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Augustine, says Sabine MacCormack (MacC), was ‘undoubtedly Vergil’s most intelligent and searching ancient reader’ (xv). Contemporary with big names in ancient Vergilian scholarship, Donatus, Servius and Macrobius, Augustine’s intellectual stature on the general plane can scarcely be overstated; and yet the claim Sabine MacCormack (MacC) makes for his writing on Vergil is ambitious.

Her project is elusive in essence: as she notes (228) and any reader of Augustine must observe, scripture is his chief source of quotes. On a first and undergraduate reading of the City of God, MacC thought Augustine quoted Vergil ‘only for purposes of refutation’ (xv); mature examination, however, revealed complexity. Augustine will apply proper Christian high-mindedness to rejecting pagan myth as fiction when it suits him, as with Cacus, a cipher brought in to praise Hercules by contrast (cf. 214-5), or he will explain pagan gods as demons (making them stars of the show, like Milton’s Satan: ‘even the demons of Christians, who in themselves were no more than a crowd of faceless malign powers, appear in Augustine’s pages in the garb of Vergilian deities whose very weaknesses and passions elicit interest’ [174]), or he will posit literal acceptance of myth in order to debate its meaning for the destiny of Rome.

MacC’s first chapter summarizes Vergil’s work and its contemporary reception, then turns on the hinge of Eclogue 4 to Lactantius, Constantine, Jerome, Augustine, contrasting their exploration of Vergil’s meaning with the learned projects of Donatus and Servius. The professional Vergilians’ product was accretive commentary, through ‘a process of addition, modification, and comparison, interspersed at times with criticism and correction’ (37), but the genre issue was only an aspect of a ‘great gulf’ in thought: Augustine and Christian contemporaries, MacC notes, used quotation and reflection on Vergil in ‘their own autonomous argument’, in just the way that the Arch of Constantine reused materials from monuments of Trajan, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius, Diocletian.

Cassiciacum and the aftermath of Augustine’s conversion to Christianity form the backdrop to the second chapter, tracing Augustine’s
reflections on grammar as the fundamental *disciplina*, and language as communication (rather than as a system in its own right), from 387 to the time near the end of his life when he wrote the *De doctrina christiana*. The *grammatici* drew on the poets for their teaching material, thus expounding a communicative science through untrue propositions: it was unbearable that someone who had not heard that Daedalus flew should seem unlearned (*De ordine* II.12.37, cf. p.53). Early on, Augustine conceded a moral value in polytheistic myth (53-4, quoting *Soliloquia* II.11.19); but later in life, he would not allow allegorical readings: in the *De doctrina christiana*, for instance, as MacC notes (64), he draws on Varro to demythologize the origin of the Nine Muses. MacC argues that Augustine’s discussion of Vergil and other writers placed the pagan-Christian debate ‘on a new footing’ (87); another view would be that over time Augustine deployed his learning more and more to lend weight to the Christian side of a long-lasting standoff: ‘you do not believe our writings, and we do not believe yours’, as Arnobius put it (*Adversus gentes* I.57, quoted at 87).

Similarly on emotion, soul and body, true and false worship (cf. MacC’s third and fourth chapters), Augustine, growing older, moved to a radically post-Vergilian position. It became unthinkable to christianize prayers from Vergil (155), and the Trojan gods’ failure to protect Troy became more clearly explicable in view of their demonic nature (167). Augustine’s combined strategies of reading Roman foundation-myth literally while viewing the gods as demonic powers prompted some coopting of Vergilian narrative and character; yet MacC surely stretches a point in claiming that this meant that “‘the renowned poet of the Romans” had the last say after all’ (174).

A fifth chapter traces the development of Augustine’s argument on the earthly city and the City of God. Writing after Alaric’s sack of Rome, Augustine was in a position to reflect on the impermanence of the achievement of settling Italy and Rome. They had had a late start, Deborah already being judge in Israel when Saturn, Picus, Faunus and Latinus were ruling Italy (208), nor was the Romans’ inherited and foundational lust for power morally admirable (209). On the other hand, the origins of Rome were not irrelevant: the life of the saints was a social life, and ‘the kingdom of God was a city that was reflected, in however remote a fashion, in the city on earth’ (217). As the poet whose work
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summed up where Rome came from and what it was for, Vergil defined an important facet of *the earthly city.*

The story MacC tells is of resisting, increasingly resisting, readership. In one sense Augustine exemplifies the Christian Church’s difficulty in late antiquity in accommodating pagan learning: he ‘regarded Vergil as supreme and quoted him even when writing to and for Christians and even when disagreeing with him, indeed so as to disagree with him’ (228). Yet MacC is perhaps making too easy a generalization when she goes on to say ‘cultural and religious change is slow, and it is not entirely voluntary’. Augustine’s ‘resisting readership’ was atypical in the wider picture, with the result that Vergil was to remain at the heart of the school curriculum for another thousand years and more. If, as MacC argues (230), ‘the divide that separated [Augustine] from Vergil was profound and indeed absolute’, then it was a greater divide than existed for most of Augustine’s west European Christian successors.

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