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Review Essay: Robert McMahon, *Augustine's Prayerful Ascent: An Essay on the Literary Form of the Confessions*

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Marina Scordilis Brownlee studies a sequence of appropriations: Boccaccio's use of Ovid's *Heroides* in the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta* and the continuation of the *Elegia* by Juan de Flores in *Grimalte y Gradissa*. She interprets the tension between Boccaccio's mythologizing (universalizing) and psychologizing (individualizing) as a crisis in linguistic referentiality, the split being then widened by Flores through reversal of the conventional signifying movement from word to referent. A similar problem is explored by James Burke in *Libro de buen amor* and *El Conde Lucanor*: both enact the hermeneutics of distinguishing signs of the true and the false, the former confident in its discernment of the counterfeit, the latter skeptical about the referentiality of signs.

Kevin Brownlee finds Christine de Pizan's authority in *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc* deriving from collaboration between woman warrior and woman poet, the former in a figural line of female saviors, the latter in the sibylline line of female prophets, both equally empowered by God. Through instances of Tasso's implicit imitations and borrowings from other texts in *Gerusalemme liberata*, Walter Stephens finds, in contrast to some recent readings, an unstable and scarcely consistent plurality of representations of marital relations and the roles of women.

In his study of Petrarch's *Rime* 131, William Kennedy finds Renaissance commentators and poets (Louise Labé and Shakespeare) responding in different ways to the poet's complex gendering of self and audience. Nancy Struever's essay seeks to show how Machiavelli and Montaigne redefined ethical inquiry in the humanist tradition—Machiavelli by resisting the exemplum as a narrative prop to canonical moral counsel, Montaigne by accentuating the autonomy of moral belief within public situations that test it; both writers appeal to an anti-authoritarian "moral work" enacted through a break with the authority of traditional moral discourse.

Michael Rudick
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MEDIEVAL

Robert McMahon, *Augustine's Prayerful Ascent: An Essay on the Literary Form of the Confessions*, University of Georgia Press, 1989, 200 pp., biblio., index, \$27.50.

BOOK REVIEWS

In *Augustine's Prayerful Ascent*, Robert McMahon attempts a literary approach to the *Confessions* that emphasizes internal patterns, unity of narrative and expositional movements, and imagery that represents the work as an *oral* prayer that, like drama, exists and unfolds in the present. In his reading of the *Confessions*, McMahon distinguishes between Augustine the speaker or character and Augustine the author. Though Augustine the character struggles forward in a seemingly unstructured manner, he is actually being meticulously guided and nurtured by God's careful direction, as understood by Augustine the author. Thus the inconsistencies that theologians and philosophers have thought to exist within and between the parts of Augustine's spiritual autobiography are resolved, in McMahon's view, by Divine Providence and the Neoplatonic concept of return to origins.

The apparent noncoherence of the first nine books—which culminate in Augustine's becoming a Christian and end with praise and prayer for his wonderful mother, Monica, who has passed on to heavenly bliss—is deliberately intended to show the meaninglessness of Augustine's life and of those readers' lives who subsist without the word of divine creation of Genesis 1 and 2, the word that Jesus Christ fulfills as the Word (John 1–2). "Looking for patterns of metaphor and interpreting their meanings" (41), in order to unify books 1 through 9 with the concluding elaborate exposition of Genesis in book 13, takes up over half of McMahon's short book. The spiritual ascent appropriately ends at the beginning—an exegesis of the creation of man and woman and God's blessing and sanctifying the seventh day.

McMahon follows this discussion with a shorter chapter that relates books 10 through 12 of the *Confessions* to book 13, with its interpretation of Creation as an allegory of the Church. Spiritual ascent continues throughout time and history, especially in the development and structure of the Christian community, the spiritual mother of both Augustine the protagonist and Augustine the author. McMahon thinks the *Confessions* imitate the return to origins found throughout Scripture, and he believes readers are unintentionally caught up in Augustine the author's careful plan.

Certainly both St. Augustine himself and various forms of "Augustinianism" have had a major influence on Western cultural history for both good and ill. Their influence on the predominant views of love, grace, providence, evil, sin, war, man, and moral and spiritual attainment come immediately to mind. Augustine's view of human sin, for example, has countered the biblical and Eastern Orthodox perspective of the human capacity for sharing divinity, as well as for receiving grace (on this point see the five volumes of Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Christian Tradition* and John Meyendorff's *Byzantine Theology*).

BOOK REVIEWS

McMahon supplies a useful, though limited, review of recent scholarship—particularly that of John Freccero, Robert Durling, and Kenneth Burke—upon which he builds his own insights. McMahon's emphasis on Scripture as well as the Church in the *Confessions* is a corrective to other views, as is his awareness of the unity of narrative and instructive styles that the *Confessions* shares with the Bible. Some important elements have, however, been omitted from McMahon's study. I wish, for example, that he had clarified what Augustine means by *reason* and in what ways it is the same as and different from *spirit*.

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Antonio C. Mastrobuono, *Dante's Journey of Sanctification*, Regnery Gateway, 1990, xiii, 279 pp., ill., biblio., \$14.95.

What follows is a review (by Sowell) of a book (by Mastrobuono) whose key sections review other volumes (by Charles Singleton, John Freccero, and Giuseppe Mazzotta) that are devoted to interpreting a poem (by Dante) that often incorporates other writings (by Thomas Aquinas) that interpret, among other books, the Book of Books (the Bible). Although this entire bookish enterprise may strike some as an exercise in frivolity, most literary scholars feel that nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, the matter *is* most serious, for the question of how to interpret another's book fuels most of the debates that rage today concerning literary theory. In the case of Dante's *Commedia*, the debate over how best to read the text has become especially heated in the last half-dozen years. For ever since a deeply depressed Charles Singleton committed suicide on October 11, 1985, the competition for the coveted title of "leading American *Dantista*" has proven intense. Now Antonio Mastrobuono has thrown his hat into the ring.

Unfortunately, the reviewer's task becomes unduly complicated when, as in the case of *Dante's Journey of Sanctification*, the author's rhetoric appears calculated to create controversy. To cite a few parenthetical examples: Mastrobuono stridently accuses Singleton of "sheer absurdity" (53) in reading Thomas Aquinas, and of a "fundamentally false interpretation of the entire structure of the *Comedy*" (73); he accuses Freccero of "pure improvisation" and "sophistry" (78) in explaining Dante's theology, and he accuses Mazzotta of "irrationalism or nihilism" (89) in arriving at a methodology. When a scholar employs invective, the reviewer must attempt to separate intemperate style from underlying argument, even if that reviewer ultimately must evaluate both.