

Augustinian Perspectives in the Renaissance. Åke Bergvall. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia, 117. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2001. 234 pp. SEK 251.00. ISBN 91-554-5177-2.

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This is a rich, multidimensional study which explodes a deeply entrenched stereotype of “the arch-reactionary system-builder standing behind a strictly vertical, logocentric, hierarchical and patriarchal construct” (212). In Åke Bergvall’s considered view, “the Augustine of political pessimism, existential angst and the decentered subject” shares with Derrida—our contemporary icon of iconoclasm—more than a strikingly similar personal trajectory: “outsiders born on the margins of empire, indeed the very same periphery (present-day Algeria)”; for Bergvall, “both cross borders as they move toward the political and cultural

centers (Paris and Milan) only to radically question the basic assumptions of those centers” (212–31). Augustine—the original deconstructionist?

This provocative reflection is well earned by the author; it follows upon well-researched and engagingly explicated investigations of a multiplicity of Renaissance humanisms in figures ranging from Ficino and Calvin to Pico and Spenser. Always proceeding on the basis of precise forays into the church father’s own textual legacy, Bergvall provides the reader with illuminating and nuanced chapters covering the topics of the soul, theory of knowledge, theory of signs, and politics, in each showing divergent ways in which Augustinian letters, previously eclipsed by scholasticism, were now taken up to meet the challenge of an early modern Europe which was rapidly outgrowing its previous parochialism.

Bergvall’s pivotal hypothesis is that Augustine’s legacy internally divides between that of the former Gnostic converted to Christianity by way of Plotinian ascent to the One and that of the later pupil of the Bible, who grounded faith in the descent of God to the many, that is, the Incarnation. The former Augustine evinces great faith in reason to guide to truth by a process of abstraction attaining to the unchanging form of perfection in a vertical ascent from the realm of visible becoming to that of invisible being. The later Augustine never wholly rejects this early Platonism. The *apophatic* aspect correlated with the biblical critique of idolatry and the doctrine of being provided an alternative to the Gnostic theory of evil as residing in matter as such. Yet study of the Bible led the mature Augustine to a view of faith as the fateful historical event of surrender to the mercy of the God who humbled himself in Christ for the sake of the arrogant creature; with this came a new view of reality as historically ordered to the victory of divine mercy over human arrogance, even as in the interim two societies driven by two diverse loves intermingle, sometimes conflicting and at other times coinciding, until in final judgment they are forever divided. The decisive point is that for the later Augustinianism, the great chain of being has ceased to serve as a ladder of ascent to be mounted and then discarded, since the descent of God in the Incarnation had rendered that very ambition nugatory and pioneered in its place a new path to human fulfillment inclusive of history and bodily existence. This latter was, so to say, the Reformation implicit in the Renaissance from the outset, a fulfillment not a negation of Augustine’s mature thought.

Bergvall’s study of the interplay of the two Augustinianisms accordingly delivers some stunning critical reevaluations of Renaissance figures: Spenser’s poetry “most decisively breaks with a Plotinian cult that can love only what is beautiful... ‘And that most blessed bodie, which was borne/ Without all blemish or reproachfull blame,/ He freely gave to be both rent and torne/ Of cruell hands, who with despightfull shame/ Revelyng him, that them most vile became...’” (127). Pico’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1986) addressed Adam before his fall, and so accords with the praise Calvin heaped on the prelapsarian Adam “giving him both free will and the power to reach God through his own reason” (84). Pico therefore “aligns himself with the Augustinian theory of original sin” and “takes a position as dogmatic as that of the Protestant reformers” (85). Luther’s two-kingdoms politics, “more at home with the *City of God*” than nominalist philosophy (179), provides conceptual alternative to the revival of Eusebian imperialism in the English Reformation that eventually would transmute into Hobbesian absolutism (186).

This significant work merits discussion, not only among historians and literary critics, but also among philosophers and theologians who have grown impatient with the conventional periodization and conceptualization of early modernity, which sees Renaissance and Reformation as alternative paths—an anachronistic reading owing to Kant and his imitators.