

Veni Carthaginem: the Influence of a Vergilian theme upon Augustine's *Confessions*

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The influence of the Greek philosophers upon Augustine, especially that of the Platonists, has been given much attention by scholars; and rightly so, for throughout his works, we can see Augustine grappling with, and then re-interpreting, these philosophical ideas. What has perhaps not been so apparent to scholars over the centuries, however, is the influence of works which are considered purely literary, especially Vergil, not only upon his style of writing, but also as informing the content of those writings. Anyone who has read even the first book of the *Confessions* will see that Augustine is rejecting those works which had such a profound influence upon him in his youth. But one must reconcile his words there with his continued use of those works in his own writings, to such an extent that they provide him with a vocabulary, both linguistic and imaginative, with which to express his own struggle with his faith. If we consider that Augustine spent his formative years studying, and then teaching, the classics of Latin literature, we must assume that these works had a lasting influence on his ideas, especially in his writings.

As one example of this important connection, I will focus on Augustine's use of Vergil's images of Carthage, and the relationship between Dido and Aeneas which occurs there. Although there are relatively few direct references to these Vergilian passages, and often Augustine's vocabulary is different from that of Vergil, a closer examination will nevertheless reveal significant references in the *Confessions*. Furthermore, I argue that these references are more than just literary embellishments, but provide Augustine, and

the reader, with powerful concepts and images for expressing his own wanderings. Central to my argument is the notion that written texts, for Augustine, have the potential to affect the reader on an emotional, as well as an intellectual level. In recounting his own experiences with such texts, he is at the same time showing the reader the effect that he intends his own writings to have. Through a brief examination of one of Augustine's literary influences, and his use of it, perhaps we can be more receptive to the intended impact of the *Confessions*.

Augustine first refers to Vergil and the *Aeneid* in the midst of a discussion, and criticism, of his early literary education. The critique begins with the faults of his teachers, who “gave no consideration to the use that I might make of the things they forced me to learn” (*illi enim non intuebantur, quo referrem quod me discere cogebant*. 1.12.19).¹ This opening statement can perhaps serve to temper the harsher criticisms of literature to come, with the notion that his opposition to such literature lies in its misuse, rather than in the literature itself. Augustine follows this with the famous account of his first encounters with Vergil. He contrasts the potentially beneficial skills of reading and writing with his more advanced studies:

This was better than the poetry I was later forced to learn about the wanderings of some legendary fellow named Aeneas (forgetful of my own wanderings) and to weep over the death of a Dido killed herself because of love. In reading this, O God my life, all the while I was dying by my alienation from you, and my miserable condition in that respect brought no tear to my eyes.

nam utique meliores... quam illae, quibus tenere cogebar Aeneae nescio cuius errores oblitus errorem meorum et plorare Didonem mortuam, quia se occidit ab amore, cum interea me ipsum in his a te morientem, deus, vita mea, siccis oculis ferrem miserimus. (1.13.20)

Of his own miserable condition, he continues in the next chapter:

Over this I did not weep, but I wept over Dido who “died in pursuing her ultimate end with a sword.” while I abandoned you to pursue the most remote things of your creation, as dust going to dust.

et haec non flebam et flebam Didonem “exstinctam ferroque extrema secutam,”
sequens imse extrema condita tua relicto te et terra iens in terram.

(1.13.21)

Although this is ostensibly a rejection of the educational value of the *Aeneid* stories, Augustine is also using these very stories to set the stage for the story of his own wanderings. Notice how he has immediately related his young self to Aeneas in this respect. But while Aeneas’ *errores* are spatial, Augustine’s are spiritual, namely a straying from God. As we will see later, though, Augustine will also make use of the spatial wanderings of Aeneas in order to illustrate his own journey. In the lines which follow, Augustine then relates himself to Dido: he writes that the unknowing sympathy which he had for Dido resulted not from his own experience of love lost, but rather from his distance from God, and the resulting misery, or symbolic death. He then extends this connection in his use of the Vergil’s *extrema*, which he converts from indicating Dido’s actual end, to the remote (from God) objects of his affection. Augustine joins the two uses of *extrema* by means of the notion that distance from a god that is life for him, is in fact death. In addition, Augustine’s use of both Aeneas and Dido to describe his early struggles shows the complexity of his account of these wanderings. He does not merely reject his early Dido sympathies in favor of a now retrospective account of his actions in terms of Aeneas. Rather, he sees his early miseries and confusion to have resulted from two roles which he played simultaneously: that of abandoner and abandoned.² It is only through reference to the emotional responses of, and relationship between, both

characters, that Augustine can adequately express the misery of a person who, through his own free will, is bereft of the presence of God.

At this point, a few words must be said about Augustine's relationship with the written word, especially as regards the emotional response of the reader. We must never forget that, as a former teacher of literature and rhetoric, he was acutely aware of the power that words and stories have over people. As we have seen, Augustine experienced this power firsthand, and herein too lies his caution in terms of its pedagogical use. But rather than reject this medium outright, which is impossible, he instead chose to harness that power for what he would consider the right use: to turn one's mind toward God through the emotional impact that a well-crafted work of literature can produce. That this experience is primarily emotional is clear not only from the Aeneas and Dido account, but also through his accounts of his more positive experiences with the written word, and the effect they had on him. His encounter with Cicero's *Hortensius* is one of the clearest examples of this effect.

The book changed my feelings. It altered my prayers, Lord, to be towards you yourself, and it altered my wishes and desires. Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardor in my heart.

ille vero liber mutavit affectum meum et ad te ipsum, domine, mutavit preces meas et vota ac desideria mea fecit alia. viluit mihi repente omnis vana spes et immortalitatem sapientiae concupiscebam aestu cordis incredibili. (3.4.7)

Augustine's conversion to philosophy was no dry intellectual exercise, for the reader is bombarded with emotional vocabulary: feelings (*affectum*), prayers (*preces*), desire (*vota ac desideria*), and even longing with incredible ardor in his heart (*concupiscebam aestu cordis incredibili*). His use of *incredibili* seems to show that these feelings are

inaccessible by the everyday intellect, and that true wisdom is a turning not only of the mind, but of the whole person, including his desires and prayers. His longing for the *immortalitatem sapientiae* echoes the erotic striving of the soul as described in Plato's *Symposium*, with which Augustine was probably familiar in some form. Continuing with the theme of philosophy as a love of wisdom, he begins the next section by reiterating his desire: "*Quomodo ardebam, deus meus, quomodo ardebam*" (how I burned, my God, how I burned. 3.4.8). It is with all this in mind that Augustine relates the story of his own conversion, couched in the poetic themes and imagery that he has reworked for a very different, but still emotional, effect upon his readers. As we move further into the story of the *Confessions*, let us keep in mind Augustine's perspective, ability, and intention with regard to literature, as well as his careful use of Vergilian imagery, for, I argue, it is not without reason that he makes so much of his time in Carthage.

The first explicit mention of Carthage seems unremarkable, or even random. But in such a carefully constructed work as this, few things are random. Augustine first mentions Carthage in his continued critique of various *poetica figmenta*. Here, he rejects these stories for not being true. In response to teachers of literature and rhetoric, such as he was, he says:

If I put the question to them whether the poet's story is true that Aeneas once came to Carthage, the uneducated will reply that they do not know, while the educated will say it is false"

si proponam eis interrogans, utrum verum sit quod Aeneas aliquando Carthaginem venisse poeta dicit, indoctiores nescire se respondebunt, doctiores autem etiam negabunt verum esse. (1.13.22).

Although he points out the obvious fact that such stories are not literally true, we must not think this the end of the story. As we saw in his account of his reaction to Dido, literal truth is not the only kind of truth to be found in such a story. One could argue that the young Augustine was so affected by the story of Dido because it spoke a truth about his own life, however unaware of this he was at the time.³ And so with this passage, Augustine's criticism is also an admission of a different kind of truth: the historical Aeneas may never have been to Carthage, but Augustine in fact did go there and, as we will see, Vergil's story also much bearing upon Augustine's own account of his stay in Carthage. As far as the theme of Aeneas in Carthage is concerned, there are not many more direct references to the *Aeneid* in the *Confessions* in this respect. But I think that, even this early in the *Confessions*, this important Vergilian theme has been established so that even the faint or indirect references which come later in the *Confessions* will be adequate to remind the reader of his earlier discussion of, and identification with, this theme later in book 3.⁴

Augustine returns to Vergil's Carthage when he recounts his own arrival there in book 3. Here we must not ignore the significance of the first words of that book, *Veni Carthaginem*, for not only is he stating a literal truth about his own life, but he is evoking all of the associations of Aeneas' stay there, especially of erotic love and abandonment.⁵ If we look at the rest of that first sentence of book 3, these associations immediately become clear: "I came to Carthage and all around me hissed a cauldron of illicit loves" (*veni Carthaginem, et circumstrepebat me undique sartago flagitiosorum amorum*. 3.1.1). Although the words are not specifically Vergilian, one could easily relate this image to the boiling cauldron which is used by Vergil to describe Turnus' possession by Allecto

(7.462-6). But Augustine's words are perhaps more effective for his purposes, especially the word for cauldron, *sartago*, which most appropriately rhymes with *Cartago*.⁶ Just as with Aeneas, Carthage will be for young Augustine too a vessel which is boiling over with dark passions, but in which he will also gain the insight which will allow him to leave for Italy, the true spiritual *patria*, the land of his baptism.

In book 4 we find further parallels between the lives of Augustine and Aeneas, for here he describes his relationship with a woman.

In those years I had a woman. She was not my partner in what is called lawful marriage. I had found her in my state of wandering and lack of prudence
in illis annis unam habebam non eo quod legitimum vocatur coniugio cognitam,
sed quam indagaverat vagus argor inops prudentiae. (4.2.2)

Whether officially sanctioned or not, Augustine sees this bond in retrospect, however close, to have been unlawful in the eyes of God. In addition, this passage takes the reader back to the *Aeneid* where, also in book 4, we see Aeneas' unlawful marriage, which is "legitimized" by Juno and the nymphs of the underworld. Upon the completion of this ritual, Vergil comments:

No more does Dido obsess over a secret love: she calls it marriage, and with that name hides her guilt.⁷

nec iam furtivum Dido meditatur amorem;
coniugium vocat; hoc praetexit nomine culpam. (4.171-2)

The most striking parallel between the two passages is "*vocatur coniugio*," and "*coniugium vocat*." Whether or not this is a direct reference, it is easy to see how Augustine would be making use of Vergil's image. His point is that even if he were married, what passes for marriage in Carthage is no better than what he had. In the same

way, Vergil describes Dido's so-called marriage to Aeneas as a literal pretext (*praetexit*) for their *culpa*. His view of Carthaginian custom is in fact one of the main reasons he cites for going to Rome. For in Rome, he had heard, "the young men went quietly about their studies and were kept in order by a stricter imposition of discipline" (*audiebam quietius ibi studere adulescentes et ordinatioe disciplinae coercitione sedari*. 5.8.14). Of the disrespect committed by his current students, he complains that it "would be punished under the law were it not that custom protects them" (*punienda legibus, nisi consuetudo patrona sit*. Ibid.). While he humbly cites this decidedly un-epic reason for his move from Carthage to Rome, the Vergilian motif is still present, especially in his account of his departure.

Augustine begins 5.8.15 by hinting at more significant reasons behind his departure, but of which he knew nothing at the time.

But you knew, God, why I left Carthage and went to Rome, and of that you gave no hint either to me or to my mother, who was fearfully upset at my going and followed me down to the sea

sed quare hinc abirem et illuc irem, tu sciebas, deus, nec indicabas mihi nec matri, quae me profectum atrociter planxit et usque ad mare secuta est.

The larger significance of Augustine's travels re-appears with a reference to God, who alone knows the reasons behind this episode. As with Vergil's story, the main character here has a fate, or destiny, which must be fulfilled. Augustine, however, receives far fewer hints about his mission than does Aeneas, and it is only in retrospect that he can discover the real significance that his trials held for him. Whereas Aeneas is spurred on by some knowledge of his mission and destiny, however inadequate, Augustine portrays himself as being almost blindly guided by God's plan for him, which he had been unable

to understand in the moment. With the mention of his mother's reaction to his departure, Augustine returns the reader to the theme of abandonment, which he conveyed so effectively through earlier references to Dido. Just like Aeneas, Augustine must resort to stealth in order to escape the woman who represents the emotional bonds which hinder his departure. When he finally does leave, it is under cover of darkness, while his mother weeps and prays at the shrine of the martyred Cyprian. This image only reinforces the notion that, for Augustine, Carthage contains no potential for life, here defined as a closeness to God. Similarly in the *Aeneid*, Aeneas leaves behind a weeping and praying Dido, who is preparing her own funeral pyre. In a dream, Aeneas had been warned that remaining in Carthage would mean death for him. Augustine was not unaware of the imagery of death and sorrow which characterized his own experience leaving Carthage.⁸ Again, while Augustine's vocabulary is not taken directly from Vergil, the images undoubtedly are. That he is now applying the Dido analogy to his mother does not create any interpretive problems, for his references to Dido have never been in the form of a one-to-one analogy. Early in the *Confessions*, he used the example of Dido to describe his own grief and estrangement from God. Next, he portrayed his female companion in Carthage as playing Dido to his Aeneas. His use of Dido in describing his mother is effective as well, for it is consistent with his more abstract conception of the truth in mythical stories, as opposed to historical fact.

Here we can also see the limits of Augustine's use of this story. While the image is extremely effective in portraying the grief that Monica feels at the perceived physical loss of her son, a reaction which Augustine attributes to her descent from Eve, the

similarities stop here.⁹ He seems to evoke a scenario from the *Aeneid*, but only half of it, and herein lies its significance:

The wind blew and filled our sails and the shore was lost to our sight. there, when morning came, she was crazed with grief, and with recriminations and groans she filled your ears. But you paid no heed to her cries.

flavit ventus et implevit vela nostra et litus subtraxit aspectibus nostris, in quo mane illa insaniebat dolore et querellis et gemitu implebat auras tuas contemnentis ista. (5.8.15)

Perhaps this is an echo of the following passage from Vergil:

When the ships gained the deep and no longer any land is in sight, but sea on all sides and on all sides sky, then overhead loomed a black rain cloud...

ut pelagus tenuere rates nec iam amplibus illa
occurrit tellus, maria undique et undique caelum,
olli caeruleus supra caput adstitit imber, (5.8-10)

as well as an earlier passage:

Soon as the queen saw the light whiten and the fleet move on with even sails, and knew the shores and harbors were void of any oarsmen, three and four times she struck her comely breast with her hand...

regina, e speculis ut primum albescere lucem
vidit et aequatis classem procdere velis,
litoraue et vacuos sensit sine remige portus,
terque quaterque manu pectus percussa decorum (4.586-9)

There are many similarities here: the abandoned woman's morning realization, and her subsequent emotional reaction, and even curses. We also see the isolation of the ships in the sea, and the foreshadowing of disaster. But this is where the two accounts diverge.

While Aeneas and his crew are about to feel the negative effects of Dido's wrath, via her prayers to the gods, Monica's frustrated prayers go unheeded, in the interests of a deeper prayer for her son's salvation:

Yet in your deep counsel you heard the central point of her longing, namely that you would make me what she continually prayed for, though not granting her what she asked at that moment”

sed tu alte consulens et exaudiens cardinem desiderii eius non curasti quod tunc petebat, ut me faceres quod semper petebat. (5.8.15)

In Augustine’s world, there are no such divine conflicts—there are no other gods to grant her selfish prayers. At the end of this chapter, Augustine shows that his mother’s Didonean condition was only temporary.

And yet after accusing me of deception and cruelty, she turned again to pray for me and to went back to her usual home, and I to Rome.

et tamen post accusationem fallaciarum et crudelitatis meae conversa rursus ad deprecandum te pro me abiit ad solita, et ego Romam. (5.8.15)

Augustine refers to her pain as the necessary pangs of her spiritual pregnancy, during which he says she suffered more than when she gave birth to him in the flesh (5.9.13).

Later in book 5 Augustine describes the separation from his longtime female companion, and here we see that, although he is now in Rome, his break from Carthage is not yet complete. In spite of his retroactive condemnation of his relationship, he does not hide the emotional pain he felt at the separation. He says that she was torn from his side, an image which could easily refer to the first division of Adam and Eve, where God formed Eve from Adam’s rib, or side.¹⁰ In his subsequent state of unhappiness, he was not able to enter the lawful marriage which had been arranged for him, but procured another woman (*procuravi aliam*), for the sake of lust rather than marriage (6.15.25). In this passage, one could recognize the taunts of a different Dido, namely as portrayed in Ovid’s *Heroides*. In Italy, she says to Aeneas, lies not marriage, but just another Dido:

Another love awaits to be taken, another oath to be sworn, another Dido whom you will again betray.

Alter habendus amor tibi restat et altera Dido
quamque iterum fallas, altera danda fides. (7.21-2)

Again, although perhaps not a direct reference, the sentiment seems appropriate, and Augustine was probably familiar with this text, both as a young sympathizer with Dido, and later as a teacher of Latin literature.

The remaining references to Carthage are few in the *Confessions*, but perhaps not without significance, in light of what we have seen so far. We have to wonder why the city turns up occasionally as his “regular example of a place seen and remembered.”¹¹ Because of the effect that the city had on him, both within the context of Vergil’s imagery, and in the details of Augustine’s own life, it makes sense that Carthage would occupy a place of some prominence in his investigations of memory, by which we come to know truth, and even God. The final occurrence of the name “Carthage” is in his discussion of how we remember actual things as opposed to how we remember concepts such as “the happy life” (10.21.30). This takes the reader full circle, back to book 1, where he was debating the truth of whether or not Aeneas actually went to Carthage. Once again Augustine is confronting the reader with the different ways that we understand, and the respective objects of those different ways of knowing. Augustine went to Carthage; this is a fact. But there is also much truth in what Vergil’s Carthage means to him. We are no longer merely in the world of historical facts, but perhaps he has touched on something even more real. Through this blending of fact and fiction, his own wanderings and the mythical wanderings of Aeneas seem to converge on Augustine’s conception of a universal journey, on which all humans must embark. This is

the discovery of the true self, the biblical “I am” which we will never find so long as we flee from ourselves.

See how widely I have ranged, Lord, searching for you in my memory. I have not found you outside it.

ecce quantum spatiatum sum in memoria mea quaerens te, domine, et non te inveni extra eam. (10.24.35)

In conclusion, I do not intend this little investigation to be the end of the matter, but rather to point to a beginning. Often, it is only at the higher, and therefore more obscure levels of Augustinian scholarship, that this literary and inter-textual perspective has been taken seriously as having significant bearing on the content of Augustine’s works, not only as literary embellishments, but as central to his message. I hope that I have at least shown that there is much room for further study. The more we look into a work like the *Confessions*, the more it can come to mean to us as readers. Augustine meant his work to impact the reader on many levels and in different ways; this is clear from his account of the many ways in which texts, both religious and secular, Christian and pagan, affected his life. Perhaps this new look at Augustine’s literary influences can challenge us to look at Augustine’s works with the same rigor, thought, imagination and feeling with which he read and wrote.

¹ All translations of the *Confessions* are from Chadwick, often modified.

² Cf. Bennet 56

³ “From the perspective offered by the older, converted Augustine, we are made to see how inadequate the young Augustine was to discern the truth in what he read” (Ibid.).

⁴ “At the same time, it was the story, and not merely the emotive vocabulary of the *Aeneid*, that left a sediment in the *Confessions*” (MacCormack 97).

⁵ Cf. Clark's cautious statement: "Probably, though not explicitly, Virgil supplied Augustine with images of his own life, tossed on a stormy sea with his companions, seeking to understand the commands of a distant father, and diverted by erotic love from his true purpose of his life" (12).

⁶ Cf. Clark ad loc.

⁷ Translations of the *Aeneid* are from Fairclough, modified.

⁸ "Augustine likewise left behind a place of death, the oratory and grave of the revered martyr, Cyprian, where his mother was pouring out her prayers" (MacCormack 99).

⁹ "At this juncture, however, his story diverged from its Vergilian prototype,..." (Ibid.).

¹⁰ Compare his words at *Confessions* 6.15.25: *avulsa a latere meo* with the Vulgate Genesis 2.22: *et aedificavit Dominus Deus costam quam tulerat de Adam in mulierem et adduxit eam ad Adam*.

¹¹ O'Donnell ad 10.16.25.

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