

Adam of Dryburgh and the augustinian tradition

I

«He found his characteristic equilibrium and his peace in the disciplines of the past¹». That was the judgement with which Wilmart concluded his discussion of Adam of Dryburgh, or Adam the Scot as he is also known ; yet it is a verdict that, while possessing a measure of insight, also requires a significant degree of qualification. For in certain respects Adam is also a transitional figure, even a precursor of future developments. His writings face forwards as well as backwards.

We know little of Adam's life, aside from the information that can be deduced from his prolix literary output². Born no later than 1140, he eventually joined the Premonstratensian order, and was made abbot of Dryburgh some time after 1184. He wrote, preached and travelled, but on one of his journeys, in 1188, he detoured down to Somerset and joined the Carthusians at Witham, where he remained until his death, soon after 1210. Although his time on earth thus coincided with so much intellectual and cultural ferment in the latter part of the twelfth century and the dawning of the thirteenth, it would be difficult to deduce as much from his writings, which still hark back towards the monastic religious literature of the earlier twelfth century for their literary models and spiritual inspiration. Hence Wilmart's remark. Yet while Adam stood apart from the main flow of theological development in his own time, it is the argument of this paper that he cannot be treated as a straightforwardly conservative figure. He stood apart not least because he was content to tread rather doggedly in the steps he believed to have been left by St Augustine of Hippo. It was precisely Adam's somewhat unfettered interpretation of that Augustinian path, however,

1. André WILMART, «Magister Adam cartusienis», in *Mélanges Mandonnet* (Paris : J. Vrin, 1930) II : 161.

2. See WILMART, «Magister Adam», p. 146-147. For Adam's life, Wilmart's article can be supplemented with the accounts in J. Bulloch, *Adam of Dryburgh* (London : SPCK, 1958), and the introduction of M.J. HAMILTON, *Adam of Dryburgh : Six Christmas Sermons*, *Analecta Cartusiana* 16 (Salzburg : Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1974).

that led him along intriguing and to a certain extent independent roads, and it is here that we find him faintly anticipating subsequent developments. If we consider Adam in this wider context of the history of the Augustinian tradition, of the developments in theology and sensibility that proceeded under the influence of Augustine's writings through the Western Middle Ages and into the modern period, we may discover Wilmart's rather placid verdict to demand some qualification.

Identifying Adam as part of the Augustinian tradition in the Middle Ages is nothing new. Petit asserted that «among the Augustinians of the Middle Ages there is no one more faithful than Adam to the thought of Augustine³». He had clearly read particular works by Augustine with some care, and revisits them in his own writings⁴. He also looked back for more immediate inspiration to those thinkers in the recent past who had adhered especially closely to Augustine's thought, in particular to the Victorines, and it is this feature especially that makes him appear a mere *laudator temporis acti*⁵. Adam, however, did more than simply repeat various elements from the Augustinian tradition in an unreflective way. He set those elements in a new context, a new sensibility, and it is the consequences of that which this paper seeks to explore, for these consequences link Adam to the future as well as to the past.

II

Adam wrote extensively, although not all his literary creations had the good fortune to survive him for long. The one that brought him the most readers was the only piece that survives from his Carthusian period, the *Liber de quadripartito exercitio cellae* (PL 153 : 799-883), which had the great advantage of later being falsely attributed to Guigo II. The only English monograph on him rather dolefully concludes that «Theological profundity is not found in Adam⁶», but on the one occasion where we know Adam actually set himself a more resolutely theological task, in the treatise *De triplici genere contemplationis* (PL 198 : 795-842), the result is certainly intriguing, and scarcely superficial ;

3. Quoted in M.J. HAMILTON, *Adam of Dryburgh : Six Christmas Sermons* p. 129.

4. Adam takes his literary model from Augustine in the case of his *Soliloquium* between *Ratio* and *Anima* (PL 198 : 843-872), even if the routine of monastic life with which this work deals hardly matches the flights of metaphysical speculation in the original, Augustine's early *Soliloquia*. The relationship between the *De triplici genere contemplationis* and Augustine's *Confessions* is discussed below.

5. Adam was especially indebted to the Victorines in the area of exegesis : see BULLOCH, *Adam of Dryburgh* p. 109 ; HAMILTON, *Adam of Dryburgh : Six Christmas Sermons* p. 34-36, 129. Hamilton also detects an Augustinian flavour to Adam's literary style (p. 130-132).

6. BULLOCH, *Adam of Dryburgh* p. 164.

Wilmart himself wrote that its pages were «filled with a brilliant Augustinian theology⁷».

In a prefatory letter to his Premonstratensian brethren, Adam explains his latest work and its structure :

«Alium verum librum, de triplici genere contemplationis intitulatum, nunc vobis cudimus: qui de eo tractat, quod Deus in seipso est incomprehensibilis, terribilis in reprobis, dulcis quoque et suavis in electis» (PL 198:794A).

«We have now forged another book for you, called «On the Threefold Form of Contemplation», which deals with how God is incomprehensible in himself, terrible in the reprobate, yet also delightful and sweet in the elect».

This threefold treatment is clearly visible in the work that follows, which is divided into three distinct parts, one for each of the forms of contemplation. The resulting structure of the text is rather reminiscent of another work written over a century earlier, although not one that Adam had necessarily read, the *Confessio theologica* of John of Fécamp, which is also divided into three parts, the first being a meditation on the being of God and the last a dwelling on the joys of heaven⁸. Where John, however, gave his second part over to consideration of the economy of salvation and the work of Christ, Adam prefers to dwell instead at some length on the fate of the damned – a point to which we will return later.

Let us start with the first part of Adam's book, and the way that it reworks its Augustinian material. The most obvious source for this part of the text is Augustine's *Confessions*, which had also provided the primary model for John of Fécamp. John's *Confessio theologica*, probably composed in the mid-eleventh century, was at one level a very selective anthology from Augustine's *Confessions*, interwoven with citations from other authors and additional words from John himself. Adam, by contrast, is not so much abbreviating and supplementing the Augustinian model, as incorporating specific elements from it into his own literary scheme. Courcelle has pointed out the way that Adam borrows closely from particular passages in the last four books of the *Confessions*, in order to portray the search of the self for the mystery of God which is the subject of the first part of his work⁹. *Confessions* X.6 is the most important single chapter for part I of the *De triplici genere contemplationis*, although the two following chapters are also used ; elsewhere, Adam clearly recalls *Confessions* XI .4 and 6 and XIII.11. The quest for God takes the form of a narrative in which the text's speaker initially interrogates various created beings

7. WILMART, «Magister Adam» p.159. Adam must have thought quite highly of it himself, for he plagiarizes large chunks of it for the section of the *Liber de quadripartito exercitio cellae* on meditation.

8. See Jean LECLERCQ and Jean-Paul BONNES, *Un maître de la vie spirituelle au X^e siècle. Jean de Fécamp*, Études de Théologie et d'Histoire de la Spiritualité IX (Paris : J. Vrin, 1946).

9. Pierre COURCELLE, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire : Antécédents et postérité* (Paris : Études Augustiniennes, 1963), p. 287-290. Courcelle comments that the first book of the *De triplici genere contemplationis* develops «comme une sorte de méditation sur le livre X des *Confessions*» (p. 289).

about God, but they all give the same reply : “quaere supra nos” (“Seek beyond us” [802D]). So how is the speaker to proceed, how is he to find God ? The answer is via that familiar Augustinian route which Gilson christened Christian Socratism¹⁰ : «Repercussus igitur, Domine Deus, converto me ad me. Converto, inquam, me ad meipsum, et dico ad me : Quid es tu ?» («Driven back, then, Lord God, I turn myself to myself. I turn, I say, myself to myself and I say to myself : What are you ?» [805C]).

The route within that then unfolds, the peeling back of the layers of interiority, is immediately reminiscent of the second half of Augustine’s *De trinitate* and of Anselm’s writings which it inspired, the *Monologion* and to a lesser extent the *Proslogion* also. Because Adam, however, is basing his account of the Augustinian ascent to God not directly on the *De trinitate* but actually on a significantly earlier text, the final books of the *Confessions*, there are also some intriguing differences. The trinity that Adam finds within the mind, for instance, and transposes to the being of God is not *memoria*, *intelligentia*, *voluntas* but instead *essentia*, *sapientia*, *amor*, while the Archimedean point that enables the text’s speaker to move from searching to knowing and to the laying of epistemological foundations is one that has a long history in earlier and later struggles with scepticism but which Augustine had already connected with his earlier trinitarian model of the mind :

«Scio igitur, Domine Deus. Et quid scio ? Scio me esse. Neque enim scirem, nisi essem qui scirem. Sed sum et scio quod sum. Itaque scio me esse, nec solum scio me esse ; sed etiam scio me scire me esse. Igitur et existendo scio, et sciendo existo» (833D).

«Therefore I know, Lord God. And what do I know ? I know that I am. For I would not know, unless I who knew existed. But I am and I know that I am. Hence I know that I am, and not only do I know that I am, I know that I know that I am. Therefore I both know by existing, and exist by knowing».

So Adam summarizes the key point in the argument of this first part towards the end of his book. With the discovery of the indestructible duality of existing and knowing in the inmost self as the hinge, Adam can now represent in the remainder of part I the ascent of the self to the first kind of contemplation : the contemplation of God who is incomprehensible in himself, and yet accessible to the soul through the image that lies within it, in the trinity of existence, knowledge and love.

III

There is much more that could be discussed in part I of the *De triplici genere contemplationis*, but perhaps enough has been said to give some indication of Adam’s close but also somehow tangential and rather idiosyncratic relationship to the central stream of the Augustinian tradition in the Middle Ages. Let us

10. Étienne GILSON, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, trans. A.H.C. DOWNES (New York : Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936).

now turn our attention to the second part of his book, where, having contemplated how incomprehensible God is in himself, we are next to contemplate how terrible and fearful he is in the reprobate. The replacement of John of Fécamp's consideration of the saving work of Christ with this careful attention to the fate of the damned might be taken as an index of the shift in sensibilities across the preceding century, and the development of a growing fixation on torture and agony – whether located on Calvary or in the caverns of hell. Adam's approach, however, also marks his acquaintance with a strand of the Augustinian tradition that did not loom large for the earlier generation of John and even Anselm : the teaching on predestination in the later anti-Pelagian treatises. Adam has no doubt that the reprobate and the blessed have been separated from all eternity, and that the will of God and indeed the Word of God are equally manifest in both, in righteousness and in mercy ; therefore the person who would contemplate God must learn to dwell on the revelation of God that comes through the damned as well as through the saved, must learn how much God is to be feared, as well as how greatly to be loved.

Hamilton has shown how closely Adam knew at least Augustine's *De correptione et gratia*, and probably also the *De praedestinatione sanctorum*, from his use of these works in a trilogy of Christmas sermons¹¹. There we encounter the familiar Augustinian themes of how salvation proceeds from the eternal and immutable will of God, not from any human merit or decision ; and how also we are entirely ignorant of our own salvation, for among those at present in the church some who are not truly of the elect will in time fall away, and we cannot know whether we, for all our spiritual progress, will be counted among these who will inexorably be joined to the number of the lost. This same Augustinian teaching on predestination that periodically appears in Adam's sermons surfaces again in this second part of the *De triplici genere contemplationis*, and indeed is integral to the conception of the whole work, as we have already noted. But what becomes particularly interesting in the text we are considering is how the raw dogma, as it were, of predestination gets processed into late twelfth-century religious life ; and in particular, how Adam subordinates predestinarian doctrine to a form of spiritual practice, for it is here that Adam appears most remote from his chosen models and most significant for subsequent developments.

The problem with contemplating the fate of the reprobate, for any rigorous Augustinian, is that it is not easily done with equanimity, for one cannot be certain that this fate is not one's own ; yet once one accepts that it might, it could be hard to find much motivation for faith, for theological investigation or for the exercise of religious devotion. What happens in the *De triplici genere contemplationis*, however, is that this problem, which we might call the Augustinian predicament, is acknowledged and accepted while at another level it is bypassed and even denied. For the contemplation of the everlasting damnation of the eternally damned is made into one part – and not a final part,

11. HAMILTON, *Adam of Dryburgh : Six Christmas Sermons* p. 130.

but the middle part – of a literary “spiritual exercise”¹². All of Adam’s literary output was designed to facilitate the spiritual exercises of his readers, but the *De triplici genere contemplationis*, unlike his other works, actually represents a spiritual exercise in itself : as we read it, we are meant to identify with the “I” who speaks the text, and thereby make its words our own and its content our own spiritual exercise in divine contemplation. Now, it is of course highly significant that Adam should make the consideration of double predestination such a focal part of the spiritual exercise that he sets for his readers, and it may well be the case that there is a degree of originality already here, although there are some suggestive parallels in the earlier *Meditativae orationes* of William of St Thierry¹³. Yet the effect of making the contemplation of twofold predestination a stage, however pivotal, in the course of a spiritual exercise is thereby to ensure that we also travel beyond it : we contemplate the spectacle of the reprobate, we even see ourselves potentially within it, and then we move on. We somehow sublimate it and accommodate it within the totality of the spiritual exercise which the text sets us¹⁴.

«Video haec, Domine Deus meus. Video haec, inquam, et timeo. Considero haec et paveo. Cerno haec et in manibus tuis trepido, O Deus juste et occulte : occulte et juste !» (820A)

«I see these things, Lord my God. I see these things, I say, and I am afraid. I consider these things and I quake with fear. I behold these things and in your hands I tremble, O righteous and hidden God : hidden and righteous !»

Within the strict parameters of the spiritual exercise itself, then, there is no resolution given to the Augustinian predicament ; we are simply invited to dwell on it and in it, and then go on. But if the reader remembers Adam’s preface to the whole work (791C-796B), or indeed if the reader proceeds to the summary and recapitulation that Adam cannot resist supplying at the end (832D-842A), then it appears that the predicament is resolved after all – so long as the reader reads the text with the proper openness to identification with its self-representation and submits his own interior self to its narrative and theological structures. For not quarelling with God about his inscrutable purposes, but rather accepting with humble fear his moral opacity to the human beholder, his secret justice – which was the final outcome of part II – is itself a sign, so it transpires,

12. Cf. Pierre Hadot’s extensive review of the variety of spiritual exercises in antiquity, in «Exercices spirituels», *École Pratique des Hautes Études : Section – Sciences Religieuses* 84 (1976-77) : 5-70.

13. On this subject, see the fourth chapter of the present author’s doctoral thesis, *The Self in the Text : Guigo I the Carthusian, William of St Thierry and Hugh of St Victor* (Diss., U. of Toronto, 1992).

14. Wolfgang Iser has argued that Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* created an analogous accommodation of the doctrine of predestination for seventeenth-century Puritans, an accommodation that, while in some ways far more sophisticated than Adam’s, proceeded like his through literary form and narrative structure. See Iser’s study of Bunyan in *The Implied Reader : Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, MD ; Johns Hopkins, 1974).

of a person's election¹⁵. Just as finding the path to God through the journey within, the topic of part I, is also an indication of our spiritual standing, so is the disappearance of the "horror of despair" when we turn to the pages of the third and final part, and contemplate the end of the elect, their eternal salvation and beatitude. Adam sums up the effects of his own text in the following way :

«Hic, Domine Deus meus, hujus meae prolixae locutionis est fructus : ut possim videlicet evidenter agnoscere quo modo, in triplici hujus contemplationis genere, tua mentem meam et incomprehensibilitas illuminat, et severitas humiliat, et pietas demulcet» (840C-D).

«This, Lord my God, is the fruit of my abundant talking : that I may be able clearly to know in what way, in the threefold form of this contemplation, your incomprehensibility illuminates my mind, and your severity humbles it, and your tenderness soothes it».

He then continues to spell out at greater length just how God works on the mind in each of the three forms of contemplation that his treatise represents. Adam concludes his summary, however, by further equating the "successful" completion of the whole exercise and perusal of the total text with the experience of God's elect, and he thereby implicitly extends to his receptive readers the assurance of eternal election which the strict Augustinian must always be denied in explicit terms : «Sic sic electos tuos illuminas, humilias, et foves, O Pater! O Fili! O Spiritus alme...» («Thus, thus, you illuminate, humble and cherish your elect, O Father, O Son, O reviving Spirit...» [840D]).

Adam tells his readers that if they read the whole of the *De triplici genere contemplationis* and make of it a spiritual exercise of the kind that its author intended – if in pondering it they consider how incomprehensible God is in himself, and adore him, and how fearful he is in the reprobate, and fear him, and how sweet in the elect, and love him – then they may after all be certain that the grace of God is at work within them, and that for the time being at least they are numbered with the saints. Successful reading, which Adam defines as reading which does not answer back, and to that extent is passive, but which also supplies the right kind of affective responses, provides a measure for your spiritual state. If you can negotiate this text in an appropriate way, and read it as a spiritual exercise, then you are walking on the heavenward path. And that is how Adam both embraces the full Augustinian doctrine of the unknowability of individual election in this life, and simultaneously undermines it, by reassuring all his respectful readers that they at least are on the side of the angels.

15. Adam is quite aware that other responses are possible to the doctrine of predestination, such as the accusation of divine caprice or even malevolence, and he actually allows space for the expression of some perplexity that the almighty Creator should treat his creation in such a way – only to turn such perplexity into praise, with the triumphant refrain of Romans 11.33 (794C-795A).

IV

The development of literary “spiritual exercises” is an important feature of religious history in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. What we encounter in Adam of Dryburgh’s *De triplici genere contemplationis*, from the end of the twelfth century, is a writer transplanting important Augustinian theological motifs, including the inward ascent and the doctrine of predestination, into this textual form. Some of the effects of this translation have already been indicated. Clearly, there is a strong tendency both to simplify and to systematize in Adam’s approach to his task – which could hardly be said of Anselm, who was approaching a not entirely dissimilar project in his own theological meditations. Adam fashions from his eclectic reading of Augustine a step-by-step road to God which at one level contracts the breadth and depth of Augustinian theology into something more simple and superficial and certainly in its accommodation of predestination draws the sting from Augustine’s thought at the cost of draining it of much of its intrinsic power. And yet it is also true that by taking these Augustinian fragments and using them as the building blocks for the text of a spiritual exercise, Adam is opening up the question of the possible connections between these theological ideas and the historical formation of human self-consciousness.

Did the kind of literary exercise that Adam created play any kind of role in causing at least some people to focus self-identity in an irresolvable knot of being and knowledge? That is a difficult question to evaluate, as the Augustinian model of the inward ascent to God had a much wider currency in the Middle Ages as the basis for patterns of self-understanding. The matter is a little different when we consider the second key motif that Adam takes from Augustine, the teaching on predestination, for Augustine himself, and many of his followers, had been reluctant to let this teaching impinge too strongly on individual self-consciousness. What might happen, then, if people ventured to explore the implications for self understanding of the Augustinian doctrine of eternal election, as Adam is in effect inviting his readers to do, admittedly in his case within very circumscribed limits? When a figure such as Thomas Bradwardine takes up the Augustinian theme of predestination in the fourteenth century, although he does so with the full scholastic armoury of argument and counter-argument, it is also clear in his work that this doctrine is one that has become intertwined with the author’s self, the concept of election with the theologian’s own sense of vocation¹⁶. And after the upheavals of the Reformation, in the early modern period, Augustinians whether Jansenist or Calvinist will have to struggle with the problem of self-identity in the harsh light of

16. This is particularly evident in the long preface that Bradwardine attached to his major work, the *De causa Dei*, but even within the work itself the voice of prayer and the author’s sense of divine vocation continue to puncture the accumulation of technical proof. See Thomas BRADWARDINE, *De causa Dei, contra Pelagium, et de virtute causarum, ad suos Mertonenses*, ed. H. Saville (London, 1618).

inscrutable eternal election¹⁷. It is a long path, to be sure, from Adam of Dryburgh to Pascal, but Adam still has an intriguing place along the road that leads from Augustine himself to the Augustinianisms of the seventeenth century.

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ABSTRACT : The paper considers the question of how far Adam is a backward-looking figure within the Augustinian tradition. Analysis of key passages from the *De triplice genere contemplationis* indicates that while Adam drew on specific texts from Augustine as the basis for his own composition, both in his choice of texts and in the use to which he put them he diverged significantly from many of his predecessors. Above all, by placing Augustinian theological motifs, especially the theme of predestination, within the context of a written “spiritual exercise”, Adam touched on the relationship between traditional Augustinian theology and the emergence of new forms of self-understanding. In this respect, Adam can be said to anticipate developments in the later Middle Ages and early modern period.

RÉSUMÉ : Cet article s’intéresse au caractère supposé passéiste d’Adam de Dryburgh au sein de la tradition augustinienne. L’analyse des passages clef du *De triplice genere contemplationis* indique que tout en employant des textes spécifiques d’Augustin comme fondement de sa propre composition, il se démarquait nettement de nombre de ses prédécesseurs, tant dans le choix des textes que dans l’usage qu’il en faisait. En particulier, en insérant des thèmes théologiques augustiniens, comme celui de la prédestination, dans le cadre d’un exercice spirituel écrit, Adam touchait au rapport existant entre théologie augustinienne traditionnelle et émergence de nouvelles formes de connaissance de soi. À cet égard, on peut dire qu’Adam a anticipé les développements de la fin du Moyen Âge et du début de l’époque moderne.

17. Cf. P.A.J. FEENEY, *Theism, Tragedy and Neo-Tragedy, with Special Reference to Lucien Goldmann’s Critique of Pascal* (Diss., U. of Cambridge, 1981), and also Willam E. PADEN, «Theaters of Humility and Suspicion: Desert Saints and New England Puritans», in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. L.H. MARTIN, H. GUTMAN and P.H. HUTTON (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), p. 64-79.