

Paul Rorem. *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. 267 pages + xiii, bibliographical references and index.

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The two most influential Christian theologians from the first Christian millennium could not have presented themselves more differently. In our antiquity, we had not yet constructed ourselves so independently of our world as we have in our modernity. Thus, the opposed *personae* of Augustine and of the author we call the pseudo-Dionysius were altogether appropriate to what they knew and loved and taught. Their integration of personality and work was so total that the differences in their self-representations have remained effective up to the present.

Of Augustine of Hippo, we know more than of any figure from antiquity. He willed it so, having exhibited the process of his conversion in his *Confessions* and having written prodigiously after his baptism as the occasions of his Christian life moved him. His transformation of the Neoplatonic spiritual hypostases to provide the *intellectus* of the Christian Trinity and his giving a common form to the structures of the human self and of the First Principle, so understood, lie at the origin of the modern western self. One may say, then, that St. Augustine deserves the colossal edifice of piety and science which the west has devoted and continues to devote to him. The suspicion, not to say loathing, with which he is regarded by Eastern Christians is equally apt.

The Dionysius, who followed St. Paul in teaching the Unknown God, has succeeded in hiding himself behind the mask of Paul's convert on the Areopagus. We are agreed about little beyond the facts that he was not that convert, that he lived in the sixth rather than in the first century and in the Near East, that he wrote the Greek *corpus* we have - though probably not the other works to which he lays claim in it - and that he had direct access to the teaching of the pagan Neoplatonist Proclus. Because he has been the preeminent guide of those who seek to lose the self in mystical union with the Unknown, his successful self-immolation, and even the western neglect of him since modern western scholarship exposed his cover without unmasking the person behind, were fitting. The Protestant Reformation, its Catholic complement and modern scholarship have magnified Augustine to the detriment of the pseudo-Dionysius. Our recent neglect may have been proper to the person of Dionysius. Useful for ourselves it was not. His secret influence is all-pervasive in Eastern and Western Christendom. This explains why Paul Rorem's latest book is both so useful and so indispensably welcome, though it is only a beginning which we must hope will soon be superseded.

Professor Rorem cannot and need not compensate single handedly for the vast institutional investments in Augustinian studies. Yet, though still a young scholar, he has made substantial contributions towards repairing our neglect. It is

hopeful that the ecclesiastical tradition from which he springs, has been, apart from the Calvinist, the least sympathetic to the doctrine of St. Dionysius. While still a pastor, Paul Rorem published *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols Within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* (1984). While he taught church history at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, he collaborated in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works, The Classics of Western Spirituality* (1987). He has just been appointed to the Benjamin B. Warfield Chair of Ecclesiastical History at the Princeton Theological Seminary. In a helpful "Afterword: On the Question of Influence in the Middle Ages", the author promises us studies on the Greek *Scholion* and on the Carolingian translators and commentators. His own work in progress reminds us that, unlike Augustine, Dionysius has eastern and western traditions. In effect, Professor Rorem exhibits and proposes for collaborators the enormous work to be done on just one period of Dionysian influence. He is now the leading scholar of pseudo-Dionysius in the English-speaking world and happily has a gift for coordinating his work with that of others.

This present work depends, perhaps unfortunately, on his earlier books and anticipates his next. It attempts, as its title indicates, two quite different things, at two different levels.

The "commentary on the texts", is dependent on the English translation and notes in the 1987 volume, and is useful only for uninitiated students working with that volume. The severe limitation imposed by the incompleteness of the references there becomes a problem for this commentary, especially as critical editions more adequately annotated are appearing. As his first book indicates, Professor Rorem examines Dionysius from the perspective of a theologian; indeed, the author does not altogether escape the limitations of his Lutheran tradition. This perspective has benefitted us in bringing out the ways in which Dionysius was a biblical theologian. But, biblical and philosophical theology were united in the pseudo-Dionysius, and this unification belongs to the character of the Neoplatonic philosophical theology he continues and transmits. Those who read the work of European scholars like Salvatore Lilla, for example, will miss in Professor Rorem's work their attention to this continuity. Some danger exists that contemporary scholarship may add to the false identities foisted on the hidden author of the *corpus*, if a biblical theologian constructed in North America assumes a *persona* distinct from the Christian Neoplatonist of European scholars.

An American Dionysian tradition is certainly being constructed: the questions of interpretation implicit in the 1987 translation and in Rorem's first book are not reopened in this volume. However, while little new or striking will be found in the commentary, this is the only English introduction to the reading of these obscurely written texts and Paul Rorem's use of the multilingual commentary now extant is judicious and extensive. It will be welcomed by those to whom it is suited.

The "introduction to their influence" is, in contrast, the most up-to-date and most extensive treatment of the pseudo-Dionysian traditions now available and is indispensable for the international scholarly community. Happily, the

bibliographical indications reveal how much has been accomplished since we got over both our moralistic and mistaken disdain for our subject's fraud as well as our preoccupation with trying to unmask him. Surrender on these fronts has enabled us to study his thought and its gigantic influence again. This "introduction" reveals both how much is being done and how much must be done. Our author treats only the medieval period and is explicit about the enormous gaps in our knowledge even here. There is nothing, however, about the modern influence: nothing, for example, about Dionysius' role in the Platonic humanism of Renaissance Florence or England, in the attachment to hierarchy in Anglicanism established against the Puritans, in French Counter-Reformation spirituality or in its defence of a different ecclesiastical hierarchy against another Calvinism, in German Idealism, or in the contemporary attempt to construct theology beyond ontology. Yet the Christian Platonism of each of these worlds was created by opposing, balancing, and harmonizing Augustine and Dionysius. Indeed, the difference between medieval and modern Christianity is arguably a result of the conquest of Dionysian unknowing by Augustinian self-knowledge. Can we understand how the two were related in one period without understanding how they combined in the other?

The strengths of the book, as well as its weaknesses, stem from the combination of its two aspects: commentary on the texts and introduction to the influence. On the one side, the two elements are carried out at very different levels and the second is woefully incomplete. On the other, its most important accomplishment results from its comparison between the text of the pseudo-Dionysius and what the western Middle Ages, primarily formed by the *persona* and thought of his great antipode, Augustine, read into it. Christ, love and a Latin view of ecclesiastical hierarchy were all read into a text which possessed a complete logic without them, and even opposed to them. Yet these are only the most striking examples, and not perhaps the most important. The most important very likely derives from the way Dionysius was drawn into the development of western theological ontology.

From such study of Dionysius, we may understand both what greatly opposed sources the west has balanced and assimilated and also to which realities, as unthinkable, we have been blind and remain blind. Can we imagine the Christian assent as a dialectic of knowing and unknowing toward an unknowable God without being, or deifying union which is neither by love nor by concentration on Christ, or final beatitude which does not fully reconstitute the self? Are not Occidental Christians too Augustinian even to imagine such things? Yet western Christianity was constructed by assimilating these elements and the story is not half told. When we have the full history, we shall know better the power and the limits of the self we have constructed.

Of course, the relation was reciprocal: Dionysius also transformed those medievals who read him. Nor was this accomplished simply by supplying gaps in their world: concepts as fundamental as hierarchy and supernatural, realities as preoccupying as the angelic hierarchy, figures as dominating as the ecclesiastical

hierarchy who is the sole mediating link between the earthly and the heavenly realms. These, and other contributions to the western tradition, with essential and not often noticed modifications and precisions, are treated in this rich book. But, more important than any of them was the role the Dionysian *corpus* played in systematizing western theology and, thus, western thinking generally. Here, during the Middle Ages, Dionysius both supplanted Augustine and supplied what his antipode in the occidental theological cosmos could not.

Dionysius' great advantage over Augustine in this regard was not just the result of his being the student and transmitter of a later and more systematic Neoplatonism. It resulted also from the small size and systematic order of his *corpus*. As a consequence, nothing is more important than discerning the reordering of that *corpus* and of its logical elements by its occidental readers. The strongest feature of Paul Rorem's book is its recognition of these facts, a recognition deriving from the study, still controversial, with which he began his career as a scholar. It is equally praiseworthy that this book uses the order of the letters and the fact that they systematically take up all of Dionysius' principal subjects as a way of introducing and structuring Rorem's own treatment. Unfortunately, Rorem's references to this structure are overly repetitious and his representation of the order of the *corpus* is no better established than it was in 1984.

This book lacks evenness, polish and completeness, and this is only partly due to the neglect of the Dionysian traditions by modern scholars. We may hope that it will be replaced as the neglect is furnished. The international conference on the Dionysian traditions being organized by Ysabel de Andia in Paris for September 1994 should, at least, necessitate an early second edition. Nonetheless, at the moment, this book is indispensable both to students of the Dionysian traditions and to those who would understand not only how the modern occidental self was constructed but also why it now feels the need to deconstruct itself.

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