REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Augustine: A New Biography. By James J. O'Donnell. New York: HarperCollins, 2005. xv + 396 pages. $26.95.

Four Perspectives

I

This book is intended to provoke—and the questions it raises are: *Why*? and *To what end*! More about that later. James O'Donnell's name is well known to those who study Augustine of Hippo. A first step in building this reputation was a little book published in 1985 (*Augustine*, Twayne's World Authors Series) that can still serve as a concise introduction to the man and his thought. A signal that he was to be taken seriously as a scholar of Augustine was his three-volume work *Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford University Press, 1992), offering a critical Latin text of the Confessions followed by what may be described as an exegetical commentary. Here O'Donnell takes the student phrase by phrase (and sometimes word by word) through the dense Latin of Augustine's text. It is a work of monumental scholarship that will most likely not be attempted again—any equivalent effort would simply be redundant. Equally important is the role that O'Donnell has played in bringing Augustine into the electronic age: "Augustine was the first saint to have his own home page on the World Wide Web" (336)—thanks to O'Donnell. In so doing, he has also stimulated a vast range of "virtual" scholarship on the entire patristic period. When O'Donnell writes about Augustine he deserves to be taken seriously.

Anyone familiar with Augustine and the extensive scholarship around him would see in the very title a portal into a history of debate and controversy. Modern biographies of Augustine begin with a controversial work written by P. Alfaric in 1918, *L'Évolution intellectuelle de S. Augustin*. He argued that Augustine's conversion was to Platonism, not to Christianity, and initiated a vigorous debate about the man and his thought that has continued unabated ever since. One could note a second phase in these debates, marked by P. Courcelle's classic work *Recherches sur les 'Confessions' de S. Augustin* (1950). Here the question raised regarded the historicity of the *Confessions*, turning attention to the "truth" of the *Confessions*, and so to the very heart of what we know (or do not know) about the man. Perhaps the most significant book written about Augustine in the twentieth century is Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (1967, 2000). It is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Peter Brown's Augustine that is perhaps the most known Augustine. This work is elegantly written, the rich tapestry of its narrative enticing the reader into another world. The Augustine that emerges here, especially in the light of the Epilogue that accompanied its 2000 re-edition, is, one might say, a heroic figure (not to say that Brown always praises his hero), in the sense that one can feel and imagine his great genius along with his great humanity. He is someone you wish you could have been in the presence of. It strikes me that Brown's biography must be seen as a background to O'Donnell's "new biography"—something I will return to at the end of this review.

To say that this is a provocative study is perhaps an understatement. When O'Donnell puts "new" into his title, that is exactly what he intends—to get us to look at Augustine in a way we have never looked at him before. A single quote makes that all too clear: "The young Augustine in Milan, awash in flop sweat in his stretch limousine en route to praise the emperor or his latest favorite, had made his way in the world as a prize-winning stage performer of just this sort" (30). A stretch limousine indeed! This little aside, occurring early on in O'Donnell's narrative, is representative of the entire book in a variety of ways. The style of writing O'Donnell has chosen is not that of the staid and clinical scientific researcher. Rather he writes as a journalist (perhaps the closest contemporary equivalent to the role played by the *rhetor* in Augustine's world), and so this story can even find room for the Grateful Dead, Le Carré, and, yes, bowling leagues (205)! The provocative approach does not end there. O'Donnell tells us that he will only speak of "Augustine's *god*"—not *God*: "the commonest risk run by historians of this period [is to assume] that we know just what Augustine meant [by god]" (7). We cannot dare to claim to know the "god" of Augustine, is O'Donnell's point. To "turn up the heat" further, he will not allow Augustine's "version" of Christianity to be called "catholic"—*Caecilianist* is what Augustine is.

These and other devices O'Donnell employs are deliberate: one could say that the underlying intention of the book is to bracket everything we think we know of Augustine and to start afresh: "imagine another narrative" (see 51). And the portrait that emerges is anything but edifying. Let me give a list of both explicit and implied descriptives that occur throughout the course of the narrative: authoritarian, intransigent, ambitious, performing, impresario, theological-extremist, self-serving, manipulator, petty, humorless, inventor, status-seeking, aloof, argumentative, ambitious and ruthless, Francoist (225), preener, ostentatious, currying, coward, muddled-thinker, disingenuous, corrosive, power-hungry, and above all fearful and anxious—the list could continue but the narrative that occupies the first three-hundred pages

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

leaves the reader with the distinct *sense* that history—Christian, Western church history in particular—would have done well without the likes of Augustine. We are left with the *impression* that he never *really* left Manicheism (50), that his approach to the Donatists was both dishonest and abusive ("regime" is a preferred word in this context, 212), and that his Pelagian battles were really about "power"—how dare you think differently than I think (277, 282)! His greatest work, the *Confessions*, seem to fit better into a title such as "*The Misleadings*" (53), "though he has succeeded in making his self-making inescapable" (37). His writings on Scripture are "performance not scholarship" (133)—reminding us, by the way, that writing was a practice of the rich (136)—shame on you Augustine! His *City of God*, it is simply a warrant for "Christian imperialism" (251). "Augustine was lucky he never had to read anything like Augustine" (125). All this is capsulized well in a statement that brings the book's narrative toward its conclusion: "Augustine the agent, Augustine the actor, Augustine the misreader of his times, Augustine the mismaker of African society: he has escaped, until now" (321). He has escaped until this book, is the author's clear implication.

And the book is not just about Augustine—it is about Jesus, it is about Paul, it is about Nicaea—it is about Monnica, Ambrose, Alypius, Possidius (they all fare as poorly as Augustine)—the list could continue. The only name on the list that goes fairly unscathed is Jesus ("Augustine's bodiless god," 180)—but certainly not the "church" that identified with this Jesus and most certainly not Augustine's Christianity's self-descriptions and claims ("too good to be true").

Scholars could argue with O'Donnell at most points along the way of the narrative: the question of the Manichees, African Christianity, the nature and scope of the Pelagian controversy (not to speak of his take on Nicene orthodoxy). However, I am not sure that this would really get to the heart of what this book is all about—such quibbling might miss the point.

I have used the word "impression" earlier, and it seems to me that it is at this level that the book functions. History, too, approaches Augustine with an *impression*, undoubtedly the product of Augustine's writings but equally of what "traditions" have done with Augustine and those writings. What O'Donnell wants us to do is disabuse ourselves of those impressions. Shock therapy seems to be the medicine he prescribes: a cerebral purgative in order to begin afresh. If our *impression* of Augustine is that of Augustine the bishop, Augustine the saint, Augustine the friend, Augustine the truth-seeker, O'Donnell would rather have us think of Augustine the potentate, Augustine the manipulator, Augustine the deceiver—and surely, the "saint" designation falls

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with such an onslaught. Why? So that Augustine can be rescued from "Augustine". O'Donnell's "Augustine is not the final authority on Augustine" (331) is, he tells us, taking him at his own word: "I had become a mystery to myself." And yet, despite the *impression*, I do not believe O'Donnell intends to be hostile (he remarks in a final author's note "by now Augustine's learned to put up with me"): he wants Augustine—and us—to put up with him, as we try to put up with Augustine.

Does O'Donnell succeed in provoking us ("connoisseurs" is what he calls his readers, 328) to re-imagine Augustine? If our African bishop comes across as a complete "failure" in this work (320), perhaps, and unfortunately, the same must be said for this "new" biography—unless, like a "connoisseur," you read carefully and integrally—and not allow yourself to be "seduced" (perhaps he learned this from Augustine) by the narrative's overwhelming dominant *impression*. If I am correct in this analysis, I am afraid that the very approach taken by O'Donnell will have the exact opposite effect. Those that already respect the theologian-saint will be dismayed, and those that already despise the "misogynist tyrant" will find themselves confirmed. And those in-between, perhaps the real "connoisseurs" O'Donnell has in mind? What they are given is the "impression" of a life that is a muddled heap of missteps, misrepresentations, and miscalculations—with no incentive to look beneath the heap. I mentioned earlier that I see Brown's biography as a background to this "new biography." Brown's narrative of Augustine suggests coherency. We may disagree with him, we may grow angry with him, but there is something about the man and his ideas, his *caritas* and their *veritas*, that grabs at our heart—and entices us to "take and read." Not O'Donnell's Augustine, or so it strikes this reader. O'Donnell's Augustine is someone you would rather forget—the exact opposite, I presume, of this book's intent.

Villanova University THOMAS F. MARTIN, O.S.A.

II

It should not surprise that James J. O'Donnell has produced a work even wider, more expansive, more comprehensive than a mere "new biography" of Augustine, for his findings do not "normalize Augustine to the practices, outlook, and disciplines of a community of thinkers that has emerged in modern times" (290). Instead, he gathers stuff to keep scholars and students in plumb with the prolixity of personae that Augustine (like all people) was. Indeed O'Donnell surveys the situation, status, intellect, and yearnings of his subject by such artifice that more conventional metaphors like "concentric" or even "double-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

helixed" flatly fail to capture the direction, shape, or tone of his narrative.

The account is seriously, yet avuncularly, written about a fascinating figure. Attracted, but not uncritical, O'Donnell nods toward fellow-toilers in the Augustine vineyard, observing that we can,

> call it co-dependency or Stockholm syndrome at its mildest, call it religious partisanship at its most extreme, but even Augustine's severest modern critics find something attractive or fascinating about the man and his work. The anti-Julian works, however, resolutely deter affection, fascination, or even respect, and they make wearying and dispiriting reading, even for his most kindly disposed students (283).

He also gathers the other players evocatively. Ambrose, Monnika, Alypius, Paulinus, scores of Donatists and some Pelagians are all here, living, breathing, human, and therefore possibly attractive or at least sympathetic. Plus, Jerome, "the great screaming extremist of his generation" who proclaimed the superiority of virginity "with the considerable authority of an ex-virgin" (268), and for whom there was never a town in which he "couldn't make himself unwelcome" (92). He has Julian of Eclanum imagining Augustine as a "tenured radical" and evokes rock 'n' roll in the like appeal of the Grateful Dead and late antique holy men as pilgrimage-cult destinations, and shows his hipness in facile twenty-first century colloquialisms (although some that may need explaining later—like the meaning of "sussing" or "a piker"—may date this work ahead of its timeless time).

Mindful that readers would fancy themselves familiar with Augustine, with the outline of his life, with the chronology of his controversies, with the skeleton and sinew of his doctrine, O'Donnell seems to begin with the presumption that we do not truly know anyone, not even ourselves, and therefore not even Augustine—and so, against any tendency toward a yada-yada-yada response, O'Donnell makes it fresh with new material, provocative counter-factual history and "So what?"-questions. Reading Augustine this way can in parts be something akin to seeing again Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling after the massive cleaning and restoration process which resulted in not a little controversy. For both, there is astonishment beholding what is familiar in such bright new light. What had been mellow in the mind's eye seems brash if not brazen in places. For both, a startled reaction could be, Is this really so?

It seems to be. O'Donnell screens the complexities of personality and circumstance via a wider lens that catches both the beguiling self-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

portraiture of Cassiciacum and the *Confessions* and the variegated montage his contemporaries beheld. O'Donnell forces consideration not just of the ideas expressed in the words that survive, having been meticulously copied over the centuries, but of the writing as well. He notably brings forward the enterprise of *production* of the words—that is, the enterprise of product, and of positioning the product via correspondence that permits, as O'Donnell says, Augustine to place himself where he is not. To do this, O'Donnell makes unforgettably clear, would have required staff or entourage who, invisible though they have been to history, would have been a matter of some expense, some enterprise, to employ and maintain. To behold Augustine (a saint, after all) depicted as someone this concerned about something as indelicate as self-promotion rightly gives one pause.

At its core is the chapter "Augustine and the Invention of Christianity," in which O'Donnell summons of all that comprises what Augustine categorizes as "pagan"—and "pagan" is not worship of the traditional Roman deities. Instead "pagan" is religious practice that deviates, O'Donnell argues, from what Augustine identifies as "catholic" (and this category, too, comes down to us, O'Donnell argues, as Augustinian). "Catholic" means Western Christian religiosity as practiced in the Caecilian churches which happened to be in minority in Augustine's North Africa, but "catholic" because Augustine claimed it was consistent with religious practice in the "world." Augustine positions himself in letters and sermons ramrodding his case for this sort of "catholicity" over-against the "paganism" of the majority Donatist Christians.

O'Donnell retells theology as Augustine's theology, God as Augustine's god, to demonstrate that how Augustine discerns and thus proclaims God obviates how Augustine will defend God. By inference, O'Donnell seems to render Augustine's work as apologetic for this God. Interestingly having little to say about Augustine's god also being all-*just*, O'Donnell observes that,

> if we found that god more unfamiliar, we would be more inclined than we are to realize that the theological extremes to which Augustine found himself driven late in life were reflections of the god he had chosen. That is to say, a god who is all-knowing and all-powerful and all-good so far transcends ordinary categories of behaviours that any narrative into which he intrudes would be seriously disordered. Storytelling doesn't work if one character violates all the rules and transcends all the limitations that the other characters endure (180).

By this point, the reader knows the Augustine the reader has brought to the page, and the Augustines that O'Donnell depicts Augus-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tine himself managing through his pages and persona. O'Donnell has already sketched the empire, the society, the people, the clergy, the city, and now the "pagans." He even asks, "What if we could laugh at Augustine? Hasn't anybody ever done that?" (202). But there isn't much to laugh about, in the end, for with his wider lens, O'Donnell captures Augustine's correspondents and *their* vantage points, showing both sides, underscoring both what the letters are about and whether either party is attending to what the other has said and is saying. Introduced is a man called Nectarius, who

> is generally taken as a "pagan," but on careful reading he emerges as a perfectly ordinary Christian whose main allegiances are not religious but social. He writes to Augustine in dismay, appealing to him gentleman to gentleman and particularly as one educated man to another, implicitly encouraging Augustine to intervene on the side of the established order to protect the old ways and the old institutions (185).

By giving space to Nectarius, O'Donnell contextualizes Augustine (does not minimalize, does not relativize, but contextualizes him). This is not pulling a curtain back to reveal the real wizard of Oz. Instead, this is "a life" treated in a readable, accessible format that should be like striking flint for students' critical thinking skills. For Augustine's reply "made much of the fact that Nectarius had waited eight months to reply to Augustine's original letter, but failed to see the dignity and measured calm that Nectarius was careful to display." Just as galling, Augustine "mocks Nectarius for speaking of patriotism when the real issue is terrorism and Nectarius' condoning of it" (187-88).

This use of a few letters presents a new way to encounter Augustine. Augustine is worth reading, all the more so now alongside the most challenging of O'Donnell's evidence about him, because "[e]very half-educated modern . . . comes to the period in which Augustine lives still lives with the unthinking binary categories he nourished (188)." If reading O'Donnell is startling, then what better grounds for reading more Augustine and considering whatsoever implications afterwards?

O'Donnell's writing is luminous and sparky—qualities to attract first the attention and then the interest of strangers to the topic, even of "faithful" strangers who might be put off by O'Donnell's deliberate lower-casing of "god" and consistent de-privileging of the saint, the father of the church. O'Donnell makes clear that the pre-ordination, -consecration, and -sanctification Augustine was first a person, mortal, pathetic, bathetic, sympathetic, person—son of particular parents, child of his time, place, and class; curiously isolated, a public figure

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

largely without friends, recasting himself in his books, letters, and sermons. O'Donnell enlivens the sepia figure. Some of the construct of Augustine's iconic persona falls away, providing views of Augustine as a remarkable person who is powerful, but also anxious, entrenched. O'Donnell muses on what might have been:

> What is remarkable about Augustine is what Hippo does to him and what, eventually, Donatism does to him. The Augustine we know is emphatically the Augustine who has been transformed by Africa. . . . Freed of the gravitational pull of African Christianity, he would have had the time and inclination to develop the persona he had sought all his life. We can combine what we know of Pelagius, of the younger Jerome, and of Paulinus of Nola to help us imagine an Augustine who ended his career as he began it, elegant and knowing it, finding expression and social success for himself in adapting that elegance to a religious posture (272).

Here, says O'Donnell,

> we come to imagining how *Christianity* would have been different if one of these other Augustines had prevailed over the one we know. To take away the pessimist ad the pragmatist and leave behind an active, articulate optimist could have thrown the balance a different way (273).

Then he snaps to and recounts what did happen next: Pelagius arrived in Africa and "crossed Augustine's path" (273). What I have tried to suggest is that the Augustine that emerges under O'Donnell's scrutiny is a darker, weaker mortal than his confident prose and its reception by the church and western culture would suggest.

I have read this book from three angles: for my pleasure, for my teaching, and for my research. O'Donnell is characteristically generous to all three sorts of reader: convincingly providing a lively, often poignant, sometimes amusing and even at times surprising "life" of this master of self-consciously self-controlled self-presentation; setting out findings tapped from the sermons that would fruitfully undergird the Augustinian-Manichaean-Donatist-Pelagian portions of an undergraduate, seminary, or graduate syllabus; and peppering expansive endnotes with a tempting range of work still to be done. Turning the last pages will keep sending readers back to the first.

University of Notre Dame LAURA HOLT

III

This book is certainly different. If ever the phrase "make the dust fly" was appropriate, it is here. In seeking to recover the real Augustine

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

beneath the heavy veneer of hagiography, the accumulated layers of scholarly consensus, and the thick, obfuscating dust of convention and popular misconception, O'Donnell attempts a clean sweep. The language is direct, colloquial, contemporary and unstuffy; the approach is fresh, novel and unpredictable. Augustine is heard, and his context is seen, through the original, primary material, which is often quoted at length.

Like those who pursued the nineteenth-century quest for the historical Jesus, O'Donnell wants to find out what happens if "you take the blinders off . . . if you stop seeing 'Augustine' or 'Saint Augustine' and instead really ask yourself who this guy reminds you of?" (202). What he finds is not very attractive: a snobbish, priggish, authoritarian, self-aggrandizing obsessive; a humorless social climber, troublemaker and political upstart machinator; a failed family man, a garage hobbyist who became the high priest figure of a new-age cult, weakened the church in Africa, and did his cause lasting damage. In short, a "deeply flawed" individual, who died surrounded by failure, disorder and disarray, and who has long been "too secure" in his claim to the title of saint (324). In his own terms O'Donnell does indeed succeed in his attempt at historical study: it is one, as he puts it, "that defamiliarizes the famous and sees for the first time what we might think is already well enough known" (328). This is certainly not an Augustine which many of us can claim much familiarity with.

But why is this Augustine so unfamiliar? Is it simply a matter of hagiography, convention and assumption; a story repeated so often that it is simply taken for granted? Maybe. Whilst there is no doubt a measure of truth in almost all of O'Donnell's bold and direct criticisms, and whilst it is undeniably good that we be forced to contemplate the 'saint' warts and all, I suspect that I am not alone among Augustine scholars—accustomed as we are to arguing the case for him at almost every turn—not to want to spring instinctively to his defense. The problem with O'Donnell's portrait is that, in attempting to resist caricature he seems to have presented us with another: he has dispensed with the saint and presented us with a thoroughly unlikeable bad guy. There is little moderation here, but a lot of over-dramatization, over- or under-emphasis, over-simplification and over-enthusiastic psychoanalysis. O'Donnell plays to the gallery to make his point with effect, but is there anyone there to take it? Most scholars will urge moderation; students—at least the ones I encounter—are too serious and respectful of secondary literature to respond to O'Donnell's performance in the way he intends (and he rarely backs up what he has to say with any references, so that his readers might evaluate some of his extraordinary claims for themselves). He is provocative, certainly, but without a prior, long and sus-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tained acquaintance with his subject on the part of his reader, he cannot but mislead; one will see the warts but little of the nice guy lurking beneath them.

One of the reasons the nineteenth-century questers after the historical Jesus failed was because the person they "discovered" turned out to be very much a nineteenth-century individual—a reflection of their own preoccupations, culture and concerns. O'Donnell's search for the real Augustine suffers from a similar failing: he is viewed from the perspective of twenty-first century religious pluralism, toleration, postmodernism, scepticism . . . and inevitably found wanting. O'Donnell's annoying practice of using the lower case for Augustine's god—because of course he is one among many other gods, and simply happened to be the one Augustine invented because he chose to adopt a certain set of stories rather than another set—is a case in point. If one is trying to get at the "real" Augustine, one might at least judge him in his own terms, not ours.

I have many niggles, but there are two I cannot resist making here. Augustine is consistently referred to as a Caecilianist, rather than a Catholic. Of course this is fine: it puts him on a par with the Donatists and gets away from any prejudgment of who was right or wrong in the controversy. But does it? In fact, O'Donnell is doing the reverse: Caecilianist is as loaded a term for him as Donatist has become for us. It serves to label, and thereby conveniently write off, Augustine and his church as the "smaller", "minority", "local", "state-supported puppet Church" as against the "larger", "majority", "African" "well-rooted mature Christian tradition" of the Donatists. O'Donnell never mentions that this evaluation of Donatism is highly disputable and almost impossible to prove, but judges that Augustine's incomprehensible rejection of them fundamentally weakened the African church.

O'Donnell almost entirely ignores the works Augustine wrote in the ten years before the *Confessions* but adopts the standard caricature of them as idealistic, optimistic, overly philosophical and generally not worth much attention. Indeed he dismisses them as largely unfinished, "brief, scrappy and unsatisfying" (27). For a biography which has such a fresh—and often controversial—take on almost everything else, this is a real disappointment.

So, "who does this guy remind you of?" The real, historical Augustine, is, I suspect, to be found somewhere between the saint O'Donnell has effectively demolished (and that is the virtue of this book) and the bad guy he has put in his place. The ground has been cleared for a "new biography."

University of Durham CAROL HARRISON

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

IV

Augustine: A New Biography by James J. O'Donnell is the work of an expert who has done, among other earlier works, what most of us had regarded as impossible—write a three-volume commentary on the *Confessions* that deals with the historical, textual, and stylistic dimensions in a thorough and readable way.

This book exhibits similar attention to historical detail. While no book on Augustine can ignore his thought, the focus here is on his life, the multiple influences upon it, and his quite human interpretations and decisions as he lived it out.

O'Donnell is not afraid to make editorial judgments, throwing light on events from various angles, not only from our own time but from Augustine's contemporaries (so far as we can gain access to them), from Augustine's own writings before and after the events, and even from the longer timeline reaching from antiquity into the middle ages. The reader is likely to feel like a member of the audience at a concert or a play "in the round," able to see other persons in the audience and sense their differing reactions even while the primary focus is upon what is happening on stage.

In that spirit we are reminded, for example, that Monica had been a Donatist until the "Macarian persecution" in 348 or later. And to emphasize that the Donatists were still the majority church until the events of 411, Augustine's party is called "Caecilianist" rather than "Catholic."

There are also some bold "might have beens": if Augustine had not become a priest and then a bishop, forced to deal with the traditions and the realities of the African church, he might have remained a leisured gentleman engaged in philosophical contemplation, like several about whom we know (11, 58, 139, 189, 213-14, 272, 314). Because of these changes, of course, the style and content of his writing—and his speaking—changed.

It is also noteworthy that, under these changed circumstances, Augustine seemed to have made few new friends, though he could still treasure his old ones (103). Perhaps an exception, for a few brief years until his fall, is the imperial commissioner Marcellinus, who became Augustine's closest contact with the aristocracy and was also associated with the development of Augustine's own thinking about the Donatists, the Pelagians, and, most importantly, *The City of God* (247, 253).

Readers cannot help noticing that O'Donnell prints the word "god" in lower case, as a reminder that Augustine's was a world in which there were many gods (7, 180). There is good reason for this. Aquinas

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and others have pointed out that "god" is a generic term; it has a plural form, and it is translated rather than transliterated into other languages. The Bible speaks of "the God (or god) of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Ex 3:6; cf. Mk 12:26, Lk 13:29), and also of "the god of this world" (2 Cor 4:4). O'Donnell's usage, while justifiable, becomes obtrusive. The word has been used as a name for well over two millennia, and Islam appropriately says, "There is no god but God."

Neither O'Donnell nor his readers can forget that Augustine became a major influence upon the West. But this is not permitted to remain a mere truism. We are reminded that Christianity as we know it began to be defined only in the fourth century (194-202), making doctrinal decisions that could be enforced by the emperors and "textualizing" authority in the canon of Scripture, the canons of councils, and the writings of "doctors of the church."

Augustine took a major role in this, probably quite consciously. He was often a guest preacher in Carthage, a far more influential place than Hippo. He wrote his major works on his own initiative; but he also responded to every opportunity to engage in polemics (319, 335). His *Reconsiderations*, a sort of "second *Confessions*," not only gave an index and chronology of his writings but, like the first *Confessions*, "built a past," creating the opportunity to stipulate in writing how Augustine was to be understood by future generations (317-19).

In many ways this is a work of distancing and deconstruction, not inappropriate to our time. But it is not only that, for it is constantly inviting us to a new and less naive engagement with Augustine's writings, all of them—and also with the flesh and blood man who is sometimes revealed by them and is sometimes concealed behind them.

Vanderbilt Divinity School EUGENE TE SELLE

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

I am both flattered and disconcerted by the invitation to respond to this collection of thoughtful and welcome reviews of my book. There are many ways in which to express my gratitude, of which the most important, of course, is to go away thinking about how to shape my own future work in this and related areas in light of this most constructive dialogue. I shall do so.

One issue seems to me particularly important and worth pulling out of this conversation for a brief meditation. Do I like Augustine?

I will first frankly confess that the issue had never occurred to me before reviews of this book started appearing. I am sure at various points in my life I had expressed enthusiasm and approbation for vari-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ous aspects of Augustine's work and thought, just as surely as I had expressed reservation and criticism about other aspects. I vividly recall being brought up short, somewhere on the fringes of the question of "liking," by a remark in seminar one day twenty years ago. I had the good fortune to spend a magical summer reading the *Confessions* in a hilltop mansion in Bryn Mawr with fifteen keenly intelligent and articulate secondary school teachers (all blessings to the National Endowment for the Humanities for sponsoring such programs!), and one of the sharpest-eyed offered the observation that she thought Augustine must have made an exhausting friend for those who knew him. I had never thought in such terms, but immediately felt the force of the remark and have borne it in mind since.

I had fallen into reading Augustine in the fall of 1969, when there were pages in *City of God* that seemed to me to address issues of war and peace and right conduct more effectively and insightfully than anything I was reading and hearing in the mass media or in my other academic explorations in that contentious time. I spent the long afternoon and evening of November 15, 1969, a Saturday when many classmates and hundreds of thousands more were marching on Washington to protest a war, in quiet seminar rooms of Princeton's Firestone Library, reading book 19 of *City of God* with great approbation. The day lingers with me as a milestone of my intellectual autobiography.

I have read Augustine almost incessantly since. I know that Isidore of Seville is standing by to call me a liar if I claim to have read all of Augustine, but I have certainly passed my eyes over every page of surviving Latin text slowly enough that I can at least think of making the claim, and some of those pages I have revisited often enough to make my reaction to them touchstones for my own measure of who I have been and who I am. Augustine has provided an intellectual continuo of sorts for my life, for all that the melodies have sometimes been Augustinian and very often have gone wildly far away from him and his concerns.

But now I come up short and find that of that fraction of readers who fall short of panegyric in their reviews of this book, most find one way or another to raise the question of "liking"—which I take to be both a question of my imputed intellectual approval or disapproval of Augustine's ideas and of my imputed personal judgment of him as a human being.

How should we think about those imputations? Why does it matter? Do not both imputations amount to a testimony of little faith in the possibility of historical objectivity? Is there, on the other hand, some assumption that a thinker whose ideas have been influential and widely approved deserves to be portrayed in a flattering context? My

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

bafflement in the face of such criticism takes the concrete form of leaving me unsure what else I could or should have done. If I were to decide that I do not in fact like Augustine, should I abstain from writing about him?

To be sure, Augustine is unlike, say, Apuleius or Tacitus or Callimachus in that there are many moderns who voluntarily align themselves with a body of teachings and practices that affirm and approve his teaching, his work, and the community he helped shape, on the theological (rather than historical) argument that their contemporary communities are functionally identical with his. That linkage does make way for the argument that one's imputed judgments about Augustine are imputed judgments about contemporary issues as well. I will say frankly that a historian who thinks too much about that contemporary partisanship will be a worse historian for doing so, and I am not one to participate in such arguments. I worked very hard in the book to defamiliarize, denaturalize, and distance our perspectives on Augustine, not out of liking or disliking, but out of an urgently felt need to see him more clearly. My students over the last decades have grown accustomed to having me send them off at some point to read a wonderful little book by Lawrence Weschler called *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees.* The title comes from Paul Valéry and the book is about the contemporary minimalist artist Robert Irwin who, on Weschler's argument, embodies the freshness of vision (and implicit nominalism) that Valéry evokes and I have found the book a useful way of making myself and my students think about the obligations of scholarship—which I take to be in fact only the obligations that we all have as morally responsible knowers and inquirers to challenge our presuppositions and see things enough differently to give us a chance to meditate afresh on what it might be like to see them as they are. Augustine (and Plato) would agree with me that we will not in fact see them as they are, not in this mortal life. But knowing that imposes an obligation that I have tried to discharge, even at the risk of disconcerting and sometimes disappointing friendly readers.

There are many Augustines in our culture: the complicated figure who lived and moved and had his being in Africa and was seen in many different ways there, the one (or rather ones) whose books had immense impact on western thought in after centuries, and the ones who persist in common cultural currency today. If I confined myself in this book mainly to the first gaggle of Augustines, the flesh and blood versions who were variously hated, loved, suspected, and belittled in his own time, I did that the better to get at just the complexity of that basket of experiences, not to disregard any other. Doing so makes biography a more complicated job than it is sometimes taken to be, for I

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

did not think it my job (or even possible) to find the one true Augustine in the middle of all those perceptions and experiences. To do so would require divine intelligence and authority.

Augustine himself is shown to us taking a position I think is very close to mine. On his deathbed, he banished his friends, colleagues, and comforters from his chamber and had the seven penitential psalms posted on the walls so he could read and meditate upon them. From the *Confessions* to that moment, we see him as a man regularly turning a skeptical and dubious eye upon himself, and at the same time skeptical and dubious about his own ability to be skeptical and dubious about himself! The historian's doubts and skepticism should not paralyze inquiry and narrative, but have to inform them. If in the end, Augustine turns out—for now, in the rendition I have been able to give of him—as a man whose flaws were as real as he says they were, his undoubted accomplishment is all the more remarkable.

I wonder—just wonder—whether we aren't all slightly misled by our habitual desire to draw pleasure from what we read—from everything we read. So let me end by posing this question: Is it better to read a book that pleases you on every level (but perhaps does so by reassuring your prejudices and flattering your self-esteem) or a book that frustrates and exasperates you but challenges you to think afresh about what it is of the things you know or believe can really be sustained in the daylight and what things you might need to reconsider—whether you like the idea or not? Hedonist of the library, I know that I practice the first kind of reading abundantly, even superabundantly, but the other practice seems to me to be of very high value. Self-indulgent author, I am only too happy to read reviews that embody readings of delight, but I need to remind myself that exasperated readers may have been the greater beneficiaries of what I have accomplished and that I should take at least some of their exasperation as a mark of success. I hope I do not deceive myself.

Georgetown University JAMES J. O'DONNELL

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900003030 Published online by Cambridge University Press