

Paula Fredriksen

Textual Healing

AUGUSTINE: A NEW BIOGRAPHY

By James J. O'Donnell

(HarperCollins, 396 pp., \$26.95)

IT IS HARD TO LOVE AUGUSTINE. He stands as the source of some of the most baleful traditions of thought in Western culture. All humans, he held, are born indelibly marked, indelibly marred, by original sin. Human desire, especially sexual desire, is a premier sign and effect of Adam's fall. Unbaptized babies go to hell. Salvation is a question not of human effort, but of divine predestination. The church, to propound spiritual truth and to protect it, should avail itself of the coercive power of the state. These are all Augustinian teachings.

And yet it is hard not to love Augustine. He states his questions and his convictions about the human condition with such ardor that the flames of his ideas leap across the chasm of sixteen centuries from his lifetime into our own. Against the best philosophy of his day, he insisted that the human being was more than a mind sojourning in an inconvenient body. Flesh, he urged, truly is the native home of spirit: body and soul belong together, and together make up the whole person. Memory, he asserted, defines and constitutes self. And love, as he passionately and relentlessly wrote, is the hinge of the soul, the motor of the will. What moves us is not what we know, but what we want. We are what we love.

How can someone born so long ago seem so easily our contemporary? The answer lies in part with the effects of Augustine's work: we are heirs to the culture that he helped to shape. And in part the answer lies with the enormity of his written legacy: we feel that we know Augustine because, to a degree unsurpassed by any other ancient figure, we actually can know him. The huge corpus of his formal writings—commentaries, treatises, polemical tracts, speculative theology—comprises some three

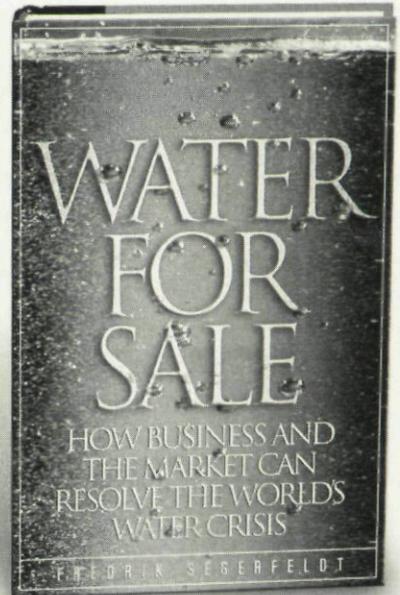
million words. Not only do we have these words, but thanks to the catalogue of his own writings that he assembled late in life, the *Retractationes* ("Reconsiderations"), we can securely date them. The effect is the intellectual equivalent of a time-lapse photograph. We can literally (and literarily) trace the growth of his thought, the movements of his mind, along the trajectory of his life from the year 386—when, at the age of thirty-two, he decided to embrace lifelong celibacy and be baptized into the church—to the year 430, when he died. To this we can add another two million words from his bulky dossier of sermons and letters. And of course we have also the brilliant and original theological treatise that combined exegesis, epistemology, and theological polemic with haunting autobiographical meditation: the thirteen books of his *Confessions*.

This last work, argues James J. O'Donnell, represents the fundamental reason for Augustine's continuing cultural presence. Its title, its seemingly intimate narration of a personal past, its resolute focus on spirituality and continence and thus on their opposite, *concupiscentia carnalis*, the appetites of the flesh: all these can make the *Confessions* seem like, well, a candid confession. But Augustine ends the ostensibly autobiographical part of his story in Book Nine. Fully 40 percent of its eighty thousand words still remain: rich discussions of memory, time, divine revelation. The *Confessions* may present Augustine's life story, but he sets that story within the infinitely larger and intensely philosophical context of eternity. Its incandescent final books retrospectively alter any simple reading of the earlier narrative ones.

Augustine did not "write" his *Confessions*, pouring his thoughts onto the page during some dark night of the soul. He performed them, declaiming his gorgeous prose always in the presence of at least one or two other people, the skilled *notarii* who took dictation. The product of his performance conforms not to modern canons of candor, but to ancient standards of rhetorical presentation. The *Confessions* is a work of brilliant

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NO LIVING SCHOLAR KNOWS the *Confessions* better than O'Donnell does. In 1992, he published a definitive three-volume study of the work, an edition of the Latin text together with a wide-flung commentary. Now he has set his hand to writing a life history of its author. O'Donnell begins his biography with Augustine's great classic; but, knowing his subject as he does, he skillfully evades the traps that Augustine set in the *Confessions* for his later readers. And while treating the full sweep of Augustine's life, he refuses to let Augustine control the story. O'Donnell helps us attend to what Augustine did not confess.

What was the story that Augustine told? In Books One and Two of the *Confessions*, we catch glimpses of his childhood in a small town in the Numidian highlands of North Africa, a place (in O'Donnell's deft description) that "felt a little like Western Canada before World War II." Book Three is all bright lights, big city: the gifted kid on a scholarship from a moneyed hometown patron goes to university—to Carthage, "where a cauldron of illicit loves boiled about me." Augustine tore through his first year of student life, frequenting theatrical performances and church services looking for opportunities "to love and to be loved." He shifted his studies from law to philosophy. He took a common-law wife, who bore his son. And shortly before he turned nineteen, he joined an outlawed Christian group, a New Age sect par excellence: the Manichees.

Why? The forty-three-year-old bishop presents his youthful allegiance as a passing mistake caused by a toxic combination of intellectual arrogance, philosophical immaturity (he hadn't yet read the Platonists), and fundamental error (truth is available, after all, only within the true church). The beauty and the power of Cicero's prose, he claims, turned him away from the familiar Christian scriptures, which he could read only in clumsy Latin translation. (Roman gentlemen in Augustine's culture were in principle bilingual, at home also in Greek. His intelligence could never fully compensate for the second-rate quality of his early education and of his up-country origins.) Raised in a Christian household, Augustine knew that

he wanted to remain Christian; newly awakened intellectually, he also knew that he could find few satisfactions in the *superstitio* of his mother's church.

The Manichees offered a perfect solution. They were Christian. They made the case for their theology by appealing to reason, not to authority. Committed ascetics whose spiritual elite were consecrated to a lifetime of sexual renunciation, vegetarianism, and poverty, they built their principles on the foundation of the Apostle Paul, augmented by esoteric scriptures of their own. And the fact that they were a persecuted minority—since the late third century, emperors both pagan and Christian had prohibited the sect—contributed to their cachet.

Unlike their orthodox competition, moreover, the Manichees had the virtue of consistency. If flesh was a source of evil, they held, if extreme austerity was evidence of holiness, then Christian scripture should reflect this. The Manichees accordingly repudiated the Old Testament: worse than "too Jewish," it was simply, irredeemably incoherent, both morally and theologically. Its god clearly had bodily shape, and hair, and nails. (After all, he had made humans in his own image.) He had framed this flawed material universe and then, against common experience, pronounced it "good." He enjoined carnal intercourse ("Be fruitful and multiply"). He demanded animal sacrifices when he was not enjoining humans to butcher each other. Such a god could have nothing to do with Christ.

And Paul the Apostle, the Manichees held, had plainly said as much. Who but Paul had so clearly seen and explained the absolute distinction between good and evil, spirit and flesh, law and gospel, inner man and outer man? Paul and the Gospels pointed the way to understanding the problem of evil. No good god could have created such a turbulent, imperfect world. Instead, two independent and opposed realms, Light and Darkness, good and evil, were locked in cosmic conflict. Man was a miniature instance of this intense battle. His moral failings reflected the strength of the forces of darkness waging war within him—"the law of my members," as Paul had written, "at war with the law of my mind."

Split the New Testament off from the Old, the Manichees urged; amplify and enrich Christian teachings with Mani's own revelations. Forget trying to see anything good in marriage when sexual-

ity and procreation were so clearly a part of the problem, not a part of the solution. And embrace the textual consequences of clear thinking: if in the name of the Gospel Christians have dropped circumcision, Sabbath observance, food taboos, and all the myriad fleshly things that the Jewish god demanded, why on earth should they retain the carnal Jewish book?

The Manichees commanded Augustine's loyalty from his early years in Carthage until he was almost thirty. Throughout Books Three and Four of the *Confessions*, the older man belittles the younger man's attachment to their message. He claims that even at the time he found much of Manichaean theology, cosmology, and scriptural interpretation unpersuasive. But in Book Five we find him lingering with them still, not only in Carthage but also, later, in Rome.

BRIGHTER LIGHTS, BIGGER CITIES: chasing after professional advancement (and pursued by his family's ambitions for him), Augustine moved on, first to Rome to look for a better job, then to Milan to take up the municipal chair of rhetoric that his Manichaean connections had helped him to secure. Once in his new position, he found himself in a city without his familiar support structure: Milan had no Manichaean community. His attachment cooled. Besides, in Milan the best and the brightest—and the most socially established—were Christians of a less exotic stripe. Ardently ambitious, uncomfortably aware of his African accent, unexpectedly unmoored, Augustine drifted.

Milan was a northern capital of the late Empire, abuzz with the wealth, the energy, and the talent that concentrations of political and military power often gather. In the mid-380s, it was also a cultural powerhouse, at the height of a renaissance of Platonic studies. The erudite sponsored salons and reading groups dedicated to the study of Neoplatonic philosophy. Ambrose, the city's aristocratic bishop, borrowed from these late pagan works, as well as from philosophically sophisticated Greek patristic writings, to enrich his own sermons. Seeking connections, social advancement, and models of effective rhetoric, Augustine floated between the reading groups and the church. He thus received—in translation, the only way he could receive it—a double dose of late Platonism: the pagan

stream via the salons, the Christianized stream via Ambrose.

Books Six and Seven of the *Confessions* chart the effects of his sudden immersion in this cosmopolitan culture. Through Ambrose, Augustine learned to think about the Old Testament allegorically. Biblical passages of seemingly intractable carnality, such as God's making man in his image, now yielded shining new truths. "Image" referred not to flesh but to mind, of which the processes, like the divinity they reflected, were utterly immaterial. Scripture's humble style embraced the uneducated many, while its obscurities enticed the interpretive skills of the learned few. Read in the bright light of Ambrosian allegory, the old Jewish texts revealed Christ and his church. The Manichees had it all wrong: the Old Testament, understood spiritually, really was a Christian book.

Pagan metaphysics, meanwhile, dissolved the seeming reasonableness of dualism as an explanation for the problem of evil. For the Manichees, evil had been a cosmic force, an entity, an active power pitted against good. But late Platonists held that evil did not exist, in the

same way that darkness or silence does not exist. Darkness is the absence of light; silence, the absence of sound. Thus evil is not a thing, but the absence of a thing—namely, of good. Accordingly, sin occurred not because the individual was overwhelmed by the incursion of a superior evil force, but because of a poor choice of his will. And if aspects of the universe seemed corrupt, this very corruption measured its essential goodness, since only what was good to start with could become less so. At a stroke, for Augustine, the creator god in Scripture was absolved of the problem of evil. Indeed, to think him responsible for evil was not only impious, but also illogical: no one, not even God, can "make" nothing.

Though released from the intellectual knots that had bound him for so long to Manichaeism, Augustine still tarried, unable to make himself join Ambrose's church. Books Six through Eight of the *Confessions* lay out why. Augustine's own perfectionism (aggravated, perhaps, by his social insecurity) paralyzed him. In the late fourth century, when even most clergy were married, the church made no requirement of celibacy. But

philosophy did. For the social and intellectual elites among both Christians and pagans, sexual celibacy was *forte à la mode*. In Milan, Augustine moved on the edges of such circles. Whether Christian or pagan, the man truly dedicated to the life of the mind would forswear the entanglements of domestic sexuality.

EVER THE ALPHA, AUGUSTINE recoiled from what he could only consider second-class status—that is, baptism as a married layman. Besides his natural competitiveness, his prior experience as a married (and thus second-class) Manichee would have stiffened what resolve he had. Meanwhile he worked all fronts. His common-law wife, an impediment to his social ascent, was sent back to Africa. He contracted an advantageous marriage to a Milanese aristocrat, though he was forced to wait two years until the girl came of age. (She was twelve at the time.) Finally, as an interim arrangement, he took a mistress. This seemingly unremarkable development in fact mortified him deeply, because it publicly gave the lie to his philosophical pretensions. The

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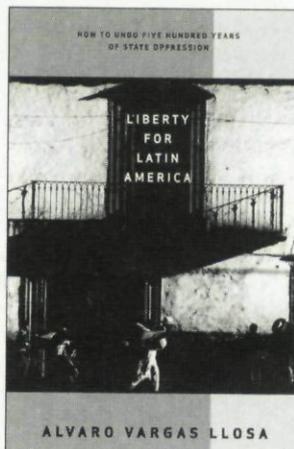
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only reason to take a mistress (as everyone knew) was for sex—an activity that the best and the brightest eschewed.

And so Augustine floundered. In the elaborately written Book Eight, he presents a sequence of interlocking conversion stories interspersed with panting portraits of his own indecision, his divided will, the paralyzing paradox of wanting and not wanting the same thing at the same time. *Da mihi castitatem et continentiam sed noli modo*: “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.” Finally, abruptly, the climax (at least for the modern reader) comes. Augustine, irreflexive and exhausted, is surprised to hear a child’s voice chanting: *Tolle, lege*, “Pick up and read.” He snatches up a volume of the Pauline Epistles, and takes as divine counsel the first lines his eye falls on. He lands, happily, on Romans 13:14: “Make no provision for the flesh and its appetites.” And then “all the shadows of doubt were dispelled,” Augustine continues. His way clear, his resolve firm, he commits to the celibate life.

Ancient readers, and Augustine himself, would probably see the autobiographical climax of his story in Book Nine, when he is finally baptized. But thereafter the scope of the *Confessions* changes. Book Ten shifts abruptly from Augustine’s past (the autobiography ends in Italy in the year 387) to his present (circa 397, when the bishop of Hippo meditates on how humans know what they think they know). Memory, time, eternity: the *Confessions* seems to end at a completely different place from where it began, with a life story. And as the life story disappears, so, it seems, does the plot.

But what emerges with the soaring speculations of these difficult final books is the question that had driven Augustine’s tale all along: how can the time-bound, imperfect human being know the timeless, perfect God? God has planted in each soul the desire to know him. But man, as a consequence of Adam’s sin and his own, is adrift in time, and knowledge of any and all sorts (of the world, of the self, of God) is always necessarily mediated (by the senses, by images, by signs, by words). In such an infinitely interpretable universe, what certainty can one ever have? Augustine’s answer: only such certainty as God imparts (as he had done for Augustine with the counsel to “pick up and read”). Truth without shadows will come only at history’s end, when time is swallowed up in “the Sabbath of

Poet at 40

When have I last doubted the tawdry and the weird
Or the dry ploys that only the gravel blind could love?
The weather-beaten I once called *beauty*, the brunt of worrying
That’s never shaken—are these the jitters or a slow burn?
Even the flattered are dogs now. Sure, that ravishing Star of David
Couldn’t be more dreary—nor supping with the impish stem-winders and swingers.
That’s why I crib this guesswork and shim and detail
A tonnage of mannerism into a hunger for the fusty.
Restrained, birth-marked, cast off, I didn’t stake out a beggar’s prophecy.
Instead, I hunker and doze with the late impatient,
And, like a keeper of reveries, I tally the rings of their ripening pallor.

DAVID BIESPIEL

eternal life.” The final paragraph of the *Confessions* closes by evoking the transformation of creation at the resurrection of the dead, somewhere off in an unknowable Beyond. Augustine thus concludes the story of his past with a hope for his future, that he will stand among the community of the redeemed. “That door opening onto eternity,” O’Donnell notes, “is the real goal of . . . [Augustine’s] narrative of the *Confessions*.”

ALL SCHOLARS WRITING BIOGRAPHIES of Augustine avail themselves of the material in the *Confessions*, augmenting its elements and expanding its time frame by appeal to the huge corpus of his other writings. O’Donnell is no exception. Other than by virtue of its recent publication, then, does this biography live up to its subtitle? Is it, in any substantial way, really “new”?

The short answer is an emphatic yes. O’Donnell’s strategies of reading, his choice and presentation of topics, are admirably innovative. His broad knowledge of the culture and the politics of late antiquity, together with his intimate command of Augustine’s own writings, produces a study of enormous range and depth. The multiple tones shading and shaping his discussion—somber and irreverent, sober and playful, effortlessly erudite and effortlessly vernacular—give the book striking freshness and originality. Sometimes Augustine the brilliant performer and ecclesiastical street fighter overwhelms Augustine the thinker, in O’Donnell’s portrait. And O’Donnell’s many contemporary references will have the unfortunate effect of quickly dating

his valuable book. (Invoking the Grateful Dead in connection with late antique relic cults will not remain as illuminating as he thinks.) Still, he provides us with fresh ways to look at Augustine’s commitments, his obsessions, and his blind spots, and to appreciate how all these shaped his life and, eventually, his times.

Consider, for example, the virtuoso act of self-interpretation performed in the *Confessions*. O’Donnell enriches our appreciation for what Augustine did not confess, and enables us to interpret more shrewdly what he did confess, by having us attend to two other contemporary Christian communities: the Manichees and the Donatists. In relating his past, Augustine had suppressed the importance of the first group, and refused even to mention the existence of the second. Together, however, they define the controlling preoccupations of his book.

The Manichees were with Augustine both early and late. He treats them in the *Confessions* as just one more species of error, a prolonged adolescent phase. And through his baroque descriptions of exaggerated youthful passion (he married and became a father, remember, at age eighteen), he artfully linked Manichaeism to a continuing sexual profligacy that real Manichees would surely have rebuked. Moreover, Augustine had been just as serious about his Manichaeism as he would be about his later catholicism. As an *auditor*, a second-tier member of this dualist church, he would have participated daily in the ritual of bringing vegetarian meals to the celibate elite, the Elect. His own marital relationship precluded his ascending to that rank. Renouncing sex in his early thirties would

be difficult, but possible; at nineteen, clearly, he just could not do it. Thus, while Ambrose might have given him better philosophical reasons for choosing celibacy, the normal seasons of life also played their part. All through his twenties, in sum, from his university days to his first great professional success, Augustine was caught in a situation where he could not succeed, could not be among "the best." But being among the best is what he always craved, no matter what group he belonged to.

MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE question at the center of Manichaean theology—*Unde malum?* Whence, and why, evil?—remained at the center of all of Augustine's own work. Other Christians of different temperament, free of the force of this question, wondered about him. O'Donnell catches this beautifully. "Manicheism," he writes,

was the one truly impassioned religious experience of his life. He was the sort of person who has a great love affair when young, sees that it just won't work, breaks it off, then settles down in a far more sober and sensible marriage. What he says and does for the rest of his life will be marked by firm allegiance and commitment to the late-blooming relationship, but the mark of the first never goes away, and some who knew him early will be unable to credit the marriage because they remember the passion.

The Donatists were among those Christians who questioned how much Augustine had really left the Manichees behind. That we have to identify such Christians as Donatists already distorts the historical picture. "Donatism" was, quite simply, the form of Christianity native to North Africa. During the last of the pagan imperial persecutions, in 303, some of North Africa's clergy had complied with the government's orders and handed over Christian holy books to be burned. Other clergy defied the order, and were jailed or even martyred. A new day dawned shortly thereafter: in 312, Constantine decided to favor the church. But by that point North Africa's clergy was riven with dissent, as the stalwart accused the pliant of collaboration. The confessors regarded their compromised brethren as *traditores* and chal-

lenged the legitimacy of their sacraments. How could a cleric be a conduit of the Holy Spirit when through his conduct he had sinned against the Spirit? The integrity of the sacraments was at stake. Those baptized by traitorous clergy, said the majority, had to be baptized again.

The confessors called the treasonous clergy "Caecilianists," after the name of one of their number. The Caecilianists returned the favor, and called the confessors "Donatists," after Donatus, one of their bishops. Both sides took advantage of Constantine's new mood and asked him to adjudicate. The emperor convened a committee of overseas bishops to examine the African case. These foreign bishops, disliking the idea of rebaptism and fighting their own fights against local purists, found in favor of the Caecilianists. At a stroke, the Caecilianists became the "catholics," the representatives of a universal (*catholica*) communion, and the confessors became the "Donatists."

Augustine entered the church through Ambrose in Milan. When he returned shortly thereafter to Africa, he identified with the Caecilianist minority. Retreating to his family's up-country estate, Augustine read books, wrote treatises, and lived the life of a philosophical Christian gentleman in retirement. By 391, however, everything had changed. His son Adeodatus died, and with him Augustine's reason for holding on to family land. Then, while visiting the undistinguished coastal town of Hippo, Augustine was wrenched out of his former life and inducted into the priesthood by the town's Caecilianist minority. In this way, public life found him again.

THIS PERIOD FROM 391 UNTIL 396, when Augustine became Hippo's bishop, is the years of Augustine's real conversion. His cosmopolitan catholicism did not impress the locals, though his rhetorical presence did. Striving to acculturate himself, he plunged into a study of biblical texts, especially Genesis and Paul, long familiar from his Manichee days. The trail of half-finished and unsuccessful treatises that litter this period gives the measure of his struggle to fit himself into what had become his life. He does not pull himself together until he works yet again on the issues of free will and grace as he sees them configured in and by Paul.

By 396, he has his answer: people are saved not by their own efforts, nor even by calling on God for help with those efforts, but simply and solely by the inscrutable will of the Divine. God chooses whomever he will, for his own unknowable reasons. He turned the persecutor Saul into the Apostle Paul because he, not Saul, had wanted it; and he has the sovereign power and authority to do whatever he wants with his creatures. Humanity universally requires redemption, because of the sin of Adam; but it universally deserves only damnation, again because of the sin of Adam. Thanks to Adam, all human flesh is rebellious and mortal; but so too is the soul, especially its erotic life. Human love, unaided by grace, is compulsive, uncontrollable, disordered, intrinsically depleting: only the love of God—which can be given only by God—heals and fulfills. If God calls the sinner to redemption, he works by re-orienting the person's love. Only through God's grace does the person come to love what is good, rather than simply what he wants.

The "autobiographical" part of the *Confessions* narratively presents this new theological insight of Augustine's. The idea had implications for society as well as for individuals. For one, it meant that, in this period before the final

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judgment, no one can know who is elected to grace or left to perdition: no one can know the heart of another, and what looks like right action could actually be motivated by self-love, that is, pride. Meanwhile—and here this theology was a blow to the Donatists' self-image—the church itself was, and would remain until the end, a mixed population of sinners and saints. In this life there can never be a church of the pure. Uncertainty and opacity characterize both individual and social life before the final redemption. In the meantime, however, Augustine did know one thing for certain. Outside the church—the *true* church, that is: Augustine's church, the church of Ambrose, the church of the emperor—there could be no salvation.

WHY, THEN, WHEN AUGUSTINE writes the *Confessions*, does he tell his story as he does? Why does he minimize his childhood exposure to the Caecilianist church of his mother? Why does he underplay his faithful attachment to the Manichees? Why does he ignore his own ordination, stopping his narrative in 387? Why does he not mention the Donatists at all? O'Donnell argues that this is because Augustine wished to center his story in Italy, in a purely catholic milieu, far from these African disorders. In this account, he meets "true" Christianity only in Milan, when he meets Ambrose. And it is that "true" Christianity that he, as bishop, carries with him forever more. "Caecilianism" (and, accordingly, "Donatism") disappears in this retelling. There is only the *catholica*.

O'Donnell's description of Augustine's lifelong campaign against the Donatists is chilling, and gripping. With consummate party discipline and political skill, Augustine and the talented cadre of Caecilianist bishops who were

his friends brought the full force of imperial authority and power to bear on this extremely local fight. The result of his success was a Christian population so utterly demoralized that within a few centuries it disappeared, embracing the new religious message of Islam.

As he traces the stages of Augustine's Caecilianist putsch—the imprisonments, the simmering threat of legal violence, the ingenious acts of co-optation—O'Donnell also presents the unlovely portrait of "triumphant" Christianity. Fourth- and fifth-century emperors—successful generals first of all—remade Christianity in their own image. Bishops came to assume the role and the trappings of civic authority, with the support staff needed for administration. (Without the secretarial assistance entailed by his office, Augustine would have been very hard-pressed to finance his prodigious, and expensive, literary output.) Imperial agents clarified theological disputes by force.

Ever solicitous of imperial favor, late Roman aristocrats hastened to join the emperor's fashionable new cult, and so brought their wealth and prestige into the church. From their ranks came a new generation of educated and socially well-connected clergy (like Ambrose, among others). The old civic cults, formerly bankrolled by this class, wobbled as their funding dwindled; and finally they were banned, the temples shut, the rites outlawed. Contemporary Jews remained Roman citizens, though the idea of "the Jew" served as a favorite target of episcopal invective. The main victims of this ecclesiastical revolution, however, were the Christians themselves. As the ideology of a universal orthodoxy took hold, emperors used it and enforced it. More Christians suffered at the hands of the Roman state after the conversion of Constantine than before. From his own vantage point, Augustine saw the use of such force as tough love, a kind of muscular pastoral care. In the perspective of history, however, he stands as a chief architect of the theology of religious coercion.

O'Donnell brings all these different factors to bear—Augustine's personal past, his theological convictions, his political effectiveness (and ruthlessness), his gnawing social ambitions—in his brilliant review of the Pelagian controversy. With aggressive single-mindedness, Augustine insisted on making Pelagius into his great opponent, though

Pelagius resisted the role. As O'Donnell points out, Pelagius resembles no one so much as the younger Augustine, the philosophically attuned catholic optimistically embracing the salvation of the church. That is the Augustine invisible, indeed disowned, in the *Confessions*; but it is an Augustine well attested in those gentlemanly treatises written before the theological revolution of 396. Pelagius had cited these early works in making a case for free will that the older Augustine found offensive. In attacking Pelagius, then, Augustine attacked his own younger self, the one who preceded his re-invention in the *Confessions*.

More poignantly, Pelagius embodied the future that Augustine had lost when he returned to Africa. Genuinely cosmopolitan, at home in the salons of the moneyed aristocrats whom he exhorted to moral excellence, Pelagius was what Augustine never became: a minister to the Italian elite. Augustine could cultivate the attention of these people only from a distance, through polite and carefully constructed letters. How much did resentment and regret fuel Augustine's overheated reaction to Pelagius?

Augustine had not sought out these reminders of the road not taken. His past found him in 410, when a wave of Roman aristocrats and their chaplains, fleeing the Vandal incursion into the old capital, washed up in Carthage. Approaching the apogee of his local efforts against the Donatists, Augustine vigorously engaged these new social and theological contacts, wooing the wealthy (with an embarrassing lack of success) and attacking their clerics. One year later, Italy settled down. "Pelagius sailed away from Africa," O'Donnell remarks. "The aristocratic refugees from Rome sailed away as well; and the Donatists stayed behind. Augustine always wrote as if it were the other way around."

Why? O'Donnell speculates about insecurity and social climbing. If the tensions in Augustine's makeup contributed to his fight with Pelagius, they were exacerbated that much more by Pelagius's younger champion, Julian of Eclanum. Julian was everything that Augustine had never been: well born, well educated, bilingual, effortlessly chaste. A bishop who was the son of a bishop, Julian as a young man contracted a *mariage blanc* with the daughter of yet another bishop in a ceremony celebrated by no less a personage than Paulinus of Nola, a fellow aristocratic

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churchman and family friend. (Augustine knew Paulinus only through correspondence.) Augustine used Julian to stage his last great public battle. It was a battle entirely of his own making, played out on an international stage thanks to the letters and treatises that he lobbed all over the Mediterranean. The struggle secured Augustine's broader reputation, but at a cost. In the course of the conflict, he once again found himself accused of being a closeted Manichee. Worse, the younger man stereotyped Augustine as the African, the provincial, the uncouth outsider. It stung.

Augustine "won," ensuring a papal condemnation of Pelagius and driving Julian from his see. He unscrupulously exercised the political connections in the imperial court that he had cultivated so carefully in campaigning against the

Donatists. Still, as O'Donnell points out, Augustine also lost. His grim ideas on predestination were impossible as a pastoral theology. Invoking his authority, later churchmen carefully re-interpreted and reshaped his message, softening its doctrinal impact. The extremist strain that he left behind remained in western Christianity, exploding centuries later with Calvin and with Jansen. But extremes are, by definition, marginal.

O'Donnell ends his book with a chiaroscuro appreciation of the multiple Augustines conjured in his volume—Augustine the politician, Augustine the poet of the divided self, Augustine the theoretician of infant baptism, Augustine the anxious sinner, alone on his deathbed, going to his God. But the one he closes on is the one who made all the others possible: Augustine the writer,

whose textual afterlife ensures his continuing cultural presence.

As O'Donnell observes, Augustine wrote as if his life depended on it. Perhaps it did. The five million words that he dictated from the time of his conversion until his death amounts to the equivalent of publishing a modern three-hundred-page print book every year for forty years. (And he "wrote" only at night, after meeting his daytime obligations.) However unelevating some of his motivations, however unfortunate his positions and however damaging his successes, Augustine's astonishing literary legacy remains, a monument to his burning intelligence and to his unquiet heart. O'Donnell's vibrant new study brings this imperfect saint to life, both in his wrenching smallness and in his exhilarating grandeur. *Tolle, lege.* ■

CORRESPONDENCE

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holes ("Nuclear Nonsense," May 23). Abe Fortas was nominated by a lame-duck president in an election year. His filibuster lasted just four days. What's more, minority Republicans didn't filibuster Clinton's judicial nominees in his first two years in office. You criticized the GOP for holding up Clinton nominees in committee, but that was done routinely to George H.W. Bush's nominees, as well. In just four years, more than 50 judges were blocked in committee by the Democratic majority. If there is a valid criticism to be made of the GOP, it is that they did away with many of the parliamentary maneuvers (such as blue slips) that previously allowed the minority to block a vote on a nomination.

PATRICIA KUNZ
Keyport, New Jersey

THE EDITORS MAKE A GOOD POINT about the generally undemocratic judiciary and, therefore, the generally more democratic use of the filibuster against it. But I'm surprised that the editors would not make a distinction between a majority party blocking judicial nominees and a minority party doing so. Clinton's nominees died in committee because they were killed by the democratically elected majority party in the Senate—the GOP.

MATTHEW RAM LEE
Derwood, Maryland

FALSE PROPHET

I TAKE STRONG EXCEPTION TO MASHA Gessen's characterization of the National Bolshevik Party (NBP) as "essentially a pro-democracy group, despite its odd choice of name" ("Show and Tell," May 16). I am certainly no fan of Vladimir Putin, but Eduard Limonov's NBP is hardly pro-democracy. For decades, Limonov has led a movement that champions extreme xenophobia and racism, especially with regard to the other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the United States. He is also well-known for his adulation of Slobodan Milosevic and his decision to join the Serbian army temporarily on a sniper patrol during the Bosnian War. Russia has many problems, but I think that racism is the most insidious and, ultimately, the most devastating to its development. National Bolshevism is not the basis on which to build a Russian democracy, and there are plenty of other victims of Russia's arbitrary justice who would make better martyrs for Gessen than Limonov.

NATHAN HUTSON
Austin, Texas

HOUSE CALL

CLAY RISEN'S ARTICLE REQUIRES several clarifications ("Home Page," May 2 & 9). First, real estate is just about the most competitive business there is. Every consumer can and should negotiate terms for real-estate services. There is no standard commission—never has been and never will be.

Second, the National Association of Realtors (NAR) applauds and encourages innovation, new business models, and better ways of serving consumers. That's why we created *Realtor.com*, the most popular real-estate website on the Internet, which the article failed to mention. Third, virtual office websites would not exist without realtors. They rely upon information created by realtors and posted on Multiple Listing Services maintained by realtors. Fourth, it's not true that NAR opposes "an SEC-like body to regulate real estate." We have no position on the question because no one has seriously proposed it before. Risen attributes the idea to unnamed "experts," but he never raised it when he talked to me. I would have been glad to discuss this on the record.

The article also contained the paraphrase: "Cook admits that the opt-out rule was included as a concession to the two industry heavyweights." In discussing the sequence of events that led to the development of NAR's rule on virtual office websites, I emphasized that many months of study, debate, and consensus-building went into the decision. In fact, the decision to proceed with broker opt-out was made by a vote of more than 700 board members after a thorough debate of the merits of the issue. No concessions were made to anyone.

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