

The Silence of *Aeneid* 6 in Augustine's *Confessions*

Numquid et post descensum vitae non vultis ascendere et vivere?

Augustine, *Confessiones* 4.12.19

Throughout Augustine's *Confessions* Vergil's *Aeneid* is quite noisily present. In this paper, I explore its moment of silence, particularly the moment of silence of *Aeneid* 6. I submit that at *Confessions* 9.10.24-25 – which describes an anabasis or ascent of the soul experienced by Augustine and his mother – Augustine frames his narrative on the model of the catabasis of *Aeneid* 6. At the same time, he displaces and hence silences *Aeneid* 6 by substituting in place of Anchises' cosmological, psychological, and eschatological first speech to his son (*Aen.* 6.724-51) direct quotation of a Neo-Platonic text, Plotinus' *Ennead* 5.1.2 (*On the Three Primary Hypostases*).

Augustine's quotation of Plotinus at the heart of his narrative of ascent constitutes a double gesture. First, the Plotinian text interprets the cosmology, psychology, and eschatology of Anchises' speech, hence amplifying Vergil's words even as it displaces them in order to disclose their true, Platonic meaning. Second, the Plotinian text that displaces the Vergilian text attempts, in turn, to displace *itself* with a call for the silencing of all speech (*Conf.* 9.10.25, quoting Plotinus' *Enneads* 5.1.2.14-17):

“If...the tumult of the flesh should fall silent (*sileat*), silent (*sileant*) the phantoms of the earth, and of the waters and of the air, silent also the heavens, and if the soul itself should fall silent, and transcend itself by not thinking about itself; if dreams should fall silent, and imaginary revelations, every language and every sign (*omnis lingua et omne signum*)...”

In this silence, Augustine and Monica hear their Heavenly Father speak without the mediation of earthly signs (*si...audiamus verbum eius*). The silent plenitude of his Word apprises them of the celestial Heldenshau, the nature of the “*vita aeterna sanctorum*.” Thus does Augustine’s *Confessions* silence all the texts that it accumulates, or better, of which it, like Augustine’s life itself, is an accumulation: the *Aeneid*, from which he gained his love of language, Cicero and Plotinus, who inspired him to philosophical transcendence, and even scripture, our earthly proxy for the Word heard in its purity. Augustine has inscribed his autobiography like a palimpsest over Plotinus’ text, with its doctrine of the soul’s transcendence of the sensible cosmos, while in the same gesture inscribing Plotinus’ text over Anchises’ philosophical speech in *Aeneid* 6. In placing the *Aeneid*’s catabasis at two removes and Plotinus’ anabasis at one remove from the silence of his own climactic ascent, Augustine attempts to kick away, as it were, the textual scaffolding that brought him to the summit, the words upon which he climbed to the Word. And yet his predicament – that he can only convey this silence in language – ensures the audibility of the stubborn structure beneath his work and of his work itself.