

Reaching Saint Antony Across the Scholarly Barriers

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Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 126)

Recent scholarship, particularly Samuel Rubenson's *The Letters of St. Antony* (1990), has shown that we can no longer presume that the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius and *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* give us a complete and accurate picture of Saint Antony the Great. While this paper respects the achievements of contemporary scholarship, it tries to look beyond the barriers this erudition erects to ask what the refurbished image of the desert father found in the *Life*, *Sayings*, and *Letters* tells us about the living of the solitary life today. What word does the "new" Antony offer to the hundreds of contemporary solitaries who look to him for consolation and guidance?



Columba Stewart, a Benedictine patrologist, recently remarked that the effort to study the spiritual teaching of early monastic texts as a sympathetic though critical reader is becoming increasingly difficult because of the tension between the traditional, theological approach and the political, feminist, and literary methodologies now

in vogue.¹ With this tension in the air, dare one “seek a word” from texts whose *real* meaning has been unearthed by deep-digging methodologies that claim to be objective and, therefore, scientific? In any case, if truth is, as sociology tells us, merely the product of history and the reflection of the forces of social interaction, what help can these ancient texts be to someone living many paradigm shifts later in the social complexity of the modern world?

In his preface to *The Life of Antony* by Athanasius in the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series, William A. Clebsch of Stanford University wonders about this. He asks: “And what can all this ancient spirituality mean for moderns? The answer,” he states, “can be brief. Certainly all this is utterly foreign to our mode of being in the world. There is no way for us to parlay supposed similarities with Antony into an empathetic act of crawling into his skin.”² He doubts that any modern readers yearn for the Christian salvation or apotheosis/theopoesis the desert fathers experienced but he cautions such readers, “if any,” that they must adopt the strange allegorical method of gaining “balms from the psalms.”³ I presume that he means by this flippant remark that such readers must adopt a completely outmoded mindset. Robert C. Gregg, the translator of the same text, adds: “To our age and culture the figure of Antony is thoroughly startling – even offensive.”⁴

Yet there are more hermits today in the West than there have been for centuries!⁵ In addition, a number of lay people are living

¹ Columba Stewart, “Writing About John Cassian in the 1990s,” *American Benedictine Review* 48 (1997): 342.

² Columba Stewart, “Writing About John Cassian,” 342.

³ Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, transl. and introd. by Robert C. Gregg; pref. by William A. Clebsch (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) xx.

⁴ Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 2. Columba Stewart, “Writing About John Cassian,” 343 observes that in modern studies in which spiritual and theological issues are not important “beloved ancestors are changed into strange, and even alien figures.”

⁵ Serge Bonnet and Bernard Goulet, *Les Ermites* (Paris: Fayard, 1980); Marie Le Roy Ladurie, *Femmes au désert: Témoignages sur la vie éremitique* (Paris: Editions Saint-Paul, 1971); *Sister Irene* [first hermit in Ireland professed under the new *Code of Canon Law*] Documentary produced and directed for BBC

quiet, contemplative lives on the margin of society.⁶ If we turn to the East, can we honestly say that there was ever a time when Antony's example did not seem relevant?

These scholars talk of "our age and culture" and mean by that our "secular" age and our "secular" culture. What they say about this secular culture's reaction to Antony is probably true. What is astounding is that this is expressed in a work in a collection of spiritual classics one would expect to see consulted by people seeking spiritual wisdom. The very possibility of doing such a thing with *The Life of Antony* is rejected out-of-hand by these scholars who see the text as merely a fascinating historical artifact.

For his part, Samuel Rubenson argues that Athanasius's *Life of Antony* is interesting because it shows how a non-conformist, slightly heterodox wise man was shaped into an orthodox, compliant servant of the Church.⁷ Rubenson maintains that the seven letters which have come down to us in translations of translations reveal the true Antony and his authentic teaching.⁸ The simple, unlettered, theologically naive exemplar of the *Life* and the *Sayings* is, in Rubenson's view, a later creation.⁹

TV by Tomasin Day-Lewis, 1993.

⁶ See, for example, Eleven Lay Associates, "A Lay Response to the Reflections of Dom Bernardo Olivera on Charismatic Associations," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 32 (1997): 235-44.

⁷ Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monastic Tradition and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 143-44 (On the scholarly difficulties with the *Life* in general see 126-32). This is a new edition of *The Letters of St. Antony: Origenist Theology, Monastic Tradition and the Making of a Saint* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1990). The two editions share the same pagination. The new edition contains a translation of the letters.

⁸ Diarmuid Ó. Murchú, "St. Antony of Egypt: The Man and the Myth," *Cistercian Studies* 20 (1985): 88-97 agrees. He claims that the Antony we find in the *Letters* is a simple, direct, gentle, Christlike human being (p. 91) while Athanasius's Antony - who conquers demons, subjugates wild beasts, and carries asceticism to extraordinary lengths - is the hero of a myth. He maintains that the *Life* "tells us little about the man himself (apart from the main events of his life) but a great deal about the world of his day and the mysterious forces baffling the people of that age" (p. 95). In his opinion, anyone attempting to imitate the Antony of the *Life* would be mistaking myth for reality.

⁹ Rubenson, *Letters*, 186-87.