

Reading Augustine Reading Virgil: "Tolle Lege" Redux
Mary C. Russell (Baylor University)

Scholars have long explored Augustine's literary relationship to Virgil (Bennett, *REAug* [1988] 47-69; Ramage, *PCP* [1970] 54-60; MacCormack, *Shadows of Poetry: Vergil in the Mind of Augustine* CUP [1999]). Augustine uses Virgilian ideals and themes to demonstrate the way in which Christian ideology transcends Virgil's pagan framework (Mommsen, *JHI* [1951] 346-52; Gavigan, *CW* [1951] 50-53). The Christian journey ends in *pax eterna* which transcends the *pax Romana*. The *Confessions* is infused with Virgilian themes which are seen in the similar passages between the *Confessions* and the *Aeneid*. In Book 8 of *Confessions*, Augustine's conversion happens when he responds to the command *tolle lege* and then picks up the Bible and reads it. In Book 8 of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas takes his destiny upon his shoulders after picking up and "reading" the shield.

Many similarities appear between the two passages. First, both occur in the eighth book of each work. Second, the settings for both passages occur in a *locus amoenus*. Augustine says, "ego sub quadam fici arbore stravi me nescio quomodo, et dimisi habenas lacrimis" (*Conf.* 8.12). Virgil writes "et amplexus nati Cytherea petiuit, arma sub aduersa posuit radiantia quercu." (*Aen.* 8.615-16). Both heroes are in nature, and, more specifically, under a tree. Third, the roles of Monica and Venus are similar. Augustine portrays Monica as constantly pointing him toward the scriptures. Likewise, Venus gives Aeneas his shield. In addition, the object both are God-given.

When discussing his conversion, Augustine writes that he heard a little boy or girl repeating the refrain, *tolle lege* (*Conf.* 8.12). After reading from the book of Romans, Augustine writes, "statim quippe cum fine huiusce sententiae, quasi luce securitatis infusa cordi meo, omnes dubitationis tenebrae diffugerunt" (*Conf.* 8.12). When giving her son his armor, Venus says, "en perfecta mei promissa coniugis arte munera. ne mox aut Laurentis, nate, superbos aut acrem dubites in proelia poscere Turnum" (*Aen.* 8.828-832). Just like the *dubitationis tenebrae* that fled away from Augustine, the purpose of Venus' gift was to remove Aeneas' doubts. Both characters were given a gift which freed them from hesitation.

After viewing the images on the shield, Aeneas "miratur rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet/ attollens umero famamque et fata nepotum" (*Aen.* 989-92). Aeneas sees the images but is "ignarus." He embarks upon the future, inspired by an image that he does not understand. He feels joy in the surface of the images and picks up the shield on his shoulder. Augustine, by contrast, embarks on the future under the guidance of the Word. Though Augustine does not have complete understanding, he recognizes the force of Romans 13:13-14. This understanding of the words in Romans allows Augustine to have a deep, personal reaction: "quasi luce securitatis infusa cordi meo." *Securitatis* points back to the shield which also provides a sense of security. Aeneas' security is found in temporal power (a sword and shield), while Augustine's security infuses his heart. If Paul's pen is not said specifically to be mightier than Aeneas' sword, by allusion, it is certainly mightier and even more influential than his shield.