

Augustine's Clashing Affection and Distaste Toward Virgil's *Aeneid*

Michael Betrus

RELS 3613: Roman Religion

November 20, 2019

During the time of the Roman Republic and Empire, Romans were fascinated with the foundation of their city, and celebrations or ideas often centered upon the founding of Rome. Augustus Caesar was seen as a second Romulus, as he restored the temple of Quirinius, a god identified with Romulus, and shared a vulture-related myth with Rome's founder. Additionally, the festival of the Parilia, a ritual related to the well-being of herds and flocks, also celebrated the anniversary of Rome's foundation.¹ In a similar manner to how the emperor and a festival were tied to the founding of Rome, the most venerated Roman epic poem, the *Aeneid*, centers on this theme as well. Virgil writes the story of Aeneas, a Trojan, as he traveled to Italy and became an ancestor of the Romans. Aeneas spends the first half of the epic voyaging to Italy and the second half fighting for a home there. Virgil's work was then a centerpiece to Western education in the centuries to follow, instrumental to teaching in the Latin classics. Augustine, a late fourth and early fifth century Christian theologian, learned the stories of Aeneas in his youth, and the *Aeneid* captivated him. The Christian philosopher, who became critical to the orthodox church's defense against Pelagianism in his development of the doctrine of original sin, eventually formed mixed opinions concerning Virgil's epic. Augustine unfolds these thoughts and his connections to Aeneas in his *Confessions* and *City of God*. The *Aeneid*, the *Confessions*, and *City of God*, with the assistance of contemporary sources pertaining to the issue, highlight the influence of Virgil and his protagonist Aeneas on Augustine's thinking, writing, and spiritual development. Augustine connects with the wanderings of Aeneas and reveals a genuine fondness toward Virgil's classic as he reflects on Roman philosophy and tells the story of his own eventual conversion to Christianity. However, Augustine also views the epic as representative of a pagan

1. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome II: A Sourcebook*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 116-117.

culture that is distant from God and grows in a distaste for the story of Aeneas, creating a conflict of sentiments for the eventual Christian priest.

Augustine's connection with and warmth toward Virgil's *Aeneid* is most explicit in his *Confessions*, which has been considered the first Western autobiography ever written and is central to studies of Christian history today. The voice of the *Aeneid* permeates Augustine's autobiography in a way that "although Augustine's explicit references to the *Aeneid* are few, the shadows of Virgil within the narrative of the *Confessions* are deep."² In Book I of the *Confessions*, when telling of his early years, Augustine recounts how he "deeply loved" Latin and "[wept] over the death of Dido dying for love of Aeneas," depicting encounters with the classic from a young age.³ Aeneas wanders on his journey to Italy from Troy and is tempted by pleasures while being pushed along due to the help of divine intervention and visions. In Book VI, he visits the underworld, emerging with a reborn sense of duty, mission, and purpose. With the vision of a new home for his people in Italy, Aeneas arrives there and goes to battle, and Virgil ends the tale with Aeneas' victory in a final battle against Turnus, his archenemy. Augustine, who is a sort of "Christian Aeneas" in his *Confessions*, consciously or subconsciously structures his autobiography in a similar manner. While the first half of the *Aeneid* deals with the wanderings of Aeneas, the first nine books (of twelve) do the same for Augustine, both spiritually and physically. The concluding half of the *Aeneid* focuses on Aeneas' "struggle to win a new homeland," while Augustine's final books depict his "struggle to understand and live the

2. Michael C. McCarthy, "Augustine's Mixed Feelings: Vergil's *Aeneid* and the Psalms of David in the *Confessions*," *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 4 (October 2009): 458.

3. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.20-21.

new life of faith.”⁴ He relates to the struggles and wanderings of Aeneas from his youth to his maturity, and this theme is seen in individual circumstances throughout Augustine’s story.

Augustine’s identification with Aeneas throughout different points of his journey — during which he evaluates many of his lusts and desires, Manichaeism, Neoplatonism, and Christianity — is manifest in his departure from Carthage, his writing about his mother, Monica, and the role of divine command in his life. Aeneas answered a divine call to go to Italy and as a result had to leave Dido, the queen of Carthage, whom Aeneas loved and also who could not resume her position in the city after his departure. Dido had attempted to keep Aeneas in Carthage and was heartbroken to the point that Aeneas “struggled to comfort her in all her pain, to speak to her and turn her mind from grief,” and despite his love for her, he “took the course heaven gave him.”⁵ Augustine, in leaving the same city to teach in Rome, leaves the woman he loves most, his mother. He describes Monica as “fearfully upset at [his] going” to the point of “floods of tears.”⁶ Meanwhile, Augustine writes that God was “using [his] ambitious desires as a means towards putting an end to those desires” in his eventual conversion, highlighting heavenly providence and divine purpose in his departure from Carthage.⁷ These reflections create a parallel with Aeneas’ struggle with love and his sense of heavenly purpose in leaving the city. Furthermore, Monica can be seen as playing a role in Augustine’s life similar to that of Aeneas’ mother, the goddess Venus, in the Trojan’s life. Dr. Eric Ziolkowski, Professor of Bible at Lafayette College, explored this connection between Venus and Monica in writing about the relationship between Monica, Augustine, and the *Aeneid*. He maintains that “just as Venus

4. John Ó'Meara, “Virgil and Augustine: The *Aeneid* in the *Confessions*,” *The Maynooth Journal* 13 (December 1988): 42.

5. Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.546-550.

6. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.15.

7. *Ibid.*

whenever she sees fit, influences the Roman deities... to perform favors in her son's interest...so Monica prays constantly to the Christian God on Augustine's behalf."⁸ Near the beginning of the *Aeneid* and during the voyage to Italy, Venus appealed to her father, Jupiter, on Aeneas' behalf.

Fearful, yet reminding Jupiter of his promises, she implored him:

"Surely from these the Romans are to come
In the course of years, renewing Teucer's line,
To rule the sea and all the lands about it,
According to your promise. What new thought
Has turned you from them, Father?"⁹

Jupiter responds to his daughter by comforting her of the prosperous and successful outcome of Aeneas' undertaking, telling her that "[her] children's destiny has not been changed" and one day he will triumph in battle to allow him to "establish city walls and a way of life."¹⁰

Correspondingly, Augustine writes to God that in response to his spiritual lostness, his mother "wept for [him] before you more than mothers weep when lamenting their dead children."¹¹ Just as Jupiter comforted and reassured Venus about Aeneas' destiny in a new earthly city, God assured Monica of her son's eventual conversion to reside in the heavenly city. In response to her mourning Augustine's perdition, God told Monica "to have no anxiety."¹² Augustine describes that Monica was shown that "where she was, there [he] was also... standing beside her on the same rule."¹³ These analogous events in the two stories depict a mother appealing to their divine ruler on behalf of their son and receiving consolation rooted in providence and fate. The notion that Augustine's story is in a rhythm and connection with the *Aeneid* is also underscored in the

8. Eric Ziolkowski, "St. Augustine: Aeneas' Antitype, Monica's Boy," *Literature and Theology* 9, no. 1 (March 1995): 11.

9. Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.319-323.

10. Ibid, 1.348-357.

11. Augustine, *Confessions* 3.19.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

role of divine command in the stories. In Aeneas and Augustine's journeys to their respective destinations of Italy and Christian faith, divine revelation and instruction exhort the two to take action.

Augustine, throughout his *Confessions*, is led astray from the true faith by lusts and different philosophies. It is only through divine intervention that he converts to the Catholic faith. Similarly, Aeneas drifts from his mission in Book IV of the *Aeneid* when he falls in love with Dido and is distracted from his endeavor of going to Italy to establish a new homeland and, ultimately, become an ancestor of the Romans. Remaining in Carthage due to love was impeding Aeneas' duty, so Jupiter sent Mercury, god of messaging, travel, and commerce, to remind Aeneas of what he was divinely called to do through the following rebuke:

“What have you in mind? What hope, wasting your days
In Libya? If future history's glories
Do not affect you, if you will not strive
For your own honor, think of Ascanius,
Think of the expectations of your heir,
Iulus, to whom the Italian realm, the land
Of Rome, are due.”¹⁴

Aeneas was at once “shocked to the bottom of his soul,” as the divine command “had shaken him awake.”¹⁵ Reawakened to the gravity of his quest, he left Carthage despite being “shaken still / With love of her.”¹⁶ In his *Confessions*, after a loss of trust in Manichean doctrine, exposure to Neoplatonism, and discussions with two of his friends about Saint Antony, Augustine finds himself in reflection in a garden. He describes the turning point in his conversion story, emphasizing the role of divine command in stirring him to action in Christian faith:

As I was saying this and weeping in the bitter agony of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which),

14. Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.369-375.

15. Ibid, 4.379-383.

16. Ibid, 4.549-550.

saying and repeating over and over again ‘Pick up and read, pick up and read.’ At once my countenance changed, and I began to think intently whether there might be some sort of children’s game in which such a chant is used. But I could not remember having heard of one. I checked the flood of tears and stood up. I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find... I seized it, open it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: ‘Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts’ (Rom. 13:13-14).¹⁷

John O’Meara, a classical historian who performed detailed research on the life of Augustine, wrote that “Aeneas and Augustine, both, were by these divine commands astounded and galvanized into action. They were resolved to do what they knew should be done.”¹⁸ Augustine had made it known to readers that he knew conversion and surrender to the Lord was right as he struggled with sin. In Book VIII of the *Confessions*, nearing but before his conversion, he tells God that at that point in his life “I was an unhappy young man, wretched as at the beginning of my adolescence when I prayed you and said: ‘Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.’”¹⁹ Only divine command and intervention allowed for Augustine’s salvation. This prior wretchedness, or depravity, is central to Augustine’s understanding of a Christian’s natural state in sin, and the only solution — the mediation of Jesus Christ and God’s sovereign, intervening grace — is distinct to Augustine’s Christian theology in comparison to Virgil. However, despite this colossal difference in soteriology, it is divine intervention and command that propelled both men forward. It is due to the similarities between the stories of Aeneas and Augustine that O’Meara contends that “that Augustine should have thought of himself, given his acquaintanceship and sympathy with the *Aeneid*, from time to time in the course of his

17. Augustine, *Confessions* 8.29.

18. John Ó’Meara, “Virgil and Augustine: The ‘Aeneid’ in the ‘Confessions,’” *The Maynooth Journal* 13 (December 1988): 39.

19. Augustine, *Confessions* 8.17.

Confessions as another Aeneas is hardly surprising.”²⁰ However, while Augustine did tie his autobiography to the Roman epic and found himself wandering spiritually in the manner of Aeneas, the *Aeneid* also represented for Augustine a culture far from and opposed to Augustine’s God.

In both his *Confessions* and *City of God*, Augustine utilizes the *Aeneid* to reflect on his formerly depraved state before his conversion and to depict the weaknesses of Roman philosophy and culture. Although Augustine does put himself in the shoes of Aeneas at several points along the journey to conversion, he felt that the framework of the *Aeneid* and its cultural reception was irreconcilable with his God and biblical Scripture. In a piece discussing the contrasting roles of the Psalms of the Bible and Virgil’s *Aeneid* in the *Confessions*, Dr. Michael C. McCarthy wrote that Augustine felt a clash “between a culture dominated by the ancient classics and a new one formed by scripture.”²¹ The primary ancient classic in reference here, the *Aeneid*, symbolized to Augustine his lusts, his prioritization of his career, and his lack of peace and stability while believing in “worldly” philosophies. On the other hand, the Psalms oriented him toward prayer and his sovereign God. Fourth and fifth century Christians such as Augustine viewed the Roman Empire as filled with ungodliness and defined by a history of lusts, violence, and most significantly polytheistic religious practice. In contrast, the Christian life drew someone away from his or her lusts and old beliefs and toward monotheistic worship in a love for the Creator God. Therefore, the *Aeneid*, filled with unbiblical notions of the afterlife, salvation, and the divine, was incompatible with Christian doctrine and practice. McCarthy argues that the two

20. John Ó'Meara, “Virgil and Augustine: The ‘Aeneid’ in the ‘Confessions,’” *The Maynooth Journal* 13 (December 1988): 34.

21. Michael C. McCarthy, “Augustine’s Mixed Feelings: Vergil’s *Aeneid* and the Psalms of David in the *Confessions*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 4 (October 2009): 454.

works, one by *Aeneid* and one primarily by King David of Israel, represented two different heart postures for Augustine, in that “the *Aeneid* abets his own ambition to garner praise from others while the Psalms reorient his desire so that he wishes to praise God alone.”²² In addition to using the *Aeneid* as part of his own life story and to critique Roman ideas, Augustine also diagnoses his spiritual condition earlier in his life by recounting an interaction with the poem:

What is more pitiable than a wretch without pity for himself who weeps over the death of Dido dying for love of Aeneas, but not weeping over himself dying for his lack of love for you, my God, light of my heart, bread of the inner mouth of my soul, the power which begets life in my mind and in the innermost recesses of my thinking. I had no love for you and ‘committed fornication against you’ (Ps. 72:27); and in my fornications I heard all around me the cries ‘Well done, well done’ (Ps. 34:21; 39:16).²³

Augustine, in reflection of this moment that occurred in his youth, identified it as revealing that he cared about the pleasures that the world offered him while remaining ignorant of the eternal satisfaction found in God. His former association and engagement with unrighteousness were unthinkable to his converted self, creating a dividing line between the earthly city represented by the *Aeneid* and the heavenly city Augustine desired. He felt that emotions rooted in the writings of Virgil rather than in the Psalms “divert our attention from its proper focus on God and reinforce patterns based on falsehood.”²⁴ These falsehoods, prevalent throughout Roman culture and religion, are troublesome to Augustine and addressed in his writings.

The distance Augustine perceived between pagan Roman religion and true religion, found in Christianity, is most evident in his monumental work *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (often shortened to *City of God*). Written as a defense against the argument that the

22. Michael C. McCarthy, “Augustine’s Mixed Feelings: Vergil’s *Aeneid* and the Psalms of David in the *Confessions*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 4 (October 2009): 455.

23. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.21.

24. Michael C. McCarthy, “Augustine’s Mixed Feelings: Vergil’s *Aeneid* and the Psalms of David in the *Confessions*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 4 (October 2009): 461.

spread of the Christian faith led to the decline of the Roman Empire, Augustine spends much of the work addressing and critiquing different ideas of Roman philosophy and religion and expounding upon Christian doctrine. Dr. Helen Kaufmann, who specializes in Latin poetry in antiquity, wrote in an article on the reception of Virgil's underworld that for Augustine, Virgil "represents pagan religion, idle preoccupations, false beliefs and therefore needs to be rejected."²⁵ The idea that Augustine develops these notions about Virgil is perceptible from the first page of *City of God*, which was written a little over a decade after the *Confessions*. In his preface to Book I, Augustine contrasts Christian Scripture with the words of Anchises, Aeneas' father, in the *Aeneid*:

For the King and Power of this City which is our subject has revealed in the Scripture of his people this statement of the divine law, 'God resists the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.' This is God's prerogative; but man's arrogant spirit in its swelling pride has claimed it as its own, and delights to hear this verse quoted in its own praise: 'To spare the conquered, and beat down the proud.'²⁶

Augustine claims here that the Romans have sinfully claimed the power and duty that God ultimately controls in extending grace or destructive judgment. Due to the Augustinian emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the total depravity of man, Augustine views the Roman assumption of this kingly role as dishonoring to his God. The supremacy of God in relation to Rome is the root of Augustine's famous quote in the *City of God*: "The Heavenly City outshines Rome, beyond comparison. There, instead of victory, is truth; instead of high rank, holiness; instead of peace, felicity; instead of life, eternity."²⁷ Because Roman traditions and practices challenged Christianity and Augustine associated Virgil with Rome, Carol L. Ramage is accurate

25. Helen Kaufmann, "Virgil's Underworld in the Mind of Late Antiquity," *Latomus* 69, no. 1 (March 2010): 153.

26. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* 1.

27. *Ibid*, 2.29.

in expressing that “Augustine saw that [the *Aeneid*’s] very pre-eminence as Rome’s cultural myth made it a powerful opponent to the spread of the Christian message.”²⁸ However, Ramage draws the conclusion that instead of “[turning] his back upon pagan literature... he will oppose it by diverting its resources to Christian use, transforming what is for him the unreality of the *Aeneid* into spiritual nourishment for fledgling Christians.”²⁹ Augustine viewed a sinful, unrighteous man or woman, such as his previous self, as needing regeneration into becoming a new creation. Similarly, rather than neglecting pagan literature such as the *Aeneid*, he recreated it in the terms of true religion, taking the works of Virgil and others from being a “semblance of truth” to rightful and legitimate truth.³⁰ While the *Aeneid* and other works of Greek and Roman literature once defined his worldview and passions, the post-conversion regenerated Augustine came to view his relationship with God and the world through Scripture, particularly the Psalms. Because of this, Dr. McCarthy concludes his treatment of Augustine’s bond to the *Aeneid* and the Psalms in terms of a competition, saying both texts “aim, in such different ways, not only to dominate Augustine’s own discourse but to format the way he sees and interacts with the world.”³¹ The divine intervention that helps tie Aeneas’ and Augustine’s stories together also pulled Augustine and Virgil apart. The triumph over worldliness such as that found in Virgil is central to the *City of God* in Augustine’s emphasis on the flaws and shortcomings of Roman philosophy and the better, transcendent Christian truths.

28. Carol L. Ramage, “*The Confessions of St. Augustine: The Aeneid Revisited*,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 5 (April 1970): 54.

29. *Ibid*, 55.

30. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* 3.11.

31. Michael C. McCarthy, “Augustine’s Mixed Feelings: Vergil’s *Aeneid* and the Psalms of David in the *Confessions*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 4 (October 2009): 478.

Augustine's education introduced him to a Latin classic, the *Aeneid*, that shaped his conception of Roman culture and how he told his story in the *Confessions*. From weeping over Dido to rejecting the epic in light of the truth, much of Augustine's spiritual journey and thinking centered on Aeneas' wanderings toward Italy and the cultural ideas espoused in Virgil's work. The *Confessions* and the *City of God* were both written due to the clash between the world of Augustine's former self and the church of his converted self. The ties between Augustine and Virgil bring together two men of different beliefs into one story yet also represent ideological division stirred by a faith that rocked the Roman Empire.

Bibliography

- Augustine. *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Beard, Mary, John North, and Simon Price. *Religions of Rome II: A Sourcebook*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Kaufmann, Helen. "Virgil's Underworld in the Mind of Roman Late Antiquity." *Latomus* 69, no. 1 (March 2010): 150–60.
- McCarthy, Michael C. "Augustine's Mixed Feelings: Vergil's *Aeneid* and the Psalms of David in the *Confessions*." *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 4 (October 2009): 453–79.
- Ó'Meara, John. "Virgil and Augustine: The *Aeneid* in the *Confessions*." *The Maynooth Journal* 13 (December 1988): 30–43.
- Ramage, Carol L. "The *Confessions* of St. Augustine: The *Aeneid* Revisited." *Pacific Coast Philology* 5 (April 1970): 54–60.
- Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Ziolkowski, Eric J. "St. Augustine: Aeneas' Antitype, Monica's Boy." *Literature and Theology* 9, no. 1 (March 1995): 1–23.