

CALVIN'S CONCEPT OF PREDESTINATION AND THE LANGUAGE OF DISPOSSESSION

In this article I deal with Calvin's concept of predestination from the viewpoint of perseverance and possession. Ever since the controversy between Augustine and Pelagius the focus of the debate on predestination has been mainly on problems related to the freedom of will or the lack of it. It is my purpose in this essay to bring to the surface a more archaic layer underlying more sophisticated arguments about the dependence or independence of the human faculties and the distinctions within divine grace, and that is the problem of possession. The apostle Paul, for one, has phrased predestination in terms of possession and it is traces of this notion that I try to discern in the most articulate defender of predestination, Calvin. For reasons of time and space I concentrate on Calvin, being unable to elaborate on the intricacies of the prehistory of predestination in its founding fathers, the apostle Paul and Augustine. Yet they do make their appearance, not as the main characters of my story but as illustrators – more often than not by way of contrast – of Calvin's stance. Apart from spatial economy, there is another reason for their relative absence. If, in my view, Calvin's doctrine of predestination can somehow be articulated, both Paul and Augustine are a much harder nut to crack. Theirs is a language and thought which is much more enigmatic and, in a sense, inaccessible than Calvin's. Dealing, then, with Calvin is, as far as I am concerned, only the beginning of a longer trajectory into the history of concepts such as free will, grace, perseverance, possession and predestination.

If, in his early works, Augustine, like an acrobat, has proven himself to be capable of intellectual and literary flexibility, as soon as predestination becomes the issue all he resorts to is the story of Adam's fall (as the improper use of the *posse peccare*) and God's grace (as the ultimate gift of the *non posse peccare/mori*). No attempt is made to trace back this story of bliss and damnation to the fragile fabric of signs covering the inner workings of the mind, God's mind no less than man's mind, that is, let alone that the problem of time, once so prominently and enigmatically present, would be appealed to in order to sharpen the contours of man's impossible fate. Here a touch of irony makes itself felt. Had not the great works on the human condition, be it the private fate of the sinner-believer in the *Confessions*, the fate of mankind in *De civitate dei* or the fate of the Trinity-man in *De trinitate*, been marked by the subtle configuration of time, plot and destiny? So subtle, indeed, that time was seen to destroy the

possibility of plot altogether forcing the searching mind to come up with more refined poetical alternatives if it wanted to tell the combined stories of man, mankind and its maker and redeemer in a proper way. All the more remarkable the story of predestination looks in the deceptive splendour of its simplicity. Here we have a story and a solid plot indeed: Adam's fall and redemption in the light of God's hidden judgement. But, for all its solidity, this is a story with a crack in it, a crack that is far from turning the narrative into a tragic one. Since it is impossible to connect the beginning to the end, the story cannot be told at all. It falls flat. As a result, knowing – or believing – what we will be in the embrace of eternity, 'we shall never be again as we were.' Does this not sound like redemption on the condition of another Fall? What then is left, in Augustine's concept of predestination, of the complex of time, plot and memory in which the end was underlying the beginning, 'hope or else despair... to be redeemed from fire by fire'?¹ For, unless we are able to look history in the face and keep its unfathomable darkness at bay, there is no point in looking ahead. At the same time it is crystal clear for Augustine that man is utterly incapable of doing just that, of dealing with the pastness of the past, of getting grip of a beginning. To disentangle this knot of the presence – and absence – of being and time had been Augustine's lifelong ambition and preoccupation: to reach out for the word that would constitute the integrity of time whether in the guise of behavioural continence, peace and vision of mind, the movements of the Trinity encompassing both divine and human memories, or the vicissitudes of the city of God preserving its identity, however hidden, throughout its toilsome journey on earth; an ambition, in other words, that aimed at integrating a solution into a question, a question into a solution, a future into a past, a past and future into a present. Given those antecedents of desire and of hope and despair, it seems legitimate to ask: how much of that obsessive attention does sound through in the repetitiveness of history's summary as the irresistible gift of destiny?

Augustine's superior grace as embodied by predestination seems to silence past voices by speaking for them thus recasting the polyphony of past performances into a monologue, a monody, or, rather, into a Word spoken once and for all. Yet there is a flaw in putting things this way. For grace abounding in Christ would seem to imply that in the course of time things have changed for the better and

¹ T.S. ELIOT, *Four Quartets* (Little Gidding IV), *Collected Poems* (London, 1936), p. 221.

that, from the human viewpoint at least – a posteriori, that is – the notion of history only makes sense if its nature of successiveness is being acknowledged. Adam's sin has in one way or another been overtaken by Christ's atonement and there is no denying that the former event is preceded by the latter. From the viewpoint of grace itself the picture looks different, however. There it is not only irresistible grace that blurs the boundaries between past, present and future – which would in a way be acceptable as the expression of God's supra-temporal decree. More problematically, the human response to irresistible grace would, by definition, also be contaminated by the radiation of superior grace revealing itself in its anthropological disguise of perseverance. In my view it is the nature of perseverance that is the crux of Augustine's so-called doctrine of predestination rather than the accompanying problems of free will and divine wilfulness. Or, to put it more precisely, the problems of free will and divine decree can only be properly addressed on the condition that they be embedded in perseverance, in a notion, that is, in which time and eternity meet. Any other option would end up in one Pelagian stance or another since it would hypostatise the human will into a set of a-temporal faculties to be used anytime and anywhere while remaining uncorrupted and incorruptible themselves. Augustine's problem, on the other hand, would seem to be that in order to maintain sustainability and durability, such perseverance would only be possible if being predestined would mean being possessed by the spirit of Christ to such a degree as to be replaced by him. And, although Augustine is less radical than the founding father of predestination, the apostle Paul, whose physical language of possession ('it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me' Gal 2:19-20) he – interestingly – shuns, there is no doubt that for him Christ has indeed become the all-absorbing centre of history. As James Wetzel puts it elegantly: 'The doctrine of predestination becomes, in essence, the claim that Christ's humanity is prior to Adam's, even though Jesus of Nazareth, like any descendant of Adam, is born into historical time and has a genealogy. In Jesus Christ, time and eternity have conjoined; for those who are his heirs, there is no longer a need to reckon the human incarnation a failure. When flesh and spirit war, as they seem inevitably to do in life, that is a birth pang rather than a death throe. Adam may have obscured the difference between living and dying by choosing flesh in the way in which he chose it. Who is in a position to

² James WETZEL, *Predestination, Pelagianism, and Foreknowledge in The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, eds. E. STUMP and N. KRETZMANN (Cambridge, 2001), p. 56.

throw stones? The one who could chose not to, and the result is that life is still before us' (56).² Yes, 'before us', but what about the past? 'The one discharge from sin and error/The only hope, or else despair....'³ Is the hope thus established really a hope in which future success is not alien to past failure and despair? In other words, can the person who perseveres be called historical, time-bound, created all in one piece? Has he ever known the 'unfamiliar name of love'?⁴ Apart from encompassing a future, does perseverance as the enactment of predestination have a (compatible) past? It is only after those questions have been answered, that the problem of priority and posteriority – such as Christ's priority over Adam – can be correctly assessed and the one and only question underlying all others be asked: is perseverance, 'the one discharge from sin and error,' sustainable as present?

What about Calvin? Does he solve the aporias we have detected in Augustine's concept of predestination and mend the cracks in the golden bowl of destiny? If we were to go by his own ambition to recreate a Biblical doctrine with the help of the one and only reliable interpreter in the field, a positive answer could be expected. Nothing is further from the truth, however. Although we as yet do not know how Augustine's stance accounts for man's past in the light of his future, so much is clear that all Calvin has to offer us is future as he makes abundantly clear in the following passage:

Although it is now sufficiently plain that God by his secret counsel chooses whom he will while he rejects others, his gratuitous election has only been partially explained until we come to the case of single individuals, to whom God not only offers salvation, but so assigns it, that the certainty of the result remains not dubious or suspended. These are considered as belonging to that one seed of which Paul makes mention. For although adoption was deposited in the hand of Abraham, yet as many of his posterity were cut off as rotten members, in order that election may stand and be effectual, it is necessary to ascend to the head in whom the heavenly Father has connected his elect with each other, and bound them to himself by an indissoluble tie. Thus in the adoption of the family of Abraham, God gave them a liberal display of favour which he has denied to others; but in the members of Christ there is a far more excellent display of grace, because those ingrafted into him as their head never fail to obtain salvation.

³ Eliot, Little Gidding.

⁴ Eliot, Little Gidding.

Hence Paul skilfully argues...that when God, after making a covenant of eternal life, invites any people to himself, a special mode of election is in part understood, so that he does not with promiscuous grace (*promiscua gratia*) effectually elect all of them. The words, "Jacob have I loved," refer to the whole progeny of the patriarch, which the prophet there opposes to the posterity of Esau. But there is nothing in this repugnant to the fact, that in the person of one man is set before us a specimen of election, which cannot fail of accomplishing its object (*ad metam suam perveniat*). It is not without cause Paul observes, that these are called a *remnant* (Romans. ix. 27; xi. 5); because experience shows that of the general body many fall away and are lost, so that often a small portion only remains. The reason why the general election of the people is not always firmly ratified, readily presents itself – viz. that on those with whom God makes the covenant, he does not immediately bestow the Spirit of regeneration, by whose power they persevere in the covenant even to the end. The external invitation [change = *mutatio*]⁵ without the internal efficacy of grace which would have the effect of retaining them, holds a kind of middle place (*medium quiddam*) between the rejection of the human race and the election of a small number of believers.⁶

Far from being innocence-driven, the future proliferates from a split – the external invitation as a *medium quiddam* between election and rejection – in the rhetorical *locus* of predestination;⁷ a split that itself cannot be part of the picture. Suppose it were part of the picture, then a third possibility would present itself in addition to the yes and no of predestination that would, of course, undermine the very *locus* of predestination itself. Yet the third possibility dominates the scene. For all his clarity of style, Calvin's is a muddled train of thought in this matter. On the one hand, the end game of divine predestination is situated in the mystical body of Christ: 'in the members of Christ the power of grace shines all the more brilliantly since, having being ingrafted in his head, they [the elect] never perish from salvation.'

⁵ There is a text-critical problem here; the Latin text has *mutatio* (change); the French text which has 'invitation' would seem to make more sense.

⁶ John CALVIN, *Institutio christianae religionis* (1559), book III in P. BARTH and G. NIESEL eds., *Johannis Calvini Opera Selecta*, vol. 4 (München, 21959), III, 21, 7; pp. 377-8. English translation: Henry Beveridge, transl., *Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, 1989), pp. 209-10.

⁷ Cf. For the emphasis on Calvin's work as a collection of *loci* and *disputationes* see R.A. MULLER, *The Unaccommodated Calvin; Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York, 2000).

Thus being tucked away inside the head of Christ – a more radical version of the Pauline image of Christ as the head and the faithful as the members of his body – the individual elect – or, taken as a collect body, the remnant elect are granted the gift of perseverance. Being possessed by someone stronger, and yet no different from the elect himself, there is no more room for hesitation ‘because God not only offers him salvation but grants it in such a way that the certitude of its effect can neither be in suspense nor in doubt.’ On the other hand, Calvin’s distinction between general and special election is far from clear. Whilst the individual elect is frozen as it were in the head of Christ, history and time abound with the vicissitudes that inhere the general election. As we have seen, grace being not promiscuous, general election can in turn become part of special election. What are we to think of perseverance when the distinction between the rejection of the human race and the election of the happy few may be drawn in God’s hidden wisdom but cannot be discerned in time and history, the latter rather being characterised by delay (*non protinus*)? How can this delay be reconciled with the suspense-less certitude so characteristic of the chosen one?

Contrary to appearances Calvin’s is not primarily a theology of the word. For, corresponding to possible delay is the spirit of future regeneration that, for its part, is based on the *medium quiddam*, the invitation/change between the rejection of the human race and the election of a tiny few. There is, however, reason to doubt the ability of that invitation to make itself heard because it is hard to see how it could bridge the gap between full-fledged election and rejection. As for that election proper, its capacity to arrogate voice can equally be doubted. For the rock-like certitude and suspenselessness of the individual elect is a matter of blind trust or utter despondency. About that trust songs and psalms can be sung and Scripture can be read time and again as a confirmation of God’s decrees and covenant, but the ‘blindness’ of that trust, the state of possession in Christ’s head, cannot be articulated, because its factuality has no relation whatsoever to any longing for it. In that respect later pietistic, mainly Lutheran expressions of desire (*Ich will bei meinem Jesu bleiben*) are both alien to Calvin’s thought and, perhaps, at the same time to be seen as an attempt to get out of the web of its aporetic intricacies. Thus the *medium quiddam* as external invitation – not itself being part of predestination and perseverance proper – is mirrored by an ‘experience’ of predestination that is equally external to its execution. And execution – or, in more religious terms, gift – is what predestination and perseverance are about rather than being concerned with a pos-

sible quest for their appropriation. Therefore, if modern interpreters such as Jürgen Moltmann and Heiko Oberman have emphasised the effect of predestination in real life – on the Calvinist refugees, for instance – as the hope (Moltmann) and the consolation (Oberman) derived from its being given as a promise come true over and against the vicissitudes of history, they hit the nail on perseverance's head.⁸ This trust is indeed built on the fact that one's fate is insured, so to speak, with an all-powerful divinity and that, if need be, this insurance can be taken out. However, this hope and consolation are quite unlike Augustine pawning his voice in his outcry *da quod iubes, iube quod vis*. Augustine, for his part, refrains from renouncing the ownership of that voice altogether. As a consequence, he avoids being silenced down by divine force. He rather keeps claiming its very power. Conversely, the voice of Calvin's elect, however biblical, is mute despite the 'wordiness' of their faith and trust. Here the *da quod iubes* is separated from, or rather absorbed by, the *iube quod vis*. True, the vocation and invitation persist even in the face of so many once chosen falling out of grace. Whilst Ismael, Esau and countless others (up to the majority of the people of Israel – *totus fere Israel* –) have decided to opt out of their privileged status and their apostasy is proclaimed in a thunderous voice that mocks their so-called freedom of choice: 'Jacob I have loved and Esau I have hated', the whisper of perseverance can still be heard: 'In Isaac the seed was called; the same vocation has persisted in Jacob/*eadem vocatio in Jacob duravit*.' So it seems, at least. And, admittedly, predestination and perseverance are about sustainability and duration. It is hard to see, however, how this persistent vocation can ever reach out to 'the external invitation without the internal efficacy of grace which would have the effect of retaining them (*quae ad eos retinendos valida esse*),' holding 'a kind of middle place (*medium quiddam*) between the rejection of the human race and the election of a small number of believers.' How can the elect, safe forever inside the head of Christ, like being part and parcel of the innermost layer of a Russian doll, make himself heard to the other voice, the 'humanistic' one counselling moderation, not yet in the possession of the efficient grace that would validate its sustainability? Does not the one voice of Jacob the elect kill out the other one of delay and hesitancy (the *non protinus*)? Is not the one as much a *conditio sine qua non* for the shaping of perseverance as the

⁸ J. MOLTSMANN, *Prädestination und Perseveranz, Geschichte und Bedeutung der reformierten Lehre "de perseverantia sanctorum"* (Neukirchen, 1961), and H.A. OBERMAN, *De erfenis van Calvijn; grootheid en grenzen* (Kampen 1988).

other? As far as Calvin is concerned, it does not seem so since it is difficult to see how perseverance proper could be subject to delay and possible failure (of interior grace to materialise). Yet both are 'vocations' the speaking of which is the exclusive privilege of their one and only 'possessor'. Being called is, sooner or later, being possessed. Could that nucleus – the inner core of the Russian doll – ever be widened into a more general invitation without losing voice? Can the 'later' subsist without being devoured on the spot by the 'sooner'? Conversely, is not humanism of a kind (a *medium quiddam*) a prerequisite for speaking at all? In its attempt to convey to the reader the overall picture of election and rejection, the auctorial voice of the *Institutes*, for one, is bound to be 'humanistic'. To speak *as* an elect is not the same as speaking *about* an elect, or, for that matter, about the invitation to become one. Or do the two exclude one another to the effect of general muteness? In that case, the Calvinist refugees would understandably draw consolation from their being elect. In them the *vocatio duravit*. As a result, the story of their lives is being rewritten, or, rather, their lives are being reshaped so as to be resistant to deflection and hesitation. The price they pay, however, is their becoming strangers to their own destiny. That destiny itself is firm like a rock. Yet it has no name (other than being buried in Christ). There is, in other words, no storyline to be detected in the life of predestination and perseverance. On the contrary, 'nameable' life as spread out in time and history is catapulted out of this cocoon into the futurology of proliferation. Just as Christ himself in Calvin's famous *extra-calvinisticum* is in heaven whilst his presence on earth is spiritual – and yet, whether in heaven or on earth, is none else than the undivided Christ – so the spirit of regeneration is driven forward by the identity of the elect (the remnant as the hard core of the chosen who do not drop out but stay where they are and persevere till the end) as possessed by the durability and sustainability of their lives in Christ. Insofar as they really exist, they are indeed *apud deum*. But what about their voice? *Vocatio duravit*: does that not sound like a dream of someone who, like Benedict of Nursia, has a nocturnal vision in which, watching from a tower window, he sees the world beneath him?⁹ To adapt this vision's to Calvin's elect we should add: including the entirety of his own life. Yet, although shouting to the point of hoarseness, he cannot make himself heard and fails to connect with the scene beneath him. From a different point of view – the same for

⁹ Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, ed. A. DE VOGÜÉ, Sources Chrétiennes 260, book II, c. 35. p. 240.

Calvin, that is – the person enwrapped in the scene of perseverance beneath attempts to cry out to his beholder who happens to be none other than his very own self. *Abyssus vocat abyssum*: 'the abyss calls upon the abyss.' But inside the very *vocatio*, inside the gift of destiny, that is, a voice is smothered that is forever struggling to tell how, 'innocence-driven', it came there, and to recount the horrors of the past. Being on the brink of doing so, that voice is folded in the wings of the dove ascending. Unlike the bird in Benedict's nocturnal vision which, disguised as the soul of a befriended bishop, passes by the window on its way from the corruptible body to the freedom of heavenly joy, the dove of Calvinist predestination and perseverance, does not let go but closes in on its prey just to catch it and carry it upward.

The idea that, while still suffering from the tribulations of time, one's life in its accomplished shape is stored away in heaven, *apud deum*, has the potential of sheer beauty. Such would indeed be the presence of perseverance as a source of hope and consolation. And in a sense the aesthetics of Calvinism such as the Weberian picture of *vocatio* evoking the hard working merchant who accumulates his earthly capital instead of spending it, in view of the fact that his real capital is stored in a celestial bank, could be read along those lines. Yet not all is well. In this very image of the Weberian Calvinist – which in my view has a point, regardless of the correctness of the technicalities involved – the presence of perseverance is overlaid by another aspect of time, the future. That future in turn looks decidedly different from the longing of the medieval pilgrim on his way to the earthly or heavenly Jerusalem: '*de longinquo te saluto*/from afar I salute you' or Abelard's '*O quanta qualia, sunt illa sabbata*/O, how great and how good will those Sabbaths be'. Nor can it be put on a par with a quintessentially Protestant classic such as *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In either case, medieval or Bunyan – like devotion – desire expresses itself in stories being told – up to stories to kill time as in the *Canterbury Tales* – or images being pictured from the sloth of despond to the knocking on the door of the heavenly castle. As far as Calvinist orthodoxy or Puritanism is concerned, all it has been capable of is to repeat the Calvinist *loci* in the very words of Calvin himself. On the one hand this linguistic hold of Calvin over his followers can be seen as proof of the extraordinary power of his language which, in its clarity and scarcity, is as beautiful and empty as a Saenredam church. On the other hand, we have evidence here that the *locus*-nature of Calvin's writings is such as to prevent extension, reflection and elaboration in other terms than those of the *locus* itself. Thus the harsh definition of predestination as God's decree with regard to

election and rejection strikes back, so to speak, and squeezes any possible future back into the presence of hard core predestination and perseverance. Or, more precisely, even Calvin's attempt itself at crawling out of his self-fabricated *locus* in order to fill in the picture of predestination (general election as a broadening of special election, the invitation and the *non protinus*) turns out to be appearance rather than reality. All it achieves is to buy time, or, to stick to the financial imagery, to borrow time, which, in the end, reveals itself as evaporating into thin air when once more reduced to, and overtaken by, the factuality of God's eternal decree.

Before having yet another go at the passage culminating in the *medium quiddam* of the humanistic voice – which, given the density and aporetic nature of the text would be quite tempting yet little promising and could be continued *ad infinitum* –, we should now turn to the question we raised before embarking on our textual soundings: where, if anywhere, can we trace the vivifying s/Spirit of the writer/reader/faithful destined to be *apud deum*? What is its *locus*? In terms of narrativity – as the general structuring of a text – this questions boils down to asking whether a plot can be found in Calvin's text. Spirit and plot, then, or, rather, letter or death, that is the question.

So much has become clear from the above analysis: on closer inspection a variety of images can be detected within the narrow space of the *locus* of predestination that vie for a place: the course of history in which the divine invitation regarding general election is sent out, the uncertainty, from the human viewpoint at least, of what the fate of individuals will be over the years, the promise of the spirit of regeneration and underlying it all the hard core information of the *locus* that some are preordained to eternal life and others to eternal damnation. What I have tried to do so far is somehow to read the picture; unsuccessfully so since the *locus* (eternal election and eternal rejection) remains a dead letter which may cause all sorts of turbulence by drawing out variations on the basic theme but fails to provide the reader/user with a coherent narrative. But why use narrative and plot when, technically speaking, the discourse of *loci*, disputation and argumentation we deal with is of an entirely different order?

In my view we face the crux of the problem here, and unless we crack this nut as it appears in Calvin's work, we will have no access to the meaning of predestination. First and foremost, Calvin's prose (in the *Institutes*) is to be seen as *Gebrauchsprosa*, as a collection of loci which can be used or applied 'at random' for teaching and preaching. Regardless of the possible pietistic strands that, according to Muller, are part and parcel, of that prose, the topics are primarily disjoint, that

being the condition on which they can be meaningfully used as *loci*. In that respect later, more dogmatic and systematic efforts to make much of the organisational structure of the *Institutes* are, as Muller rightly argues, indeed to be dismissed as anachronistic.¹⁰ Now, whilst the *locus* (of predestination, for instance), can in a sense be considered a dead body, a *nature morte*, that is to be vivified by the voice of the Word or the Spirit, it is precisely the transition from the one state to the other that would seem so problematic. Caught in Calvin's rhetorical embrace of moderation (not knowing too much, not knowing too little about God's *arcana*), the Word and Spirit themselves appear somehow to be driven out insofar as they are no intrinsic part of the *locus*. Perhaps they figure more freely in the performative acts of preaching and praying, but even there the problem of their being encapsulated in the rhetoric of *loci* cannot be avoided. No language, however powerful, can conceal itself from Calvin's rhetorical touch that imbues it with moderation and some sort of literalness. Yet at the same time we have seen how the content of a *locus* such as 'predestination' can be at once so problematic and dynamic that, almost violently, it breaks out of its rhetorical constraints (the message of eternal life or eternal damnation) proliferating into the breadth of time and history, its ever receding horizon being the spirit of future regeneration. To assess the fact that, appearances notwithstanding, the *loci* are not there just for the taking, requires some sort of plot, some way of telling what the persevering reader 'experiences' beyond the catechetical – short-lived – mode of authority-based reception.

Now, in order to be able to underpin the perseverance of the reader with a sustained plot, however hypothetical, I focus on the relationship between the constraints of rhetoric (the *locus*) and that which is (possibly) being constrained. Doing so, I proceed by way of circumlocution. One of the reasons for this approach is my wish to avoid problems concerning the semantics of *loci* becoming mixed up with the muddled discussion resulting from the discovery of 'pietistic strains' in Calvin's writings whose status either as present in the text itself or in the mind of the reader, or somewhere in between, is far from clear. The more urgent question presenting itself does not so much concern the 'pietistic strains' as rather the semantic force inside the rhetorical *locus*. To bring out the intertwined presence of those two features, force and form, I apply the more archaic model of Pauline language to Calvin's text, whose force is expected to bring to the surface 'the language of possession and immediacy.'

¹⁰ Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, p. 161.

For Calvin the head of Christ is the one and only place in which there is a unity of place and time since it lodges those who can no longer fall from grace. This divine *caput* containing those who have persevered, or, what comes down to the same, those who will persevere to the end can be called a chronotope (as coined by Bakhtin), time and place being blended into one. Now, perhaps because of its familiarity, we are used to take this imagery for granted, to take it, quite flatly, for a fact in the 'topological' sense of the word. However, as we have seen already, dense though this chronotope may be, underlying it is a variety of lines being drawn. In other words, both time and spaciousness are so restless within the image as to break it open. Christ turned out to be present 'extra-calvinistically' – in more than one place, and yet in one place – in a more complicated way than just being in heaven embracing his elect. The elect, in their turn, proved to live a kind of a double life insofar as, if really elect, they were incapable of falling out of grace. Yet how could one tell them apart from those, within the realm of general election, faced with delay, those 'on which the spirit of regeneration is not immediately bestowed that would give them the power to persevere in the covenant to the end'?

Realising that in dealing with the *locus*-nature of Calvin's predestination we have a special problem at our hands in establishing spirit and plot, the least we can say is that examples can be given in which destiny – as the contraction of the human condition inside divine holiness – is traced in its dramatic course. On a slightly wild note (in particular in view of the introduction as an extra of the flying soul of the befriended bishop of Capua) the vision of Benedict quoted above is, for instance, furnished with spatial and temporal unity. For so much is clear that the spatial and temporal extension unfolding in the vision makes sense as it can be said meaningfully to contract into the chronotope of the world as observed in its entirety. In that respect, the story (being told by Benedict's biographer, Gregory the Great) has plot and spirit. For all the differences, it breathes an air of familiarity and intimacy.

Why is it that, apart from the flattening down of potential drama as a result of the constraints imposed by the *locus*, we are inclined to take a communication such as the one that the elect are safely in the head of Christ (*capiti suo insiti numquam a salute excidunt*) for a fact without even asking ourselves what this concise presence means and how much is left intact of the identity of the inhabitants? In other words, why is it that this state of affairs does not evoke in the reader an even more vivid sense of drama than the one conveyed by the

'contractions' of Benedict? The answer seems simple. It is our over-familiarity with the language of Paul, which, reproduced, often to the letter, by Augustine, Calvin, Jansenius, Pascal and others, prevents us from appreciating it in its revolutionary freshness. Are we able at all to wonder what exactly it means to be in (the head of) Christ without being able to fall out of it? How did our elect come there in the first place and how long did it take them?

In a recent book, *The Religion of the Apostle Paul*,¹¹ the New Testament scholar John Ashton has sprung a *coup de foudre* on his discipline by bluntly picturing Paul as a shaman. To begin with his spectacular conversion on the Damascus road, Paul's career as an apostle was further determined by this event as well as by the spiritual energy derived from it. If we consider spiritual flexibility in time and space accompanied by extraordinary powers (such as exorcism) that correspond to the blurring of the constraints of time and space to be one of the main features of shamanism, the Pauline texts with a ring of mysticism and possession prove to be charged with a power that was decidedly lacking in later, more metaphorical interpretations. Let us reread, for instance, the text from the Letter to the Galatians about the fusing of identities in Christ, this time quoting it in full:

For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified along with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2: 19-20).

As Ashton notes, it is once again over-familiarity that 'dulls' the crudity and cruelty implied in the picture of crucifixion which, aestheticised throughout the ages, is looked at in a metaphorical rather than in a natural sense. 'Here if anywhere we are in what Hugh Kenner calls "the whispering forest of traditional poetry, where the very words to which millions of minds respond have helped to form the minds that respond to them."' ¹² However, prior to metaphors is the realism of Paul's language whose effect on the reader is, or should be, all the more unsettling in view of the fact that the focus of his preaching is on resurrection rather on the crucifixion. The latter event, could not, according to Ashton, fail to evoke in Paul's contemporaries 'the sheer horror of this barbarous form of execution.' But the weak option of metaphorical language having been ruled out, why did Paul

¹¹ John ASHTON, *The Religion of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, 2000).

¹² Ashton, *The Religion*, p. 231; Hugh KENNER, *The Pound Ezra* (London, 1972), p. 521.

express his new identity in Christ in terms of being crucified along with his 'possessor'? The answer, Ashton asserts, is given by 'shamanism':

It is to be found, I suggest, in his actual experience of an agonizing death that preceded a new kind of life. This is in fact what Paul says (!); but the clue to understanding what he says, if we could only see it, comes from a very dissimilar religious tradition, that of shamanism. In asserting that he died to the law and was crucified with Christ, Paul is referring to the anguished struggle that preceded the blinding revelation of his call. The event that the two verbs allude to is the traumatic experience that led up to his decision to abandon the law; the indispensable precondition of the call itself, and also its negative or observe side. The abandonment of the law is now seen as a death to the law. In shamanistic terms it was the victorious outcome of a terrible struggle. Sin, like a malign demon, had seized on the law as an instrument with which to keep Paul in subjection. Paul had just had a vision of the Crucified and Risen Christ. It was natural for him to describe his own terrifying experience in terms of the recalled vision. Whatever it was that had previously been at the centre of his life, the new centre is Christ. Looking back on his pre-Christian past, he generally sees it to have been dominated by the law. Only in Romans 7, where he describes the struggle itself, does he see the temptation to cling to the law as the consequence of the occupancy of Sin. From now on, though, it is Christ, not Sin, who lives in him. How are we to make sense of this extraordinary statement? No rational human being can think of himself as being occupied by another. Whatever name we give to Paul's conviction, it unquestionably depends on his awareness that Christ is no longer an ordinary human being but a spirit' (232-3).

I have quoted this passage in full in order to highlight the strand of sheer archaic power in a text whose strength, in the course of history, has been considerably toned down. Apart from the possible rights or wrongs of Ashton's rapprochement between Paul and shamanism, what he succeeds in bringing to the fore is the intensity and the 'natural', literal status of a statement ('It is no longer I...') prior to its being contaminated by a more distant way of reading. What we have here is a man really dead to the law and really possessed by the spirit of Christ. More importantly, this very possession turns out to contain a story – as a combination of spirit and plot –, a story of conversion as possession whose antecedents and after-match are wiped out in their shape of successive events by the fiery intensity of vision. Struck with blindness on the road to Damascus Paul's has become a vertical way of life: dead to the law, alive in Christ, and yet this very verticality abounds with voices. Voices about the struggle in one's members (Romans 7), the afflictions of life under the gospel, the sighing and suffering of creation longing for the children of God to be revealed, the rejection of Israel, the trust that 'all Israel will be saved.'

Those voices are bound to remain mute, however, as long as they are spoken by the 'letter that killeth'. Conversely, they come alive when uttered by the 'spirit that vivifies'. 'Shamanistically' speaking, that means that words only make sense if spoken *apud deum*. For his part, Paul makes it abundantly clear what speaking *apud deum* means: living and speaking beyond the constraints of time, place and identity. Yet, rather than being dispersed and scattered high up in the air, living in the spirit means a solution being integrated into a question, a past into a future, a future into a present. It means being compressed to the point of being possessed as a precondition for telling the story and preaching the gospel to the end of the earth.

An additional advantage of Ashton's 'shamanist' approach is that it offers us a clearer view of the spatial and temporal co-ordinates of Paul's thought. Thus the famous passage about 'a thorn given me...to buffet me, to prevent me from being raised too high' (2 Corinthians 12:1-10) fits in with Paul's 'being crucified with Christ'. Once more we have a story governed by the combination of spirit and plot. As for plot, Paul tells, within the frame of boasting of visions and revelations, the story of 'a man in Christ, fourteen year ago, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows, snatched up, this man as far as the third heaven. And I know that this man – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – was snatched up into Paradise and he heard things ineffable that humans cannot utter.' If we leave aside the intricate problems of interpretation (the combination of boasting of frailty and the reaching/not reaching of the third heaven), we face, Ashton argues, once again the account of someone dying and rising with Christ as based on a visionary experience (in Ashton's view: the experience on the Damascus road). So, as for spirit, we once more see plot (the telling of a story including life's turmoil, and, more in particular, the suffering and the being frail for the sake of Christ), being condensed to spirit. It is this spiritual nature of Paul's story (and boasting in adversities) that lends authority to his preaching. 'For if I choose to boast I will not be without sense, for I shall be telling the truth. But I refrain lest anyone reckon in my regard something beyond what he sees in me or hears from me.' So, really to understand the preacher the audience should in a sense reverse the message as far as its width is concerned. The stories – the preaching of the gospel in ever widening circles – remain the same. But, when listening to Paul one has to weigh his speech for what it is worth and reduce it to the source it springs from. Underlying its universalism is a one-time condensation into the being in Christ.

Finally, we can see how the spatial co-ordinates of this power-centred blend of spirit and plot affect the course of history at large. It is not only the conflicting members in one's own body and mind ('who will deliver me from this body of death?') nor the adversities suffered in preaching the gospel while extending its dimensions in space to the most remote corners of the earth, but rather the vertical line that intersects (with) the horizontal one and subsumes the vicissitudes of life and history. Thus even Paul's grand design of history in Romans 9-11 which bases the redemption of the gentiles on the rejection of Israel, breaks down, in a sense, when stumbling on an insight that turns out to be deeper and more forceful than the pro's and cons, the yes and no of the divine plan with his people so as to overturn previous deliberations: 'I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved as it is written....' (Romans 11:25-26). Right at the end, then, of what has become known as the charter of predestination (Romans 9-11) – 'so then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills' –, a new element is introduced by means of a 'category change' one that 'transcends the period of human choice and focuses on the boundless mercy of God.'¹³ How this prospect of supreme reconciliation can be squared with Paul's exhortation to his audience to accept the gospel and strive for perfection with the risk of eternal damnation in case of refusal and negligence, or of eternal damnation as a result of God's decree, is hard to see. Yet, following E. P. Sanders, Ashton counsels acceptance of the possibility of both options being true at the same time, both the life of faith as an athletic contest and the 'image of God as the omnipotent king of creation: he created the world and he will save all that he created,'; or, as Sanders puts it: 'It [all that God created being saved] is this image which takes control in the closing verses of Romans 11.' Once more bringing his 'shamanistic' reading of Paul into action, Ashton adds an interesting reminder to this solution. 'It is less a matter of thought, even lateral thought [i.e., the category change as proposed by Sanders], than of an oracular insight, one that reverses, or rather complements, the insight with which Paul began. This too came to him as a sudden revelation' (197).

One of the merits of Ashton's approach towards Paul is to have pointed to a possible source of the extraordinary strength of his

¹³ E. P. SANDERS, *Paul*, Oxford Past Masters Series (Oxford, 1991), pp. 125-7; quoted by Ashton, *The Religion*, p.196.

writings. The question that remains to be answered is whether ultimately the origin of this strength is to be found outside the text or in the very textuality itself. In case we opt in favour of the latter possibility – Ashton himself, by emphasising the opposition between religion (shamanism: experience-bound) and theology (discourse-bound) seems to diminish a bit the chances of the text itself being ‘shamanistic’ – we would have at least one explanation of the power of Paul’s language. There is indeed a Dostoevsky-like drive in it which makes the effect of rhetorical refinement such as the discussion of the law in Romans 7 all the more magical, establishing distinctions and clear-cut arguments and blurring them at the same time. Those distinctions are there all right and so are the metaphors and the category changes. What governs it all, however, is possession, the being dead for the law, crucified and risen with Christ. Being possessed in Paul’s case means that there is no observer allowed into this enclosure. Unlike Benedict watching the entire world beneath him and his biographer, Gregory the Great telling the story (*sicut ipse narravit*) and unlike many visionaries whose visions, despite claims to the contrary, are bent on the expansive aspects of communication, Paul is his own, that is Christ’s, man. Whilst the accounts of great mystics such Teresa of Avila and Mechtilde of Magdeburg replete with plot as the narration of a succession of events including the possibility of *peripeteia* (‘after a long period of feeling elated and/or despondent, a sudden change took place and I was then and there carried away...’ etc.), Paul’s story is different. Here the reader is not ‘voyeuristically’ invited to observe or, somehow, to participate. The language of occupancy just does not allow room for being handled in such a way. Plot is absorbed by spirit – as if struck by blindness – and together they represent a seamless blend of vitality and drama. Small wonder that the one and only conclusion Paul draws from his freshly established identity and from his having heard ‘things ineffable that humans cannot utter’ is the arrogation of voice as the *authority* to preach the gospel: ‘Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God...’ (Romans 1:1).

After this excursus on Paul, let us have a final go at Calvin. Despite the fact that Paul as processed through Augustine is the progenitor of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination, the difference between the two is striking. Whilst in some way or another Paul being in Christ as crucified, dead and resurrected is the driving force behind his preaching, Calvin is notoriously reticent with regard to any involvement in his own language sticking as he does to the (Kantian) principle: *de nobis ipsis silemus*. That does not mean, though, that a more

personal commitment such as Luther's outspokenness on this issue or, for that matter, the later, pietistic language of adherence and confirmation to Christ would be more to the Paulinian point. Nor does it mean that Calvin's is a less powerful concept of authority.

So much is for sure: Calvin is most positively not a shaman. Nowhere do we find him, like Paul, exercising his powers on the basis of the claim that he himself is or has been in Christ. Yet the elect are. Who then are the elect and what language do they speak: the language of possession? On the contrary. Those who '*capiti suo insiti numquam a salute excidunt*/who placed in his head never fall from salvation' have no name. They are mute. Unlike Paul, they are not dead, crucified and risen with Christ and have, therefore, no story to tell, not even the unnameable story of how they were lifted up into the head of Christ after being struck blind by vision. Not surprisingly, as we have noted above, experiential Calvinism has sought to bend the co-ordinates of space and time from possession and perseverance as vertical moments up in eternity's heaven into the more horizontal dimensions of the believer's existence on earth. That believer could be seen probing his life for possible traces of the Spirit as ever so many testimonies to his being elect, pondering the latter possibility as much as the one of 'ineffectual calling'. And if, as Muller and others would argue, this is not a faithful interpretation of Calvin's thought, the Weberian, more activist image of the hard working, over-confident Calvinist, shows an equally 'bent' shape of the co-ordinates of space and time in which the gift of destiny and perseverance in its temporal appearance is equally hard to pinpoint. On the other hand, one of the few attempts to present Calvinist doctrine as the subject matter of a real story, James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, is, significantly, phrased in terms of possession. Since being elect, in view of what I have called its muteness, cannot be related to real life, a ghost story is all that there is left. Possessed by a *Doppelgänger* who, *sub forma boni*, manifests himself as an angel of light but turns out to represent the prince of darkness, the story's hero elect becomes thinner and thinner. He indeed turns into his own phantom. Exiled from the community of human mortals, he ultimately evaporates altogether. Of course, Hogg's 'memoir', whatever its real intents, can be dismissed as a distortion of Calvin's thought, but, then, can one read Calvin and escape such a verdict?

After so many attempts to penetrate the ever-eluding harshness of Calvin's predestination, it is time finally to take the measure of the cracks and splits we noted in his picture of predestination. By way of summary and conclusion the following can be said. In the end, the

humanistic voice of the *medium quiddam* as the calling between 'rejection of the human race and the election of a small number of believers,' whose indeterminate presence turned out to be at the root of hesitancy and proliferation (into the spirit of future regeneration) reflects dispossession rather than possession. For all its determinacy and steadiness Calvin's is a language of hesitancy, not the hesitancy *post festum*, spreading into the life and times of the Calvinist faithful but, rather, in the heart of predestination itself. Unlike Paul who saw himself forcefully identified with his own destiny, Calvin remains an onlooker at his own fate. Yet there is possession in the air: the elect as they are preserved and persevering safely in the head of Christ. That story can, however, only be told as the drama of dispossession. The solid rock of predestination reveals cracks ever increasing or diminishing proportionate to the proximity or distance of the observer. Here the ultimate paradox of the gift of destiny and perseverance reveals itself: to acquire voice it has to be close by, seamlessly, in fact; in terms of presence, that means that, in order fully to enjoy that gift, one has to be in the head of Christ. Seen from afar, however, its contours become remoter and remoter, the appropriating voice weaker and weaker. Ultimately, that voice can no longer make itself heard except in terms of dispossession. But, as we know, the Calvinist language of calling, vocation and invitation does not become less articulate for all that; nor does the authority of appropriation. In fact, the practice of Calvinist language reverses this situation of increasing weakness: the further away the gift of predestination, the louder the voice. Only a shaman could solve this paradox of the simultaneity of possession and dispossession. Calvin's shaman is in heaven though and so is the authentic voice of his elect since their destiny is pawned in Christ. For all the loudness of preaching, praying and arguing, that voice cannot be restored in its integrity *apud deum* here and now. No happy ending here in which the voices of past and present can be heard, no past to be made up for, no plot unfolding but a letter that, without losing any of its constraints, proves miraculously to be nothing but future and spirit.

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