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From Ciceronian to Christian: 
Literary Conversion in Jerome and Augustine

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The transition from traditional Roman religion to Christianity did not always proceed smoothly, either in public institutions or in private life, and education was no exception to this rule. In the fourth century, ambitious young men from Christian families who sought to make their way up in the world would still pursue a secular education in the classics, steeped in traditional Roman rhetoric and literature; such was the case for the Church Fathers Jerome of Stridon and Augustine of Hippo. Because of the detailed autobiographical writings that each man left behind – Jerome in passing in his Epistle 22 to Eustochium, Augustine at great depth in the *Confessions* – we can trace their ideological transitions from a broad education in secular letters to a theoretically exclusive commitment to the Bible. Both Jerome and Augustine, in their autobiographical writings, describe a dramatic shift in the literature they consider exemplary, from classical Latin literature to the Bible. Both identify this exchange of one inspirational library for another as an act of conversion. However, on closer analysis, the two writers conceive of this change significantly differently. Jerome and Augustine each understand literary conversion in light of their own theology: for Jerome, taking up the Bible becomes an act of asceticism, while for Augustine, it signifies a triumph of content over form.

In general, Jerome bases his definition of literature on the Greek and Roman classics. His letter to Eustochium offers a useful example that is less ideologically charged than the Bible: when speaking of two Hellenistic Jewish writers, Jerome refers to them as “Philo, Plato’s imitator” (*Philonici sermonis imitator*) and “Josephus, the Greek Livy” (*Iosephus, Graecus Livius*) (Jerome *Ep.* XXII.35)\(^1\). Jerome explains the roles of non-classical authors based on well-known Greek and Roman equivalents. Rather than simply

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\(^1\) All quotations from Jerome are from the Loeb Classical Edition of the Selected Letters. For Augustine, all English quotations are from the Henry Chadwick translation, with only the Latin text cited from the Loeb. See works cited at the end of the paper.
describing Philo as a philosopher and Josephus as a historian, he lends them additional authority by comparing them to recognizably important examples. Jerome implies that every worthy body of literature would include its own Plato and Livy. These authors and the literary culture of which they are a part represent Jerome’s primary cognitive model for literature.

For the Bible, as well, Jerome uses classical literature as a model for the role texts should serve for their readers. Elsewhere in the letter, Jerome sets up similar comparisons between the “authors” of classical works and of the Bible. He asks, “‘What communion hath light with darkness?...’ What has Horace to do with the Psalter, Virgil with the Gospels and Cicero with Paul?” (Jerome Ep. XXII.30). In this example, Jerome sets up pairs similarly based on genre, from the poetry of Horace and the Psalms to the literary letters of Cicero and Paul. Such a comparison implicitly defines the worth of the Bible based on classical models, even as it claims a significant moral difference (light versus dark) between the two. Jerome argues for the supercession of the Bible over the secular reading that would have formed the education, moral and otherwise, of Roman elites like himself. At the same time, his very rhetoric suggests that the Bible will play a parallel role to that of secular literature. We might not give the obvious answer to his rhetorical question, that Cicero has nothing at all to do with Paul, but rather respond that Paul has become the new Cicero.

Given this attitude of supercessionism, Jerome views reading the classics as a sin for which he must repent. He must have read and mastered many of these works in the course of his first-rate education at Rome, where he studied under the famous teacher of rhetoric Aelius Donatus. Jerome describes almost lovingly “the library which with great care and labor I had got together at Rome,” and explains how difficult a task it was to give it up
(Jerome *Ep. XXII.30*). He recounts, “[M]iserable man that I was, I would fast, only to read Cicero afterwards. I would spend many nights in vigil, I would shed bitter tears called from my inmost heart by the remembrance of my past sins; and then I would take up Plautus again” (Ibid.). Jerome constructs reading as a sin, an almost physical pleasure which continually tempts him. He even seems to make a comparison between secular reading and sexuality: he repents this behavior but in weak moments feels compelled to repeat it. In fact, Jerome describes his desire to read as “the old serpent… attacking me,” referencing the temptation of Eve (Ibid.). Jerome recounts that during this period of his life he became seriously ill; he blames this illness on his body’s severe weakness from cycles of reading and repenting (Ibid.).

Jerome relates a dream which he experienced during his illness, using this narrative to construct a strict choice between Latin literature and Roman pagan identity on one hand, and the Bible and Christian identity on the other. He describes the scene in great detail:

Suddenly I was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the Judge’s judgment seat: and here the light was so dazzling, and the brightness shining from those who stood around so radiant, that I flung myself upon the ground and did not dare to look up. I was asked to state my condition and replied that I was a Christian. But He who presided said: “Thou liest; thou art a Ciceronian, not a Christian (*Ciceronianus es, non Christianus*). ‘For where thy treasure is there will be thy heart also.’” (Jerome *Ep. XXII.30*)

Jerome elevates the issue of secular reading material until it becomes a primary criterion of Christian identity, utilized by God Himself. Jerome cannot claim to be a Christian while still reading Cicero; the balanced chiasmus of *Ciceronianus es, non Christianus*, and the artfully similar sounds of the two terms, set them up as parallels but opposites (a rhetorical move comparable to the one that Jerome performs on Horace and the Psalms, Virgil and the Gospels, and Cicero and Paul above). “Ciceronianus” is, of course, an invented term, by which no Roman would define himself. Jerome creates a straw man of the Roman pagan, for whom reading classical authors could become in itself a “religion” with a name and an
identity as exclusive as that of Christianity. In the end, Jerome has God quote Matthew 6:21, indicating that a person can cherish only one treasure, one single identity or system. This very act of quotation models the use of the Bible as exclusive exemplary text.

Furthermore, Jerome’s dream narrative suggests that the only way to overcome the temptation of secular literature is through punishing the body. He attributes much of the power of the dream to its elements of physical suffering. Indeed, immediately after quoting the Gospel of Matthew, God Himself orders Jerome to be beaten. Jerome cries out for mercy, and emphasizes how loudly he must shout in order to be heard over the sound of the whip (Jerome Ep. XXII.30). The mercy that Jerome is granted holds out the threat of still further punishment:

At last the bystanders fell at the knees of Him who presided, prayed Him to pardon my youth and give me opportunity to repent of my error, on the understanding that the extreme of torture should be inflicted on me if ever I read again the works of Gentile authors (gentilium litterarum libros). In the stress of that dread hour I should have been willing to make even larger promises, and taking oath I called upon his name: “O Lord, if ever again I possess worldly books (codices saeculares) or read them, I have denied thee.” (Ibid.)

Jerome again stresses the incompatibility of Christian and pagan literary identity: to read or even to possess codices saeculares would be a way of denying God. But even more noticeable is how Jerome binds rebellious reading to physical punishment. God directly presides over the whipping and has the power to inflict “the extreme of torture” again should the reader relapse. Jerome makes his promise to behave better due to “the stress of that dread hour” rather than due to rational argument or spiritual inspiration. Yet he clearly views this physical punishment as a necessary and positive goad for himself. He carries the marks of this violence into waking life: “I profess that my shoulders were black and blue, and that I felt the bruises long after I awoke from my sleep” (Ibid.). They serve as physical reminders of Jerome’s promise and of the permanence of his literary conversion.
That the dream narrative emphasizes the physical experience of suffering supports Jerome’s larger concern with asceticism, one of the great driving forces of his theology. Although born into a Christian home, the young Jerome did not seriously devote himself to the faith until adulthood, when he began to pursue an ascetic lifestyle. He went on to spend a large portion of his life in a monastic cell in Bethlehem. Jerome guided others in his circle in their ascetic practices, including Eustochium, the recipient of this letter, along with her mother Paula. These principles of severe austerity and self-punishment were central to Jerome’s concept of the Christian life. Thus, it should not be surprising that Jerome enfold his condemnation of the Greek and Roman classics in a framework of ascetic practice. Occurring in this context, in a dedicated letter of advice to a young protégé, the dream narrative and its explication present a self-conscious example of worthy behavior. He recommends to Eustochium (and to the others whom he doubtless expected would read this self-consciously literary correspondence) not only a set of literary values, but through them a set of physical values: austerity and the punishing of the body.

When Augustine sets up the Bible as an alternative to the shared body of classical literature, he does so with different theological aims and values. He does not construct Latin literature as a sin in any simple way. Indeed, it is a work of pagan classical philosophy, encountered during his secular education, which puts Augustine on the path to a Christian awakening: the non-extant Hortensius, an exhortation to philosophy by Cicero. On the Hortensius, Augustine writes,

The book changed my feelings. It altered my prayers, Lord, to be towards you yourself. It gave me different values and priorities. Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart. I began to rise up to return to you. (Augustine Conf. III.iv.8).
The text serves simultaneous functions for Augustine, as both a philosophical work in the classical tradition and a call to seek the Christian God. These sentiments intertwine with one another, following sentence by sentence. Cicero likely aimed to change “feelings”, “values” and “priorities”, yet he could not have imagined this work redirecting his reader’s prayers to a monotheistic Lord. Augustine “long[s] for the immortality of wisdom” in a sentiment that would have been familiar to Plato, but in the next sentence recasts the neo-Platonic concept of rising to the One as a path to the Christian God in heaven. Augustine’s relationship to secular literature leaves room for religious inspiration. He accepts a certain amount of literary boundary-crossing that would have inspired Jerome to boundary-enforcing acts of self-punishment.

The salient issue for Augustine is not an outright rejection of all classical texts but a change in literary values. In this same passage, Augustine reveals his own way of approaching literary conversion, as a victory of content over form. He argues that pagan literature praises form over content, while the truth of Christian writing transcends its (often rough) literary quality. Augustine discovers the Hortensius while studying rhetoric intensively in Carthage, with aspirations to become “an advocate in the law courts, where one’s reputation is high in proportion to one’s success in deceiving people (hoc laudabilior, quo fraudulentior)” (Augustine Conf. III.iv.6). This is in line with the general literary values of the late Roman world, which placed a high value on rhetoric even at the expense of subject matter. Augustine reflects this consensus when he speaks of “Cicero, whose language (but not his heart) almost everyone admires (cuius linguam fere omnes mirantur, pectus non ita)” (Augustine Conf. III.iv.7). At the same time, he sets up a fundamental conflict between the form of language and the heart of its meaning. Augustine finds the Hortensius personally
inspirational. He explains its effect on himself as due to its substance rather than to Cicero’s famous control of language: “I was impressed not by the book’s refining effect on my style and literary expression but by the content” (Ibid.). Here, Augustine reconciles how a pagan philosophical text could further his Christian search for God: he was reading Cicero not as pagans do (for “language” rather than “heart”) but with the substantive values of a Christian.

Immediately after the *Hortensius* Augustine turns to the Bible; but paradoxically, after reading Cicero with Christian eyes he proceeds to read the Bible with pagan eyes. The young Augustine is emphatic: “It seemed to me unworthy in comparison with the dignity of Cicero” (Augustine *Conf.* III.v.9). Augustine rejects the Bible at this phase of his life because the roughness of its form blinds him to the worth of its content. However, the reflective author of the *Confessions* interprets, “My inflated conceit shunned the Bible’s restraint, and my gaze never penetrated to its inwardness (tumor enim meus refugiebat modum eius, et acies mea non penetrabit interiora eius)” (Ibid.). Augustine balks at the simple style of the Bible (modum eius) because of his own swollen, distorted perspective (tumor). Indeed, the literary quality of the biblical translation available to Augustine, the Vetus Latina, would have been rough, and naturally off-putting to a high-level student of rhetoric; its Old Testament text was a translation of a translation, through Hebrew by way of koine Greek, and its textual history was inconsistent and piecemeal. But more than simply excusing the Bible’s style, Augustine praises the “inwardness” of its content (interiora). He now values the Bible’s message despite, perhaps even because of, its less rhetorically polished form.

In the meantime, however, the philosophical journey begun by the *Hortensius* leads Augustine far from the Bible. He spends years as a devotee of Manichaeism and then
Neoplatonism before returning to Christian texts. But when Augustine finally reads the letters of Paul, he learns to draw inspiration from their content despite formal problems:

> With avid intensity I seized the sacred writings of your spirit and especially the apostle Paul. Where at one time I used to think he contradicted himself and the text of his words disagreed with the testimonies of the law and the prophets, the problems simply vanished. The holy oracles now presented to me a simple face (apparuit mihi una facies)… (Augustine Conf. VII.xxi.27)

Previously, reading with a secular Roman value system, Augustine had rejected the Pauline letters because of technical flaws. Perceived contradictions at the literal level, between two letters or between one letter and the larger canon, prevented him from accepting any spiritual meaning. But when he begins reading for content, inconsistencies in form no longer matter. The ideas themselves present a single face (una facies) which he can accept as a conceptual whole.

Once again, for Augustine the transition from classical literature to the Bible does not require an unequivocal rejection of the former. As with the Hortensius, Augustine can continue to value true content in the Neoplatonic books while rejecting the works as a whole. He writes, “I began reading [Paul] and found that all the truth I had read in the Platonists was stated here together with the commendation of your grace…” (Ibid.). His reading of Paul does not disprove the Platonists, but supplements their truth with the complementary and entirely necessary truth of Christ. In the passage that follows, Augustine quotes no untrue statements from Neoplatonic works; rather, he offers an account of Christian theology cobbled almost entirely from biblical quotations and concludes, “None of this is in the Platonist books” (Ibid.). The ultimate concern in seeking truth must be content: if the Bible contains true material which other sources do not, then Augustine, under his new content-based hermeneutic, must turn to the Bible.
The *Confessions* proceeds with fits and starts, but Augustine experiences one final, climactic experience of Christian conversion in a garden at Milan. This mystical moment depends not only on reading, but on a particular act of reading which severs content as extremely as possible from form. In this famous scene, Augustine is interrupted from his agonizing self-examination and self-doubt by the voice of a child chanting, “Pick up and read, pick up and read” (*tolle lege, tolle lege*) (Augustine *Conf*. VIII.xii.29). He thinks immediately of an exemplary moment in the life of Saint Antony:

> I interpreted it solely as a divine command for me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find. For I had heard how Antony happened to be present at the gospel reading, and took it as an admonition addressed to himself when the words were read: ‘Go, sell all you have, give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me’ (Matt. 19:21). By such an inspired utterance he was immediately ‘converted to you’ (Ps. 50:15) (Ibid.).

In Antony’s conversion experience, he hears a random passage from the gospel and interprets it as a personal command with direct application to his own life. He betrays a radical attitude which values content regardless of context; any given fragment of the Bible can hold great meaning or indeed change the course of one’s life. Yet Antony’s experience still takes the form of listening to a voice. God speaks through the gospel-reader as if through a prophet, a familiar model for those well versed in the Bible. Antony’s conversion story does not raise larger questions about how or why we read, as Augustine’s does.

Augustine takes this attitude a step further when he translates Antony’s act of prophetic listening to his own of prophetic reading. As he tells it,

> I seized [the Bible], opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: “Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts” (Rom. 13:13-14). I neither wished nor needed to read further. (Augustine *Conf*. VIII.xii.29).

Augustine’s conversion experience does not involve hearing a prophetic voice, as Antony’s does (beyond the mystical chant of the child, *tolle, lege*). Rather, Augustine opens the book with his own autonomy and receives his personal message by reading. His act holds
implications for the attitude with which one reads the Bible in general. By this example, any randomly chosen passage of the Bible can offer profound meaning to a reader, regardless of the biblical book from which it came and regardless of that work’s genre or literary quality or factual consistency. The qualities which initially repelled Augustine from the Bible no longer matter in the slightest. Content has achieved its ultimate triumph over form.

Significantly, however, Augustine assigns this status only to the Bible. No other book can be read in this fashion, not even classical works he values highly like the Neoplatonists or the *Hortensius*. Augustine has made a significant break from the hermeneutics of the classical world, foreshadowing the literary values of the middle ages. When later Christians seek divine guidance by opening Virgil’s *Aeneid* to a randomly selected verse, they will be extending Augustine’s attitudes toward a classical text that has begun to function as a mere biblical subsidiary.

Jerome constructed and justified his transition from classical literature to the Bible according to the needs of his own theology; Augustine does the same. Ultimately, the conflict between content and form reflects the larger conflict Augustine poses between soul and body. The concept of soul-body dualism runs throughout Augustine’s writings, and is obvious in the *Confessions* as well; the text itself presents a dual function as both a timeless, disembodied prayer to God and a retelling of sinful actions in a mortal life. Meanwhile, the literary value systems which Augustine defines, classical form and Christian content, map neatly onto the physical body and spiritual soul. His literary conversion is made to address the same problems as his lifestyle conversion. At the end of the *Confessions*, Augustine sees himself as embarking on a wholly soulful life, transcending the challenges of the body.
Likewise, he moves forward reading only the Bible, transcending classical literature’s concerns with language and genre, rhetoric and form.

In the course of their autobiographical writings, both Augustine and Jerome depict significant and ideologically weighty transitions from classical literature to the Bible. Both write about these changes after the fact, consciously reshaping their experiences to further their theological aims. For Jerome, this means recasting a personal dream into public advice, emphasizing an idealized control over both reading material and body. Augustine’s discussion of literature also morphs into a discussion of the body. He traces in the *Confessions* a conversion from literary form to literary content, which he ultimately understands as conversion from a life of the body to a life of the soul. But whether asceticism or soul-body dualism serves as the guiding framework, both writers explain their transitions from classical literature to Bible from firmly within the conceptual world of Christianity.

**Works Cited:**

