

THE LIFE OF ANTONY and the LETTER TO MARCELLINUS by Athanasius. *The Classics of Western Spirituality. Translation and Introduction by Robert C. Gregg; Preface by William A. Clebsch. SPCK London 1980 £5.50.*

'Once, in Treves, as he himself, with three companions, while the Emperor was detained at the afternoon games in the circus, went out to walk in some gardens near the city walls . . . they came at length to a poor cottage . . . and there they found a book, wherein was written the life of Antony.' Thus Pontianus told the young Augustine in a garden in Milan in 386 about the moment when he 'resolved to leave the world and become wholly Thine' (Augustine, *Confessions*, viii). Nor did the influence of the *Life of St Antony* stop there; a greater than Pontianus heard and wept: 'I cast myself down' wrote Augustine, 'under a certain fig tree and gave full liberty to my tears'; the influence of the example of the Egyptian hermit worked to the full, a 'severe mercy' and Augustine rose, 'the darkness of all former doubts driven away', 'for Thou didst so convert me to Thyself'.

The Life of St Antony by Athanasius is one of the most influential of all biographies. Written by Athanasius in Greek after the Saint's death in 365, it was soon circulating in the Mediterranean world, and was translated into Latin by Evagrius to reach an even wider audience. Athanasius's account of the Egyptian hermit, the first Christian monk to go into the 'extreme desert', provided a pattern for conversation which influenced men profoundly in what Plato called 'no chance topic . . . but how shall a man order his life'. Thus, almost at once, the *Life of St Antony* was subject to that process of transmission called translation and Evagrius set a pattern in the matter by a self-confessed paraphrase of the text: 'direct word for word translation' he wrote, 'from one language to another darkens the sense and strangles it . . . For my part to avoid this I have so transposed the life of the Blessed Antony which you desired that whatever lack there may be in the words, there is none in the meaning' (Evagrius, *Vita B. Antonii*, prologue). More recently, Helen Waddell has continued this

pattern of elegant paraphrase according to the sense of the text in the area of desert literature with the same effect for the reader of a genuine confrontation with divinity incarnate in the words and deeds of men. The new series, *Classics of Western Spirituality*, now adds to its already impressive list this formative work for the monastic tradition of Egypt.

While such a book is welcome, simply because of its importance, I begin to wonder whether this particular translation, excellent as it is in so many ways, is quite the 'converting ordinance' that might be expected. Professor Clebsch says in his Preface that 'the translator's fidelity to the texts ensures that the reader receives in these works Athanasius' meaning' (p. xxi). I take leave to doubt that. The reader receives a strictly accurate rendering of Athanasius' words, but perhaps not always his meaning. For instance, 'the discipline of virtue' may never really prove attractive, but if it could be called 'the practice of ascetic life' (an equally accurate translation) at least one would know what to do about it. 'So that you might lead yourselves in imitation of him' is painstakingly accurate, but surely we hope either to 'lead our lives in imitation of his' or 'conduct' ourselves in that course? To describe St Antony as 'god-loved' is to introduce confusion by accuracy, reminding the reader not of the 'friend of God' of tradition but of the fools for Christ, the God-touched, the God-loved, of a different Christian ethos. Perhaps this is a carping criticism of such a serious and painstaking work, but simply because of the spiritual value of the *Life of St Antony* one could have wished for a little more flexibility and sensitivity to the impact of the English text on the reader.

The *Letter to Marcellinus*, a little known work by Athanasius on the psalms, is a surprising choice if the book is meant to present the theme of early monasticism. This, however, is not the case; the introduction makes it clear that this is a sample of the works of Athanasius and not two

early monastic texts that complement each other. The comments Athanasius makes here on the psalms present one theme in the Christian use of the psalter, that of the personal identification of the person reading the psalms with the emotion of the psalmist, so that any feeling or reaction to experience can find its reflection and resolution in the repetition of appropriate verses; a limited and prosaic approach, perhaps, if set beside the great phrases of Augustine on the psalms as the prayer of Christ to the Father. The translation is suited to the text in its plain pedestrian tone; it is welcome rather for presenting in English an untranslated work of Athanasius than for any dramatic light the content throws on the psalms.

As is usual in this series, the translator has provided an introduction and someone else has written a preface. 'What' asks the preface writer, 'can all this ancient spirituality mean for moderns?' (p xx) 'The answer' he continues 'can be brief' and indeed it can (though in fact it is not), for when one has read the paragraph which contains his answer, it can be summarized as 'very little if anything', a discouraging beginning for the reader who has been promised on the cover 'one of the foremost classics of

Christian asceticism'. The preface is a sad disappointment, clumsy in expression, vague in ideas and with little understanding of the texts. The Introduction on the other hand is a valuable addition to the study of the text, and balances the pessimism of the preface by indicating both the intrinsic value of the *Life of St Antony* and its effect on those who have read it through the centuries.

Perhaps a post-script to this review may be permitted: the Classics of Western Spirituality is concerned to present many invaluable texts in translation, but its policy in this volume as in the others continues to diminish their value in one unnecessary way: the use of the pronoun 'he' is outlawed in the introductions and where possible, it seems, also in the texts. In this case, the word 'men' is always followed by 'and women', and 'sons' by 'and daughters', a needless irritant and a grammatical misunderstanding. In the case of the *Life of St Antony*, the more appropriate gesture to feminism (if such is desirable) might have been to replace the *Letter to Marcellinus* with the *Life of St Syncretica*, an ancient parallel to the *Life of St Antony*.

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LE COURAGE DU FUTUR, by V. de Couesnongle. *Du Cerf*. 1980. pp 168.

This is a collection of pieces written by the Master of the Dominican Order since 1975, most of them addressed to Dominicans and all of them clearly entitled to a particularly serious hearing from Dominicans.

As the title of the book suggests, one of the Master's main concerns is that we should face the future without undue timidity. He recalls for us the courage of St Dominic, who left his familiar home with the canons of Osma to follow an unknown path, who established himself in the very heart of the heretics' own territory, who scattered his few brethren instead of consolidating his young foundation. It is this kind of courage that we need, which can escape from the cramping conservatism which seeks only to maintain what the past has given us, precisely because it rests on certain eternal and unchanging values,

especially hope in God.

The Master is evidently afraid that we shall fail to respond to the real challenge of our time either because we are too much entangled in the works which we have inherited from the past, or because we lack the courage to explore uncharted apostolates. In particular, he reminds us that our religious poverty ought to mean a real freedom to undertake tasks which do not guarantee us the kind of financial remuneration which we easily take to be necessary. The only really important question is the one which provides the title of the last chapter of this book: Who are our Cumans? Just as St Dominic dreamed of going off to bring the gospel to the Cumans, and was sustained throughout his life by this desire, so we ought to be haunted by some apostolic dream, whether or not we man-