

Friendship and the Reading Experience in Augustine

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INTRODUCTION

Augustine's writings reveal him as fully appreciating friendship. In his life and thought friendship has a indispensable value.¹ Some illustrations of his need for friends are found in *Confessions*. In the review of his past life Augustine looks back on those early days. In Rome, Milan and the country estate near Cassiciacum, he has been shared the same interests and wishes with friends.

Many references to his early relationships show how he regarded them sinful as they led him and his friends away from God. But dependent on his need to be encircled by dear friends is Augustine's attraction towards the coenobitic mode of life.² His experiences would find fulfilment in his later thoughts on monastic community:³ the importance of renunciation of property and sharing of all things, and spending life in prayer, spiritual reading and conversations.

Some scholars explore areas in which they have dealt with the characteristic of his view on friendship and its evolution in his works. My concern is in the correlation between friendship and the reading experience (and other literary pursuits). They permit him to approach the divine matters that lay beyond their adhesions to temporary things. In this paper, I shall thus try to look at two particular aspects. These are: (1) the idea of friendship from the viewpoint of its spiritual sources; (2) his view on the idea of shared activities in relation to friendship. Especially I am concerned to see how, despite of the individual fluctuations, reading experience in combination with friendship secure us a future basis for human perfection.

SPIRITUAL ASPECT OF FRIENDSHIP

AUGUSTINE'S EXPERIENCES OF THE INVULNERABILITY OF FRIENDSHIP

The ideal of openness and intimacy in friendship would never be dissolved for slight reasons, since it involves mutual love in human relations. What is necessary for a lasting

¹ John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine: the Growth of St. Augustine's Mind up to His Conversion* (London, 1954), 86: 'one of the remarkable features of Augustine's character — his capacity for making friends.'

² Cf. P. Courcelle, *Les Confessions de saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire: antécédents et postérité* (Paris, 1963), 26; L. Verheijen, *Nouvelle approche de la règle de saint Augustin* (Begrolles-en-Mauges, 1980), 238; A. Sage, *La vie religieuse selon saint Augustin* (Paris, 1972), 181.

³ Cf. George Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and his Monastic Rule* (Oxford, 1987). See also Augustine's *De diuersis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*.

friendship might be that friends desire one purpose and will: the harmonious agreement of desiring and rejecting the same things. Once some obstacles arise, one would attempt every means to remove them and to fasten its mutual tie.⁴

With regard to the reciprocal bond of friendship, Augustine would have been influenced by the traditional views put forward by Classical writers.⁵ To his confidant, he applies Horace's felicitous phrase: 'He was half my soul'.⁶ Of friends at Carthage he says that the unity of friendship makes a single being out of many,⁷ which echoes of Cicero's *Laelius*.⁸ In his later life, to Proba he writes in *Epistula 130*: 'Whatever, therefore, be our circumstances in this world, there is nothing truly enjoyable without a friend',⁹ which is also very similar to Laelius' words.¹⁰

However, despite his sharply demanding for its unity, Augustine was sometimes tortured by the loss of friendship from his youth onward. Many of his acquaintances remains his friends, but grief-stricken he is when some were separated from him in their circumstances. He explains this affection in his letter to Zenobius, his friend and pupil in Milan.¹¹

... though my mind sees in itself that you are a true and simple man, the sort of person who can be loved without any worry, we, nonetheless, admit that, when you depart from us in terms of the body and are separated by place, we seek this contact with and sight of you to the extent that brothers are permitted to desire it. If I know you well, you, of course, are fond of this defect in us, and though you desire for your dearest and closest friends everything good, you are afraid that they will be healed of this defect. ... As for myself, when I long for someone who is absent, I want to be longed for too. I am, nonetheless, as vigilant as I can be and strive to love nothing that can be absent from me against my will.¹²

⁴ Cf. *Epistula 73.10* to Jerome in 404 (CSEL 34, 163 sq.).

⁵ Cf. J. G. F. Powell, ed. and trans., *Cicero: On Friendship and the Dream of Scipio* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1990); T. J. van Bavel, 'The influence of Cicero's Ideal of Friendship on Augustine', in J. den Boeft and J. van Oort (eds), *Augustiniana Traiectina* (Paris, 1987), 59-72. Augustine continues to show approval of Cicero's definition of friendship as 'agreement about matters divine and human together with benevolence and affection' in *Epistula 258* to Martianus (See also *Contra Academicos 3.6.13*). As Maurice Testard has shown, Augustine, here and elsewhere, deliverately reverses the order of the words between 'divine and human' and makes the order of things fully theocentric.

⁶ *Confessiones 4.6.11*.

⁷ *Confessiones 4.8.13*: ex pluribus unum facere.

⁸ Cicero, *De amicitia 25.92*: as it were, one soul out of many (*ut unus quasi animus fiat ex pluribus*).

⁹ *Epistula 130.2.4* (NPNF): cf. Anne-Marie La Bonnardière, 'La lettre à Proba', *Saint Augustin et la Bible*, sous la direction de A.-M. La Bonnardière (Paris, 1986), 181-188; E. Clark, 'Theory and Practice in Late Ancient Asceticism: Jerome, Chrysostom and Augustine', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 5.2* (1989), 25-46.

¹⁰ Cicero, *Laelius 6.22* (Loeb 154), 131: qui potest esse vita vitalis, ut ait Ennius, quae non in amici mutua benevolentia conquiescit?

¹¹ See also his explanation in *De ciuitate dei 19.8*. Concerning his most zealous for the study of moral philosophy, cf. *De ordine 1.2*.

¹² *Epistula 2* (CSEL 34, 3-4); R. Teske, WSA II/1 (2001), 17.

How much the absence meant to him is apparent. When the separation is imposed, he is afraid that their union would gradually lessen and disappear. Because he has put so much energy into loving friend and missed it deeply. His complaint reminds us of the Cicero's attachment to the affinity of friendship: 'What is sweeter than to have someone with whom you may dare discuss anything as if you were communing with yourself?'¹³ Experiences of its frailty has been taken seriously by Augustine. The transience and vulnerability seem to be one of the central motif of his view of friendship.

SPIRITUAL ASPECT OF FRIENDSHIP

What prescriptions does he give for the loss of friendship? There seems to be two approaches. Firstly Augustine thinks that friend's absence can not destroy the relationship. Friend's physical presence is superfluous for its preservation. Because there is contact of friend's soul. His mature thought resorts to this spiritual aspect of human relationship. Secondly the emphasis on shared activities among friends becomes the focus of his ideas on its reciprocal bond. By virtue of their common interests they can be closer to one another in their souls. References to their pursuits made by him consistently appear in his writings.

First I shall consider the first approach in this section 2.2. The reflection on friendship formed with an unnamed young man at Thagaste centres around his review in *Confessions*. He refers to it as 'a friendship sweeter to me than all the sweetnesses of my life, as it then was'.¹⁴ In his story, Augustine defines the true friendship.

it is only true friendship when you glue together those who cleave to you by *diffusing your love in our hearts through the Holy Spirit* (Rom. 5:5).¹⁵

The love that flows from the gift of the Holy Spirit lays the foundation for true friendship. All other which differ from this 'true' one are false and empty.¹⁶ It is not human beings but God's grace that provides the solid basis for it.

Another text which is important to his view is found in *Epistula 218*,¹⁷ in which Augustine expresses the belief that true friendship ought not to be valued according to bodily presence of friends.¹⁸

¹³ Cicero, *Laelius* 6.22 (Loeb 154), 131: Quid dulcius quam habere quicum omnia audeas sic loqui tu tecum?

¹⁴ *Confessiones* 4.4.7; P. Burton (2001), 69.

¹⁵ *Confessiones* 4.4.7; P. Burton (2001), 69.

¹⁶ Cf. J. J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford, 1992), ii.109; H. Pétré, *Caritas: Étude sur le vocabulaire latin de la charité chrétienne*, *Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense* 22 (Louvain, 1948), 38-40; P. M. Valente, *L'éthique stoïcienne chez Cicéron* (Paris, 1956), 154-157.

¹⁷ Concerning the formula of the double commandment to love God and neighbour, see also *Epistula 258*; James McEvoy, 'Anima una et cor unum: Friendship and Spiritual Unity in Augustine', *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 53 (1986), 40-92.

¹⁸ Cf. *De trinitate* 9.4.6 (CCL 50, l. 51-52): Quamquam et amici corpore uidentur separari posse, non animo in quantum amici sunt, ... ; Although it seems that friends can also be separated from each other in body, but not in mind, inasmuch as they are friend; ... (FaCh 45, 1963), 275.

Whether absent or present in body, we wish to have you in the one spirit by means of which love is poured forth in our hearts, so that wherever we may be in the flesh, our souls will be inseparable in every way.¹⁹

Remarkable in this passage is the allusion to Romans 5:5, as he explicitly appeal to it in *Confessions* above mentioned.²⁰ It is used by as a proof-text to justify the empowerment of love of God. Thus, sharing in love for God, friends can never be far from each other in their absence. And friendship would be possible between them who have never met.²¹

This lies at the centre of his view of the spiritual aspect of friendship. And there should be given some indication of his view of love and friendship: his sentiment that each love is characterised by its different degrees.²² For God is the ultimate object of love, while other loves are subject to that love. Some disparity has occurred with regard to human love for God and love for all else. But both are given by God's grace rather than being done by human beings. This belief is considered as to be the emphasis he laid on the need for grace in human affairs. Such is the way Augustine gives prescription for the loss of friendship.

READING EXPERIENCES IN COMBINATION WITH FRIENDSHIP

But if the prescription enables him to overwhelm the loss of friendship, why does he readily express his distress over human friendship?

is not the unfeigned confidence and mutual love of true and good friends our one solace in human society, filled as it is with misunderstandings and calamities? And yet the more friends we have, and the more widely they are scattered, the more numerous are our fears that some portion of the vast masses of the disasters of life may light upon them.²³

Augustine's pessimism concerning the stability of friendship firmly remains.

Furthermore, his conviction that true friendship are spiritual one would be paralleled with his continuous emphasis on the sharing of daily experiences in friendship. If Augustine does not think it necessary for friends to live in close proximity, what place is there for his concern for shared activities and common interests of friendship?

¹⁹ *Epistula* 218.4: Nos autem te sive absentem corpore sive praesentem, in uno spiritu habere cupimus, per quem diffunditur charitas in cordibus nostris, ut quolibet loco fuerit caro nostra, nullo modo separata possit esse anima nostra.

²⁰ For the use of Romans 5:5 in the works of Augustine, see A.-M. La Bonnardière, 'Le verset paulinien Rom., v. 5 dans l'oeuvre de saint Augustine', *Augustinus Magister* (Paris, 1954), ii.657-665.

²¹ See e.g. *Epistula* 9 (388-91) to Nebridius, *Epistula* 193.2 to Mercator and *Epistula* 267 (after 395) to Fabiola.

²² Cf. *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus manichaeorum* (387/388), 1.26.49 (CSEL 90, 53-54).

²³ *De ciuitate dei* 19.8; Marcus Dods (1948), ii.311-312.

When he was inspired by the reading of Cicero's *Hortensius* to convert to philosophy,²⁴ Augustine was also deeply concerned about Manichaeism. The discovery of Cicero would prepare for him to adopt philosophy as a way of life.²⁵ And the encounter with Manichaeism would appeal to him to settle the rational grounds for belief²⁶ and to offer a religious commitment to asceticism. Although they attaches him respectively, there seems to be common realm where Augustine's longing for unity of friends has stimulated interest in the shared activities in friendship.

The atmosphere of these days is clear from *De duabus animabus*, in which Augustine refers to the irresistible forces of Manichaeism: one is the intimate companionship and the other is their urge for disputations with Christians. Augustine the 'auditor' eagerly participates in public debate 'by reading the works of others'.²⁷ And it is also evident from *Soliloquia*²⁸ that Augustine's fraternal members 'may together, with one mind, seek to know our souls and God'.²⁹ They help one another in the attainment of their aims. Augustine and his intimates are regarded as fellow seekers along ascending the ladder of education through the corporeal to the incorporeal matters.

Some of his letters provide the evidence of devotion to friendship in combination with literary pursuits. Correspondence between Augustine and Paulinus of Nola clearly illustrates it.³⁰ Alypius, Augustine's friends, brought them into contact by sending several copies of Augustine's book to Paulinus.³¹ Paulinus immediately writes to Augustine: 'How intimately I have come to know you, as I profit daily from the conversation I have with you through your books'.³² Since they have never seen one another,³³ at first they conform to the rules of sophisticated letter-writing. After Paulinus' friends show Augustine a portrait 'by word of mouth', Augustine writes to Paulinus that they were as if 'an additional letter from you, ... whereby most agreeably your presence was in

²⁴ Cf. Erich Feldmann, *Der Einfluss des Hortensius und des Manichäismus auf das Denken des jungen Augustinus von 383* (Diss. Münster i. W., 1975), i.14-43; Goulven Madec, *Saint Augustin et la philosophie. Notes critiques* (Paris, 1992), 17-20.

²⁵ G. Madec, "In te supra me." Le sujet dans les Confessions de saint Augustin', *Revue de l'Institut Catholique de Paris* 28 (1988), 46.

²⁶ Cf. *De moribus* 1.2.3.

²⁷ *De duabus animabus* 9.11 (CSEL 25/1.65-66).

²⁸ *Soliloquia* 1.12.20.

²⁹ *Soliloquia* 1.12.20; Gerard Watson (1990), 53.

³⁰ Cf. Pierre Courcelle, 'Les lacunes de la correspondance entre saint Augustin et saint Paulin de Nôle', *Revue des Études anciennes*, t. III, 3-4 (1951), 294-296.

³¹ Cf. *Epistula* 24.2-3 (CSEL 34/1.74-75).

³² *Epistula* 25.2 (CSEL 34/1, 79.9-12); 'You see, my brother beloved, esteemed, and welcomed in Christ our Lord, with what intimacy I claim to know you, with what amazement I admire and with what love I embrace you, seeing that I enjoy daily converse with you by the medium of your writings, and am fed by the breath of your mouth'. (NPNS trans.).

³³ Cf. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London, 1967), 161-162; John Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, A. D. 364-425* (Oxford, 1975), 211-215.

part enjoyed by us'.³⁴ A 'delightful and hallowed spectacles are presented to the readers', which seems to nurture their starting community.³⁵

Those exchanges are closely related to their concern for each other. Paulinus is simply satisfied with formal courtesy. But Augustine allows himself to express a strong desire for friend's presence. He says that:

by their very countenance and eyes while they spoke, we could with unspeakable joy read you written on their hearts.³⁶

He is fascinated by seeing friend's face and eyes, in which 'many movements of the soul are recognisable'.³⁷ Because his yearning to see the physical presence is accompanied by his concern for the events of inner life. Sharing a lively curiosity about the course of one another's soul, he is fascinated by recreating friend's appearances, even if he confirms that friendship is preserved in friend's absence.

As Peter Brown has shown him as 'a man who needed to have friends around him, who could never be content with a world of disembodied souls, turning in despair away from human communication to God',³⁸ Augustine can not take an optimistic view of perfect friendship. Only in heaven human companionship can be perfect, where mutually loving members of the City of God will be formed. That distress is all the more reason to be forced to reveal his inner self and to know the itinerary of other's soul. And his compelling concern frequently turns to the reading and other literary pursuits, since these activities provide him the reasonable possibility to examine one another's soul through verbal and written signs.³⁹

In fact, Augustine's reading combined with companionship often appears as his interest in what way personages in the story had been once lived, in what way one had adopted the mode of new life. In book 4 of *Confessions* we have the most vivid picture of his friendship:

³⁴ *Epistula* 31.2.

³⁵ However, an unfortunate interval in their correspondence (398-405) and the following crisis in their relationship, in which Paulinus found himself torn between Augustine and his adversary Pelagius, makes it difficult to expect the growth of their intimacy.[Cf. Marie Aquinas McNamara, *Friendship in Saint Augustine* (Fribourg, 1958), 127-132; Pierre Courcelle, 'Les lacunes de la correspondance entre saint Augustine et saint Paulin de Nôle', *Revue des Études anciennes*, t. III, 3-4 (1951), 284-288, 299.] Although their love for each other was courteous enough to overcome two crises, their affectionate relationship in their early correspondences disappeared.

³⁶ *Epistula* 31.2 (NPNF trans.).

³⁷ *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 47: si ergo multi motus animi nostri nunc agnoscuntur in oculis, probabile est quod nullus motus animi latebit, eum totum fuerit corpus aethereum, in cuius comparatione isti oculi caro sunt; cf. *Epistula* 27.1: 'you have disclosed to my sight your mind, which is the inner man'; *Epistula* 28.1

³⁸ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London, 1967), 161.

³⁹ Concerning the possibility of errors in these processes, see *De utilitate credendi* 4.10; Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 189-190.

shared talk, shared laughter, mutual acts of kindness, the shared reading of good literature, of moments of levity and seriousness; occasional disagreements that were without ill-feeling, as a man can disagree with himself, which gave a relish to our more usual concord; ...⁴⁰

While he was teaching at Thagaste, Augustine found his intimate friend. Their mutual bond was settled upon the 'fired in the heat of our shared studies'.⁴¹ And his death deeply upset Augustine. He asserts that the unity of true friendship must be referred not to human love of others but to love for God. But the same can be said for his consolation in other friendships after the subsequent return to Carthage. The vulnerable friendships continuously suffer from the agony. So it might seem that this is one of anecdotes, although the consideration of his grief would make face his guilt about friendship and expose his sin from there.

At the end of book 3, Augustine was sharing a household with his mother at Carthage.⁴² Then he met a young man at Thagaste,⁴³ which resulted in his return to Carthage. There would be no references to his friendship during his first stay at Carthage. But it does not exclude the possibility of forming it with his classmates. And Augustine was still in the grip of Manichaean community. Despite the emphasis on his friend's death and his sorrow, another close relationships with Manichaean friends have endured in these days.⁴⁴

I derived from other friends, who shared my love for the thing I loved instead of you — that great myth, that long lie (*ingens fabula et longum mendacium*) which entered my mind as it itched to be tickled through my ears, and rubbed it as an adulteress strokes her lover.⁴⁵

The yearning for sharing the Manichaean *fabellae* with friends is the enduring indicative of his preoccupation with a failed community. Augustine introduces it to a school-friend with whom he resumed the literary pursuits of childhood⁴⁶. And he discusses with Manichaean friends the difference between absolute and relative beauty. Their pursuits produce his first book, *On Beauty and Aptness*. Thus, if Augustine presumes his Manichaeans to be the first audience of these descriptions,⁴⁷ there would be an admonition to them. The sequence of their failed community was linked with their literary labours. Hence, Augustine exhorts them to read another passage which will be

⁴⁰ *Confessiones* 4.8.13; P. Burton (2001), 73.

⁴¹ *Confessiones* 4.4.7; P. Burton (2001), 69.

⁴² *Confessiones* 3.11.19.

⁴³ *Confessiones* 4.4.7; P. Burton (2001), 69: 'when I had first begun to teach in my home town ...'.

⁴⁴ Cf. Neil McLynn, 'Disciplines of Disciplineship in Late Antique Education: Augustine and Gregory Nazianzen', *Augustine and the Disciplines: From Cassiciacum to Confessions*, Karla Pollmann and Mark Vessey (eds) (Oxford, 2005), 41-42.

⁴⁵ *Confessiones* 4.8.13; P. Burton (2001), 73.

⁴⁶ *Confessiones* 4.4.7.

⁴⁷ Cf. Annemaré Kotzé, *Augustine's Confessions: Communicative Purpose and Audience*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 71 (Leiden, 2004), 131-134.

the beginning of their consolation: 'it is he that has made all these things, and he is not far off'.⁴⁸

Concerning another reading experience, there is a more direct admonition. In book 8, Ponticianus, a fellow countryman and a servant of the emperor, tells Augustine and his friend Alypius the story of St. Anthony, a hermit in Upper Egypt, and a story about himself and his friends.⁴⁹ One of the significant features is that there exists a circle of friends who have their interest in each other. For these stories are full of the expressions on their affection and visual appeal. It implies that Augustine and his friends (and personages) could see one another's faces and eyes in which "many movements of the soul are recognisable".⁵⁰ Satisfied with their curiosity, the deeper their sympathy, the closer their friendship. It would also strengthen the hope of their quest for the new mode of life. Because another point to notice is that mutually speaking and hearing the episode would satisfy their curiosity. If speaking and hearing centre around their yearning, what relation does they have? Here, as for example in the case of Ponticianus and Augustine, there seems to remain a small gap. Even after Augustine listened to his story 'in rapt silence'⁵¹ he could not respond to what he heard from the most inner centre of his being. He did not proceed to decide on the form of new life. This is not the another case that Ponticianus' comrade did, and that later in book 8 Augustine himself will do.

CONCLUSIONS

Augustine's approach to the combination between friendship and the reading experience is deeply affected by his continuous interest and regard for the quality of one another's life, which has been part of the cultural climate of the late fourth and early fifth century.⁵² His concern for literary pursuits interacts with his yearning for the mode of new life. Hence, Augustine's view of their combination converges into the possibility of human perfection in this life. Human frailty of revealing one's inner self and communicating one another notwithstanding, more straightforwardly he has not been indulged in the impossible perfection in this life. He would rather proceed to the humble way. Of these activities in his community, the reading and other literal one nourish his steadfast adherence to the divine matters. Often despaired by errors and misunderstanding, the formation of friendship and reading experiences would be a foreshadowing of human perfection in heaven.

⁴⁸ *Confessiones* 4.12.18; P. Burton (2001), 76: ipse fecit haec et non est longe.

⁴⁹ *Confessiones* 6.6.14-15.

⁵⁰ *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 47: si ergo multi motus animi nostri nunc agnoscuntur in oculis, probabile est quod nullus motus animi latebit, eum totum fuerit corpus aethereum, in cuius comparatione isti oculi caro sunt; cf. *Epistula* 27.1: 'you have disclosed to my sight your mind, which is the inner man'; *Epistula* 28.1

⁵¹ *Confessiones* 8.6.15; P. Burton (2001), 172.

⁵² Cf. Carolinne White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge, 1992), 3-4.