roughly with the duration of the sermon in the pulpit, although some booklets contain an additional leaf or two suggesting a degree of flexibility in the pulpit period. Most of Edwards' early sermons are fully developed as literary texts within the single booklet. However, very early in his career — indeed, at the very start — Edwards began producing some two-booklet sermons which required two pulpit sermons to deliver in their entirety. Perhaps the most obvious appurtenance of the sermon event in these manuscripts is the transitional summary which occurs at the juncture of the preaching units without regard to the literary structure of the sermon. A typical one is as follows:

Matt. 16:26

Doctrine: That the salvation of the soul is of vastly more worth and value than the whole world. 1st, by showing the world in general should come to an end at the conflagration of the world; and 2d, that it should come to an end with respect to every particular person at death. 3rdly, by showing the uncertainty, fodeyness and vanity of the world, whereby it is liable to come to an end before death. 4thly, by showing that the soul was immortal. 5thly, that if all the world could be enjoyed forever, it would be little worth. 1stly, we showed that riches were little worth; 2dly, that honors were little worth; 3rdly, that worldly pleasure is so likewise; 4thly, that earthly [friends] are in comparison but little worth. 6thly, we showed in the sixth place that the salvation of the soul was more worth than all the world because it is of inestimable worth and value. And that, 1st because it is deliverance from so great misery, and we showed that the misery from which a saved soul was delivered was very great because in it the soul was deprived of all good. 2dly, all evil was brought upon it. [3rdly,] this misery would be eternal and mixed with despair. We shall now proceed to show that

And here he begins the next head, as it happens about halfway through the development of the doctrine division. The summary has no particular relation to a reader's progress through the sermon text, however, and is significant only to auditors who need to be caught up on a subsequent occasion. Realistically, the summary is not part of the literary sermon although it is in the manuscript.⁹

Particularly in his early sermons, Edwards experimented with a variety of devices specifically intended to enhance the pulpit sermon. He had a very real problem: he could not preach either *extempore* or *memoriter*, but had to read from a rather complete literary text, although there is some evidence that he could amplify *ad libitum*.¹⁰ What may have been a source of uneasiness was certainly compounded when his first permanent settlement turned out to be in the church in which his revered grandfather, the outspoken Solomon Stoddard, was senior pastor. Stoddard, you remember, had published against those half-baked preachers who had to read sermons. At any rate, Edwards changed his octavo booklet for duodecimo, which could be palmed more unobtrusively, after arriving in Northampton. But he had used, from the first, horizontal lines to separate major heads. These lines he continued throughout his career, and in the third decade he even divided the page (four inches square) vertically, the result being units resembling postage stamps. Also in the early sermons are diagonals with slightly curled ends which at first glance seem to separate sentences or perhaps paragraphs — and sometimes they do — but further searching will reveal some that divide only phrases or even words. These “pick up lines,” as I have christened them, are not unorthodox punctuation, but rather so many grab-irons, usually between three and a half-dozen per page, that mark major points or concepts to which Edwards could return after some *ad lib.* amplification, or simply points he would not want to miss as he looked up and down from the page. In a few early sermons, Edwards seems to begin each new sentence as a paragraph. Since at the same time he developed normal paragraphs in notebooks, letters, and other documents, it seems evident that these indentations are not paragraphs but attempts to make the sentences more readily visible and the structure of the page more apparent when reading the sermon in the pulpit. There are a few other devices of this sort that occur only once, such as placing opposed terms in pairs vertically or using boxes or inserting curved lines above key concepts. These devices are all part of the manuscript, but they are meaningful only as a dimension of the preached sermon — a text that is essentially unrecoverable.

Another group of devices might be categorized generally as abbreviation. Of course this includes various abbreviations of words that would be familiar enough to anyone today, but it also includes symbols such as a circled dot for “world,” ampersands that resemble the mathematical symbol for infinity, and so forth. One of the most interesting of these abbreviations is employed in Scripture quotations where Edwards often gives the first few words of a quotation and then draws a line which stands for the remainder of the quotation. This line is not a dash, incidentally, or a

mere equivalent of “etc.,” but an indication of the words to be quoted. Thus, if the quotation is lengthy, the line may run on for several lines down the page. In the pulpit Edwards could give the entire quotation pretty accurately from memory, since there are many indications that he routinely cited and quoted from memory where the passages are written out. In any event, the length of the line told him just how much of a verse should be quoted. While these abbreviations may have saved some time in the writing of the manuscript, it is clear that their primary function was to save space, not space in the sense of the paper of the booklets because Edwards could always add more and in his notebooks he is less prone to abbreviation than in the sermons, but to save space in the sense of bringing more of his text before his eyes at a glance when reading from his manuscript in the pulpit. Edwards did not want to flip pages any more than he had to.

Thus even abbreviations emerge, along with the aforementioned devices, as so many traces of the oral sermon imposed upon the literary sermon. My point is not that one of these sermons is more important or authentic than the other, but merely that they are independently present within the manuscript and may be differentiated.

When things relating to the sermon event are removed from the manuscript, what is left? Essentially, it is a full text in the sermons preached during the first twenty years of Edwards’ career and in all of the really important ones thereafter.¹¹ This does not mean that there are no underdeveloped heads or sketchy passages, but it does mean that, if only because he never could fully compensate for the absence of carefully written words in the pulpit, Edwards’ manuscripts contain true literary texts rather than sermon notes. This is not unusual, incidentally, for a number of late seventeenth and eighteenth century preachers whose sermon manuscripts I have examined — including Jonathan Edwards’ father and Solomon Stoddard — also wrote out literary texts even when they were known as *extempore* or *memoriter* preachers.

The recovery of the literary document from the manuscript involves recognition of several conditions. First, perhaps, is the fact that the oral discourse is a matter of sound and the literary document a matter of letters. The letters presented to the reader should, it would seem, at least be the equivalent of the sounds we have evidence were pronounced. To be specific, we should remember that Edwards said “world” and not “circled dot” when he spoke. Likewise, when quoting Scripture, he did not say “three lines’ worth of the text,” but I trust you have my point.

Perhaps one of the most noticeable facts about Edwards’ sermon manuscripts is that, once the markings pertaining to the oral event are discounted,

there is virtually no punctuation. Edwards punctuated completely and competently in sent letters and documents he saw through the press; however, although there is some sporadic punctuation in the earliest sermon manuscripts, this soon virtually disappears. There are henceforth no commas, periods, colons, semi-colons; no quotation marks, question marks or even proper dashes. Occasional periods after numbers and abbreviations account for just about all of it. The place of punctuation is minimally taken by spacing between sentence units. Because he attempted punctuation at first, it seems likely that he found it difficult to punctuate rhetorically, though he may just not have wanted any more markings on an already crowded page. That Edwards nevertheless considered meticulous punctuation to be an essential part of the literary sermon is attested by the fact that the only known galley sheet with his corrections contains a corrected comma;¹² moreover, although there are several legends about his pulpit performances, such as that he stared above the heads of his auditors or that he never raised his voice, I have never heard a trace of a rumor that he ever delivered an unpunctuated sermon.

Because they are frequently long, convoluted, repetitive, and not infrequently contain unmarked parentheses, not to mention a plethora of ambiguously situated pronouns, Edwards’ sentences are not to be negotiated without pondered punctuation. Similarly, the formal structure which defines the literary sermon is composed of intricately-articulated heads, numbered and frequently titled to indicate their place in the sermon. In sermons Edwards prepared for the press, these heads receive typographical clarification; however, in the sermon manuscripts the numbers are generally simple arabic numerals except for the two or three major heads which usually get roman numerals. The result is that the reader sometimes experiences the “one-two-two-five-three” effect wherein heads become a confused jumble. Here again, the resources of typography must aid the reader in perceiving the essential structure. Edwards’ auditors were highly trained in the form, but modern readers are not, and I have observed more than one anthology editor who was apparently quite ignorant of the fact that a sermon cannot be sliced like a loaf of bread. But with typographically-distinguished heads the modern reader can follow where Edwards’ auditors, perhaps with a little coaching now and then, noted the structural intricacies of philosophical theology.

A final aspect of the sermon has to do with the uniqueness of the sermon event and the enduring manuscript. It is a paradox that the sermon manuscript often embodies both a unique event and a class of events. For Edwards and for most other great

preachers regardless of period, each sermon is a work of art, the result of days or perhaps weeks of labor. As such, it is a permanent resource in his library of his own compositions, and at least until publication in the print medium, it is likely to be retooled for another pulpit occasion which, though also unique, bears analogy to the first. Thus, many sermon manuscripts contain not merely the two original avatars of the sermon, but successive layers of texts. There are some true corrections or revisions in Edwards' manuscripts where his intent is merely to fill in an omitted word or to enhance the quality of his expression, but most of the revisions in his sermon manuscripts represent transformation rather than improvement. Such changes may involve a stratum of alterations running throughout the original manuscript, the insertion or deletion of heads numbering hundreds of words, or even the substitution of new versions of major divisions comprising forty to sixty percent of the sermon's totality. All of these changes can be identified through Edwards' own notes, internal evidence of the literary text, and through analysis of hand, ink, and paper. The real problem is how to consider the multiple texts present — sometimes as many as a half dozen, though usually two or three — when preparing the literary text for publication. The author of a poem or novel may revise or even make several drafts, but in most cases he is clearly working on a single text and his editor simply decides to publish the final revision, or perhaps the first version. However, in the case of the multiple-occasion sermon there is no single text: Edwards has already published in the pulpit two or three sermons on this text or this doctrine, all of which happen to reside in the same manuscript; but the editorial issue has to do with what he wrote before the Great Awakening or after; what he wrote in 1726, in 1732, and again in 1748 on this subject. Are all the texts equal, or is one to be paramount and the variants to be assigned to footnotes and appendices? Whatever the technical solution, one indissoluble fact remains: these variants are not strivings toward a single culmination, but so many discrete ends, the oral equivalents of which have already been published.

It has not been my intention during these remarks to suggest that the sermon is that which cannot be edited, but rather to share some of the considerations that the complexity of sermon manuscripts has forced me to ponder over the past several years. For some of these problems there may never be a consensus solution, but I believe that most of them are real enough and must be decided one way or another. Certainly, for instance, the sermon manuscript looks two ways: to the oral event which is permanently just out of view, and to the literary work which is usually insufficient as it stands in manuscript to give the

literary correlative of the oratorical event. Clearly, an editor must consider the purpose of his edition. For instance, is he editing a *paper* — that marvellously evasive word! — or is he editing a *work*, something that is expected to make a statement to a literate reader? Finally, what can he do to clarify the context, inescapable and yet ambiguous, within the practical limits of his edition so that the essential occasional dimensions of the literary sermon are not lost?

NOTES

¹Richard M. Weaver, "Language is Sermonic," in *Language is Sermonic: Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric*, ed. R.L. Johannesen, R. Strickland and R.T. Eubanks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1970), p. 206.

²See, for instance, Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 158-59; or Winfried Herget, "The Transcription and Transmission of the Hooker Corpus," in *Thomas Hooker: Writings in England and Holland, 1626-1633*, ed. G.H. Williams, N. Pettit, W. Herget and S. Bush, Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 253-70.

³Consultation of the standard bibliographies will reveal that the literature of the sermon, sometimes in treatise format, constitutes nearly half the output of the presses in England and America well into the nineteenth century. Curiously, although it preponderates even more in American culture, English scholars have done more in the way of literary evaluation and modern editions of this distinctive literary heritage.

⁴Solomon Stoddard, *The Defects of Preachers Reproved* (New London, 1724), p. 23.

⁵This interesting practice of Bishop Bedell, a Calvinistic admirer of William Perkins, is mentioned along with numerous other such variations in W. Fraser Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson: A Study of its Literary Aspects* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1932), p. 19.

⁶[Samuel Hopkins, ed.], *The Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards . . . Together with a Number of his Sermons on Various Important Subjects* (Boston: Printed by S. Kneeland, 1765).

⁷This sermon was first printed in Edwards' *Discourses on Various Important Subjects, Nearly Concerning the Great Affair of the Soul's Eternal Salvation* (Boston: Printed by Kneeland and Green, 1738), pp. 131-72. The manuscript sermon is divided into four preaching units (or oral sermons), though the printed sermon is continuous.

⁸For instance, see the Advertisement in Peter Clark, *The Advantages and Obligations arising from the Oracles of God committed to the Church and its Ministry* (Boston: Printed by J. Draper, 1745).

⁹This summary is transcribed from the manuscript sermon on Matt. 16:26, leaf lr. of the second booklet.

¹⁰Samuel Hopkins, in his *Life and Character*, p. 48, avers that though Edwards had to preach from a written-out text, some of his *ad lib.* amplifications were of better quality than what he had written. Even in the earliest sermons that seem to be fully written out, there is an occasional "etc." in the midst of Edwards' argument, apparently indicating that he should complete the argument at that point *ad lib.*

¹¹After 1742, Edwards' sermon manuscripts become increasingly outlinish, though some passages are more

developed. But he seems to have written out rather fully some, presumably more important, sermons, a fact corroborated this past year when the manuscript of the Farewell Sermon (1750) was discovered and found to be virtually fully written out.

¹²This proof containing a page from *Discourses on Various Important Subjects* (1738) is now bound into the manuscript sermon on Luke 12:35-36 where its blank verso is utilized. In the first edition the comma has been deleted as directed.
