

Miles HOLLINGWORTH, *Saint Augustine of Hippo. An Intellectual Biography*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 312 pp., ISBN 978-14-411-7372-0, £20.00.

I must confess that I found it extremely hard to even start this review. The “blurb” on the back cover of the book tells me that:

This is a book whose style and feel are really worthy of Augustine himself – humane and probing, full of telling metaphor and seriousness about the strangeness of human experience. It is capable of doing for a new generation a great deal of what Peter Brown’s epochal biography did half a century ago.

This is the opinion of Rowan WILLIAMS, the now retired archbishop of Canterbury, and the author of some really important theological contributions to our understanding of Augustine, which only makes my confusion stronger.

What I could, however, take as a point of departure is that WILLIAMS begins with – a remark on the book’s “style and feel”. I do not think that this is mere rhetorical ornament. Albeit HOLLINGWORTH (= H.) is a scholar and the author of a study of Augustine’s political thought¹, his book is first and foremost “style and feel” and it is “style and feel” that we are left with after reading some three hundred pages of it. A disappointing and irritating experience, at least for a scholar interested in learning something new about Augustine. I tried to read and re-read the pages, looking for some “substance” of ideas and arguments, but it seemed almost impossible for me to find out what this book is really about.

To substantiate this criticism a little, let us look at the content of the two first chapters. Chapter One is entitled “Out of Africa” (a mere foretaste of many more such allusions later on...) and H. proposes an idea that Augustine’s “Africanity” is a key to the understanding of his personality and work. This is as good a start as any, but what comes later is rather disappointing. The author ponders about Late Antiquity, pointing out that this was a transitional period in the history of our culture (just like the period we live in), then he points out that Augustine “has shown the European sensibility how to feel the utter incongruity of a human life” (p. 6). An experience of “the homesickness of the heart” is mentioned, as well as the universality brought about by Christianity, its criticism of this world, the ideas of pride and fall connected with the Roman Empire. The chapter, towards its end, repeats the intriguing thought of Augustine the African “as the outsider ‘holding up the mirror’ to the Western tradition” (p. 10), but apart from those rather vague images of Augustine’s “otherness” (to use a Lacanian concept that is quite *en vogue* nowadays) and its supposed advantages, the reader is given no coherent perspective on what that actually means.

The title of Chapter Two, “Augustine’s Intellectual Milieu”, is even more promising. H. writes about the atmosphere of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, and he does so in Latin-sounding but clearly late modern terms, such as multiculturalism, pluralism or cosmopolitanism. The atmosphere of the Empire was disorienting. Christianity tried to overcome this multiculturalism and pluralism by its monotheism and universalism. The new religion questioned traditional links between religion and politics. What follows this loosely connected set of ideas is a delineation of some philosophical schools of antiquity. Pre-Socratic philosophers looked for the single principle explaining the world (only they?), Socrates looked for stability in the world of ideas (perhaps Plato rather than Socrates?), Plato did not create a system and his philosophy was “temperamentally conservative” (not good, but

¹ M. HOLLINGWORTH, *Pilgrim City: St. Augustine of Hippo and His Innovation in Political Thought*, London–New York 2010.

what does it actually mean?). Ultimately, the Stoics spread around ideas that became very popular towards the end of antiquity – individuality, universal kinship, cosmopolitanism, the laws of nature. The “conclusion” of the chapter is that Christianity is a religion of exiles and the homesick.

Probably the reader of this review will think that this summary of the first two chapters is a derogatory attack on the author by a frustrated reader. It may be believed or not, but I really tried to extract important ideas from the first two chapters and this was the effect of my work. There are various ideas; some of them seem true, some are debatable, but the main question is how they are connected to each other and to Augustine’s intellectual evolution, and this question remains unanswered or, at least, I was not able to understand the answer. The “style” of the book reminds me of the Freudian method of “free associations” during an hour of therapy. One idea leads to another, sometimes links are understandable, but often they are not, and it is extremely difficult to find a classical argument or intellectual order.

Given all that, a brief, general survey of the content is possible. Chapter Three is focused on Augustine’s parents and the next chapter discusses his infancy. H. follows a chronological order, based on the *Confessions* – in Chapter Five he deals with Augustine’s adolescence and its “traumas of initiation” in order to describe his first conversion to philosophy, caused by reading Cicero (Chapter Six: “Cicero and a Sense of Purpose”). Chapter Seven describes Manicheism and the next one – Augustine’s friendship with a youth who also joined the Gnostic movement, but died, causing the future bishop of Hippo much grief. Chapter Nine is about “Christian Conversion” in the year 386, while the following one deals with the early philosophical writings of Augustine. The last chapter deals with the 44 years of Augustine’s life, public activity, Church ministry and writing. The book clearly is not a biography in the sense that it gives an account of the life of Augustine, because the greater part of the bishop’s life is basically omitted. The pattern clearly reflects that of the *Confessions*, so it is a “biography of the *Confessions*” rather than of its author himself.

What makes this even more difficult to follow is the incessant display of H.’s erudition. The book strives to appear sophisticated and literary – it has a “style”. Moreover, citations from various works of Augustine and a wide range of modern and contemporary authors constitute nearly a half of the body of the book. We find extensive quotations from such authors as Freud, Popper, Hobbes, Havel... But those quotations also do not seem to be essential to H.’s argument, they are rather ornaments and encrustations, associations of a widely read intellectual.

An instructive example of how the author deals with the Augustinian concept of *confessio* can be found in Chapter Three. First the concept is compared to Edgar Degas’ dancers. Then follows a rather poetic interpretation of that analogy which I will quote in order to illustrate the “style and feel” of H.’s writing:

It was an ongoing means of catching hold of fragile little testimonies, too sublime for the nets of historical explanation – or for that matter, of any kind of analysis at all. There are some things that are designed to be caught by the human mind: but the understanding of them has nothing to do with the catching: but consists rather of handing them back, intact, to their Maker (p. 44).

The reader of this review will probably think that I am again being very mean to the author, but his book in general makes exactly an impression – in his own words – of “fragile little testimonies, too sublime for the nets of historical explanation – or for that matter, of any kind of analysis at all”.

Perhaps, as WILLIAMS suggests, H. actually attempted to imitate Augustine’s *Confessions* and this is the effect of this. We should say rather “to imitate the way in which he experiences and understands the *Confessions*”. But even if this were so, it is a futile attempt. Probably the best chapter of the book is the one on Manicheism (Chapter Seven), because it is a sound, instructive representation of this Gnostic system that could be recommended, for instance, to students. H. also interestingly compares the Manichean “appeal” to the way psychoanalysis and Marxism were attractive to many intellectuals in the 20th century.

One more thing about a “feel” of the book is that there are a lot of references to contemporary ideas. It is openly stated in Chapter One that Late Antiquity resembles our times. But in effect the reader receives not only many quotations from contemporary authors, but also a lot of concepts such as the previously mentioned multiculturalism or pluralism. We are not told what they mean. And given the fact that they are rather “fast food concepts”, successfully sold in popular culture and losing their meaning to the point of unintelligibility, I suppose that a reader deserves at least some definition to start with. What makes the use of those ideas worse is that they often lead to rather banal thoughts: “pluralism is good”, “nationalism is bad”, “people should not think in black and white”...

Gillian CLARK called the *Confessions* “a book about Augustine and what matters to him”². I think that is also a fair description of H.’s biography of the bishop of Hippo, if we substitute “Hollingworth” for “Augustine” in CLARK’s *bon-mot*. Curiously, it bears a strong resemblance to the other 21st century Augustine’s biography, that by O’DONNELL³, even though they are written in a completely different vein and have different agendas. O’DONNELL’s biography is sometimes labelled “a first postmodern biography of Augustine”. H.’s book proves that, unfortunately, it is not the last.

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² G. CLARK, *Augustine: The Confessions*, Exeter 2004, p. 41.

³ J.J. O’DONNELL, *Augustine: A New Biography*, New York 2005.