

Psychohistory and St. Augustine's Conversion Process

An Historiographical Critique

The classic scene in the garden is most probably what immediately comes to mind at the mention of the conversion of St. Augustine. There, in the late summer of 386, after years of much inner turmoil and conflict, Augustine finally arrived at his «moment of truth» when, responding to a child's voice, he took up and read a passage from Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Suddenly released from the ambivalence that had plagued his way and paralyzed his will for almost two decades, he made the decision to commit himself fully to Catholic Christianity. It was, of course, an intense personal experience, as any reading of the *Confessions* reveals and confirms. Although written eleven years afterwards, that autobiographical account of the turning point in his life recaptures the mood as much as it recalls the manner of its occurrence. Indeed, no less than centuries of readers since, even the author of that intimate and vivid self-analysis long remained deeply moved by his own reconstruction of the first critical passage of adulthood: «Thirteen books of my *Confessions*, which praise the just and good God in all my evil and good ways, and stir up towards Him the mind and feelings of men: as far as I am concerned, they had this effect on me when I wrote them, and they still do this, when now [twenty-nine years later] I read them» (*Retractiones* II.32).

It is just this intensity of experience and honesty of expression that make the *Confessions* such a remarkable and valuable piece of literature. For, unlike most people, Augustine is hardly reluctant in recognizing and probing the subtle relationship between emotions and actions. The emphasis he places on the affective as well as cognitive aspects of that particular incident in the garden in Milan likewise characterizes his treatment of the whole skein of events constituting the process of conversion. Emotional impact becomes the criterion of crisis:

An intellectual event, such as the reading of a new book, is registered only, as it were, from the inside, in terms of the sheer excitement of the experience, of its impact on Augustine's feelings: of the *Hortensius* of Cicero, for instance, he would never say «it changed my views» but, so characteristically, «it changed my way of feeling» — *mutavit affectum meum*¹).

Given that capacity for relating the external and internal dimensions of his being, it is little wonder that Augustine is often seen as somehow the precursor of the modern behavioral scientist. Thus, as A. C. Outler observed, Augustine

was far and away the best — if not the very first — psychologist in the ancient world. His observations and descriptions of human motives and emotions, his depth analyses of will and thought in their interaction, and his exploration of the inner nature of the human self — these have established one of the main traditions in European conceptions of human nature, even down to our own time. Augustine is an essential source for both depth psychology and existentialist philosophy²).

Despite the obvious, if not outrageous, hyperbole, such claims do point up the fact that a central feature of the *Confessions* is its psychological orientation. This is not to say that Augustine himself was in any way a professional psychologist with empirical and theoretical expertise; rather, the point is that, since he seems to have realized intuitively that feeling as much as thinking is an integral part of living and acting, his observations regularly included the emotional as well as the intellectual factors at work in his development. Therefore, because of Augustine's fascination with the complexity of human behavior and the frankness of his explicitly introspective autobiography, there is available a wealth of data from his own hand and heart for configuring the personality of a man trying to cope with a difficult environment.

The *Confessions* provides, in short, the makings of the psychological profile of Augustine. Seen from this perspective, Augustine's conversion is not a product but a process, a series of events constituting a dialectic encounter over time between self and society that was rooted in his past and reached into his future. What came to a conclusion, then,

¹ Peter BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 169; the citation is from Conf. III, 4, 8.

² A. A. OUTLER, ed. & trans., *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion* («Library of Christian Classics», Vol. VII; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955) 15.

in Augustine's thirty-second year was the integration of basic behavioral patterns of his identity: self-image, world view, and style. Put another way, Augustine had discovered at last, during his stay in Milan, who he was, what his normative and existential postulates were, and how he would accordingly function. As such, it represented the critical transition in his life and career, something that he not only acknowledged but also analyzed. In their handling of this crucial phase of Augustine's biography, however, historians have generally shied away from taking the psychological dimension into account. Even a sensitive scholar of the calibre of Henri-Irénée Marrou, while acknowledging «l'importance de cette crise... dans l'évolution psychologique d'un homme», fails to include it in his suggested mode of inquiry into that phenomenon: «Précisément à cause de son caractère total, cette 'conversion' offre plusieurs aspects que l'analyse peut et doit séparer, mais dont il ne faut pas oublier la commune présence» — namely, the religious, the moral, the social, the philosophical, and the cultural³). Although one cannot quarrel with their inclusion, one may seriously question whether, given the exclusion of the psychological aspect, any sufficient realization of «la commune présence» of those external influences can be achieved. For what especially ties together the forces that impinged on Augustine from so many directions and at various degrees is, quite simply, the man himself. His interior world engaged no less than it encountered the exterior world. Construed in that light, Augustine's conversion can be interpreted as a web of decisions involving the nonconscious and non-rational as well as the conscious and rational. Furthermore, the psychological frame-of-reference thereby opens up another avenue of research for explaining that conversion. The perspective is focused in the kind of question posed by the psychoanalyst James Dittes:

How did Augustine happen to come finally to make a particular set of affirmations? To answer this question, the intellectual historian can trace the influence of particular people, schools, and books. But with so many potential influences available, this only pushes the question a step or two back: why should Augustine respond to *these* influences? Can there have been something about the person of Augustine... which was parti-

³) Henri-Irénée MARROU, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (4th ed.; Paris: Éditions E. de Boccard, 1958) 164-165.

cipating in the process of screening and selectively responding to the range of intellectual positions available to the growing young man? ⁴).

Working from the proposition that the subjective elements are much more contributory than the objective to determining human fate, the psychoanalytic approach answers that question in terms of a basically Freudian theory of behavior. But to frame an explanation of Augustine's conversion process in those terms, it might be argued, challenges not only the ordinary conventions of history-as-story but also the very convictions about history-as-inquiry.

At first glance, the kind of investigation proposed by Dittes would not appear to be all that threatening to the canons of historical scholarship. A sampling of Augustinian historiography, for example, indicates general subscription to R. G. Collingwood's injunction that the historian «is investigating not mere events... but actions, and an action is the unity of the outside and inside of an event» ⁵). The problem, however, is that the historian employs different conceptions of «inside» and «outside» from the psychoanalyst — and, consequently, a different causal scheme in relating the twin aspects of a single phenomenon. To be sure, both agree that it involves a temporal process. But where the former concentrates on the intellectual, the other probes the emotional; and what the one sees as the social and cultural, the other defines as the individual and familial. The different approaches are most evident from how Augustine's conversion is treated by historians, for theirs has been the compelling as well as prevalent interpretation. Accordingly, three reputable and representative studies will be briefly considered: A. D. Nock's *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (1933), John J. O'Meara's *The Young Augustine: The Growth of St. Augustine's Mind up to his Conversion* (1965), and Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (1967).

Although his work is premised on the idea that conversion means «the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that

⁴) James E. DITTES, «Continuities between the life and thought of Augustine», *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5 (1965), 130.

⁵) R. G. COLLINGWOOD, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) 213.

the old was wrong and the new is right»⁶), Nock's abbreviated case study of Augustine's experience conveys neither the intensity nor the profundity of the crisis that the convert himself remembered. Instead, it is presented as a matter of rational calculation of options, a choice made without any urgency or involving any complexity of feeling. The gist of Nock's interpretation is that what occurred in Milan was the final and logical working out of a problem that had more to do with fate than faith :

From early manhood Augustine sought to find an adequate theistic scheme of the universe. This quest fascinated him, and he could not escape from it. The various things which interested him — Manichaeism, Neoplatonism, Christianity — did so in so far as they contributed to this problem... So his quest ran its way to an intellectual conviction [that Christianity was intellectually respectable], and this conviction gradually acquired an emotional strength sufficient to bring him to decisive action... it is like a chemical process in which the addition of a catalytic agent produces a reaction for which all the elements were already present⁷).

O'Meara, on the other hand, maintains that what happened to Augustine was more than the recognition and adoption of some abstract world view. Conceived as « a new study of the development of Augustine's mind »⁸), his monograph nonetheless can perceive that moral conflict was as much a part of his conversion as intellectual confusion. Discovery of the truth was only penultimate to the decision to live by it : « In point of fact conversion came... not in the assent to propositions but in the acceptance of an Authority which guaranteed the truth of mysteries which [he] could never be expected to understand... conversion ultimately was not a question of understanding, but of submission »⁹). In that vein, O'Meara entitles the two chapters (XI and XII) concerned with the final stages of Augustine's religious evolution « Submission of Intellect » and « Submission of Will ». Yet,

⁶) A. D. NOCK, *Conversion : The Old and New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (London : Oxford University Press, 1955) 7.

⁷) *Ibid.*, 262 & 265. The almost passive character that Nock ascribes to Augustine's conversion is summed up on p. 261 : « Augustine thus grew up 'Between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born' ».

⁸) John J. O'MEARA, *The Young Augustine : The Growth of St. Augustine's Mind up to his Conversion* (Staten Island, N.Y. : Alba House, 1965) 9.

⁹) *Ibid.*, 166.

despite some incisive references to the agitation and excitement that seized Augustine at the time of his experience in the garden and thereafter colored its recollections¹⁰), O'Meara's analysis remains locked in to the «history of ideas» explanation form, a mode of inquiry much more concerned with the rationality of the action than the personality of the actor. Convinced that «it is our duty to explain what we can of the change that came upon Augustine in terms of human reason alone»¹¹), he has perforce limited himself to giving a constricted view of his subject's total growth and development. Peter Brown, however, has no such compunctions or constraints — and, therefore, more compassion and comprehension. Perhaps because his biography is, to quote W. H. C. Frend, «one in which the scholar's full range of skills, those of the historian, the philosopher, and human psychologist have been brought to bear»¹²), he has captured the context no less than the content of Augustine's life and world. At any rate, Brown presents a man with a mind *and* a milieu. A public as much as a private person, Augustine belonged to a generation fashioned by old patterns and faced with new pressures. In North Africa as well as the rest of the Latin West — not to mention the Greek East — the dominant culture of fourth-century society was both traditional and transitional, with the momentum clearly running with change. Given that environment, Augustine's conversion process was not at all untoward; indeed, in comparison with the radical shifts in behavior of an Ambrose, a Paulinus, and a Jerome, his experience seems, Brown notes, almost unexceptional: «A sense of purpose and continuity is the most striking feature of Augustine's 'Conversion'. Seen in his works at Cassiciacum, this 'conversion' seems to have been an astonishingly tranquil process. Augustine's life 'in Philosophy' was shot through with S. Paul; but it could still be communicated

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 182 ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ix. Obviously, O'Meara is saying that he is going to use his own human reason — in contradistinction to the credulity of hagiography — to explain Augustinian behavior. Nonetheless, his treatment becomes exclusively concentrated on just the rational or intellectual aspect of his subject, as a statement on p. 208 clearly indicates: «... he was intellectual, even if he was not primarily interested in philosophy. His constant absorption in the beginning was neither Religion nor women, but truth: he was always interested in ideas, and captivated by them».

¹² W. H. C. FREND, Review of *Augustine of Hippo* by Peter BROWN, in *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S. 19 (1968), 654.

in classical terms»¹³). The upshot of Brown's analysis of Augustine's reorientation — particularly when coupled to the curious fact that it is defined as conversion only within inverted commas in a chapter entitled «Philosophy» — would appear to be, in essence, intellectually centered, albeit much more situationally grounded, and consequently not substantially different from the treatments already cited. Yet, if he speaks of that experience as «the tranquil synthesis of great [classical and Biblical] traditions», Brown can also see at the same time that this impression is perhaps deceiving. «Augustine's own tranquility of mind, however, may have had deep, personal roots», he allows.

These are only revealed ten years later in Augustine's *Confessions*, that work of deep psychological authenticity, rather than in the formal, literary works of the time of his 'conversion'. In his formal works Augustine wrote as one public figure to other public men: he is a professor in retirement, and so his illness, the reason for this retirement, is mentioned, as are the effects of his retirement on his public career, that is, his abandonment of a rich marriage and the prospects of a governmental post: but the classic scene in the garden in Milan is passed over in silence. Yet it is only in this scene that we can glimpse the depth of the reorientation which was taking place in Augustine. It affected parts of him which bore little relation to his public life as a literary man: it affected the nature of his painful involvements with women, and, of course, his even more intimate relation with his mother¹⁴).

Unfortunately, that insight is not elaborated. What was broached is not bridged.

The unexplicated reference to Monica is typical of historians' failure to span the false dichotomy between feeling and thinking. Although Nock insists that «This is a conversion which rests in the last resort on the permanence of an early impression and of the religious atmosphere with which his mother had invested his childhood», he completely ignores her role in what, admittedly, «was an emotional background for conversion»¹⁵). Even O'Meara's admission that the «*Confessions* portray her as playing a dominant part in his life and in this they doubtless only represent the truth» does not

¹³) BROWN, *op. cit.* (n. 1 above), 113.

¹⁴) *Ibid.*, 113-114.

¹⁵) NOCK, 265-366.

prompt any effort to link up Augustine's external and internal worlds by means of the mother-son relationship. Granted that Monica was a major figure, still

her efforts were not the decisive factor in his conversion and in his life. One can rule out of account any notion that Augustine was completely dominated by his mother. In point of fact he had defied her in his whole manner of life and more than once in important issues. Naturally, however, she had considerable influence on his actions ¹⁶).

Yet that judgment betrays the same ambivalence about the maternal role shared by Augustine himself throughout his autobiography. As Brown has correctly observed, «What Augustine remembered in the *Confessions* was his inner life; and that inner life is dominated by one figure — his mother, Monica» ¹⁷). This is not to say that it was a unilateral bond, in which Augustine merely played a subservient and resentful role. His own anguished recognition, at the time of Monica's death, that «her life and mine had been as one» (*Conf.* IX. 12, 30) is a revealing as it is touching. Accordingly,

The relationship between mother and son that weaves in and out of the *Confessions*, forms the thread for which the book is justly famous. Yet it takes two to make such a relationship. What Augustine says about Monica throws as much light on his own character as on that of his mother; and what he says is less important than the way in which he says it ¹⁸).

The same insight, too, could be applied, it seems, to fleshing out the identity of Augustine's father and defining more precisely the nature of their affiliation. Though hardly as prominent and certainly not as pivotal a figure in Augustine's life as Monica was, nonetheless Patricius did contribute, positively or negatively, to the configuration of his son's personality. The commonplace observation that Augustine's almost indifferent report of his father's death (*Conf.* III. 4, 7) stands in marked contrast to the very deep hurt he expressed concerning the deaths of friends as well as of his mother may conceal but cannot cancel out the more sympathetic composite of Patricius to be gleaned from references scattered throughout the *Confessions*. To stress the impetus of the relentless Monica need not result in glossing over

¹⁶) O'MEARA, 205.

¹⁷) BROWN, 29.

¹⁸) *Ibid.*

Patricius' impact. In any event, they both left their imprint on his sensitive disposition and sensible character — and, to that extent, the saint's own feelings about his parents belie the claim, made to discourage psychological speculation, that « Augustine was different from his parents and greater than them » ¹⁹).

Not surprisingly, it has been by his frank intimations of that « subterranean tension » between Monica and Patricius that « Augustine has deservedly brought down upon his own head the attentions of modern psychological interpreters » ²⁰). They, in turn, have incurred at least the skepticism of historians. O'Meara is particularly critical of, if not hostile toward, their claims; on several occasions he severely censures what he considers the « crudely drawn picture » psychoanalysts have constructed of Augustine's conversion process. « Some writers », he complains, « have been less than fair to Patricius and more than fair to Monica ».

They represent Augustine as never saying anything but evil of his father, and tell us even that that father was the sole author of Augustine's lust. Contrariwise, they commend Augustine's praise for his mother and make her the human author of what was good in him. They speak of Augustine's dual heredity, of his nature harbouring both the unbridled sensuality of his father and the gentle mysticism of his mother, and of his having within him a tangle of seething, overflowing passions, yet as being also possessed of the power to raise himself to the *templa serena* of metaphysics. They see a radical division of Augustine's *ego*, due to his parents, a dualism within him which kept him stranded for nine years in the dualistic heresy of Manicheism ²¹).

Viewing the complexity of traits associated with such a portrait as inherently contradictory and therefore absurd, he concludes his running criticism with a sweeping condemnation of the value and validity of the psychoanalytic treatment of Augustine's relationships with his parents: « In short, too much has been made in this matter of questionable psychological theories, too little care has been taken in their application, and not enough attention has been paid to the evidence » ²²). Brown, by contrast, is much more restrained, eschewing O'Meara's reproachful attitude. He doubts rather than dismisses the

¹⁹) O'MEARA, 205.

²⁰) BROWN, 31.

²¹) O'MEARA, 50-51.

²²) *Ibid.*, 207.

efficacy of the psychological perspective and approach for historical inquiry :

It is... one thing to take due note of a blatant childhood tension, that was still very much alive in Augustine's mind as he wrote the *Confessions* in middle age; and it is quite another, to follow this tension through, from its roots in Augustine's childhood, throughout a long and varied life. The unexpected combinations, ramifications and resolutions that a properly sophisticated knowledge of modern psychology would lead us to expect, escape the historian ²³).

Yet his reservations are stronger than his reasons; the former are beyond quarrel but the latter are open to question. « The studies known to me », Brown declares in an explanatory footnote, « ... show that it is as difficult as it is desirable to combine competence as an historian with sensitivity as a psychologist » ²⁴). It is both a curious and an incongruous statement. Curious because, apart from the citation of three works (none of which, significantly, is by an historian), it stands without any argument and substantiation, much less any elaboration of what it is that he expects from « a properly sophisticated knowledge of modern psychology ». Thus, the conclusion can be faulted for failing to demonstrate why the very data that invite psychological speculation inhibit historical explanation. The incongruity is that Brown's own biographical study not only disproves the improbability of combining in a single scholar the competence and sensitivity he posits, but also provides how it is possible to achieve it. Quite frankly, all that prevented Brown himself from fully realizing that combination was not doing explicitly and systematically what, in fact, he was doing intuitively and implicitly. Consider, for example, his characterizations of the *Confessions*, which he has defined as « a manifesto of the inner world »: on the one hand, « The *Confessions* are a masterpiece of strictly intellectual autobiography »; on the other, « The *Confessions* are, quite succinctly, the story of Augustine's 'heart', or of his 'feelings' — his *affectus* » ²⁵). The point is not that

²³) BROWN, 31.

²⁴) *Ibid.*, n. 4. The cited works are « notably B. LEGEWIE, *Augustinus: Eine Psychographie*, 1925, E. R. DODDS, 'Augustine's Confessions: a study of spiritual maladjustment', *Hibbert Journal*, 26, 1927-1928, pp. 459-472, Rebecca WEST, *St. Augustine*, 1933 and C. KLEGEMANN [sic], 'A psychoanalytic study of the Confessions of St. Augustine', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, V, 1957, pp. 469-484 ».

²⁵) *Ibid.*, 168, 167, 169.

Brown is being contradictory but that the cognitive and affective sides of Augustine's « inner world » are complementary; they can be distinguished but not separated from his personality. Of course, Brown knows this very well and hence employs both extrinsic and intrinsic analysis of the *Confessions* and other Augustinian literature in his composition; again, it is just that he does not « put it up front ».

At any rate, whether because of hostility or hesitancy on their part, the fact is that historians have shied away from any explicit and systematic analysis of the mental state of Augustine at the time of his conversion. Though their resistance or reluctance may not be unwarranted, what is disturbing has been the failure even to consider seriously and critically the studies available regarding the connection between internal and external reality in an individual personality. A relevant case in point, *inter alia*, is Brown's attribution of *dolor pectoris*, a physical impairment Augustine suffered only during the summer of 386, to possible psychosomatic causes ²⁶). But the question remains, Was that condition a function of this conversion? Nor is it sufficient to reply that an area like that lies outside the historian's expertise. Anything that elucidates the circumstances or explicates the causes of change in human behavior is within his province. Moreover, as sociologists have already been informed, « ... the body of [psychoanalytic] theory exists for *anyone* to use. Neither personal analysis nor clinical training is a guarantee of superior insight » ²⁷). Accordingly, both the empirical data and the theoretical constructs for a psychohistorical analysis of Augustine's conversion process are

²⁶) *Ibid.*, 109-110: « During the summer he had developed some illness of the chest, a *dolor pectoris*, which affected his voice, and so would have made it impossible to continue his work [*Conf.* VIII, 12, 28-30]. It would be of great importance to know the exact nature of this sudden development: such knowledge might reveal the stress under which Augustine had been living. Some, for instance, have suggested that this 'pain' was a bout of asthma, which is often a psychosomatic illness; and it more than probable that in these tense months, Augustine had come to develop the physical manifestations of a nervous breakdown. It is perhaps most revealing, that although Augustine suffered from frequent ill-health in his later life, this 'pain in the chest,' a pain which seemed to strike him just where he was most implicated in his career as a public speaker, and in just that part of the body which he later came to regard as the symbolic resting-place of a man's pride, is never again mentioned ».

²⁷) Fred WEINSTEIN and Gerald M. PLATT, *Psychoanalytic Sociology: An Essay on the Interpretation of Historical Data and the Phenomena of Collective Behavior* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) 1, n. 1 (emphasis added).

at hand. But the problem is that they have yet to be used with competence and sensitivity.

One of the earliest interpretations of Augustine's conversion in terms of a psychological frame-of-reference is William James' citation of it in his treatment of « some typical cases of discordant personality, with melancholy in the form of self-condemnation and sense of sin ».

Saint Augustine's case is a classic example. You all remember his half-pagan, half-Christian bringing up at Carthage, his emigration to Rome and Milan, his adoption of Manicheism and subsequent skepticism, and his restless search for truth and purity of life; and finally how, distracted by the struggle between the two souls in his breast, and ashamed of his own weakness of will, when so many others whom he knew and knew of had thrown off the shackles of sensuality and dedicated themselves to chastity and the higher life, he heard a voice in the garden say, « *Sume, lege* » (take and read), and opening the Bible at random, saw the text, « not in chambering and wantonness », etc., which seemed directly sent to his address, and laid the inner storm to rest forever. Augustine's psychological genius has given an account of the trouble of having a divided self which has never been surpassed ²⁸).

Granted that it was published in 1901 and hardly constitutes an in-depth analysis, nonetheless James' interpretation deserves extended quotation because it contains what is both desirable and difficult about the psychoanalytic approach. On the one hand, it apparently explains the phenomenon of Augustine's conversion with a theory of the discordant personality or divided self that makes it a simple and predictable thing. His behavior, otherwise so odd and bewildering to the modern mind, becomes intelligible; its cause, course, and cure are encapsulated in a single idea whose imposition reduces complexity to simplicity. Reality, on the other hand, is not so easily constrained. The perceptive reader familiar with Augustine's life and career notes discrepancies in the portrait — for example, the sloppy handling of events (adoption of Manicheism put after emigration to Italy), the vague description of his problem (« the struggle between the two souls in his breast »), and the absolute certainty of judgment (the Scripture reading « laid the inner storm to rest forever »). Worse still, Augustine's condition is presented in isolation; there is no consider-

²⁸) William JAMES, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (repr.; New Hyde Park, N.Y. : University Books, 1963) 171-172.

ation, much less incorporation, of such key biographical data as his social background, intellectual interests, and religious experiences. As a result, James is unable to explain how that condition came to be, how it reacted to experience, and how it changed.

Perhaps because he comes out of a Freudian paradigm that James did not belong to, E. R. Dodds is better equipped to try to answer those questions about the structure, function, and process of Augustine's psychological state at the time of his conversion. In an article published in 1927, Dodds, picking up the notion though not the term of divided self, identifies the condition as neurotic, its source as familial conflict, and the resolution as achieved in conversion²⁹. The origin and definition of the saint's «spiritual maladjustment» were rooted in the circumstances of early childhood — and therefore beyond his control, though not his consciousness.

Duae voluntates meae confligebant inter se («two wills were at war within me»): this is the recurrent ground-theme of the *Confessions*, as of most of its successors in the same kind. The origins of the conflict are to be looked for in Augustine's family history. His mother, Monica, was a pious countrywoman who had been reared by an old nurse in a tradition of fervent Catholicism, at a time when paganism was still in the ascendant in Roman Africa... While still in her teens this devout and sensitive child was given in marriage to a small country squire named Patricius, a pagan by tradition and temperament if not also by conviction... Of this ill-assorted union Augustine was the fruit. It was his tragic destiny to combine in a small and sickly body the warring souls of both his parents and a fastidious intellect which served each soul in turn³⁰).

Thus, the strain of their incompatibility engendered the neurosis that plagued Augustine from childhood into manhood. The tensions were always at work, affecting his outlook and effecting his growth. In the end, Dodds argues, Augustine was forced, after much confusion in his personal and intellectual wanderings, to make a choice between the competing identities of the paternal and maternal presences. «The natural man — the soul inherited from his father — was now dominant in Augustine; but it was not long to remain in undisturbed

²⁹) E. R. DODDS, «Augustine's Confessions: A Study of Spiritual Maladjustment», *The Hibbert Journal* 26 (October 1927-July 1928), 459-473.

³⁰) *Ibid.*, 460-461.

possession»³¹). For Monica, «the only member of his family who counted for him»³², succeeded because she survived her husband and stayed close to her son. Throughout his Aeneas-like travail, her pressure as well as presence was insistent. Coinciding, moreover, with the submission taking place to his mother's domination was the clarification of the search of truth that had taken him from the company of the Manichees to the coterie of the Neo-Platonists. And it was this not coincidental termination of his emotional and intellectual pursuits that set the stage for the dramatic finale which would resolve his conflicts. «Once furnished with the framework of a theology which his intellectual conscience accepted as rational», Dodds argues,

Augustine could not long postpone the final trial of strength between the two souls which shared the tenancy of his body. Their conflict had already reduced that body almost to a ruin. The last stage of the struggle was fought out in bodily sickness and mental anguish. A decision had to be reached, but the old Adam resisted stoutly to the end; after all argument spent, *remanserat muta trepidatio*. We can sympathize with that «dumb panic», for the battle ground had by this time shifted from the intellectual to the moral field. On the one side stood arrayed his bodily pleasures, his worldly ambitions, his professional interests, his joy in free discussion with his fellows, in a word, most of the dispositions acquired in thirty years of rich intellectual and sensuous experience. On the other side stood Monica, and the monastic ideal. He had reached, as it were, the watershed between the ancient and the mediaeval world. Once and again he cried «It is decided! I will do it now»; but his own will refused to obey him. So it goes on, day after day, page after page; in all literature there is no more faithful and arresting picture of a neurotic crisis³³).

Unlike James, however, Dodds does not think that the experience in the garden ended the conflict once and for all. Viewing the conversion more as a suppression than a resolution of Augustine's neurosis, he finds «it is difficult to believe that this man had found within the Church the true mental balance which he had failed to achieve outside it»³⁴). Rather, the introspective autobiography itself is evidence of

³¹) *Ibid.*, 464.

³²) *Ibid.*, 465.

³³) *Ibid.*, 471.

³⁴) *Ibid.*, 472.

the continuing neurotic conflict, for «no man faces the anguish of self-analysis unless there be grave trouble in his soul... its *raison d'être* is a condition of spiritual maladjustment which must be laid bare before it can be fully dealt with»³⁵). In effect, there was no conversion at all. As proof of the persistence of «the old Adam» he alleges the misogyny and asceticism of Augustine's episcopal life, purportedly the permanent effects of his abnormal love for his mother³⁶). «From this springs the inability to find happiness in the love of women; from this his desperate pursuit — in philosophy, in friendship, at last in religion — of an elusive substitute for that happiness»³⁷).

The deleterious impact of Monica on Augustine's personality from nursery through episcopacy is the *idée fixe* of psychoanalytic interpretations of his conversion process. «One need not have studied Freud», Dodds rightly observes, «to recognise in this exceptional relationship to his mother one of the determining factors in Augustine's life-history»³⁸). More to the point, given what Dodds has done implicitly and the psychoanalysts explicitly, Monica is actually treated as *the* cause, period. The mother-son relationship is emphasized alone, at the expense of any other considerations. Augustine's social environment, intellectual evolution, and religious experiences are neglected or slighted, except only insofar as they might be used to illustrate that «exceptional relationship». This concentration on the internal to the exclusion of the external side of Augustine's crisis explains, though it does not excuse, the psychoanalysts' unfamiliarity with, much less reference to, the scholarly literature covering all aspects of his life and thought. Even granted the obviously questionable assumption that an individual's personality is permanently fixed in the early years, logic demands that serious attention be paid to the cultural context, uniquely defined by temporal and spatial dimensions, in which those alleged influences developed and operated. If, because orthodox Freudians fail to take historical factors into account in their conceptual schemes of human behavior, «no sound theory of change has ever emerged from psychoanalytic thought»³⁹),

³⁵) *Ibid.*, 460.

³⁶) *Ibid.*, 472.

³⁷) *Ibid.*, 461.

³⁸) *Ibid.*, 466.

³⁹) WEINSTEIN and PLATT, 57.

by the same token none has ever been incorporated into it. Divorced from external reality, Augustine's internal development is — and can be — only analyzed within the restricted confines of libidinal and narrowly familial theoretical frameworks. Ironically, as a result of their ahistorical stance, one can fault the Freudian analysts with Augustine's essential complaint against the books of the Platonists: they are too abstract and theoretical, insisting on the eternal state of being and ignoring the actual state of becoming ⁴⁰).

Typical of the failing is Charles Kligerman's analysis ⁴¹). Terming Augustine «possibly the greatest introspective psychologist before Freud», he holds a similar high regard for his *Confessions*:

the book is essentially a psychiatric personal history without the contaminating presence of an interviewer. This history is particularly suitable because Augustine is not rigid and systematic, but emotionally labile and speaks from the heart in a rhapsodic fashion. Thus, the text has the spontaneous quality of free association, and in this spirit we shall follow the continuity and be alert for clues ⁴²).

His key to defining and explaining that continuity is, of course, Freud's concept of the oedipal complex. Put within the psychosexual frame of reference, Augustine's neurotic behavior is rooted in the intractable (and inevitable) contrariety of having a pagan father and a Christian mother. «This religious difference», Kligerman maintains, «led to intense parental conflict which was decisive for Augustine's entire development» ⁴³). Because of her incompatibility with Patricius, Monica transferred her erotic needs to her son, an incestuous affection translated into frustrating demands on his divided loyalties. Thus, at the death of his father, the young Augustine's latent hostility toward his domineering mother surfaced when he went to Carthage, where he lived in concubinage and joined the Manichees. Such defiance, it is argued, had already manifested itself subconsciously with his preoccupation with Virgil's moving story of Dido and Aeneas.

⁴⁰) See particularly *Conf.* VII, 9. It would not be remiss to indicate here that none of the authorities cited in this paper ever deals forthrightly, much less sympathetically, with Augustine's reaction to the core Christian doctrine of the Incarnation and its decisive role in his conversion.

⁴¹) Charles KLIGERMAN, M. D., «A Psychoanalytic Study of the Confessions of St. Augustine», *American Psychoanalytic Association Journal* 5 (1957), 469-484.

⁴²) *Ibid.*, 470-1.

⁴³) *Ibid.*, 470.

« It is my thesis », Kligerman declares, « that this story contains the nuclear conflict of Augustine's infantile neurosis and played a most decisive role in his subsequent career » ⁴⁴). But the relentless Monica was not put off, and so, in desperation, « Like Aeneas, Augustine left the seductive blandishments and entreaties of his widowed African queen; ... The parallelism is too striking to be coincidental; it was the compulsive repetition of his boyhood fantasy » ⁴⁵. In Italy Augustine was introduced to Ambrose and Neoplatonism, yet, despite what historians make of their influences on his final conversion, Kligerman insists that « another fact was more significant :

Monnica came to Milan. When Monnica failed to commit suicide like Dido, but sailed the seas to rejoin her son, it proved to him that her magic was stronger, and from that moment he began to surrender — not without periods of violent struggle, but there is never much doubt about the outcome ⁴⁶).

Accordingly, Kligerman concludes that « the end result of his conversion experience was an identification with the mother and a passive feminine attitude to the father displaced to God » ⁴⁷).

Kligerman's interpretation is both distorted and contrived. The distortion is twofold. First, the psychiatrist posits a fundamental hostility between Patricius and Monica that the *Confessions* do not substantiate. Indeed, Augustine, while candidly admitting what Peter Brown has termed « subterranean tension » within his family, specifically states nonetheless that the circumstances of his parental relations, though strained, were more harmonious than in most other homes in Thagaste ⁴⁸). Cavalierly confusing tension with trauma,

⁴⁴) *Ibid.*, 472. Psychoanalytic reference to Augustine's « preoccupation » with the story of Aeneas and Dido (Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Bks. I & IV) as symbolic of his inner neurotic conflict was first made by DODDS, *art. cit.* (n. 28 above), pp. 462 & 470.

⁴⁵) *Ibid.*, 478.

⁴⁶) *Ibid.*, 480.

⁴⁷) *Ibid.*, 483.

⁴⁸) See *Conf.* IX, 9 (R. S. Pine-Coffin's trans. in Penguin ed.): « ... my mother was brought up in modesty and temperance. It was you [the Lord] who taught her to obey her parents rather than they who taught her to obey you, and when she was old enough, they gave her in marriage to a man whom she served as lord. She never ceased to try to gain him for you as a convert, for the virtues with which you had adorned her, and for which he respected, loved, and admired her, were like so many voices constantly speaking to him of you. He was unfaithful to her, but her patience was so great that his infidelity never became a cause of quarrelling between them.

Kligerman seriously misconstrued the nature of the parental conflict and therefore its impact on the son. (Other than the misreading of the *Confessions* regarding Augustine's family situation, there is also a conspicuous absence of any informed knowledge of or reference to domestic relations — particularly the roles of parents therein — in fourth-century society.) Secondly, there is what can only be termed the gross distortion of Monica herself; indeed, the scandalous caricature of her as a castrating mother is outdone only by Kligerman's unfounded speculation that, due to Monica's wish to be buried in Italy rather than Africa, « Augustine exulted even as she lay dying. He had fulfilled the infantile oedipal fantasy of separating his parents forever, and was even able to rationalize it as an act of piety »⁴⁹). The contrivance of Kligerman's approach is that the exclusive use of the oedipal complex permits the displacement of even legitimate conflicts within Augustine into the wider world. One instance of this is Kligerman's invention of a dichotomous culture externalized by Augustine's neurosis. « In the childish imagination of Augustine », he claims,

Patricius represented the power and prestige of Rome, paganism, the religion of the ruling class, and masculinity. Monnica represented Africa, the mother country, whose great city was Carthage, Christianity, then more prevalent among the lower classes, and femininity. His boyhood dreams of glory must have been associated with following in his father's footsteps leading him to Rome — magnificent center of the universe. Carthage was great, but it was not Rome; Africans were provincials⁵⁰).

Much more captivated by the Aeneas-myth than Augustine, it

For she looked to you to show him mercy, hoping that chastity would come with faith. Though he was remarkably kind, he had a hot temper, but my mother knew better than to say or do anything to resist him when he was angry. If his anger was unreasonable, she used to wait until he was calm and composed and then took the opportunity of explaining what she had done. Many women, whose faces were disfigured by blows from husbands far sweeter-tempered than her own, used to gossip together and complain of the behaviour of their men-folk. My mother would meet this complaint with another — about the women's tongues... These women knew well enough how hot-tempered a husband my mother had to cope with. They used to remark how surprising it was that they had never heard, or seen any marks to show, that Patricius had beaten his wife, or that there had been any domestic disagreement between them, even for one day ».

⁴⁹) KLIGERMAN, 483.

⁵⁰) *Ibid.*, 478.

would seem, is Kligerman himself, for he declares that, since it proved impossible for Augustine to sublimate his tensions entirely in religion, « he fought the battle all over again in his monumental work, *The City of God*... Rome was still the city of his father, and the 'City of God' the province of his mother »⁵¹). Finally, coupled to and complementing those two shortcomings in Kligerman's interpretation (which are likewise in evidence in his treatment of the saint's Manichean phase) is a basic ignorance about the social conditions and intellectual climate of Late Antiquity. To think, for example, that Augustine's journeys to Carthage and Rome were merely flights from a relentless mother overlooks entirely the fact that education served as a major vehicle for ambitious men to climb the social ladder. Moreover, anyone who declares that Augustine's « study of Neoplatonic philosophy... led directly into Christianity »⁵²) has not only not read carefully Book VII of the *Confessions* but has also no real understanding of either Neoplatonism or Christianity. Unfortunately, such shortcomings seem endemic to the Freudian model, with its emphasis on internal reality to the neglect of its social counterpart.

The other psychoanalytic study under review here — James E. Dittes' article in a journal volume carrying several other Augustinian contributions⁵³) — simply confirms the judgment, made on other grounds, that « it is not possible to render an analysis of historical and cultural problems in terms of drives and psychosexual phases »⁵⁴). In many ways a more sophisticated and compelling conceptualization of Augustine in Freudian typology than Kligerman's, Dittes' essay still suffers from the divorce between the environmental and psychological factors. The gist of Augustine's thought, says Dittes, is that it is not only monistic but also « mom-istic »⁵⁵). And, of course, this interpenetration of philosophical and psychosexual tendencies stemmed from the infantile configuration of personality. « Augustine shared with Joseph of Egypt and with Freud of Vienna the fate of being

⁵¹) *Ibid.*, 484.

⁵²) *Ibid.*, 480.

⁵³) James E. DITTES, « Continuities between the Life and Thought of Augustine », *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5 (1965), 130-140. Companion papers on the *Confessions* in this volume include articles by Paul W. Pruyser, Joseph Havens, Walter H. Clark, and David Bakan.

⁵⁴) WEINSTEIN and PLATT, 47.

⁵⁵) DITTES, 138.

the first-born son of a young woman and of an older and aloof father»⁵⁶). The deduction, therefore, is that Monica, deprived of affection, sought gratification through her domination of Augustine. Aside from his testimony in the *Confessions*, there is also indirect evidence of the son's dependence on a strong mother in terms of what Dittes diagnoses as Augustine's oral preoccupation, supineness as «a cowering 'mama's boy'», narcissism, self-abasement, and the hint of homosexuality — all symptoms of a repressed frustration expressed in hostility and aloofness⁵⁷). This internal conflict found expression in such behavior as Augustine's concubinage and Manichean association, both efforts to free himself from dependence on his mother and to establish his own autonomy. However, it all proved vain. «After years of the most vigorous assertion of his independence, Augustine submitted. He surrendered to his mother, and to her church and to her wishes... He abandoned, in short, the effort to be a father. Instead, he became an obedient son»⁵⁸).

Reliance on the Freudian concept of the oedipus complex as the single explanatory principle of Augustine's lifetime behavior is, to be sure, the most characteristic feature of the psychoanalytic approach. Employing this preconceived image of Augustine as the point of reference for their orientation, the studies considered here deduce conclusions which are not fully substantiated either in fact or logic, even when couched carefully in qualifying terms like «may's» and «must's». Dittes, however, goes further in imposing the tyranny of theory on the data. In a footnote speculating on the cause of Augustine's «conversion», he proposes, however tentatively, an interpretation that destroys the integrity of the text, the authenticity of the event, and the honesty of the author:

The conversion may have been part of a guilt-filled reaction to his mother's death. A rebellion which goes so far as to kill the object of ambivalent feelings is sure to elicit counter-reaction. The conversion and the death of his mother are closely linked chronologically in Augustine's own account, with the conversion preceding. Is it possible that he has consciously or unconsciously reversed the sequence? Such a reversal would not be too surprising for a man who now fervently wished that it were possible to tell her of his conversion and to fill her with «exultation and

⁵⁶) *Ibid.*, 133.

⁵⁷) *Ibid.*, 134-135.

⁵⁸) *Ibid.*, 137.

triumph» and to receive her blessing (VIII, 12). The account of the conversion episode in Book VIII already appears to be something of a stylized construction — not unlike the Gospel narratives themselves — not attempting actual historical chronology, but coalescing events of different times and the significances of events all into a more unified production intended to achieve particular impact and spurpoe ⁵⁹).

This is nonsense, sheer fantasy. It is also a sobering testimony to what can happen when external controls are absent from analysis. In response, one can point out that not only did Augustine categorically report otherwise in a document read by friends and contemporaries familiar with what transpired that summer but also the epitaph of Monica's tombstone, discovered in 1945 at Ostia, substantiates his account ⁶⁰). Accordingly, nothing in the evidence calls for, much less confirms, such «demythologization» on Dittes' part, except his own fascination with a theory in search of universal validation.

The treatment which Augustine has received at the hands of those interpreters of his conversion process adopting a psychoanalytic approach deservedly earns the very scorn which the psychiatrist Leslie Farber has directed at members of his profession for callousness toward human subjects :

Without examining these normative statements in detail, the reader can see why psychiatry is so often charged with being reductive. For while the creatures described above may bear some resemblance to animals or to steam engines or robots or electronic brains, they do not sound like people. They are in fact constructs of theory, more humanoid than human; and whether they are based on the libido theory or on one of the new interpersonal theories of relationships, it is just those qualities most distinctively human which seem to have been omitted. It is a matter of some irony, if one turns from psychology to one of Dostoyevsky's novels, to find that no matter how wretched, how puerile, or how dilapidated his characters may be, they all possess more humanity than the ideal man who lives in the pages of psychiatry ⁶¹).

Although it is difficult to say whether it is a charade or a caricature, the format as well as substance of an essay by Paul

⁵⁹) *Ibid.*, 138, n. 7.

⁶⁰) Russell MEIGGS, *Roman Ostia* (Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1960), 399-400.

⁶¹) Leslie FARBER, «Martin Buber and Psychiatry», *Psychiatry: A Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes* 19 (1956), 110.

W. Pruyser of the Menninger Foundation underscores the applicability of Farber's general criticism to Augustinian analysis ⁶²). Indeed, given the work done so far in this area, one is tempted to paraphrase Augustine's own famous plea: Give me psychology, Lord, but not yet! This is not to deny the inherent advantage of a psychoanalytic perspective, viz. its explicit and sympathetic attention to the development of personality. Rather, the complaint is that this had been done with respect to Augustine in a vacuum. Thus, a strictly orthodox Freudian frame of reference has proved much too narrow because of a fixation of its own, to wit, that internal development is determined (not just disposed) during infancy and early childhood and that the reality of the external world plays no significant role thereafter. What is needed for any comprehensive inquiry into Augustine's conversion process is a recognition, on the parts of traditional historians and orthodox psychoanalysts, of the dialectical experience of any human mind as it engages and encounters reality within and without. Making adjustment for the postdictive nature of their enterprise, scholars investigating the major crisis in Augustine's development ought to heed the critique registered against the deductive mode of general categorizing according to psychological types: « One cannot predict a man's opinion by knowledge of his personality alone or of his environment alone. Both must enter into any predictive formula » ⁶³).

Despite the theoretical rigidity and historical insensitivity of the psychoanalytic studies reviewed here, a configuration of Augustine's personality still seems warranted. Without denying that « it is as difficult as it is desirable to combine competence as an historian with sensitivity as a psychologist » ⁶⁴), Augustinian historiography would do well to test at least the applicability of Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* as a model for conceptualizing and investigating the problem of Augustine's conversion process ⁶⁵). Eschewing the psychosexual as the exclusive explanatory principle, Erikson has provided such psychosocial concepts as « identity crisis », « negative

⁶²) Paul W. PRUYSER, « Psychological Examination: Augustine », *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5 (1965), 284-289. It is presented as a clinical report, as though Augustine himself had been interviewed.

⁶³) M. Brewster SMITH, Jerome S. BRUNER, and Robert W. WHITE, *Opinions and Personalities* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1956) 39.

⁶⁴) BROWN, *Augustine*, 31, n. 4.

⁶⁵) Erik ERIKSON, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1958).

identity», and «moratorium» as well as the pattern of an eight-stage epigenetic cycle that, at first glance, appear quite appropriate for preliminarily construing a psychohistorical study of Augustine. Other than the very significant fact that Erikson's biographical studies do not assume that a subject's religiosity is *a priori* proof of neurosis indelibly fixed at childhood, the major advantage of Erikson's method over other approaches is that it extends the range of analysis beyond infancy to include the stages of adolescence and adulthood as independent foci of growth and change in the individual. «Psychoanalysis has tended to subordinate the later stages of life to those of childhood», Erikson has complained.

It has lifted to the rank of a cosmology the undeniable fact that man's adulthood contains a persistent childishness: that vistas of the future always reflect the mirages of a missed past, that apparent progression can harbor partial regressions, and firm accomplishments, hidden childish fulfillment... In this book we will add... the historical concomitance which teaches us how, in the period between puberty and adulthood, the resources of tradition fuse with new inner resources to create something potentially new: a new person; and with this new person a new generation, and with that, a new era ⁶⁶).

Adoption of such a model for an investigation of Augustine's conversion would require, of course, some theoretical adjustment and empirical accommodation. After all, not only is the world of the fourth century quite different from that of the sixteenth, but also Erikson, for all his insistence that one's identity is the result of interaction between the individual and his social environment, remains firmly, though not slavishly, within the Freudian tradition with its narrow familial orientation and cultural devaluation. Thus, any psychohistorical inquiry into Augustine's life and career would have to incorporate other theoretical and empirical findings. The former are available in psychological studies on adult behavioral changes that, for example, have been popularized in Gail Sheehy's recent best-seller, *Passages* ⁶⁷); the latter in historical works on the society and culture of Late Antiquity, one of the foremost of which is Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo*. And yet such a line of inquiry

⁶⁶) *Ibid.*, 18-20.

⁶⁷) Gail SHEEHY, *Passages: Predictable Crises in Adult Life* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976).

promises to accomplish for Augustine and his age what Robert Bellah found most valuable about Erikson's biography of Luther (himself once an Augustinian monk): « Erikson also contributed to the broader problem of religious change by indicating that Luther's solution, once it was embodied in communicable symbolic form, could be appropriated by others in the same society that had analogous identity problems arising from social-historical matrices similar to Luther's own »⁶⁸).

LAWRENCE J. DALY

⁶⁸) Robert BELLAH, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York : Harper & Row, 1970) 13.