IV

ST AUGUSTINE'S PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF EUROPE

We can now approach with rather more confidence the tremendous question stated at the beginning of this essay, the mystery of predestination. St Augustine, following St Paul, viewed it from the standpoint of mankind as a whole, for it would be unduly rash to try to see its application in a particular case.

After the fall of Rome it was possible to envisage the approaching end of a world. All that had value, the unity of the human race, culture, the security in order which the Romans called peace, tradition, the assurance even the Church drew from the support of the civil power, all this was on the decline. Was this decline to continue indefinitely? The history of the spiritual element in mankind shows, as in a vibrating string, points of expansion and contraction. In one privileged sector a purer element of humanity advances, develops, and seems likely to fecundate the whole earth; but corruption supervenes, accompanied by what seem disasters and the triumph of grosser

elements, and the 'chosen people' is broken up and dispersed. Everything leads to the belief that the spirit is on the point of departure; but what looks like the end becomes a new beginning and history starts off again to sow a new seed. The Jewish prophets were strongly conscious of this rhythm in the affairs of men as shown in Abraham's descendants. It was symbolised in the story of the Ark. Isaias spoke of the small *remnant* that continued to be; and the whole ground of the Jewish hope lay in the affirmation that a *remnant* would persist, that the earth would always *bud forth* a saviour.

We may say that in the fifth century of the Christian era in the West one of these difficult transition periods had come. But we might have expected that the *remnant* (as regards thought) would be a School of theologians, perhaps some *diaspora* of prophets widely separated in place but acting to a common end, as were the Fathers of the Church in the East, who wrote in Greek and upheld the Byzantine culture. These 'Greek Fathers' were hardly known in the West. The Western Church was comprised in the Latin culture and that in turn was summed up in St Augustine.

Periods of decline favour the appearance of

genius, that chance product, so improbable yet substantial and enduring. It is, said Hegel, 'at the decline of day that Minerva's bird takes flight'. When the old syntheses break up, their bonds loosened, their matter scattered, the elements now free but unable to remain in a state of anarchy, seek some principle of fresh unity; and this principle or germ is in itself a unity. Then the course of events which seeks to continue, centres on a man apart, whether an originator or a reformer, who takes up what of the past is still living to make it the foundation of the future. But the work of founders and reformers subsists mainly by its consequences, and their names are easily forgotten. The only ones who are really *reborn* are those whose command of language makes their writings last, such as Plato, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare. Men like these could well console us for the disappearance of a civilisation, if their writings remained, for they are each of them a world, and anyone who had assimilated their work alone would have a world of thought at his disposition. M. de Saci once said to Pascal that he could find in St Augustine alone all the original utterances of Pascal himself.

We may recall St Augustine's analysis of time. A song, which passes in time, is never given in it-

self, since the sounds which make it up are constantly flowing. But the memory, he says, preserves it and gives it stability. Likewise, in the fifth century when everything rushed headlong, vanished and seemed to be lost for ever, there appeared the art and thought of St Augustine, which gave this flight a fixed and stable form.

There are several types of posthumous existence. Some cease altogether, for they derive merely from the fashion of a time. Others are retained because they are bound up with a political or religious tradition; others, as in Stendhal's case, turn out to be contemporary with a succeeding age. With St Augustine, it is quite otherwise; he is not born anew as a result of chance, but he forms a part of the essence of a human group with its descendants, of a civilisation which recovers self-consciousness in him. This continued life of his has no parallel except in that of Plato whom he resembles and whose thought he hands on.

In Plato there were present in the fullest degree the conditions necessary for survival, though he was not preceded, sustained and continued by a Church. But he founded a School, perhaps the first to have done so, one which resembled a monastic order, provided with rules governing the succession. His works, too, were often obscure

enough to be deemed sacred and to demand interpretation. They have their light and their more weighty passages, but always pulsate with life; and, through the dialogue form, so lifelike, they seem to create themselves anew with every fresh reading. In them are found intermingled elements from so many different sources, so many kinds of inspiration, that any reader, no matter what his taste, may find food for the mind. Above all they contain all that was most solid in the preceding tradition. The errors which ever recur are there rejected, but they are depicted as possessing a dignity and, sometimes, an elegance of their own. Heraclitus, Parmenides, Gorgias, and even Callicles are by no means diminished by their presentation in the Dialogues; and if they are made use of to be refuted, it is with far less severity than St Augustine uses against his opponents, Faustus, Pelagius or Julian of Eclanus. Plato sets forth myths derived from common recollection and easy to retain, the equivalent of a Genesis and an Apocalypse, bordering uncertainly on ecstasy and mystery. He gives us a philosophy of politics, of education, of poetry, and a mystique of love. We find in his work politicians, women, young men in great number, gods, and there is always present the almost too real personality of Socrates who

had the advantage of being able to bring the pure Idea down to earth.

St Augustine, though lacking Plato's suppleness and versatility of talent, and devoid of humour, had the same sort of advantages. Christ was, so to speak, his Socrates, though on an incomparably higher level; for Christ, being divine, was not an object of contemplation but the very source of it.

It is true that St Augustine, who had never heard Christ, could not present him in vivid fashion. But his own personal history, with all the various episodes in his journey towards God, the continual reverberance of it in his memory, the repentance ever accompanying the memory—all this gives his writing a quality of personal witness, the lack of which makes any work even though otherwise excellent seem defective to us, familiar as we are with the Gospel. But what Plato borrowed from the story of Socrates and the hemlock, St Augustine possessed on his own account; he lived it in virtue of his conversion constantly renewed.

St Augustine felt no need to found a School. He had the equivalent of a School in the Church, to which he committed his thought to unite to its own. At the most, what he did was to give a rule of life to a few disciples. As he grew older, he gave

up the idea of a monastery of thought and discussion which had attracted him so much at the beginning of his conversion. It must be remembered, also, that round about 420 any foundation of a School was out of the question. As with us in 1940, it was a time of chaos—in other respects, a time very favourable to a work of creation, for a written work can be constructed in the very abyss, when it is helped on by the dissolution of the elements of the world, and when surrounded by an atmosphere of indifference like the mist upon which Virgil looked as the garment of the gods.

Both Plato and Augustine had, as well as pre-eminent genius, an accidental greatness, owing to the catastrophes of the age. A man is always nobler and greater when he is alone,* and still more so if those who should have accompanied him have disappeared.

The centuries which followed Plato, and those following Augustine, saw a period of emptiness in which it might well have been asked if culture

* It is true that Plato's complement and balance followed him at once, in the person of Aristotle, while St Augustine's Aristotle (St Thomas) did not appear for a long time. Plato was less solitary than St Augustine; for he and Aristotle were twin summits of one mountain, the comparison of one with the other was richly rewarding, and that contributed to the fame of each.

were going to vanish altogether, and then an attempt by the survivors to rebuild the tradition. By then this could be done only by a *Letter*, for, continuity being broken, memory was insufficient. So it was that the Platonic *Scripture* came to be held in especial veneration.

In this connection it may be noticed that what makes a work of original thought survive is its style. That alone lasts long which pleases, as Pascal must have felt when he examined what made up the art of pleasing. All Scripture is like the wreckage of a ship after a storm, and a wreckage has beauty on account of its gaps, its strange shapes, the treasures vaguely anticipated, and all the gifts left by the dead.

At this point we may ask if the recapitulation of tradition round *a single* survivor does not mean an alteration of it, since it is then depicted in the exclusive colours of an individual mind and career. The qualities, then, of an individual destiny are liable to be taken by many generations as rules of thinking, as governing man's aims and feelings.

We may wonder if it is not the case that the very defects of Plato, the rarefied geometrician, the so abstract lover, the remorseless political planner, have been canonised as part of Platon-

ism; if, after twenty-five centuries, we are not still suffering from having inherited Plato's temperament along with his teaching, in spite of Aristotle's mitigations. (Some day the question may be asked about Pascal.)

Likewise, we may wonder to what degree Christianity still suffers from St Augustine's pessimism, which is explicable by his temperament, the circumstances of his passionate and brooding youth, and his nine years' association with the Manichaeans. Why should a people necessarily bear permanently the image of what, for better or worse, a single individual once underwent?

Still, we have to remember that this is a condition belonging to any human work. Any work must have an originator, and be rooted in the circumstances in which it rose. No doubt, as it grows, it seeks to rid itself of its first colouring but it cannot always do so. Nor can it ever do so completely.

Christ's work itself knew these limitations, the price to be paid for any effective presence of the Spirit within history, for any incarnation.

The spirit of Christianity could have been expressed in the most diverse languages; it could have coalesced with a number of different

mentalities. It is, however, a matter of history that it was developed and handed on to the Western mind by Judaeo-Greeks. This initial contingency continues to have effect. It is a fact that the first apologists attempted to join the new preaching with the ancient culture and that their work was made easier by the writings of Plato and his disciples of Alexandria. It is a fact that St Augustine rid himself of his obsession with pantheism and dualism by reading Plotinus, and that a mind so steeped in the Gospel first came to a knowledge of itself through the *Enneads*. It is a fact that St Augustine, when a slave to the flesh, was freed only by a favour which he regarded as wholly gratuitous and that he based on this his doctrine of grace. Lastly, it is a fact that, with the separation of the East and the eclipse of Greek culture, Latin theology, derived from St Augustine, dominated the Middle Ages, and inspired the Reformers. So from St Thomas to Malebranche, from St Bernard to Jansenius, the history of theology and philosophy was bound up with the fortunes of Augustinism, just as if this were a second tradition mingled with the first, as if it had given, on the threshold of the new age, a new version of the Christian message.

This being so, no wonder there is a temptation

to equate the Christian *spirit* with the Augustinian *mentality*. My own view is that, from the fifth century onwards, the Church has been attempting, by degrees, to keep in St Augustine's teaching what in him belonged to her spirit and to drop what derived solely from his own cast of mind.

But when all is said and done it must be admitted that we owe to him far more light than shade. Suppose he had never been in the Western and Latin part of the Church. What would have happened?

No doubt we would still have had the essence of the Christian religion, a revelation expressed in dogmatic formularies and in Scripture. *Doctrines* and *duties*, that is the simple, positive religion of the Latins, of St Cyprian for example. But, left to these practical people, we should never have had a 'Christian philosophy', by which I mean a union of faith and intelligence, apart from mystical elevations of the mind or purely moral reflections. We may question whether a Christian philosophy is desirable, or even possible. At one time, too, it was questioned whether 'philosophy' was possible; Socrates showed that movement was possible by walking. Likewise St Augustine showed the reality of a philosopher who was always Christian or of a Christian who was, nevertheless, a philosopher;

and the paradox seems as if it will last as long as the civilisation of the West. We may even say that all that is new in Western philosophy since his time, even the anti-Christian philosophies, so numerous from the sixteenth century onwards, was fostered in Augustinian soil by methods borrowed from him and that they are all transpositions or inversions of Augustinism, like those of Spinoza, Kierkegaard or Hegel, not to mention others more recent.

That being so, it may well be asked what would have happened to the West if there had been nothing corresponding to Augustinism to adapt it in advance to the struggles and contributions to come, so as to prevent it being shattered by the struggles or submerged by the new arrivals. Thus, as regards the contribution of Aristotle, which St Thomas turned to such advantage, how could it have been taken up without ill effect, had there not been already present a germ of Augustinism to guard scholasticism against the pressure of that pre-hegelianism which was the system of Aristotle?

The danger was all the greater in that, as G. de Plinval observed, in many points St Augustine is more modern than St Thomas. Though living in a non-scientific age, he had a scientific mind.

He was remarkably ignorant of mathematics, as he was of Greek and Hebrew; but ignorance is no misfortune, if it enables one to avoid false certainty and leaves intact the power of intuition. The *De Musica* and the *De Ordine* treat in quite modern fashion of number, relativity, and discontinuity; and it may be noted that St Augustine, more of a Platonist than Plato himself, never admitted astrology, nor the eternal cycle of things, nor messages from the dead to the living. If we read the myths of Plato and Plotinus, we are struck with Augustine's sobriety in the matter of images concerning the condition of the spirits in heaven or hell; likewise, if we read St Gregory's *Moralia*, with its stories of persons who have come back to life, we can appreciate his caution.

This is, no doubt, all to be ascribed to his philosophical turn of mind, or else to the purity of his idea of God, and perhaps also to an unconscious independence of his own period. 'Three centuries of profound changes and revolutions in every sphere of life, together with the myriad events and ideas they have seen, perforce make it seem to posterity absurdly naïve and odd, and at times quite incomprehensible, that we are essentially the outcome of what took place in times so different from ours.' What Valéry said on the

subject of Bossuet ought to apply still more strongly here, but, in fact, to St Augustine it does not apply at all.

From the standpoint of faith we would be naturally inclined to say that God, in raising up persons of singular endowments, founders or rather recapitulators, always applies 'his law of economy'. What he did with Plato for philosophy and was to do with St Benedict for the monastic life, with St Teresa of Avila for mystical experience, he did, correspondingly, for Christian thought in the West with St Augustine. It is indeed curious to see how those very general disciplines we call *philosophy*, *monastic life*, *mystical life* are stamped by the mentality and even the idiosyncrasies of the person who gave them impetus. Wherever there are people who think in a Christian way, they bear some resemblance with St Augustine, that 'Father' of the Church. It is not merely that they continue or comment on one or other of his ideas, but, for better or worse, something much more far-reaching. They bear within their own being some hormone derived from that so individual destiny and from such extraordinary circumstances. St Augustine's own history, his carnal and zoroastrian phase, his controversy with the monk of Brittany have, in this way,

become part and parcel of our intellectual climate.

Now, once again, it seems as if the historical universe is to undergo a radical change. As in the fifth century of our era, civilisation is both concentrated and divided. It seems to be getting ready to be transformed in a fashion impossible to foresee. We belong to an age in which the old structures are collapsing, when the worst seems possible (even the end of our race) when, none the less, there are many signs which give hope of a new synthesis round a rejuvenated Catholic centre.

Here it is that we can profit from the example of the solitary bishop of Hippo. St Augustine lived at a time when it was not easy to hope in a future for humanity. He prepared for death while dictating the last pages of the *City of God* in his episcopal see, which was being besieged by 'barbarians' and defended by Arians—an image of the isolation of those who, while they seek absolute and pure truth, have to compound with the necessarily impure forces of the temporal power. St Augustine could well think himself one of the last generation of men and a witness of the end of time. But the idea of the end of the world is

a deceptive one; the things of time die to be born again. And, when fate has placed one in a period when the established order seems about to break up, since the face of the future is impossible to discern, it is best to turn the mind towards the *eternum internum*. In that way, without being aware of it, as did St Augustine, we prepare the manifold future.