

Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent: Augustine, Boethius, Anselm & Dante. By Robert McMahon. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006. Pp. xiv + 284. \$59.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-8132-1437-8.

"I often think it's comical," Private Willis sang in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*, "how Nature always does contrive, that every boy and every gal that's born into the world alive is either a little Liberal or else a little Conservative!;" a sentiment the well-known theologian Gerald McCool once amended to say that every boy and every gal born into the world alive is either a little Platonist or a little Aristotelian. And in terms of the history of Christian thought, the remark is not far wrong. But then it has to be admitted that, despite the prominence Thomism has given to Aristotle, century for century there has been no influence on Christianity that can rival Plato's, a point which Robert McMahon makes abundantly clear.

The subtitle of the book is a little misleading: there are only passing references to Dante, and it is Augustine who receives by far the most attention, Anselm being assigned to chapter four, and Boethius to the fifth and final chapter. Still, as the title indicates, McMahon's primary purpose is to introduce the reader to the distinctive structure of a medieval literary form he terms the "meditative ascent," using as examples the *Confessions*, the *Proslogion* and the *Consolation of Philosophy*; and in this he succeeds admirably.

Early on McMahon acknowledges his debt to Pierre Hadot's research on the role meditation played in the ancient schools of philosophy to bring about an adherent's interior transformation. His argument is that the same was true for the medievals. Because of the long-standing practice of *lectio divina*, which involved a prayerful meditation on the several layers of meaning in the Scriptures, medieval readers expected a philosophical or theological text to have this transformative effect, and medieval writers consciously crafted their work to provide it. Augustine, Boethius and Anselm intended their writings to be more than expository treatises; they were to be spiritual exercises. The reader who reflected upon the patterns of meaning embedded in their work would rise to a deeper understanding of divine truths, and so to a heightened awareness of God's presence.

One of the patterns employed was numerological. The number of books, chapters or sections a work was divided into would serve as a symbol of the fundamental principles ordering the world. For example, the central numbers of the *Confessions* and the *Proslogion* are Trinitarian, being multiples of three, while those of the *Consolation*, McMahon writes, "are Platonist and cosmological." That is to say, the parts into which the *Consolation* may be broken down correspond to the numbers 13 and 19—there are thirteen sections in Book 1, seventy-eight sections in the work as a whole (13x12), the sections in Books 2 to 5 form the chiasmic pattern 13 + 19 + 1 + 19 + 13, etc.—and these two numbers signify a Platonic cosmos in which opposites find reconciliation. Thus, 13 unites the solar (representing the divine constancy) and the lunar (signifying fortune and the flux of things here below) because there are thirteen lunar months in a solar year; and 19 stands for what is called the Metonic cycle, named for the fifth century B.C. Greek astronomer Meton who discovered that the phases of the moon fall on the same dates every 19 years. Even the cross pattern of the chiasm carries both Christian and Platonic meaning. *Chi* is the first letter in the Greek for "Christ;" as a cross it recollects the crucifixion; and its "x" shape forms a kind of circle,

denoting the Christian hope for our return to our Origin, through Christ. In the *Timaeus*, the most widely read of Plato's dialogues in the Middle Ages, the Demiurge is said to have established the movement of the celestial bodies by dividing the world soul into two revolving motions which were then crossed in a chiasm: the Movement of the Same (referring to the movement of the *primum mobile*, and that of the fixed stars directly beneath it) and the Movement of the Different (or that of the seven planets which vary in their revolution around the earth). In this instance, too, the chiasm functions as a circle, and particularly in Neoplatonic thought it represents the circle of *exitus* from and *reditus* to the One, a journey that moves at once upward and back, to what is previous and primordial. This cosmological pattern had its parallel in Christianity, writes McMahon, for the Christian mystery concerns the Son who becomes flesh, then ascends to his Father. The thought of the Middle Ages is a marriage of these two, Christian-Platonism, and McMahon considers the Neoplatonist cycle of return to one's origin to structure each of the three works in his study.

Not that the structure is always evident. Often it is only suggested, as are many of the works' ideas. It is only in meditative reflection that the reader will perceive them. Here McMahon thinks it is important to distinguish between the voice of the narrator, who might quite unknowingly provide the matter for the reader's meditation, and the intention of the author who is deliberately leading the reader toward insight. For instance, if in Book 2 of the *Confessions* Augustine the narrator first says that the pears he took as a boy were stolen without any reason, then later states that he did it for the sake of friendship, albeit friendship in crime, the reason is that Augustine the author wants to trigger a meditation on human motives that will ultimately issue in meditation on oneself. And if in Book 8 friends once more come to the fore, it is in order that the reader will contrast these friends, who represent spiritual friendship, with those of his boyhood whose friendship was carnal. What is more, through the figures whom the narrator names as friends—Monica, Alypius, Simplicianus, Ponticianus, Ambrose—the author is extending an invitation to delve into the meaning of spiritual friendship. Indeed mention of St. Anthony and two *agentes* (8.6.15) is meant to raise in the reader's mind the question of whether there can be spiritual friendship with a person one has never even met, which for Augustine the author implies the idea of a communion of saints. And with this the *Confessions* embarks on the last stage of the return; for in Book 13 Augustine interprets the biblical account of creation as an allegory of the Church, which is said to be the beginning and the end of God's creative work.

The same distinction between narrator and author is present in the *Proslogion* and the *Consolation*, as is the meditative design and the theme of return to the Origin. Anselm the author uses the narrator's disconsolation at his failure to experience God to fashion a drama in which insight is understood to come as a gift of grace, elevating the narrator to see that not only is God the greatest that can be thought, but greater than anything that can be thought; not only is He in all things, but all things are in Him; finally, in a moment of mystical union filling the narrator with joy—to the point that Joy becomes his final name for God—He is the Good that all good things are. The careful reader of the consolation, McMahon argues, will notice that lying behind the five books of the work is a four-part structure, corresponding to the four sections of Plato's divided line. Hence, taking Book 1 as a prologue to the whole, Books 2-5 narrate ascending modes of knowledge—from sensation, to imagination, to reason, to understanding—which also follows the Platonist discipline of turning away from sensation

and imagination, turning within to the exercise of reason, and then above in an intuition of the highest good. This regimen is the therapy which Philosophy offers to Boethius the narrator, to heal the confusion into which injustice has thrown him. But does it work? The narrator makes no reply when Philosophy answers his complaint that rather than effecting our happiness, the absolute providence of God precludes true happiness, for if such providence is real then there can be no freedom of choice, no point to our prayers, and so no personal intimacy in our relation to God. On the contrary, McMahon insists, the narrator does reply, in the role of Boethius the author, whose recounting of his exchange with Philosophy is proof that he has been convinced that happiness can endure. Boethius the prisoner arrived, through a process of self-examination, at understanding of himself and of the providential presence of God, at self-mastery and self-possession. We know, because he writes the *Consolation*.

The preceding affords only a general sense of a study that McMahon develops at great length (at times perhaps too great length) and in detail, conversant with the secondary literature, and with a style that is clear and fluid. What is to be regretted is that he never takes up what certainly is one of the core questions raised by his study, namely which of the two really benefited in the marriage of Christianity and Platonism. There is no denying that Christian-Platonism gave the latter wide currency, and perhaps more influence over a longer period than might otherwise have been the case. But what of Christianity? In what is surely one of his most provocative statements, McMahon writes, "'Return to the Origin' may have a Neoplatonist ring to it, but for Augustine it was a profoundly biblical and ecclesial reality. Within the *Confessions* he treated Neoplatonism as an incomplete Christianity, for the Bible encompasses and surpasses the truths taught in 'the books of the Platonists' (7.9) . . . " (p.102). It is one thing to say that what is true in Platonism will not find contradiction in the Bible, but quite another to describe Christianity as simply completing the teaching of Neoplatonism.

Yet McMahon neither defends his claim that this was the view of Augustine, nor offers any critical examination of the view itself. One can of course see the circle-return motif in Luke's genealogy of Jesus (3:22-38) and in John's talk of the Son returning to the Father, in the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 and perhaps even in that of Colossians 1:15-20. But from the standpoint of the Gospel, if by "origin" is meant God, then the only sense in which talk of separation is meaningful is in terms of intentionality, of the heart. And if by "origin" is meant our primal condition, then there can never be a going back. There is no returning to the Garden. Those blessings are lost, never to be recovered. The talk rather is of life coming to full maturity, of every antithesis to life, every kind of death, being overcome; of life being not only healed but transformed, of an entering definitively into the life of God, through union with the living Christ. McMahon himself notes that the Neoplatonist analysis of the world is fundamentally cosmological. This means more, however, than simply that the cosmos constitutes an objective order, or that the principles of that order have their reflection among us. It refers to a worldview in which stability entails necessity and all difference is a fragmentation of unity and a fall into alienation. It is a description of the real that is entirely opposed to the freedom proclaimed in the Gospel. And one can expect that wherever the two approaches are brought together, a conceptual tension must ensue; for theirs is a union that neither can abide except some part of the identity of either one, or the other, or both is let go. McMahon provides an illuminating historical description of three core medieval texts. It is

evident, though, that he places far too much value on the Anselmian project of faith seeking understanding not to take an interest in just how much the Christian insight in these works had to compromise in order to find accommodation with its Platonist partner. And his deep familiarity with these texts makes him uniquely suited to the task.

Kevin A. McMahon
Saint Anselm College
Manchester, New Hampshire