

BEAUTY AND REVELATION IN THE THOUGHT OF SAINT AUGUSTINE by Carol Harrison, Oxford: *Clarendon Press*, 1992, ix–xi, 289 pp. £35.00

Carol Harrison has replaced Gerald Bonner at the University of Durham where she is a lecturer in the History and Theology of the Latin West. In this book she has given the results of her thorough investigation into Augustine's theory of beauty. She views this theory as aptly called 'theological' without ceasing to be 'incarnational.' For, in fact, Augustine appreciated not only the beauty of the transcendent world so powerfully opened to him by Plotinus, but also the beauty of the temporal world created through the Word by the divine Trinity.

To demonstrate her thesis Dr. Harrison presents a wealth of evidence against a popular notion that Augustine never rejected the Platonic form of otherworldiness nor the Manichean disdain for the material world. This misconception arises, she argues, from a failure to place his statements regarding sensible experience within his theory of the 'order of love.' In an hierarchical order of values, those at the lower end do not become valueless, still less, evils. She not only highlights Augustine's positive response to created beauty but shows how he related a *full* experience of sensible beauty to the regaining of the human person's original state as God's beautiful icon.

The author's central conviction is that there was development in Augustine's theory of beauty. His deeper reflection on the Fall of man brought him a realization of the role of beauty in the created world and in the life of Christ, 'the fairest among the sons of men.' In coming to terms with Adam's loss of 'an intuitive, spiritual vision of God,' (p. 1), Augustine recognized the need to ascend to God through the 'temporal, mutable, corporeal realm of created reality.' The vision of divine Beauty, lost through the Fall, was henceforth to be glimpsed in the mirror of created reality.

The author skillfully takes the reader through the evolution in Augustine's thinking. She discusses the role of beauty in his conversion, from a Stoic conception as manifest in the extant work *De Pulchro et apto* as described by him in the *Confessions* to a Plotinian conception awakened by his reading of *Ennead* 1.6. In her argument considerable attention is given to Augustine's view of language as a sign indicating a reality and truth distinct from it. She presents this view as a paradigm for the awareness of transcendent Beauty within created beautiful things which are signs of their Source, Supreme Beauty. This witnesses, the author argues, to the dialectic of immanence-transcendence in Augustine's final theory of beauty.

This sign-theory affected his scriptural exegesis. Like beautiful natural forms, scriptural texts both conceal and reveal divine Truth and Beauty. The literal meaning veils and reveals the spiritual meaning which Augustine used allegories to release. These allegories contributed to a coherent meaning in the Old and New Testaments: Christ once

prophesied and now present with his central teaching: the love of God and neighbour.

Dr. Harrison finally focuses upon the two realities found in Scripture which are never absent from Augustine's thought. They are the human being made to the image of God, and Christ the Incarnate Son, the perfect Image. It is Christ in his union of humanity and divinity who defines and gives meaning to Augustine's aesthetics as necessarily theological and incarnational. (p.192)

In bringing divine Beauty to earth Christ also restores the lost beauty of the human soul by sending the Holy Spirit with his gift of *caritas*. This gift reforms the human image and makes it like God who is Love. Augustine's theological aesthetics, therefore, reaches its culmination in Christ in whom there is 'no gap between the sign and the signified.' (p. 229) But since all signs veil as well as reveal, faith is needed to open the way to hope and love.

The author is well acquainted with the secondary sources on her topic. She seems to have been guided and reinforced in her conclusions by H. U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. But there are two books opposed to her interpretation which she feels bound to discuss rather fully. One book is *L'Esthétique de Saint Augustin et ses Sources* by K. Svoboda (1933). The other more recent one is *Art and Christian Intelligence in Saint Augustine* by R. J. O'Connell (1978). These authors hold that Augustine's theory of beauty was an over-spiritualized one and excluded the positive value of sensible beauty.

Dr. Harrison acknowledges Svoboda's 'painstaking comprehensive analysis of the early works' (p.21,n.105) but criticizes him for separating philosophical from theological insights. For that reason he characterizes Augustine's aesthetics as unduly mathematical, rational, spiritual, that is to say, Pythagorean and Platonic. He even concludes that the theory became more spiritualized as the influence of Christianity increased. C.H. strongly disagrees. If Svoboda had analyzed the later works, she maintains, he would have seen that the Christian doctrines of creation *ex nihilo*, of the Incarnation, of an historical Revelation, and of the resurrection of the body made Augustine's thought much more positive concerning the beauty of the temporal realm. (p. 32)

In the other book O'Connell distinguished Augustine's theory of art from his practice and claimed that he had never integrated these two. O'Connell took it upon himself, therefore, to construct an all-inclusive theory as 'what Augustine might have said if only he had been aware of what he really, deep down, wanted to say, had his views not been coloured by a doctrine of the fall of the human soul from a pre-existent state, which in fact O'Connell has foisted upon him in the first place.' (p.74)

Dr. Harrison thinks that O'Connell, in attributing a fallen-soul theory to Augustine, has distorted his aesthetics. 'In fact,' she writes, 'the idea of a pre-existent, fallen soul might be said to have become an *idée fixe* in O'Connell's works which no amount of criticism from other scholars will

cause him to modify or retract—rather, it becomes more central as his defence of it becomes more vehement.’ (p.33) She does not take up the task of refuting this fallen-soul theory because ‘most scholars would now regard it as having been satisfactorily refuted.’ (p.33)

The task she assumes, however, is to demonstrate that the transposition from a disincarnate to an incarnate aesthetics which O’Connell claims to have constructed on his own initiative was in fact achieved by Augustine himself. In doing so he was unhindered by a non-existent theory of a pre-existent soul and was buttressed by the ‘theological doctrines which give structure to the whole of Augustine’s thinking as a Christian theologian and bishop: creation, man as created in the image of God, Scripture as the Word of God, and most importantly, the Incarnation—the latter being a doctrine which O’Connell curiously neglects despite his emphasis on an “incarnate aesthetics”.’ (p.363)

In her conclusion the author states that Augustine would agree with Prince Myshiken in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* when he ‘suggested that the world will be saved by beauty.’ (p.270) And yet Harrison’s sections on sin show that she is quite aware of Augustine’s acute consciousness that human freedom can make even beauty a stumbling block, an occasion for turning away from Ultimate Beauty. The fact, however, that he warned his readers and his listeners of the ambiguity of beauty does not justify the conclusion that his theoretical aesthetics failed to include the appreciation of beauty in the temporal world.

Dr. Harrison has not restricted her research to one kind of thinking done by Augustine: the philosophical or the theological. The result is a comprehensive study on the nature of beauty as theorized by a Christian theologian who did not compartmentalize his thought and action. Whatever he said in any work was illuminated by all that he knew in whatever way he knew it. This book is eminently fair to Augustine because it analyzes his attitude towards beauty within the framework of his central teachings and deepest convictions. Both scholars and general readers can be enriched by it.

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MOZART. *Traces of Transcendence* by Hans Küng, SCM Press Ltd, 1992, £6.95, pp.xi and 81.

Professor Küng, at the invitations of the Catholic Academy in Freiburg im Breisgau and Swiss Television and the Tübingen Collegium Musicum, ventured like the rest of us in 1991—I myself got a piece into *New Blackfriars* and a few sentences on local radio in Belfast—into the Mozart bi-centenary celebration. After the much that the rest of us have written, Professor Küng says that he will ‘attempt to make rather deeper theological soundings into Musical work, in two directions’. The pair of pieces printed in this little pamphlet, ‘Traces of Transcendence?’ and the ‘epic longer version’ of ‘Opium of the People?’, will give pleasure to a variety of folk.

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