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## HOW TO DO THINGS WITH AUGUSTINE.<sup>1</sup> PATRISTICS AND RECEPTION THEORY

**Abstract:** This article explores in its first part the theoretical conditions for the investigation of the impact or reception of Augustine in later times. This implies a reflection of the nature of the discipline of patristics in general as well as the development of a working definition of reception or reception theory. The second part of the article demonstrates the method of investigation with a concrete example, namely the reception of Augustine in Jostein Gaarder's novel *Vita Brevis. A Letter to St Augustine. A Love Story* (London 1997; Norwegian original 1996).

**Keywords:** Augustine, patristics, reception,

### I Some Theoretical Reflections

In the context of my paper it seems appropriate to probe the term "Patristics" featuring in its title. The term *theologia patristica* occurs, as far as I know, first in a handbook for librarians by the Swiss professor of church history, Johannes Henricus Hottingerus, (Zurich 1664).<sup>2</sup> Dogmatic histories in a narrower sense have been written from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>3</sup> However, especially in the last two to four decades this 'discipline' has undergone some interesting changes. Indeed, there exists quite a wide range of terms denoting the discipline that tackles early Christianity (covering the time span from roughly 200 to 650, although that also is a matter of dispute):<sup>4</sup> patristics, patrology (and

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1 This title is inspired by the famous book of the British philosopher J.L. Austin, *How to do things with words*. The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955, ed. J.O. Urmson (Oxford 1962). Earlier versions of this paper were given in a seminar at the St Andrews School of Divinity, at a conference at the Catholic University of Washington, during my stay as Cecil and Ida Green Visiting Professor at Green College, UBC, Vancouver (2006), and finally, during my stay at NIAS, in a meeting of my theme group "The Modern and Postmodern Augustine. Aspects of His Reception from 1600 to 2000" (2008). To all participants in the discussions I would like to express my warmest thanks for their valuable input. Moreover, this research is connected to my interdisciplinary and international project on the reception of Augustine through the ages, sponsored by the Leverhulme Trust (see [www.st-and.ac.uk/classics/after-augustine](http://www.st-and.ac.uk/classics/after-augustine)).

2 The first instance is not in Johann Franz Budde, *Isagoge historico-theologica ad theologiam universalem singulasque eius partes*. 3 vols (Leipzig 1727), as is stated, e.g. in Fürst 197.

3 See e.g. D. Petavius, *De theologicis dogmatibus*. 5 vols (Paris 1644-50); but anti-heretical surveys of the type of *Adversus omnes haereses* go back more or less to the beginnings of Christianity.

4 This is also a hotly debated topic. There are good reasons to put a caesura at 284 (Diocletian's tetrarchy), as before the continuity with the classical tradition, politics etc. is strong, whereas afterwards things change significantly. See for the whole discussion Herzog 38-44, Suerbaum XLVI-XLVIII, and generally Herzog/Koselleck.

matrology<sup>5</sup>), early/ancient Church history, history of early (or ancient) Christianity, historical theology, history of theology or historical theology, post-classical studies, Byzantine studies, early Christian studies, late antique studies, study of later Latin - and this will not be a complete list.<sup>6</sup> Hardly any other 'discipline' depends so much on the precise definition of its objectives and on its institutional setting, both for what it is called and how its method and line of investigation are determined (a conference on "Early Christian Studies and the Academic Disciplines" at the Catholic University of America in Washington in 2005 made this very clear again): 'patristics' is generally linked to departments of theology predominantly interested in the history of early dogmatic and general theological thought as developed by ecclesiastical writers, who are often called 'fathers' and given more or less canonical status. At the other end of the spectrum would be a historical or cultural-sociological approach, often based in departments of history, or a philological-literary approach, as in departments of Classics. It goes without saying that overlaps in the approaches represented by individual scholars or institutions are generally possible regardless of their formal affiliation. While this broad spectrum of institutional and methodological possibilities is not necessarily a disadvantage and speaks for the interdisciplinary richness of the subject, it has occasionally been regretted that these various approaches do not sufficiently exchange and critically discuss the results of their respective investigations.<sup>7</sup>

The relatively recent (trans)discipline of reception studies adopts as its conceptual and critical framework the method of "reception theory", a method originally developed by and used in literary studies (*Literaturwissenschaft*), concentrating on what readers do with texts.<sup>8</sup> Whereas *reception aesthetics* is predominantly interested in illuminating the hermeneutic interaction of production and reception,<sup>9</sup> *reception history* focuses on who reads what and why,<sup>10</sup> that is, has an interest in mechanisms of intellectual appropriation throughout history.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it initiated a new interest in the historical dimension and the communicative aspects of a (literary) text.<sup>12</sup> Relatively recently, cultural studies more widely have adopted reception theory, as not only texts, but also film, drama, artefacts, and other forms of cultural expression can be analysed by taking the recipient into account.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, reception studies not only investigate a wide range of cultural processes but also contribute to them, because historical modes of reception can also influence the further production of texts and artefacts.

For our purposes it is sufficient to define reception theory as an approach to texts that concerns itself first and foremost with *historical* actualisation(s) of a text by one or more reader(s), be it by way of precise quotation, more or less precise paraphrase, or the mere apostrophe of the author as authority, and be it for rather mundane doxographic purposes, for political or other very specific concrete aims, or in wider interpretative

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5 See Kadel passim and, for a concrete example, Burrus.

6 The same is true for other languages as well, for the German equivalents see Marksches in Marksches/van Oort vii, for the Italian debate see Perrone in Marksches/van Oort 91 with n. 1.

7 See most recently Fürst 199. Marksches in Marksches/van Oort xi rightly sees in this dialogue a chance for and no a threat to stimulating scholarly results.

8 See Eagleton; Segers.

9 Jauss (1982); Jauss (1992), which was later developed especially by American scholars into a reader-response theory.

10 Grimm.

11 One example would be the sociolinguistic approach in Burke and Burke/Po-chia Hsia.

12 Heuermann 17-22, 34-40

13 See in particular Machor/Goldstein.

contexts. Accordingly, reception studies do not primarily engage in textual interpretation. Instead, by developing and using reception theory, they seek to understand textual interpretations as they have been produced historically in different times by various readers and analyse the process of producing interpretations rather than to provide them.<sup>14</sup> Although this has of course consequences for how we look at and interpret texts ourselves, it implies above all the acknowledgment of the fact that a text should not be confined to the meanings that have historically been attributed to it.<sup>15</sup>

The New Testament itself depends strongly on the Old Testament as a hypotext against which its own message gets historical grounding, authority and direction. Likewise, New Testament scholarship relies heavily on reception, as the Bible only fulfils its mission if others read it, make sense of its meaning and do something with it.<sup>16</sup> The resulting divergences in interpretative results have again to be seen as a phenomenon characteristic of reception.<sup>17</sup> Already in Antiquity itself various forms of reception were practiced.<sup>18</sup> The epoch of Late Antiquity, to a good deal overlapping with the historical period that forms the field of patristics or early Christian studies and often accused of being second-rate, eclectic and un-original, can more accurately be called a period for which the reception of the earlier classical tradition is constitutive as a means of creating an identity for itself.<sup>19</sup> Thus, this epoch is a central 'bridge' or 'bottle-neck' in deciding which classical authors will continue to be read and transmitted and which not. Ecclesiastical writers are part of this process and a good deal of research has been done on this.<sup>20</sup> With ecclesiastical writers as objects of later reception themselves the situation is slightly different: this has been studied at random, and unevenly. Our St Andrews project funded by the Leverhulme Trust<sup>21</sup> on the reception of Augustine of Hippo (354-430) from his death through to the year 2000 will try to address this deficiency in an exemplary way. It will focus on Augustine solely as the object, and not as the agent of reception. This project is necessarily multi- and interdisciplinary, as, apart from theology, Augustine's impact can also be observed in secular areas such as political theory, philosophy of history, psychology, semiotics, epistemology, social ethics, anthropology and the literary imagination. He also plays a key-role in post-modern and postcolonial discourses.

Moreover, the status of Augustine's iconicity is such that it allows us to use the exploration of his enormous *Nachleben* to pursue tasks and demonstrate issues of a much wider impact under the umbrella of the history of ideas, namely:

- De-theologizing research in a major late antique thinker.
- Emphasizing and further developing the interdisciplinary approach to an

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14 Hardwick 4-11; 107-113.

15 Grimm 13.

16 See the useful and very clearly written book by Wischmeyer.

17 See Hartin/Petzer, Punt and Watson, and for the latter point in particular Gaither.

18 Hardwick 12-31.

19 Late Antiquity also important in constituting what we consider to be Classical literature and thought, cf. Herzog § 500. It should also be mentioned in this context that reception does not equal with unoriginality; on the contrary the intensive reception of older writings can often be at the beginning of new developments; see Henri de Lubac's famous statement that every new beginning within the church is accompanied by harking back to the early ecclesiastical writers ('resourcement theologique').

20 See e.g. the investigations by Freund, MacCormack and Müller.

21 See Pollmann/Lambert 165-83 and the website at <http://www.st-and.ac.uk/classics/after-augustine>. Importantly, mediating factors in this process, like anthologies or specific editions, will elucidate some of the conditions of successful reception.

ecclesiastical writer who would not have called himself a theologian.

- Elaborating specific patterns, which will be partly different in various periods and should also be of significance beyond the field of Augustinian studies, for a wider academic audience.

- Asking the more general question of why such an (in our case: text-based) authority is needed at all. What are the (psychological, social, cultural) functions of such authorities and which political, intellectual or other events do trigger their creation? What role do specific institutions like schools, universities, religious communities or the churches play? How are they created and transferred outside their original culture? Under what kinds of circumstances are they most intently celebrated, manipulated, distorted, or vilified? What, formally speaking, are the modalities and strategies of (mis)quotation? What, if anything, makes Augustine different from other icons? How important is historical distance in such matters? How does the 'career' of such an individual authority enter into larger patterns of continuity and change in the history of ideas?

Such a procedure affects first, but not only, the two disciplines that, apart from history, are most closely involved in studying early Christian texts, viz. theology and classics. It is characteristic of both these disciplines that they have to negotiate the tension between having to preserve and interpret given texts of considerable age and impact and linking these texts in a meaningful way to the present time. Therefore it is striking but perhaps not entirely surprising that in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century these two disciplines face the same accusations of being outdated, old-fashioned, Eurocentric, and of representing imperialistic values. This contrasts sharply with the historical fact that the texts and issues dealt with by these disciplines continue to have an impact and to trigger creativity in modern and post-modern thinking, even beyond the narrower confinements of these disciplines.

In general, this is supported by the fact that antique and late antique authors themselves had already a strong self-conscious awareness of the importance of appropriate reception and the role of the reader for literature, as for instance especially a well known line by Terentianus Maurus, a Latin grammarian probably from the end of the second century AD, which is rarely quoted in its full version: 1286 *pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli* ("Depending on the reception faculty of the reader books have their specific fates"). Because of the rising importance of the Bible and obvious divergences of opinion about its meaning between different Christian groups, in Late Antiquity the question of reception was given new emphasis as a vital element of a produced text, be it the Bible or other texts like creeds, dogmas, encyclicals, etc. This led not only to an extensive exegetical productivity but also to differentiated reflections on the theoretical conditions and framework of exegesis, that is, a systematic concept of hermeneutics, as particularly visible in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*.<sup>22</sup>

Among modern theorists themselves reception theory has been subjected to a number of criticisms: it has been accused of introducing aspects of literary determinacy on one level which it denies on another,<sup>23</sup> of neglecting post-modern approaches as especially represented by French and American avant-garde theorists,<sup>24</sup> or, put differently, the critique focuses on reception theory's implicit conservatism by being based on out-dated metaphysical axioms, and on its dubious relativism because it allows incompatible interpretive communities, and, in its poststructuralist versions, because of its a-historical

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22 See Pollmann passim.

23 Holub 150, 155-6.

24 Holub 153-4.

character. However, these criticisms have not managed to invalidate the general usefulness of investigating the history of a text's reception, but have rather helped to refine and further develop it, for instance, by making scholars more critically aware of the relativity and subjectivity ('ideology') of their own approach, and by opening it to new areas, including women's and multicultural literature, popular culture, the ordinary reader, and the history of the book.<sup>25</sup> Thus follows that literary production and its reception are part of the history of a people in general, and, more specifically, part of the history of ideas.<sup>26</sup>

Regarding the discipline of Classics there has been an awareness of its ever present and ever changing legacy through the centuries for some time. More recent investigations have attempted to integrate theoretical concepts, also with the aim to expose the ideological or other presuppositions which influenced the reception or understanding of the classical past.<sup>27</sup> In the case of early Christian studies this means not only to use an approach which is entirely appropriate because of the historical development and theoretical self-awareness of its very subject-matter, but will also help to refine both our perception of the ecclesiastical writer in question (in our case: Augustine), and contribute to an improved understanding of the (often not outspoken) values and predilections of the periods, areas and disciplines in which the reception has taken place. Jim O'Donnell in his presidential address to the *American Philological Association* said that it was the task of late antique studies to find out why the old story of the Roman Empire did not work anymore.<sup>28</sup> It is the task of reception studies to find out why we, nevertheless, still deal with these concepts and authors.

## II A Concrete Example as Illustration

In our next part, let us look at a concrete case study, viz. the reception of Augustine in J. Gaarder's *Vita Brevis. A Letter to St Augustine. A Love Story*, which appeared in the original Norwegian in 1996 and was translated into English (on which my remarks are based) in 1997. J. Gaarder (\*1952), a former teacher of philosophy, gained worldwide fame through his novel *Sophie's World. A Novel about the History of Philosophy* (Norwegian original 1991). Gaarder's novel about Augustine was inspired by Peter Brown's book *The Body and Society* (1988)<sup>29</sup> tells how an old Latin manuscript comes to light in an Argentine flea market, appearing to be a letter to (St) Augustine from the woman he renounced in favour of chastity. From the historical sources we do not know her name, but Gaarder calls her Floria: highly educated, passionate and compassionate, she delivers a highly personal commentary on the *Confessions*.

Already the novel's outlay is unusual: after a brief prologue in italics (3-8), in which the finding and purchasing of the manuscript by the author are described, there follows the translation of Floria's letter, presented on the odd pages, with comments and references especially taken from the *Confessions*, placed on the even pages opposite to where they are quoted or indirectly referred to in the letter. My counting of these references led to the result that the *Confessions* are referred to 69 times and *De bono coniugali* ("On

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25 Machor/Goldstein 319-23.

26 This has already been stipulated in the seminal article by Heinze; see also Schmidt (2000) 100-1.

27 For a reflection on the relationship between reception theory and Classics see Schmidt (2000) 85-96 and Schmidt (2000) 97-102; Schmitz; Martindale. For specific instances of reception see e.g. Wehrli et al.; Kallendorf; Hardwick/Stray.

28 O'Donnell, especially 213.

29 Hübner 159 with n. 138.

the Good of Marriage") once. Furthermore the Bible is quoted several times (mostly from the New Testament), Cicero is referred to six times, Horace three times, and once mentioned are Juvenal, Seneca, Terence, Sophocles, Vergil's *Aeneid*, and other pagan authors. Like the prologue, the references and linguistic or historical annotations introduce a dimension of realism meant to enhance the feeling of authenticity of this 'document'.

We will now examine Gaarder's technique of quoting and using the *Confessions* (and other sources) by looking at a particularly crucial passage in the book, Chapter VI (pp. 87-95), where Floria recounts how Augustine met bishop Ambrose, was troubled by the prospect of a Christian life in celibacy and was finally persuaded to get engaged to a suitable young woman, which meant having to get rid of Floria. In this context mostly passages from *Confessions* 6 are quoted literally (and in a correct translation). Throughout, Floria's comments on those passages make the focus of her criticism clear: she exposes Augustine's problematic assumption that living without a woman and his soul's salvation through Christianity were inextricably linked. Secondly she attacks Augustine's sweeping generalization that celibacy was identical with the forgoing of sexual intercourse, instead of highlighting the personal and affectionate side of a heterosexual relationship which is then also at stake. Floria sets up her attack in two ways: first by way of degeneralizing a literal quote by Augustine (p. 91): after "For I thought I would be far too unhappy if I had to go without a woman's embrace" (taken literally from *Conf.* 6.11.20) she adds "It was *my* embrace you could not do without, Aurel, that was something we two talked of many times. Couldn't you write it? Ah, well, one must be cautious about naming names." Not only does Floria emphasize here, as otherwise, that she was not merely a sexual, but also an intellectual partner to Augustine, but reaffirms her education by alluding with the proverb "One must be careful with naming names" to Cicero's speech to Roscius.

Secondly, the point that marriage does not only consist of sex but also of affection and companionship is made by quoting Augustine against himself, at *Conf.* 6.12.22 "Neither of us [i.e. neither Augustine nor his friend Alypius] was especially attracted to what makes marriage into something beautiful, the task of creating a good home and bringing up children. The chief concern was that I was accustomed to satisfying my insatiable sexual desire, which kept me captive and plagued me violently." She then unmasks this even more by pointing out their own family situation, with their child Adeodatus, and Augustine's not simply sexual commitment to Floria which he would have to give up if he married someone else: "What in reality plagued you was that a marriage (...) would entail your betrayal of me. For were we not twin souls<sup>30</sup> (...)?" Again she emphasizes that their relationship was much more than simply physical and accuses Augustine of anonymizing and reducing their relationship to a purely carnal one for his specific line of argument. This is further backed up by Gaarder's note 87 (p. 91) in this context where he refers to the changed attitude of the old Augustine who in a well-known passage from *De bono coniugali* 5 claims that dismissing one's concubine in order to marry another, more suitable woman, was to commit adultery.

But despite all this close reading there is in Gaarder's epistolary novel a strong undercurrent suffusing Augustine's story with what one could call a modern notion of romantic heterosexual love, which puts Platonic ideals back into an affectionate erotic relationship with sensual aspects. This becomes clear when Floria uses a romantic *topos* (p. 89-90, similarly at p. 81): "you who once bent over me to smell my hair when we had

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30 This thought or *topos* is at least as old as the craving of two souls for unity expressed in Aristophanes' speech in Plato, *Symposion* 189C-193D. Similarly expressed on pp. 81 and 137-9.

walked over the River Arno together".<sup>31</sup> This line of thinking leads then to a very un-Augustinian conclusion or complaint (p. 93) "I was betrayed by my own spouse [i.e. Augustine] for the sake of heavenly love! That is how it was, Aurel, that is exactly how it was!" Augustine himself would not have put it that way. He would admit (as in *De bono coniugali* 5) that he betrayed Floria by committing himself to his new fiancée, but as becomes clear from his theological tenets it was more his mother (and his consenting in a state of weakness and uncertainty) who linked baptism (i.e. Christianity) to a suitable, i.e. career-friendly marriage instead of celibacy.<sup>32</sup> So if at all, Floria was rather betrayed for the sake of love for earthly, material success in society. Significantly, in *De bono coniugali* Augustine does not say anything about whether it was alright to leave one's concubine or indeed wife in order to become a celibate monk or priest (rather than living together 'as brother and sister').

Harking back several times to the title and leitmotif of the novel, *vita brevis*, Floria plays off the brevity of life against an ascetic ideal that looks too much towards the hereafter which may not even exist: pp. 105-7 "Life is short, it is all too short. But perhaps it is here and now that we live, and only here and now".<sup>33</sup> Floria interprets Augustine's advocacy of sexual asceticism as a deformed denial of his affection and love for her (p. 115-17), in modern psychological parlour as a replacement activity. She accuses Augustine of putting an entirely subjective morality on an absolute, divine pedestal: (pp. 131-3) "As imperial rhetor you should at least have discussed the possibility of there being an eternal life for individual souls, but that the grounds of judgment are different from those you yourself almost take for granted. For instance, I believe it is not necessarily a greater sin to engage in physical love with the woman in one's life than it is to separate that same woman from her only son."

### III Conclusions

Looking at our sample text by Gaarder, it has to be emphasized that he offers a knowledgeable and sensitive reading of a crucial aspect of Augustine's *Confessions*, namely the price Augustine felt he had to pay by converting to Christianity properly. Gaarder uses mostly literal quotations from his sources, which are correctly translated into English. Characteristic is a cento-like assembling of various pieces of text that are not necessarily so closely related in the original. Thus Gaarder achieves often a more poignant reading highlighting a specific aspect of Augustine's thought. Alternatively, he plays off various

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31 But Floria will not commit 'romantic' suicide in the end, thus shunning her model Dido (p. 95), the legendary Queen of Carthage, who at the end of Vergil's *Aeneis* Book IV, kills herself after the departure of her lover Aeneas. In this respect, Floria is more like Augustine's mother Monica who, when he son leaves Africa for Rome, laments like Dido but then decides to follow him (cf. especially *Conf.* 5.8.15).

32 It is perhaps important in this context to emphasize that for the sake of simplicity I just paraphrase Augustine's line of story as he presents it in the *Confessions*. This notwithstanding the fact that the *Confessions* are a highly elaborate artefact whose autobiographical credibility has to be handled with the utmost care.

33 Augustine uses the phrase *vita brevis* in *Conf.* 3.7.13 *homines autem, quorum vita super terram brevis est*. On p. 131 where the topos reoccurs, see further below, and cf. also p. 159. It is perfectly clear where the pros and cons lie: if someone has a rotten life and does not see what one can do about it, the concept of a life after death is comforting and encouraging. If one has quite a good life or indeed if actions can or even ought to be taken to improve matters, then the vision of a life to come can be oppressive (or 'life-denying').

Augustinian passages which were originally not meant to stand side by side, or comments on such extracts through Floria in order to reevaluate critically Augustine's concept of love and salvation. Gaarder intends to 'correct' Augustine's notion of pure love by emphasizing the positive or even divine aspects of 'romantic' or sensual love, but by doing so he loses sight of other important and timeless dimensions of Augustine's concept of universal Christian love. This has not only been noticed in scholarship,<sup>34</sup> but also triggered a literary response in Latin (!) by Mechtild Hofmann, in her *Unvergängliches Leben. Augustinus antwortet Floria* ("Imperishable Life. Augustine answers Floria"). To put it succinctly: Gaarder's novel successfully attacks Augustine's *Confessions* on the biographical-pragmatic level, but unsuccessfully on the theological-theoretical level. But then, this is again a question of reception - whence Floria rightly says (p. 159): "It is the theologians I fear."

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<sup>34</sup> Hübner 162, whom I also owe the reference to Hofmann's book.

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**КАКО РАДИТИ СА АВГУСТИНОМ  
ПАТРИСТИКА И ТЕОРИЈА РЕЦЕПЦИЈЕ**

У свом првом делу рад се бави теоријским претпоставкама за истраживање утицаја или пријема (рецепције) Августина у каснијим временима. То укључује сагледавање природе патристике као дисциплине, као и развој одређења појма рецепције или рецептивне теорије. У другом делу рада се демонстрира сам метод истраживања на конкретним примерима романа Јустејна Гордера (Jostein Gaarder), *Vita Brevis. Писмо Флорије Емилије Аурелију Августину* (норвешки оригинал 1996; превод на енглески Лондон 1997; превод на српски Београд 2005).

