

Between Imperialism and Anarchy. The Paradox of *L'altro Agostino* by Gaetano Lettieri Twenty Years Later

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Abstract. This note essentially constitutes a re-presentation of *L'altro Agostino. Ermeneutica e retorica della grazia dalla crisi alla metamorfosi del De doctrina christiana* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2001) by Gaetano Lettieri. Reprinted in 2002, and long at the centre of the scholarly debate, *L'altro Agostino* has been a seminal and influential book. Over the past twenty years, however, Lettieri has had the opportunity to further develop his perspective, deepening some earlier insights. This brief discussion is then intended as a new critical evaluation of *L'altro Agostino* in light of the speculative progress of its author.

Keywords: Gaetano Lettieri; Augustine; predestined grace; Christian dispositive

[es] Entre el imperialismo y la anarquía. La paradoja de *L'altro Agostino* de Gaetano Lettieri veinte años después

Resumen. Esta nota constituye esencialmente una re-presentación de *L'altro Agostino. Ermeneutica e retorica della grazia dalla crisi alla metamorfosi del De doctrina christiana* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2001) de Gaetano Lettieri. Reimpreso en 2002, y durante mucho tiempo en el centro del debate académico, *L'altro Agostino* ha sido un libro seminal e influyente. Sin embargo, durante los últimos veinte años, Lettieri ha tenido la oportunidad de desarrollar aún más su perspectiva, profundizando algunas ideas anteriores. Esta breve discusión pretende entonces ser una nueva valoración crítica de *L'altro Agostino* a la luz de los avances especulativos de su autor.

Palabras clave: Gaetano Lettieri; Agustín; gracia predestinada; dispositivo cristiano.

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1. Introduction

I read (and reviewed) *L'altro Agostino* exactly twenty years ago.² This book, which had a significant impact on me, immediately struck me as a study of rare vigour and mastery. It skilfully blends historical-critical accuracy with genuine speculative insight, a combination that I still regard as its defining quality.

The book starts, as is well known, from a literary hypothesis, which in turn presupposes a critical one: that Augustine interrupted the composition of *De doctrina christiana* because of the discovery of predestined grace in *Ad Simplicianum* I, 2.³ More precisely, Lettieri believes that: (1) with the discovery in

Ad Simplicianum Augustine's theology undergoes a radical turning point, so much so that we can speak of another Augustine separate from the 'first Augustine'; (2) the radicality of this turning point is such that it "disavows" the outdated project of *De doctrina christiana* and induces Augustine to abruptly interrupt its drafting (which, therefore, precedes and does not follow that of *Ad Simplicianum*, as the order of *Retractationes* seems to suggest); (3) this disavowal is not, however, mere 'contradiction' but profound and complex re-comprehension starting from a crucial new point of view; (4) this point of view explains exactly the late recovery and 'metamorphosis' of *De doctrina christiana*.

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² See Gaetano Lettieri, *L'altro Agostino. Ermeneutica e retorica della grazia dalla crisi alla metamorfosi del De doctrina christiana* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2001), reviewed by Massimiliano Lenzi, *Schola salernitana. Annali* 7-8 (2002-2003): 172-85

³ We know from *Retractationes* II 4, and without further explanation, that Augustine, when revising his writings, discovered that the books *On Christian Instruction* were not completed, and he preferred to finish them before moving on to the reexamination of other works. Accordingly, as we possess it today, *De doctrina christiana* turns out to be made up of two editorial blocks: the first, going from the preface to III, 25, 35, probably completed by April 397, and the second, going from the interruption of book III to the conclusion, drafted between 426 and 427.

It has rightly been said that Augustine's failure to explicitly clarify his reasons for this abrupt interruption and unpredictable resumption makes all our hypotheses more or less aleatory.⁴ However, Lettieri's scenario is particularly suggestive, because adheres to Augustine's moral and speculative coherence. If the Augustine's discovery in *Ad Simplicianum* represents a radical turning point in his thought, it is logical to imagine the abandonment of a project that, as originally conceived, had lost its meaning. According to Lettieri, a tenacious thread then holds together the unexpected discovery in *Ad Simplicianum*, the abrupt interruption of *De doctrina christiana* and the immediate writing of *Confessiones*, a work which testifies to the urgency of both confessing human misery and praising the salvific irruption of irresistible grace. As a phenomenology of undue grace, *Confessions* is actually a "theological heterobiography", and the beating heart of 'the other Augustine'. *L'altro Agostino* dedicates memorable pages (chapters 5 and 6) to this work. I can just add, echoing Lettieri's point of view, that those who do not pass through the discovery in *Ad Simplicianum* cannot truly understand *Confessions*, with its tragic doubling of the ego and its impressive reduction of conversion to a doctrine of creation.⁵

But let us take a step back.

2. The first and the other Augustine

Lettieri's opening chapter is dedicated to the analysis of 'the first Augustine'. Its approach is systematic. All the early Augustinian theology, from the dialogues to the Pauline commentaries, is consistently interpreted in the light of the project of the interrupted *De doctrina christiana*. A project, according to Lettieri, aimed at resolving the most advanced outcomes of pagan (and Platonic) culture in the Bible. By means of revelation, ecclesiastical tradition and divine help, humans have all the necessary conditions to rationally know the truth of the *ordo caritatis* and persuasively convert to it, through a free and responsible rediscovery of themselves and their own lost humanity. Let it be clear: the role of grace, as well as a certain primacy of divine initiative, are certainly not absent or underestimated. Lettieri is well aware that the novelty of Christianity compared to Platonic dialectics and pagan culture is the personal help of God, who mercifully provokes, excites, and strengthens human free and autonomous desire for conversion and purification. However, Lettieri also believes that when this divine grace, foreseen but not predestined, is not expressly resolved in *doctrina*, *disciplina*, *exemplum* or *eruditio*, in short in knowledge, it is

always configured as an extrinsic aid, i.e. as a reinforcement and refinement of a properly human intention, and never as an infallible and unconditional cause of it. By instilling charity, the Spirit does not create meritorious passion from nothing, but inflames a desire which has already been freely kindled "by the cultivation of pure desires and virtuous habits" (*bono studio bonisque moribus*).⁶

This project, however, radically breaks down when faced with the 'tremendous' discovery of predestined grace, first witnessed in *Ad Simplicianum*. As I said, there is no question that the problem of grace and justification engaged Augustine from the time of his conversion, and with decisive novelties.⁷ Yet this is not incompatible with the sudden irruption of an unexpected solution. It is the thesis defended by Lettieri, who does not question that Augustine, writing *Ad Simplicianum*, worked on elements that he had for years, but he insists on their radical reconfiguration. If 'the first Augustine' leaves a margin of autonomy to human beings, represented by the *initium fidei* or the *occultissima merita*, 'the other Augustine' reduces the authentic meaning of forgiveness (*per-dono*) to that, unconditional, of gift (*dono*). All merits, remitted to the eternal divine mercy, suddenly become unavailable, i.e. removed from any autonomous human capacity, and led back to God's will converting those He wants to convert.

From this point of view, the ongoing discussion about the intensity of Augustinian turn is a rhetorical exercise, since Augustine's words (and texts) are indisputable.⁸ It is rather their theological sense that should be questioned. And this is exactly what Lettieri does. *L'altro Agostino* is in fact nothing less than a mighty effort to return evangelical meaning to the discovery of the Spirit as gift.

To put it briefly, according to Lettieri *Ad Simplicianum* rebalanced Augustine's theological system on the absolute primacy of God. The humanistic illusion of a human behaviour capable of arousing God's mercy, is replaced by an anti-humanistic (pessimistic) theocentrism: humanity, corrupted by sin, is not even capable of preparing conversion that is now entirely dependent on the divine will.⁹ If any impression

⁶ *De doctrina christiana*, I, 10, 10.

⁷ On this, see most recently Armando Bisogno, *L'eterno assente. Agostino e la ricerca della verità* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2021).

⁸ "In the solution of this question, I, indeed, labored in defense of the free choice of the human will; but the grace of God conquered, and finally I was able to understand, with full clarity, the meaning of the Apostle" (Augustine, *Retractationes*, II, 1, 1). Particularly illuminating is the distinction 41 (chapters 1-2) of the first book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, a small historical-critical and evolutionary gem far more advanced than many of his renowned scholastic commentators and modern scholars. But see also Donato Ogliaari, *Gratia et Certamen. The Relationship between Grace and Free Will in the Discussion of Augustine with the So-Called Semipelagians* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), who is far from sympathising with Augustine's predestinationism but honest.

⁹ Consider the impressive theological exegesis of Romans 9:16 (*It is not a matter of willing or of running, therefore, but of a merciful God*) in Augustine, *Ad Simplicianum*, I, 2, 12: "For if it is only said that it is not a matter of willing but of a merciful God, because the

⁴ Manlio Simonetti, "L'ermeneutica biblica di Agostino", *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 12 (1995): 393-418, 415.

⁵ Let me refer to Massimiliano Lenzi, "Il nulla nelle *Confessioni* di Agostino tra creazione e conversione", in *Discussioni sul nulla tra medioevo ed età moderna*, ed. Massimiliano Lenzi, Alfonso Maierù (Firenze: Olschki, 2009), 21-35.

moving human assent is arbitrarily inspired by the Spirit,¹⁰ there is no longer a salvific intention universally ‘available’ to the moral and intellectual abilities of human beings. There is only an unconditional act of grace that, for a chosen few, opens up a new spiritual and existential horizon of meaning.¹¹ *Ad Simplicianum* – Lettieri writes – “disavows” (*sconfessa*) the project of *De doctrina christiana* just as it “disavows” any salvific value of culture and any “project of Christianising the classical pedagogical-rhetorical model” (*L’altro Agostino*, 98). Divine grace, in fact, can not only do without cultural mediation, but also upset and subvert any ethical and metaphysical order that, in itself, is completely insufficient to redeem and convert. And this is where Lettieri’s focus lies.¹² In his reconstruction, any creatural order is not simply denied, but reduced to a surface, *littera*, “the phenomenon of an inscrutable noumenon that is the act of divine love” (*L’altro Agostino*, 93). In other words, it is a matter neither of contradicting a cultural system – ontological, ethical, political, institutional, sacramental – nor of delegitimising a rational understanding (Augustine is and remains a theologian). It is rather a matter of denying that knowledge and culture could in themselves constitute a value capable of revealing and leading us to God. Any cultural mediation has cognitive and redemptive efficacy only if it is re-founded by the predestined gift of divine grace (*L’altro Agostino*, 123). Outside of this gift there is only autonomous impotence and vanity. Hence the vertiginous idea of a ‘heteronomous subjectivity’ (even though entirely in keeping with the theological and religious presuppositions that command it), which is the true pivot of Christian freedom. This is then the reason why Lettieri is not afraid to bring out the predestinationist foundation of Augustinian theology in all its logical and speculative coherence: because Lettieri’s dialectical thought is that Augustinian human freedom and subjectivity are not against but dependent on that foundation. It is

human will does not suffice for us to live in rectitude and righteousness unless we are aided by God’s mercy, it can therefore also be said that it is not a matter of a merciful God but of human willing, because God’s mercy alone does not suffice unless our will’s consent is joined to it”.

¹⁰ “Who has it in his power for his mind to be touched by such a manifestation as would move his will to faith? [...] When, therefore, things attract us whereby we may advance towards God, this is inspired and furnished by the grace of God; it is not obtained by our own assent and effort or by the merits of our works because, whether it be the assent of our will or our intense effort or our works aglow with charity, it is he who gives, he who bestows it” (*ibid.*, I, 2, 21).

¹¹ Lettieri dedicates very powerful pages (cf. especially chapters 9-12) to divine re-creation of goodwill from the nothingness of sin, which provide a profound, coherent, and historiographically balanced interpretation of mature Augustinism and its historical debts.

¹² In this sense, a text such as *Ad Simplicianum*, I, 2, 22 (“he who has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the strong, and the foolish things of the world to confound the wise”) takes on great significance. According to Lettieri (cf. chapter 3), it becomes the expression of an authentic evangelical theology, where the unavailable power of God is placed at the service of the last, the poor, the marginalised, being a power that overthrows and liberates.

the irresistibility of grace that, according to Lettieri, determines the Augustinian complexity of the subject (against the illusory and idolatrous autonomy of the will). And this ties a dialectical knot holding Lettieri’s hermeneutic perspective and explaining his systematic and almost obsessive *apologia* for predestination (cf. chapter 10). But the point that needs to be made here is that Lettieri never assumed the predestination system to be an end in itself, I mean as mere theocentric imperialism, or logic of terror.

3. The paradox of the other Augustine

It is surprising then that in criticism of *L’altro Agostino* (as well as other anticipatory studies) this aspect, which should have been seriously discussed,¹³ has been completely overlooked. A major and incomprehensible misunderstanding, which explains (but does not justify) how Lettieri’s Augustine could have been reduced to the Augustine of Flasch, and how Lettieri’s interpretation could have been defined as dogmatic (‘libresque’) and sclerotic (scholastic).¹⁴

Therefore, it must be forcefully reaffirmed that *L’altro Agostino* was conceived not only against any confessional manipulation of Augustine’s predestinationism – being close, in this respect, to Flasch’s quite obvious interpretation¹⁵ –, but also against the idea (also shared by Flasch) that the doctrine of predestination was simply an “arbitrary (crypto-manichean) deformation of the New Testament revelation” (*L’altro Agostino*, 128) instead of having – as Lettieri believes – a deep evangelical rootedness and coherence (*ibid.*, 582-585).

The point is decisive.

When I first read *L’altro Agostino*, my interest was in Augustine as mediator of medieval Platonism. I was working on a doctoral thesis relating to the status of the human soul in the anthropological and ontological debate of the 13th century. I wanted to demonstrate the Porphyrian roots of the scholastic model of the soul ‘form and substance’, and the Augustine I focused on was the Platonic one of Heinrich

¹³ Nello Cipriani, for example, reduces Lettieri’s whole speculative framework to linguistic intemperance: see “*L’altro Agostino* di G. Lettieri”, *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 48 (2002): 249-65, 264.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Goulven Madec, *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 43 (1997): 248-249; Luigi Alici, *L’altro nell’io. In dialogo con Agostino* (Roma: Città Nuova, 1999), 144-5; Id., “Le lieu d’Augustin: l’interprétation de Jean-Luc Marion”, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 63 (2009): 295-315, 308-309; Maria Bettetini, *Introduzione a Agostino* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2008), 131 and 198. The reference to Kurt Flasch is to his *Logik des Schreckens*. Augustinus von Hippo. *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* I 2 (Mainz: Dieterich, 1990).

¹⁵ The centrality of predestination in Augustine’s thought should be obvious. In reality, it is not so. In the disconcerting preface – rather a scathing criticism: but then why write it? – to the Italian edition of *Einführung in die Philosophie des Mittelalters* by Kurt Flasch, Augustine read “as the philosopher of predestination” is mentioned as an example of “uncritical presentation”: Maria Bettetini, *Prefazione*, in Kurt Flasch, *Introduzione alla filosofia medievale* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), xx-xxi.

Dörrie, Ernest Fortin and Jean Pépin. Therefore, in reviewing Lettieri's text, it was quite natural for me (thanks also to Riccardo Chiaradonna's studies) to trace the metaphysical paradox of the Spirit, i.e. its being *simul* immanent and transcendent, back to Plotinian dualism, and to insist on the Greek and metaphysical origins of Augustinian theology of grace. Lettieri did not neglect the metaphysical dimension, but he claimed that metaphysics had to be understood dialectically, in the framework of an unresolved tension between onto(theo)logy of the cause and phenomenology of the gift, between order and anarchy (cf. chapter 8). By insisting on Platonism, I was resolving the tension in the direction of a metaphysical order and imperialistic Augustine, while Lettieri's requirement – and this became increasingly clear later¹⁶ – was to go beyond any onto-theological theocentrism in the direction of an evangelical (anarchic) thought of alterity and democracy.

Here then is the authentic paradox of the Augustinian theology of irresistible grace according to *L'altro Agostino*: the paradox of an extraordinary heterogony of ends, in which the more tyrannical (unavailable, undue, unconditional) the divine action, the more anarchic (subversive, freeing) the human effect. A paradox that Lettieri revisited in the form of a Christian dispositive of deconstruction, connoting it in an increasingly philosophical manner. Highlighting the Jewish apocalyptic matrix of predestination, Lettieri reversed the archaism of divine election in the phenomenological actuality of messianism (with references to Benjamin, Lévinas, Derrida, without forgetting Pascal and Kierkegaard).¹⁷ The unavailability of grace, mirror of the terrible transcendence of divine judgement,¹⁸ has thus been turned into an an-

ti-metaphysical critique of the subject. Lettieri insisted, in fact, on the 'destitution' of the graced self, which precisely because it has been pardoned and re-generated by the absolute free gift of grace cannot but recognise itself as indebted to the other. Within the consciousness of debt – this is his argument – the self finds in the other its own existential condition. Consequently, heteronomy and self-expropriation stand as unexpected evangelical principles of empowerment, moralisation and democratisation.¹⁹ Hence the continuous (progressive) search for a "community of the free and equal",²⁰ and the apocatastatic turn taken by the Christian dispositive, increasingly configured as 'inclusive' (because devoted to deconstructing every social exclusion and marginalisation), 'kenotic' (because aimed at banishing every logic of power), 'empathic' (because rooted in pity for the misery of others), and 'apocalyptic' (because deferred and catastrophic: apocalypse being a revelation of revelation destined to subvert all the alleged human and natural orders in their claim to truth).

4. Conclusions

Lettieri developed his deconstructive dispositive after *L'altro Agostino*. But its origin remains Augustinian – as I want to underline – coming from Augustine's theological insight of Spirit as unconditional gift. This insight is, for Lettieri, the core – at once theological and evangelical – of 'the other Augustine', based on the subversive primacy of the last (the poor, the marginalised) and the kenotic scandal of Jesus. On the other hand, it is the same Augustine who teaches that "there is a deeper way of being free" than the illusory and idolatrous freedom of arbitrariness,²¹ disavowing, along with the autonomy of the

¹⁶ I refer here, *inter alia*, to Gaetano Lettieri, "Un dispositivo cristiano nell'idea di democrazia? Materiali per una metodologia della storia del cristianesimo", in *Cristianesimo e Democrazia*, ed. Annibale Zambarbieri, Giorgio Otranto (Bari: Edipuglia, 2011), 19-134; Id., "Teologia politica ed escatologia politica nel *De civitate Dei*. Il dispositivo apocalittico-paolino matrice decostruttiva del pensiero e del politico occidentali", in *Kampf oder Dialog? Begegnung von Kulturen im Horizont von Augustins 'De civitate dei'*, ed. Christof Müller, Robert. Dodaro, Allan D. Fitzgerald (Würzburg: Echter, 2015), 387-463; Id., "Le aporie della libertà cristiana dal Nuovo Testamento a Giovanni Scoto Eriugena", in *Libero arbitrio. Storia di una controversia filosofica*, ed. Mario De Caro, Massimo Mori, Emidio Spinelli (Roma: Carocci 2014), 133-69; Id., "Dostoevskij tra apocalittica e apocatastasi. L'eccezione messianica nella teologia politica de *Il Grande Inquisitore*", in Fëdor Dostoevskij, *Il Poema del Grande Inquisitore. Tra teodicea e modernità*, ed. Antonio Corati (Roma: Castelvecchi, 2022), 133-258. Lastly, see also Luigi Manconi and Gaetano Lettieri, *Poliziotto-Sessantotto. Violenza e democrazia* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2023).

¹⁷ Messianism means here apocalyptic deferral, i.e. irreducible disavowal of any definitive (ontological) and as such sacred (hierarchical) truth.

¹⁸ Lettieri interprets the dialectic between justice and mercy as a dialectic between affirmation and critique, order and charisma, law and grace, always making the latter the deconstructive principle of the former. He knows, however, that both sides are irreducible and inseparable (cf. Lettieri, "Dostoevskij tra apocalittica e apocatastasi", 151), whereby "the terrible doctrine of predestination" is always

"exposed to the risk of the theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*), an inhuman speculative gnosis by an autistic and imperialistic Absolute" (*L'altro Agostino*, 583). In this regard, see for example the onto-theodicy (no less Aristotelian than Augustinian) of Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 23, a. 5, ad 3, where the moral order is founded on metaphysical order, and humans (the elect and the damned) are made an instrument (in naturalistic and technical terms) of God's auto-glorification.

¹⁹ Cf. Lettieri, "Dostoevskij tra apocalittica e apocatastasi", 209-210 and 253. Democracy, the belief in freedom and equality between people, stems from the fact that the pardoned self is made free "to dissolve and consume his negativity" (ibid., 225), i.e. his autistic identity, recognising his dependence on the other. In this paradoxical way, the theology of grace becomes a theology of liberation, and the omnipotence of God an anarchic and kenotic principle of subversion of every autistic (and therefore oppressive) human power, starting with the power of the self.

²⁰ Manconi and Lettieri, *Poliziotto-Sessantotto*, 168. Authentic (evangelical) democracy appears in fact always deferred, to come (*a-venire*), because every single person demands justice, and this implies a never-ending work of recognition and inclusion. In short, no democracy is such if someone is excluded – which imposes at least a theoretical limit to the unbearable rhetoric of the superiority of Western democracy, too often a pretext for imperialistic legitimisation.

²¹ Cf. Aldo Magris, *L'idea di destino nel pensiero antico*, 2 voll. (Udine: Del Bianco Editore, 1985): II, 878.

self, his own Greek metaphysics of being and subject. Hence the further paradox of a God who, while appearing to exclude tyrannically, includes democratically. The Christian dispositive is, in fact a self-destructive device, according to Lettieri. His idea, then, is that Augustine's theology is the bearer of its own *Aufhebung*, and that the theology of grace, as a phenomenological overcoming of any onto-theological order, is also an overcoming of the terrible letter

of predestination, i.e. the partiality of redemption.²² Of course, the fact that the most authentic meaning of predestined grace could be apocatastic (no less Origenian than Pauline) was completely beyond me twenty years ago. Yet there is no doubt that *L'altro Agostino* was moving in exactly such a direction, and that the anarchic power of predestined grace meant to express an evangelical theology not only radically subversive but also potentially inclusive.

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²² Therefore, the accusation of scholasticism and dogmatism levelled at *L'altro Agostino* is truly in vain. It fails doubly: from a historical point of view, by not grasping the theo-logical nature of Augustine's exegetical thought; and from a critical point of view, failing to realise that Lettieri's attempt consisted precisely of returning spirituality to the letter of predestination. A letter that ultimately is to be abandoned (Lettieri, "Teologia politica ed escatologia politica nel *De civitate Dei*", 390) as a perverse attempt to give ontological foundation to the anarchy of the spirit.

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