

Baptizing the Bees – Elysium in Augustine’s *Confessions* 9

This paper will examine the famous scene from Augustine’s *Confessions* 9.10 where the newly baptized Augustine has a conversation with his mother Monica, especially with a view to Vergilian influences. During his conversation at Ostia, Augustine describes how he and his mother both transcend the perception of their physical surroundings and ascend to a heavenly knowledge of the divine mysteries about which all words fail to describe. Augustine’s mother had been hoping for his conversion for his entire life, and thus this moment serves as a climactic conclusion to the autobiographical portion of the work. Indeed, after the conclusion to this intimate moment between mother and son, Monica admits that the one thing she still desired in this life before moving on to the next was to see him converted to Christianity (*Conf.* 9.10.26). This paper argues for a connection between *Confessions* 9.10 and Vergil’s *Georgics* 4 which enriches the reading of Augustine’s conclusion to his autobiographical work.

Much ink has already been spilled on Augustine’s reception of Vergil and the overall influence the writings of Vergil has had on Augustine’s entire corpus. This is especially true in his *Confessions*, which has been dubbed Augustine’s “*Aeneid*.” In Book 9 of the *Confessions*, Jacob Mackey points out a connection between this scene and the underworld in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*. He writes that while Aeneas underwent a katabasis to the underworld, Augustine takes a divine anabasis. When Aeneas arrives at Elysium, he meets his father Anchises, who then describes to him the future of Rome as signified by the parade of heroes. Augustine, meanwhile, speaks with his mother Monica. However, Mackey points out that rather than allude to Anchises’s speech in this scene, Augustine cites texts from Plotinus in order to capture a picture

of the divine (Mackey 2020, 230–32). This raises the question to what extent Augustine alludes to Vergil’s underworld here, or to what extent is Monica a foil for Anchises.

Another scholar has argued cogently for a link between *Confessions* Book 10 and Vergil’s *Georgic* 4, pointing out how Augustine uses the same descriptive language to describe memory as Vergil uses to describe societal structure of the bees (Hübner, 1981). In Book 10, this culminates in Augustine extending his discussion of memory even to the topic of knowledge of God, wherein some sort of preexisting comprehension is necessary to satisfy his interior desire for this full knowledge (*Conf.* 10.20-25). Thus, Augustine chooses to use language from *Georgics* 4 to describe the process of obtaining memory, even of the divine. Likewise, Vergil tacitly makes mention of his fourth *Georgic* in *Aeneid* 6.707–709, where he compares the parade of heroes near the river Lethe to the hum of bees across a meadow. As Vergil suggests the future of Rome perhaps resembles the bee society he lays out in his *Georgics* 4, Augustine suggests that ascent to a knowledge of God shares this resemblance. Thus, this paper argues that although in *Confessions* 9.10 Augustine seemingly makes little mention of Anchises’s cosmology and parade of heroes, this may still be read into his dialogue with Monica through the divine knowledge they each attained together, such a knowledge Augustine later clarifies in Book 10 to be like the perfect society of bees described in Vergil’s Fourth *Georgic*.

Bibliography

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