

A STUDY OF THE CONFESSIONS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE.

By GEDDES MACGREGOR.

PERHAPS it was due to some precocity of taste that I read Pusey's translation of the *Confessions of Saint Augustine* when I was fourteen. I read quite thoroughly, although I did not bring a mature mind to bear upon them, but I must confess that my interest was not awakened permanently enough to cause me to re-read them at an age when I should have better enjoyed their import. On the other hand, having absorbed the fundamental idea of the Confessions at that early age, I assimilated them in later adolescence, so that, on re-reading them for the purpose of the present essay, I found that any misconceptions I had were historical or otherwise unessential to the spiritual content of the theme.

The self-revelation of Aurelius Augustinus as to his childhood and boyhood, before he came under Manichaean influence is a very necessary prelude to the confessions of his subsequent activities. As a child, he seems to have been almost as introspective as was Rousseau. It is not an unnatural trait in the character of one destined to write a painfully veracious self-history. But there are some striking differences in the attitudes of these two men, not as viewed by them in retrospect, where of course the respective viewpoints are almost diametrically opposed, but as related by each of childish introspection.

Rousseau was clearly and simply masochistic. Speaking of his petty thefts—a delinquency which Augustine practised probably less persistently than his Confessions might have us suppose—Rousseau writes :

“ Au lieu de retourner les yeux en arrière et de regarder la punition, je les portais en avant et je regardais la vengeance. Je jugeais que me battre comme fripon, c'était m'autoriser à l'être. Je trouvais que voler et être battu allaient ensemble, et constituaient en quelque sorte un état, et qu'en remplissant la partie de cet état qui dépendait de moi, je pouvais laisser le soin de l'autre à mon maître. Sur cette idée je me mis à voler plus tranquillement qu'auparavant. Je me disais : Qu'en arrivera-t-il enfin ? Je serai battu. Soit : je suis fait pour l'être.”

Augustine does not seek physical pain in the way in which, it is clear from the above and other passages, did Rousseau. Nevertheless, amongst the confessions in Book II, Saint Augustine admits to having gloated over stage-plays which portrayed the suffering of others, which propensity might be construed by modern psychologists as a form of masochism ; and elsewhere, when Augustine dilates upon the torments of spirit which he underwent in the process of conversion from a licentious to a sober life, he reveals a tendency to what the

psycho-analysts call "ideal masochism"—due according to Freud* to the conversion of the sadistic component into its opposite. But the Saint's particular perversion, whatever it may have been, was unquestionably sublimated with such efficiency that his Confessions become thereby the story of a great spiritual struggle in a remarkably striking setting of psychological conditions.

Augustine raps out the note of championship of discipline from almost every page of the Confessions. "Let not my soul faint under Thy discipline." (Book I.) This contrasts vividly with Rousseau's attitude, which assuredly did not applaud, as did that of Augustine, the severity of the educational methods of the past. It is noteworthy that whereas even the morally seditious *Confessions* of Rousseau are not indexed at Rome, his *Emile*, now a prescribed book in the training of Scottish school teachers, is included in the Roman *Index*.† However, it may not be without significance that the very word *disciplina* had a physically castigatory meaning in Christian Monasticism, even as early as Augustine's day.

The capacities for pleasure and for pain have been said to grow *pari passu*,‡ and however great the confusion seems in the early lives of highly sensitive persons, there appears to be no doubt that some fierce inter-relation of the two is the inevitable prerequisite of spiritual stabilization in such souls. Augustine reveals an early acquaintance with acute physical suffering. Acute it must have been, when the hoary-headed Bishop of Hippo remembers it in late life, amidst the avalanche of reminiscences of more mature suffering, and compares his childish beatings to the tortures of the dread rack and other engines of adult physical torment.

The reason for his childish punishments is not far to seek. How the Saint abhorred the "hateful sing-song" of "one and one, two, two and two, four," which went hand in hand with the rod! Classical Latin writers refer to the distraction caused by the continual squalls and monotonous drones from neighbouring schools. Educational psychology cannot be supposed to have been much ameliorated by Augustine's day. For the Saint loved historical and imaginative literature, as expressed in phrases like "Creusa's shade and sad similitude," just as he hated exact sciences—either by nature, or more probably, by having been driven to them. He also seems to have been athletically enough inclined to have made him a greater success, *prima facie*, in one of our English public schools, than he was at Tagaste in the fourth century of Grace.

The thefts of the pears which have such predominance in the Saint's record of his earlier iniquities have been the subject of considerable critical study. Ardent Catholic supporters of the heroic sanctity of Augustine would have us believe it likely that in modest self-effacement, Augustine greatly over-rated the gravity of the offences. From an analysis of later exploits in the Saint's life, however, it becomes very tenable that the pear thefts were a natural prologue to the unbridled,

* See his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Ch. IV.

† Decretum S. Off. fer. V, 9 Sept. 1762, and included in the *Indices* of 1929.

‡ Tyrrell: "Hard Sayings," Appendix to the *Gospel of Pain*.

body-prodigal vices of early manhood : he but tasted the pears, and threw them to the hogs, out of sheer destructive exuberance. The theft of fruit was far from unpardonable, but the spirit of irresponsible waste was indeed pernicious.

When, therefore, he sets sail in the uncharted seas of carnal dissipation, he seeks not to satisfy but to ravage nature. He seems to have been in a state of extraordinary turmoil, and although he himself suggests that had his friends been less concerned about his future prowess in academic glory, and paved the way for his early marriage, the result would have been spiritually better, it is difficult impartially to consider the temperament of Augustine and reconcile it with credence in the success of early marriage as an antidote such as the Saint had in mind. For his besetting weakness was vanity and love of praise, so that, as he confesses, he often made claims to sins he did not commit. Such a practice may become so persistent in a praise-hungry temperament as to cause, by the auto-suggestive substitutes for the hetero-suggestive applause which is sought, a positive belief in one's guilt for sins uncommitted. "I did it, says memory. I could not have done it, says pride. Finally memory yields," is Nietzsche's epigrammatic expression of the more normal process of moral self-deception. In Augustine's case, the exact opposite obtained : "I did not do it, says his memory. I must have done it, says his pride," because he has idealized prodigality of life-forces.

There is too much strength, however—too much certainty of lofty purpose—in the tone of the Confessions, to allow us to toy with the notion that Augustine carried his thirst for applause into the sober writings of his latter years. Apart from the fact that they are patently God-addressed, they bear a tremendous conviction of some discovered Truth which has revealed the futility of even the best of pre-conversion deeds. Augustine saw as plainly as he could possibly have seen, that all the wild challenging in his youthful heart was but a striving after the pure Truth of the spirit. "I hungered and thirsted . . . after Thee Thyself, the Truth." Perhaps the deepest self-penetration in all the Confessions is the sentence : "I loved not yet, yet I loved to love, and out of a deep-seated want, I hated myself for wanting not" (Book III). Within him was a "famine of that inward food," and without, a "cauldron of unholy loves." The entire Confessions might be styled a quest of love.

One of the most perplexing circumstances which have to be analysed in a study of the Confessions is the attraction of this swarthy-hued spirit to the Manichees. Manichaean doctrine, fully understood, was hardly a suitable shelter for a sower of wild oats, even between sowing-bouts. The best explanation I can offer is that Augustine misinterpreted Manichaean tenets much in the same way as Prussians are alleged to have misinterpreted the *Also Sprach Zarathustra* of Nietzsche. There is, indeed, a certain affinity between the Manichees and the philosophy of the inventor of the idea of *uebermensch*. Both derive in some degree inspiration from Zoroaster. Mani was himself a Persian, born in 216 A.D., and his philosophy is in no small degree a direct development of Zoroastrian doctrines. Its conception of the

entanglement of evil in which human spirits are involved is more intense than in Zoroastrianism, and great stress is laid on the redemptive process. Good and evil are contrasted as light and darkness, and regarded as complementary. Harnack attributes its success to the fact that it united an ancient mythology and a thorough-going materialistic dualism with a beautifully simple spiritual worship and a strict morality. It influenced many sects, such as the heretical Albigenses, even in medieval times, which is doubtless one of the reasons for the contention of the Lutheran Beausorbe's presentation of the teaching as "une sorte de Protestantisme anticipé, mais encore inconscient." The highly authoritative work of Prosper Alfaric on the subject says (Ch. III, S. 3) : "La tradition bouddhique a aussi joué un grand rôle dans la formation et l'évolution du Manichéisme."

At all events, Manichæus cannot airily be daubed, as Kessler daubs him, "the perpetrator of Babylonian paganism dissimulated under the cover of the Christian Gospel" ! His contribution to Religion was quite a real one, although the fourth century may have been scarcely the time to propagate it. There can surely be little doubt that the system to which Augustine clung, and which he describes as "forging for us angels and gods" (Book IV), was a corruption of Mani's teaching, indistinguishable therefrom in the eyes of the rhetoric-worshipping youth. Augustine's taste for divination and other occult activities may reasonably be supposed to have rested rather on materialistic conceptions than on any distortion of spiritual activity in his early manhood. Certain forms of occultism attracted him, while others repelled. "Those impostors . . . whom they style mathematicians," he "consulted without scruple," but he abhorred "such foul mysteries" as those dealt in by the wizard who sought to win for him a theatrical prize by sacrifices to devils. Augustine revered chance as an art, it is true, but in a way not essentially different from the often sub-conscious reverence of the masses for a "lucky man"—a reverence which they bear in spite of their avowed contention that such luck is due to no personal skill. But in spite of his having dipped into the west-wafted mysteries of Asia, nothing is more obvious than that the Saint had not yet been spiritually born at all, so that his repentance for misguided spirituality must be regarded as misguided repentance. Repent he might well do, that his soul was as yet then unawakened, but even at the time of writing the Confessions, he seems to confound his admiration of magic with misplaced spirituality.

His passionate nature found expression in his ardent friendship with another young man who shared many of his interests. The loss of this friend, in death, must have been one of the most bitter experiences of his youth. For the love he bore towards this friend was of a truly spiritual fibre, and the loss of such a friendship to a spiritually unredeemed man must always be a trial whose bitterness nothing but a more comprehensive love can ever assuage.

When Augustine went to the eminent church dignitary, Ambrose, his mind must have been full of purely theological errors concerning the orthodox Christian faith of his day, and this very fact may have assisted Saint Ambrose in securing his attention long enough to arouse

in Augustine the light of inward spirituality to which his unkempt energies needed to be directed. But Plato-diluted Christian draughts did not draw aside the veil from the catechumen's weary eyes. The conversion was left, as it must always be, in the last resort, to direct God-contact. Nothing short of that could redeem the cry, "Give me chastity . . . only not yet." Self-mastery would never, could never come now, without direct knowledge of the Source and Author of all Life. "Tolle, lege," had not yet been uttered.

The moment of true spiritual birth is not certain. It may be said that, embryonically, a soul has life long before it takes form intelligible to us as a progressive spiritual entity. But there must be some moment in the life of a penitent when his soul first emerges from the womb of dark materialistic oppression, and, helpless albeit for the time, sees light—is born, and that for ever !

At any rate, by the time Augustine was baptized, it may fairly be assumed he was awakened from a slumber to which no balm could ever again seduce him. He was baptized with his natural son Adeodatus, the offspring of Augustine's mistress when Augustine was eighteen years of age. The scene of Ambrose, creator of the glorious form of plainsong which Gregorian conformity-laws could not extirpate from Milan, baptizing the thirty-three year old Augustine and the fifteen year old boy Adeodatus transcends the power of pen or brush to unfold in all its implications. Ambrose, a man something like only fifteen years the senior of Augustine, was of an entirely different calibre. His very innate gentleness of nature had won for him at so early an age the See of Milan. How difficult it must have been for the tumultuous Augustine to kneel before him and to hear the quiet voice say : "Ego te baptizo in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti." How fierce must those simple words have been to Augustine, which came from the all-gentle lips of Saint Ambrose ! How vivid the blighted boisterousness of the past as the Saint knelt side by side with the child of the cauldron of unholy loves that both in Christ might receive and know the consummation of all love !

Every sentence of the Confessions is ablaze with the sense of the divine, which all his metaphysical subtleties serve only to whet. Sometimes there is *naïveté*, sometimes almost egotism run riot, but as Monsignor Benson declares in his *Confessions of a Convert*, the art of writing a book of self-revelation without egotism has yet to be discovered. And Saint Augustine, as much as the Anglican convert to Rome, is restricted by the limitations of human power in literary treatment. All prayer may have the same criticism laid at its door.

But there is something more than egotism in his pages—something far more even than mere autobiography. Cellini writes an autobiography—the libraries are full of them—and so does Cassanova. Such works suggest the Parthian shot of men who have tasted every other form of eroticism, and autobiography-writing is the last they try before sinking into the grave. There is a comparatively recent book, for example, by Lees,* giving his confessions as a drug addict. He is cured, after taking more than the death dose of morphia, cocaine,

* *The Underworld of the East*, by James Lees.

hashish, opium and numerous other drugs every day for many years, partly by the expedient of repudiating the orthodox methods of daily dose-reduction and substituting therefore a method of alternating and mixing the drugs, and partly by the discovery of a certain root which, amongst many others, he purchased from the natives of one of the countries in which he was employed as an engineer in the east. This book is characteristic of the type of biography with which Augustine's Confessions may vulgarly be confounded. It is blatantly exuberant in painting the picture of a chest literally blue with the marks of hypodermic syringes, and in shouting from pinnacles of self-glorification that victory was come at last. Nothing could less resemble the tone of the *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, where penitence is so sincere as to leave us with an autobiography literally inferior to what it might easily have been, had Augustine told us more that would interest us and less of what interested only God. It is the prayerful treatment which takes the Confessions out of the range of adverse criticism on grounds of egotism. Saint Augustine's other works, written after the Confessions, such as *De Civitate Dei* confirm in no uncertain way that the spiritual depths which the Saint probed in the exposition of his inner life-history made the foundations of a thoroughly robust and permanent self-realization.

Almost the last words of the Confessions (excluding Books XI—XIII, which are a Commentary on the first chapter of Genesis, and not an integral part of the Confessions) are : " Let not the proud speak evil of me ; because I meditate on my Ransom, and eat and drink, and communicate it." The ending of the story of the conversion of this turbulent spirit is not less refreshing because less epigrammatic than the end of the infernal journey of Dante, when, after he and his master Virgil had ascended by Satan's back from the bowels of hell to the surface of the earth, " e quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle " ! The restoration of true chastity of mind and body after an entirely dissipated youth entails, as Saint Augustine says, a veritable flaying alive of being, and " qui seminant in lacrymis, in exultatione metent."* There is vast literary as well as religious satisfaction in the Confessions, for even the temptations described in the tenth Book have assumed a different hue, in which are but the pale relics of a dead past, and the very stains have been toned down *odore sanctitatis*.

The abandonment of the profession of Rhetoric, on Augustine's part, was the complete immolation of his being to divine service. " And I resolved in Thy sight, not tumultuously to tear, but gently to withdraw, the service of my tongue from the marts of lip-labour : that the young . . . should no longer buy at my mouth arms for their madness."† There is therefore an Augustinian affinity to the Pauline prowess in evangelization by reason of this consecration of formidable dialectic powers, hitherto wildly flung without the inspiration of a vigorous ideal, to the service of that from which boundless force is drawn.

* Ps. cxxv, Vulg. Edit. (In convertendo Dominus.)

† Book IX, *Confessions of Saint Augustine*.

There exist virtuous people who, in middle-age exhibit a sometimes well-nigh aggressive lack of sympathy with Augustine. It is evidence of lack of spiritual breeding to belittle the heroism of those who have given testimony to something of the extent of the divine forgiveness.

There is no levity of appeal in the Confessions. Augustine's very conversion was a gradual process. It was no mere emotional reaction which led a man along that long, rough road towards the sure stronghold of the *City of God*.

Among the books that have a direct bearing upon the celebration of the Fourth Centenary of the English Reformation is *The Reformation in England*, by L. Elliott-Binns, D.D. (Duckworth, 5s. net). Dr. Elliott-Binns, as an accomplished historian, has naturally written an interesting account of the various stages of the Reformation Movement. He has, however, declared that he is not conscious of having any axe to grind or any special point of view to maintain, and therefore he adopts the judicious course of not accepting or rejecting either side unreservedly, but has endeavoured to balance and combine the testimony of both. When a writer adopts this attitude towards the Reformation we are not surprised to find that he discovers means of glossing over the excesses of one side, and minimizing the accomplishments of the side with which he might naturally be expected to agree. It is difficult to understand how any writer of the English Church can adopt a neutral attitude in dealing with the Reformation and the great improvement that it wrought in Christianity throughout the world. An interesting chapter on "The Consequences of the English Reformation" makes clear the great benefits that accrued to this country through the return to Scriptural Christianity, and we are glad to know that the traditional English view which sees in it the beginnings of national greatness needs but little modification.

Edinburgh 1937 is the story of the Second World Conference on Faith and Order told by the Rev. Hugh Martin (Student Christian Movement Press, 2s. net). The Archbishop of York who was the President of the Conference contributes an Introduction and says that he wishes that all English-speaking Christians would read this book as they would gain from it very much of the impression that the Conference made on those who shared in it. We re-echo this wish, for the book is very skilfully done and brings out the great facts of the discussions and the important decisions made. He makes quite plain the spirit of the Conference and does not hesitate to indicate the points upon which little advance towards unity has been made. It is an admirable introduction to the actual report of the Conference which has been issued gratis by the Secretariat of the Continuation Committee.