

Introduction

Augustine and Company

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Somewhere in his classic biography, Peter Brown tells us that Augustine “would never be alone.” The visual record bears him out. One apocryphal scenario, favored by late medieval preachers and by painters of the Renaissance and Baroque, has the learned bishop discussing the Trinity with an angelic child on the beach (Marrou 1964). Another scene, of similar pedigree, has him in *tête-à-tête* with St. Jerome on the origins of the soul. Almost always there are interlocutors at hand. One model for such visions of Augustine in conversation would have been the *Confessions*. In illustrated manuscripts of that work from the later Middle Ages we find depictions of its protagonist listening to Bishop Ambrose preach, hearing the priest Simplicianus tell the story of the conversion of Marius Victorinus, relaying to Alypius a narrative heard from Ponticianus, debating with friends at Cassiciacum, disputing with Faustus the Manichean, and then, *hors texte* as it were, presenting a copy of the finished *Confessions* to Christ himself. The famous scene of conversion in the garden at Milan in 386 CE is no exception to the rule of company. Even when the artist leaves the figure of Alypius in the background or out of shot, the Augustine who hears the call to “take it up and read [or choose]” (*tolle, lege*) is no more solitary than a lone Virgin in a painting of the Annunciation. These illustrators did not seriously misrepresent their source. In the original scenography of the *Confessions*, even the most pregnant silences come wrapped in shared discourse – whether it be Augustine’s and his mother’s, on either side of their instant of mystical rapture at the window in Ostia, or Augustine’s and his unnamed companion’s (or companions’) as they walked away, wondering aloud, from the soundlessly reading Ambrose. Concatenation of speech acts, counter-Vergilian epic, trinitarian ascent, all-enfolding song, and whatever else it may be (Feldmann 1998; Wills 2011; Conybeare, Ch. 8 in this volume), the *Confessions* is at all points an invitation into company.

Biography, as we know it nowadays, is the art of bringing readers into company that they could not otherwise keep. Ancient or classical biography – including the late classical genre of the saint’s life, whose prototypes belong largely to the time of Augustine’s life (Williams 2008; cf. Barnes 2010) – was more concerned to provide models for imitation.

It was this concern that led Augustine's first biographer, Possidius of Calama, to reflect that, for all the benefits likely to accrue from the bishop's vast literary legacy in aftertimes, the impact of his character, intellect, and teaching would probably have been felt most keenly by those who had dealings with him while he was still alive (Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 31.9; ed. and trans. Weiskotten 1919). Even if he could have conceived a modern biographer's desire to simulate for his readers the experience of knowing Augustine as he lived, the *Confessions* would already have stolen much of Possidius' thunder. In fact, by presenting as steadily as it did the exemplary life of an ascetically inclined Christian bishop, the fifth-century Latin *Life of Augustine* provides us with a clear specimen of late classical biography enrolled in the service of Christian religious ideals (Elm 2003; Hermanowicz 2008). In its own time it inaugurated a series of textual and visual renditions of "Augustine" (man, life, and published works) that, over the centuries, would continue to serve the evolving interests of Christian institution-building and reform (Saak, Ch. 35 in this volume). As the *Confessions* models a quasi-personal familiarity with Augustine of a kind that modern biography still seeks to facilitate, so the first *Life of Augustine* attests to a process of "Augustinian" community formation that had already begun before the bishop's death in 430 CE.

The present *Companion* draws gratefully on several fine biographies of Augustine that have been written in recent years (notably Brown 1967 and 2000; Lancel 1999 and 2002a; O'Donnell 2005a), without aiming to offer any substitute for the experience of a sustained encounter with a historically recreated individual, which those books supremely afford. Nor does it seek to induct its readers into any identifiably Augustinian community – not even one of "Augustinian" scholarship. The progressive effacement, over the past half-century, of the disciplinary boundary markers that previously made "Augustine" a distinct and primarily theological academic specialization is what has made the present work theoretically and practically possible. Brown's (1967) success in refashioning Augustine as a subject of modern biography appears, in retrospect, as both a sign and a catalyst of the change that has come about. If at any time before the middle of the twentieth century Augustine could have been said to belong naturally to any one company, that would have been the company of the "Fathers of the Church" – a phrase used to denote a cadre of primarily Greek- and Latin-writing Christian teachers who flourished in the first five or six hundred years of post-Apostolic Christianity and whose reputed agreement on salient points of doctrine was appealed to by theologians across Christian denominations, in their efforts to document orthodoxies rooted in an early (or "patristic") era. Alternatively, he might have been placed in the less exclusively ecclesiastical but no less elite company of runners imagined by Brown as participating in "the relay race of the formation of Western Christian civilization," an event in which Augustine was seen "to have picked up the baton brought to him by Plotinus, all the way from Plato and the ancient sages of Greece, and to pass it on triumphantly to Boethius, and thence to Thomas Aquinas" and so on, until it was carried safely down to the present (Brown 2001: 183).

Despite differences in their canons and methods, these two entrenched modes of disciplinary thinking were alike in defining their subject, "(Saint) Augustine," in relation to a discourse of long-term continuity and community that depended for its coherence on that subject's maintaining a pre-assigned place within it. "Augustine" and the traditions in support of which "he" was cited thus secured each other's identities over the *longue durée*. But what if modern spectators of the transmission of western civilization and of Christian orthodoxies were to shift *their* ground? From another vantage point, would the hermeneutical circuit still close so neatly? Just such a shift in perspective on western

Christian cultural traditions was effected by the work of Marrou, Markus, Brown, and other scholars who, between the late 1940s (Marrou 1949 marks a watershed) and the early 1990s (e.g. Markus 1990), staked a claim for Augustine to be considered in the first instance as a denizen of the later ancient, (post-)classical, Mediterranean world – or, to use a now widely accredited expression, as a man of “late antiquity.” (From an abundant scholarly literature on the sense and emergence of this period concept, see (in English) especially Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar 1999: vii–xiii; Liebeschuetz 2004; Straw and Lim 2004; Markus 2009; Rousseau 2009: 1–92; and G. Clark 2011.)

Like some other, equally debatable period concepts, that of late antiquity is more readily understood in terms of what it did and does to other conceptualizations than in relation to what it purportedly describes. The main effect of the coming of late antiquity in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century historiography has been to displace the discipline of “patristics” (even among Christian theologians and historians of early Christianity; see E. A. Clark 2008) and to disarticulate the section of the late modern narrative of western civilization that used to join up classical antiquity with the (Christian) Middle Ages. Augustine – the pre-eminent Latin theologian of the early Christian era, as he was according to the majority view of his western co-religionists since no later than the ninth century (see Leyser, Ch. 34 in this volume), and a first choice for the embodiment of medieval Latin Christianity for Enlightenment historians, from Edward Gibbon in the eighteenth century to Ernst Troeltsch in the early twentieth – bore much of the weight of those prior disciplinary constructions. Nor was it pure coincidence that the two scholars mainly responsible for unleashing the counter-disciplinary force of the deceptively anodyne-sounding formula of “late antiquity,” namely Marrou and Brown, each deployed it on the strength of a prolonged personal engagement with Augustine’s writings. Both had come to see that the standard divisions of the history of western civilization could not contain the phenomena that a close study of Augustine’s life, thought, and times revealed. Whatever definitional contents might in due course be assigned to “late antiquity” as a period concept, the formulation was needed in the first place as a wedge for splitting a monolithic scholarly and popular discourse of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of western Christendom. The force of that calculated act of epistemic violence can still be measured, half a century later, in the proliferation of textbooks and reference works now devoted to late antiquity as such. An originally counter-disciplinary move has at length produced something that has almost the consistency of an academic sub-discipline.

It is fitting that this *Companion to Augustine* should have been preceded, in the series of Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World, by a volume devoted to late antiquity (Rousseau 2009). For, if it is the case that Augustine, as represented afresh in post-war Europe, partly precipitated the creation of “late antiquity” as a mode of critical and constructive dissent from standard, triumphalist narratives of western Christian civilization, it is equally the case that the study of “Augustine” has in its turn been gradually transformed over the past few decades by exposure to the new climate of late antique scholarship – so much so, indeed, that it is now possible to envisage a series of approaches to *this* subject that will be dictated, or at least suggested, by themes and tendencies in current research on the later ancient world, rather than by the interests of any trans-historical community of Augustinian allegiance, howsoever envisaged. To say this is not, of course, to disparage traditional Augustinian affiliations or to deny the roles that they may still play in shaping the discourses of the volume in hand. (A glance at the Notes on Contributors will be enough to reveal several well-defined scholarly sub-communities, both Augustinian and other.) Rather, the point is to recognize the possibility of treating

those affiliations, for the present purpose, either (1) as part of the historical subject in view, since this volume will be concerned with the formation of Augustinian communities from as early as Augustine's lifetime; or (2) as strictly extraneous to it, since this volume will be confined by certain horizons of the later ancient world, even as it offers a foretaste (in Part VII) of the history of the latterday reception of "Augustine." It may be, indeed, that such coherence as this *Companion* proves to have will be largely the product of a double and somewhat fleeting privilege. We now have the chance to (re)discover Augustine in a world of late antiquity sharply illuminated by other lights than those of his own traditionally canonical works. And we are able to rely on the rich resources of, and for, scholarly understanding laid up over centuries by individuals and communities of scholars motivated by more or less canonical convictions regarding Augustine's significance in the long run.

Few figures from any cultural tradition will have been better served in the later twentieth- and early twenty-first century by compilers of author-centered works of reference than Augustine has been. There is no shortage of encyclopedias, handbooks, and guides (online and off) for those interested in his life, work, and legacies. This will not be either the first or the last *Companion to Augustine*. However, until now there has not been any compendious work, in English but representing more than anglophone scholarship, that introduces the subject of Augustine as it has begun to reappear after the invention of late antiquity. The commission for this *Companion* was to set forth that subject.

Although no user of this book will mistake its seven-part structure for the promise of a plenitude comparable to that anticipated by Augustine at the close of the *Confessions* and of *City of God*, there is a strong sequential logic to the chapters. The intent is first (in Parts I–V) to bring Augustine into focus as a figure in the late antique social, intellectual, and cultural landscape, then (in Part VI) to let some of the longer-term and "traditionally" recognized impacts of his oeuvre as a thinker and writer emerge anew against that background, and finally (in Part VII) to capture a number of facets of the complex processes of transmission and transformation that divide Augustine the man of late antiquity from the subject of our modern scholarship and at the same time make that subject so compelling in its multi-layered historicity.

Part I (Contexts) sets scenes on which Augustine would enter and play his roles in life, but from which he remains largely absent in these preliminary chapters, appearing in person, when he does, only in cameos derived from the *Confessions*. Christopher Kelly (Ch. 2) evokes the turbulent political history of a Roman Empire for which Augustine, long before he mounted the critique of *City of God*, acted as an official apologist. William E. Klingshirn (Ch. 3) sketches the countours of the landscape most physically immediate to Augustine as a native of North Africa who, having returned home from what should have been a career-making sojourn in Italy, never again set foot abroad. Éric Rebillard (Ch. 4) addresses, indirectly and with Augustine's sermons as a primary source of information, a third aspect of this Roman African's social identity, by asking what it meant for anyone in his time and milieu to be known as a "Christian."

These general historical precautions taken, Part II (*Confessions*) begins again where most modern readers make their first contact with Augustine, whether to be attracted or repelled by his company. In parallel but differently focused analyses, Roger Tomlin (Ch. 5) and Kate Cooper (Ch. 6) consider what the *Confessions*, read now in the light of late Roman social norms, may be able to tell us about Augustine's ambitions and disappointments, including certain things that he himself does not tell us in so many

words. The generic oddity of that work of his, at once so captivatingly autobiographical and so manifestly not just about him, is then twice explored and resolved – first by Paula Fredriksen (Ch. 7), who reads Augustine’s narrative in the key of theology, and then by Catherine Conybeare (Ch. 8), who reads the *Confessions* in a way that raises doubts about the validity of any reading that does not also hear it(self).

The lingering problem of the genre of the *Confessions* becomes the cue for a wider survey, in Part III (Media), of the communications strategies deployed by Augustine and his contemporaries. Philip Burton (Ch. 9) lays out Augustine’s theory and practice as a master of the Latin language, occasional interpreter or auditor of other languages, and tireless investigator of the phenomenon of language in general. With Claire Sotinel’s contribution (Ch. 10), the emphasis shifts from spoken language and face-to-face communication to the traffic of written discourse in Roman North Africa and neighbouring Mediterranean lands, especially the epistolary protocols that were the primary medium for all the information transfer among the empire’s elites. Then, in a piece that stays closer to the written registers of language than its title might suggest, Richard Lim (Ch. 11) reminds us of the attention paid by Augustine, in the *Confessions* and elsewhere, to the forms of attention and distraction characteristic of the crowds that gathered for public spectacles in Roman cities, and he offers guidance for the critical analysis of a complex dossier of texts, each of which was calculated to produce its own special effects in a reading or listening public. In the final essay of this part of the *Companion*, Guy Stroumsa (Ch. 12) confronts one of the most striking properties of Augustine’s discourse concerning himself, his god, and the communities to which he successively or concurrently belonged: its preoccupation with books, both as physical containers (*codices*) and considered for their contents (texts).

The rationale of Part IV and of Part V should be sufficiently plain from the titles listed in the Table of Contents not to need much elaboration here. Part IV (Texts) can be seen as a further acknowledgement of the particular stylization, wrought by Augustine in the *Confessions*, of his own pre-conversion, conversion, and post-conversion experiences as episodes in a life lived in language and – to a degree unmatched by any other narrative of comparable scope from the pen of an ancient Greek or Latin author – in contact with books and texts. The chapters roughly follow the narrated order of his own readings, without being otherwise constrained by the *Confessions*. Thus the discussion moves, from the library of classical Latin authors that Augustine began frequenting as a schoolboy in Thagaste and Madauros and never abandoned (Ch. 13, Danuta Shanzer), to the philosophers for whom he acquired an extracurricular passion while still an adolescent (Ch 14, Sarah Byers); to the dangerously alluring books of the Manicheans that passed through his hands as a young man and permanently shaped his thinking (Ch. 15, Johannes van Oort); to the less immediately attractive books of the canonical Scriptures, against which he stumbled, before discovering how to use their stumbling-blocks as launch-pads for flights of Christ-centered exegesis (Ch. 16, Michael Cameron); to the newly emergent library of extra-canonical Christian authors, both from earlier times (Ch. 17, Mark Edwards) and from his own (Ch. 18, Michael Stuart Williams), in whose company he came at length to see the Christian writer that he himself had become (Ch. 19, Mark Vessey).

While Part IV concentrates on Augustine’s subjective experience in his various encounters with texts, Part V (Performances) takes a more objective stance, presenting a gallery of the figures that his companions and contemporaries would have seen him cut, in his own texts and in his other appearances. The coverage in this case is at once partly serial – with the *Confessions* continuing to supply support for a developmental or

“conversional” narrative – and largely parallel, since Augustine as bishop combined several roles, most of them already rehearsed under other circumstances before he started doing that job. Gillian Clark (Ch. 20) sets the picture gallery in motion with an account of Augustine’s reinterpretation of the traditional role of the philosopher, which already assumed a tension between private (if often convivial) contemplation and responsibility to a wider society. Subsequent chapters show how that tension was played out in action, as Augustine adapted the repertoire of available social styles and media to the demands and opportunities of his situation: as a dialogue partner in a variety of modes and genres (Ch. 21, Therese Fuhrer); as the exponent of a spiritual (mystical, ascetic, monastic) lifestyle that aimed to turn the insights of the individual to the advantage of the community (Ch. 22, John Peter Kenney); as the impresario of a communal sacred drama, liturgically staged by the bishop in his basilica, on the basis of biblical scripts (Ch. 23, Hildegund Müller); as the master and steward of more than one household (Ch. 24, Neil McLynn); and as champion of causes to be fought in public – in writing and in “live” encounter – with all the weapons of the forensic rhetoric that he had once taught his students (Ch. 25, Caroline Humfress). By the end of Part V, we may suggest, the *Companion* will have fully reprised Possidius’ *Life of Augustine*, the central section of which was structured according to the controversies in which its protagonist had been involved, and which also referred the reader to a list of his published works (the *Indiculum*, ed. Wilpert 1931), arranged mainly on agonistic lines. Like Possidius, if only in this respect, the authors of these chapters seek to represent Augustine as he might have been understood by a sympathetic and well-informed contemporary observer.

Having reached that point, students of the history and culture of the (late) ancient world may choose to part company with the *Companion*, but only if they are willing to concede a “reception” history and a hermeneutics of reception as challenging and potentially enthralling as any nowadays claimed for the legacies of classical antiquity. Parts VI and VII, though designed as sequels to what has come before, take for granted an estimate of Augustine the man – and, even more crucially, of “Augustine” the subject – that no contemporary of his, not even one as well-informed and sympathetic as his friend and fellow-bishop Possidius, could possibly have made. They consist of chapters written with direct or implicit reference to the after-effects of Augustine’s texts and, beyond any strictly textual recourse, to the impacts of the variously constructed “cultural memories” and latterday conjurations of Augustine.

Part VI (Positions) interrogates Augustine’s writings on selected themes and issues that have been central to the discourse of western Christian culture and whose place and framing within that discourse are to a greater or lesser degree attributable to his agency: the will (Ch. 26, James Wetzel); the body (Ch. 27, David G. Hunter); orthodoxy (Ch. 28, Stefan Rebenich); the church (Ch. 29, Alexander Evers); the conduct of politics (Ch. 30, Robert Dodaro); the Trinity (Ch. 31, Sabine MacCormack); redemption (Ch. 32, Lewis Ayres). Several of the contributors of these chapters clearly write from positions of their own within the discursive community of the Christian church(es), and they are not alone in the volume in doing so. It would be a strange *Companion to Augustine*, even in an age of the ascendancy of late antiquity, that did not admit such variety of company, and a poorer one that did not avail itself of such diligent readers. Augustine’s own sense of priorities, expressed in the formula of “orderly love” (*dilectio ordinata*: *Doc. chr.* 1.28; *C. Faust.* 22.28), already entailed a strategy of reading (*Doc. chr.* 1), and we should recall again that the second term of the mysterious command of *Confessions* 8 (*Tolle, lege!*) could be translated “choose!” as well as “read!” – and that the narrative of *Confessions* is full of

reading choices or acts of the reader's will. Beginning with Wetzel's recreation of Augustine's dramaturgy of the will, Part VI of the *Companion* essays the rereading of Augustine – in his own texts, with their late antique contexts in mind, if not in view – after sixteen cumulatively Augustinian centuries.

The historical reception of Augustine is a field of study now open and accessible as never before. An orientation to what is known and opportunities to uncover all that is still obscure will be found in the *Oxford Historical Guide to the Reception of Augustine* (Pollmann and Otten, eds.). The chapters in Part VII below are in the nature of site-reports on a vast, collaborative archeological excavation in progress, presenting data ranging from the levels closest to Augustine himself all the way up to the surface of our own time. Clemens Weidmann (Ch. 33) traverses the whole distance, offering an account of the physical transmission of Augustine's works, from the moment transcripts left his hands or those of his staff to the moment we click on a link to an online version of a critically edited text. Conrad Leyser (Ch. 34) and Eric Saak (Ch. 35) shed new light on the customization of Augustine (as "Augustine") by interested parties from the early Middle Ages to the sixteenth-century Reformations. Johannes Brachtendorf (Ch. 36) and John D. Caputo (Ch. 37) provide a sampling from what is, by any account, the most intellectually impressive department of the modern (including postmodern) reception of Augustine, namely the take-up of his writings by professional philosophers, from Descartes to Jean-Luc Marion, and the transformations that "Augustine" has undergone in the process. It may be noted in passing that the chronology of the late modern phase of this philosophical Augustinianism (roughly, from Husserl to Derrida) encompasses the period of the disciplinary rise of late antiquity, for which Augustine – the ancient historians' Augustine – has also been the author of choice. The co-existence and belated mutual recognition of these two differently disciplined modern companies of Augustine is an important part of the continuing story of reception and production.

Whenever the ideal reader of this *Companion* finally puts the book down, it is a safe bet that many of his and her fellows will, at some point, leap ahead to the Epilogue (Ch. 38). In doing so they will felicitously short-circuit the volume. For, as James J. O'Donnell intimates, after he has led us back to Augustine's own ground and spent a few moments there reflecting on the choices made by the present company of authors, the diligent reader of a *Companion to Augustine* is likely sooner or later to take a leaf out of the book of an earlier companion to Augustine and to start making reading for others (*Conf.* 8.12.30). In that regard, this work of many hands extends the original invitation of the *Confessions*.

