

Aeneid as Gift in Augustine's *Confessions*

When talking about the concept of the gift, social anthropologists are primarily concerned with three components of gift exchange: giving, receiving, and reciprocation. The latter can manifest itself in many ways (e.g. gratitude, a gift in return, or a favor bestowed later). Gifts function to create relationships and networks, and their value is determined by those, among whom the gifts circulate. Hyde discusses gifts as taking on new value or “increase” as they are circulated and how these gifts expand their sphere of circulation by being passed on beyond the two original participants.¹ Texts are gifts for numerous reasons: first, they are given and “received”; once received, they are subject to the interpretation of the reader. Secondly, like gifts, they also compel a return, which in literature can appear in the form of allusion or adoption of themes and figures. Thirdly, they expand the circle in which they are circulated, and, in the process, take on new meaning and value. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that in Augustine's *Confessions*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, in its reception by Augustine, belongs in the realm of gift, as conceived by Augustine himself.

When Augustine reads and memorizes passages from the *Aeneid* as a school age boy, he finds himself forgetting his own *errores* and weeping for Dido (*Conf.* 1.13.20). As a convert, he looks back and reflects on the perversity of his sadness: *quid enim miserius misero non miserante se ipsum et flente Didonis mortem, quae fiebat amando Aenean, non flente autem mortem suam, quae fiebat non amando te, deus, lumen cordis mei*, “For what is more pitiful than a pitiful man pitying himself and crying over the death of Dido, which happened because she loved Aeneas, yet not crying over his own death, which happened because he did not love you, God, light of my heart” (*Conf.* 1.13.20). Although Augustine criticizes his boyhood lessons in the *Aeneid*, nevertheless, his *Confessions* are replete with references and allusions to Vergil's work. Bennett reconciles this discrepancy as Augustine reappropriating “pagan literature in the service of truth” (Bennett, 53).² Her reading focuses on and depends upon the conversion of Vergil's text. Ramage similarly views Augustine as “transforming what is for him the unreality of the *Aeneid* into spiritual nourishment for fledgling Christians” (Ramage, 55).³ There is evidence for this sort of transformation in the *Confessions*. Augustine himself reflects that even the tales of Medea's flight are more wholesome than the lies of the Manichaeans, because at least he can transform them into something edifying: *nam versum et carmen etiam ad vera pulmenta transfero*, “for I can turn verse and song into real food” (*Conf.* 3.6.11).

As Bennett and Ramage's arguments suggest, the problem with the *Aeneid* is not in the text itself. Augustine does not criticize Vergil's text so much as he criticizes his own reading of it or, rather, his boyhood *reception* of it. Following his conversion he is able to read the text in such a way to make a proper return on it, that is, in a way that furthers his goal of glorifying God. His return on Vergil's gift becomes yet another gift in the form of his *Confessions*, so that his readers may know how deeply they must cry out to God (2.3.5.)

I will examine the concept of the *Aeneid* as gift by looking specifically at Augustine's reception of the figure of Dido in his *Confessions*, who, I will argue, is representative of the desires of Augustine and his mother's attachment to the things of the world and their mis-reception of these objects. Augustine's boyhood sympathy for Dido is a symptom of his very attachment to the world, or as Fichter

¹ Hyde, Lewis. 1979. *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. Vintage Books, New York.

² Bennet, Camille. 1988. “The Conversion of Vergil: The *Aeneid* in Augustine's *Confessions*.” *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes*, 34: 46-69.

³ Ramage, Carol L. 1970. “The *Confessions* of St. Augustine: The *Aeneid* Revisited”. *Pacific Coast Philology*, 5: 54-60.

puts it, “Dido’s love of Aeneas has a counterpart in Augustine’s cupidinous love of this world” (p.42).⁴ Vergil’s text is a gift, from which Dido emerges and becomes a means for Augustine to diagnose his desire for God, of which he was ignorant in his youth. In turn, Augustine reciprocates or makes a return on Vergil’s gift, appropriating Dido’s misery and loss to talk about his separation from God and how it came to be remedied. Just as Augustine sees God making use of his *errores* to good ends, Augustine turns Vergil’s work into an effective instrument of confession. In this way Augustine offers his reception of the *Aeneid* as a gift to his own audience, who most likely already appreciated Vergil’s epic as a gift of poetry and beauty in itself.

⁴ Fichter, Andrew. 1982. *Poets Historical: Dynastic Epic in the Renaissance*. New Haven.