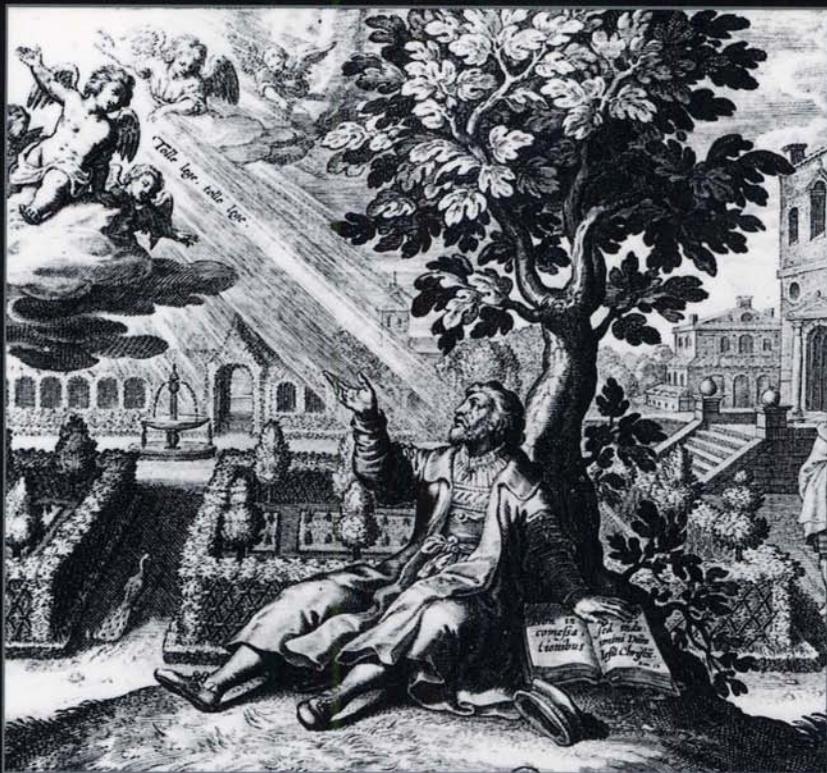


BRIAN STOCK



AUGUSTINE
THE READER



*Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and
the Ethics of Interpretation*

Augustine the Reader

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and the Ethics of Interpretation*



Brian Stock

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Cum legerem, per me ipse cognoui. Itane est?

—*De Utilitate Credendi* 7.17

INTRODUCTION



This is a study of Augustine's attempt to lay the theoretical foundation for a reading culture.

Augustine was convinced that words and images play a fundamental role in mediating perceptions of reality. From the spring of 386, when his interest in Christianity was renewed, he attempted to situate his inquiries into such transfers of meaning within a programme of scriptural studies. The subsequent union of philosophical, psychological, and literary insights gave birth to the West's first developed theory of reading.

This theory deals with, among other things, mental representations, memory, emotion, cognition, and the ethics of interpretation. These themes are unified by Augustine's concern with the self as a reader, that is, with the personal understanding that can be created through a mental "rereading" of the narratives of previous events lodged in memory. He contrasts the inner certainty of the self's existence¹ with the uncertainty of information acquired through such accounts. If our presentations of self are in this respect like such rereadings, we cannot hope for objective knowledge of ourselves any more than we can be certain that an interpretation of a given text is correct.

As a guide to self-analysis, therefore, reading occupies an ambivalent position in Augustine's thinking.² On the negative side, the knowledge acquired through reading is inseparable from sense perceptions, which are limited by time, place, and circumstances. Yet, in the presence of a sufficiently authoritative text (such as the Bible), the reader can approach a higher understanding, even if he or she rarely transcends the senses entirely.³ An act of reading is then a critical step upwards in a mental ascent: it is both an awakening from sensory illusion⁴ and a rite of initiation, in which the reader crosses the threshold from the outside to the inside world.

This upward and inward movement takes place when the appropriate text is transformed into an object of contemplation.⁵ *Lectio* becomes *medi-*

tatio.⁶ Words, created in silence, return to silence in the subject's mind:⁷ the Many become the One as they are united in reflective thought.⁸ The reading process concentrates the subject's attention, and the normal flow of time, which is measured by the passing sounds and letters, is replaced by an awareness of an extensive present—a “distending” of thought that creates the illusion of permanence. Needless to say, in order to achieve this desired end, the student of scripture has to leave behind all linguistic and literary conceptions of selfhood.

Augustine drew on many ancient authorities in the formation of these ideas, through which he was able to bring together his spiritual concerns and his metaphysical reflections. Yet it is his writings rather than those of his predecessors that provide Western reflection on reading, inwardness, and transcendence with their earliest synthetic statement. His design for reading is one of the distinguished intellectual achievements of his age.⁹ He tells us more about the subject than does anyone else in antiquity.¹⁰ Equally important, his theory is consistent with his authorial practice: he is one of the earliest masters of a type of prose whose “phenomenological”¹¹ qualities depend on the presence of a speaking and reading “I.”¹² There is no autobiographical voice quite like his¹³—a fact that Edmund Husserl was quick to recognize in claiming the bishop of Hippo's patronage for his own *ego cogito*.¹⁴ Philo, Origen, and Jerome rival his interpretive skill but lack his ability to combine meditative reading, exploration of the self, and first-person narrative.¹⁵ Augustine also consolidates the role of reading and meditation in Western mystical thought: he differs from Plotinus and some Christian authors in not reducing but accentuating the distinction between subject and object¹⁶ through patient, line-by-line exegesis.

Augustine is by far the most influential thinker in the field during the medieval and early modern periods. Inevitably, as well, his admirers subtly altered his views.¹⁷ Medieval monastic authors frequently gave reading a higher priority in devotional activity than he did,¹⁸ just as scholastic theologians used his critical vocabulary to engage in a philosophical type of hermeneutics that rarely appears in his writings. As interest in his ideas grew, one branch of his thinking on language passed to philosophers from Henry of Ghent to Duns Scotus,¹⁹ while another proceeded from Ramón Lull to fourteenth-century French prose stylists.²⁰ Authors such as Petrarch, Montaigne, Pascal,²¹ and Rousseau popularized the *Confessions* as a literary genre, whereas Augustine himself was more interested in exploring the value of the *Confessions* as a “spiritual exercise.” Luther was indebted to his programme of Bible study,²² as was his erudite critic Erasmus,²³ but neither replicated his ideas on Christian education. Seventeenth-century English

poetry rediscovered and transformed his biblical meditations.²⁴ Iconographic tradition associated him with Jerome as a father of Western book culture.²⁵ Contemporary literary theorists have confirmed this view.²⁶

While I recognize the historical relevance of these developments, my aim in this study is to analyse Augustine's own various statements about reading within the evolution of his ideas²⁷ and to describe his responses to specific occasions, audiences, and controversies.²⁸ I propose that the notion of the self-conscious reader plays an important part in his resolution of key issues in the philosophy of mind. Furthermore, I offer an interpretation of his formative years that emphasizes the consistency of his thinking, on the basis of his approach to reading, in contrast to the once fashionable tendency of scholars to distinguish sharply between the writings of the early and middle phases of his career.²⁹ The best narrative account of the role of reading in his education remains books 1–9 of the *Confessions*, despite their often noted weakness as a historical record, and that is where I begin. In the story of his early years he explains why he adopted reading as a means of acquiring edifying knowledge; in particular, why he replaced the type of verbal ratiocination that was common to both Manichaean dualism and pagan philosophy with an inward search for wisdom in which answers to existential questions devolved from a scriptural (if no less verbal) authority, the word of God. The life history tells us how he pursued the most elusive of antiquity's philosophical goals, truth and eternal life, only to discover at the story's dénouement that their timeless values are not a part of the reader's world.³⁰

Throughout the study I adhere to Augustine's vocabulary for reading, speaking, and thinking. Also, I restrict myself to his explicit statements, since it is here rather than in his implicit views that he stands out most notably among ancient authors. My emphasis is on the structure of his ideas in an attempt to reveal what Goulven Madec calls "le mouvement propre de son discours et de sa pensée."³¹ His normal unit of thought is the book: accordingly, I follow his arguments through his works or lengthy segments of them without trying to isolate problems that are best brought into focus by grouping texts written at different times and places.



THE TOPIC can be approached in essentially three ways: through what Augustine read in the course of his education, through his comments on ancient methods of instruction in literate disciplines, and through some subjects to which he gives special attention, namely authority, reason, silence, and the theory of signs.

It is difficult to generalize about his use of his sources.³² We are ill-informed about the occasions on which he read many of the books at his disposal.³³ Nor are we certain what he read. He knows some authors whom he does not quote; he quotes others (such as Virgil) selectively and interprets them as he wishes.³⁴ Plato is known through intermediaries—Cicero, Plotinus, and Porphyry.

Augustine reshapes everything that he reads: the critical factor in understanding his literary debts is the context of the references in his own writings. Where precise borrowings occur, “the quotations form an essential constituent of the argument,” amounting to “a documentary exposition” of his text.³⁵ In his use of the Bible, it is frequently the arrangement of the texts rather than an interpretive gloss that offers guidance to his meaning:³⁶ the phrases from the Psalms that interlace the narrative of the *Confessions* provide its textual foundation as well as sources of doctrine.³⁷ In commenting on classical and Christian works, moreover, he alters, supplements, and occasionally disagrees with the ancient manuals of instruction that he is thought to have had at his disposal.³⁸ His knowledge of Greek—both in his early writings and after 410, when he acquired greater expertise—remains a subject of speculation, each student of the question, as Pierre Courcelle noted, proposing the degree of competence that “he finds convenient.”³⁹ His handling of patristic authors likewise resists simplification:⁴⁰ it is at once “a christianizing of hellenism” and “a hellenizing of Christianity.”⁴¹ As a young man, he eagerly studied the classics, as he did after 413 when he wrote *De Civitate Dei* and *De Trinitate* 12–15. By contrast, in works composed between 391 and that date, his only extensively cited source is the Bible.

In order to provide an alternative to this unclear picture, we can turn to Augustine’s method of reading, which is reasonably stable over time. His habits reflect a typically fourth-century Latin education, whose often emphasized weaknesses⁴² include a rigid curriculum of set texts, an academic attitude toward speaking and writing correctly, and a commitment to the dated ideal of the learned orator. He paints a vivid picture of this type of schooling in a decadent phase, objecting to archaism, thoughtless mimicry, and the preference for style over moral values. In his recollection of *grammatica*, that is, instruction in grammar and literature,⁴³ he speaks of practices that had remained unchanged for generations: reading set texts in class,⁴⁴ teaching by dialogue with a master,⁴⁵ memorization and recitation of “classics,”⁴⁶ intensive study of pronunciation,⁴⁷ exercises in composition, scrutiny of commentaries,⁴⁸ and fabrication of stories based on exemplars.⁴⁹ Much of the literature was not read in the original but drawn from

anthologies.⁵⁰ Recognizing the superficial nature of such studies, he came to detest all instructors in wordplay (*litteriones*).⁵¹ He later reproached himself for having allowed literary exercises of this type to lure him from the teachings of his pious mother, whose faith was sure, even if her spoken Latin was unpolished.⁵²

In raising questions of sources and methods, it is necessary to remind ourselves that reading in the ancient world placed a considerably greater semantic burden on the voice than it does nowadays. Silent reading was not unknown,⁵³ as Augustine's examples will demonstrate. Yet books of a literary, philosophical, or theological nature were normally read aloud. The ancient reader's first acquaintance with style, genre, and subject matter occurred when he or she listened to the vocal modulations of the text as the words were pronounced.⁵⁴

Oral reading was necessitated by the format of scrolls and codices, which were not punctuated.⁵⁵ In order to understand a lengthy passage of verse or prose, a student had to sound out the words, syllable by syllable.⁵⁶ Memory was an aid, since the texts that were read in class were frequently those that had been read before. After the literal—that is, the vocal—sense was clear,⁵⁷ the reader engaged in higher interpretive activities—philological commentary, textual criticism, analysis of style, and aesthetic judgment.⁵⁸ The rules were applied to written as well as to nonwritten texts,⁵⁹ the former were often transcribed so that they could be performed before live audiences.⁶⁰ Oral methods of reading and composition overlapped.⁶¹ Augustine's attitude on these matters is typical of later ancient and early medieval authors.⁶² Visual reading did not make serious progress until Latin was recognized to be a foreign language, word-separation became common in manuscripts,⁶³ and punctuation gave rise to what Malcolm Parkes calls "a grammar of legibility."⁶⁴

Augustine's mature writings are rich in oral genres, primarily those of an exegetical and meditative type, such as the *sermo*, *enarratio*, *tractatus*, *expositio*, *commentum*, and *explanatio*.⁶⁵ A unique description of his oral and meditative reading is found at *Confessions* 9.4, where he recites psalms in Monica's company as they stroll in the villa garden at Cassiciacum.⁶⁶ Within the life history, this performance is a public symbol of the maturing of his private spiritual life; however, by the time it was written, he was accustomed to the oral, rhetorical reading of scripture in his daily sermons. Some 546 are extant,⁶⁷ eloquent witnesses to the growth in his ability to combine spoken and reflective theology.⁶⁸ During delivery⁶⁹ he occasionally had moments of meditative withdrawal, that is, short periods of time when he stopped talking and reflected on the biblical text's meaning,⁷⁰ and these

intervals may have contributed to the formation of readable commentaries out of groups of sermons: an example is the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, which were preached in Carthage before large audiences,⁷¹ the lector⁷² reading parts of the same psalm over several days. There was considerable variety in his methods: some sermons were “dictated” for use by his brethren and not “preached”;⁷³ others were too long to be read aloud.⁷⁴ Another variant occurred in the 124 sermons of the *Tractatus in Iohannis Euangelium*, which were conceived as a commentary, even though their composition appears to have been frequently interrupted.⁷⁵ Normally he delivered his sermons from notes, or occasionally *ex tempore*; secretaries took down what was said.⁷⁶ The audience “read” what was “heard” and “known”: the public reading was a “commemoration.”⁷⁷

We possess an inadequate vocabulary for describing the oral qualities of such readings. The generalizations of contemporary literary theorists are based on the age of mass produced books, which began in the eighteenth century,⁷⁸ rather than on the practices of the ancient world, in which an “edition” meant the production of a single, handwritten copy.⁷⁹ The reader is assumed to be an individual, and silent reading is taken as the norm.⁸⁰ Studies of orality and literacy, which have proliferated in recent decades, have inadvertently widened the gap between ancient readers and ourselves by placing the concept of reading within the orbit of writing, thereby restricting orality to spontaneous forms of speech.⁸¹ Analytic and continental philosophy, in concert with linguistics, has confirmed the bias. Since Austin and Wittgenstein, Anglo-American philosophy has been concerned chiefly with meaning arising in spoken sentences,⁸² whereas in ancient authors such as Augustine there was an equal interest in words that occurred in speech, texts, and thought.⁸³ European philosophy since Husserl, which shares a phenomenological focus with Augustine,⁸⁴ occasionally privileges speech.⁸⁵ Even when it does not,⁸⁶ there is little attempt to distinguish between the ancient speaker and oral reader.⁸⁷

One area in which Augustine illustrates the difference is his thinking about reason and authority.⁸⁸ There are early statements in which the topic is taken up in the absence of textual considerations.⁸⁹ On other occasions readers are implicated, as at *De Ordine* 2.8–9, where he speaks of “the very law of God, transcribed, so to speak, onto the souls of the wise.”⁹⁰ Authority is said to precede reason in time; yet reason has a certain precedence,⁹¹ since it consists of “the motion of the mind capable of separating or connecting what is learned.”⁹² At the same time, it is authority, guided by reason, that orients studies, while a higher rationality remains a distant goal.⁹³ In *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae* (388)⁹⁴ the two ideas appear as

dimensions of biblical study: authority has priority, owing to the weakness of unsupported reason,⁹⁵ which is said to be frustrated in its search for wisdom unless scripture comes to its aid by means of marvels and books.⁹⁶ It is a short step from such a statement to the studious discipline⁹⁷ of moral reform in *De Doctrina Christiana* and to the view that authority derives from the Bible, while reason consists of the intellectual exercise of making sense of the text.

The themes of oral reading and literary authority are linked to another major issue in Augustine's thinking—meditative silence. In the *Confessions*, the connection occurs in the well-known scenes in which the Milanese professor of rhetoric observes the reading habits of Ambrose (6.3) and at the moment of conversion, when he is called by unseen voices to “take up” and “read” in Paul's Epistle to the Romans (8.12).⁹⁸ An analytic account of the phenomenon occurs in book 11, where the distinction between the oral and silent recreation of the first line of the Ambrosian hymn *Deus creator omnium*, is critical for the resolution of the problem of time (11.27).⁹⁹ Elsewhere Augustine compares silence to sound as the darkness was to light when God created the world.¹⁰⁰ He believes that the silences in biblical texts kindle our interest in topics on which they do not explicitly speak, such as the nature of the soul.¹⁰¹ He contrasts the sensory appeal of music with the silence of truth, which steals into our hearts and invites us to seek the blessed life.¹⁰² Aesthetics are involved: in a well-composed song, the intervals between the notes contribute to the impression of an orderly, pleasing whole; similarly, the shadows in paintings throw prominent features into relief.¹⁰³ As speech incorporates intervals of silence, silence involves an interior type of speech.¹⁰⁴ Silence is a hermeneutic space that is emptied of outer, physical sound so that it can be opened to inner, permanent knowledge.¹⁰⁵

Augustine's way of approaching these and other questions concerning reading is through the theory of signs. He is the first to have proposed a relationship between the sender, the receiver, and the sign (normally a word),¹⁰⁶ which subsequently becomes a standard feature of medieval and modern theories of language.¹⁰⁷ In the application of his ideas on speaking to reading, the role of signification remains unchanged: the sender is replaced by the text and the receiver by the reader. Other triads involving sending, receiving, and appropriate intermediaries account for a variety of mental activities, including thinking about what has been heard or read.¹⁰⁸ Augustine believes that meaning is created out of the individual sounds or letters of a word in the same way that the soul gives rise to the body's vitality.¹⁰⁹ The theological model for mediation between the temporal and