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Mohr Siebeck

Religion in the Roman Empire

Jonas Grethlein

Lucian's Response to Augustine: Conversion and Narrative in *Confessions* and *Nigrinus**

Abstract

In the case of the extraordinary experience of a conversion, the shortcomings of a verbal rendering are felt with particular force. Augustine's account of his conversion in *Confessions* 8, however, not only ignores the gap between experience and narrative, but entwines them in a way that seems to erase the boundary between *Life* and life. In *Nigrinus*, Lucian trenchantly satirises the kind of chain between conversion and its representation envisaged by Augustine. At the same time, a comparison with the much later reception of the *Confessions* in Petrarch throws into relief the common ground which Lucian and Augustine share. Taken together, the *Confessions* and the *Nigrinus* give us a glimpse of what may have been a rich tradition of protreptic conversion literature in the Hellenistic and Imperial Eras.

Keywords: conversion, narrative, conversion narrative, experience, Augustine, *Confessions*, Lucian, *Nigrinus*, Petrarch, Mount Ventoux

Enargeia is a prominent category in ancient rhetoric. Often defined as 'speech bringing before the eyes what is being said', it illustrates the power of an orator over his audience. *Enargeia* is also applied to narrative which succeeds in making the past present. Commenting on Xenophon's account of the battle at Cynaxa, Plutarch remarks: 'Xenophon all but brings it before our eyes and, through his *enargeia*, always makes his reader much affected by the events, not as they have happened, but as they are happening, and sharing their dangers.' (*Artax.* 8.1: Ξενοφῶντος δὲ μονονουχὶ δεικνύοντος ὄψει, καὶ τοῖς πράγμασιν, ὡς οὐ γεγενημένοις, ἀλλὰ γινομένοις, ἐφιστάντος ἀεὶ τὸν ἀκροατὴν ἐμπαθῆ καὶ συγκινδυνεύοντα διὰ τὴν ἐνάργειαν …'). At the same time, ancient critics were aware that narrative is only a form of representation and can never fully grasp experiences. This is reflected in the qualifying comments of rhetors who define *enargeia* as 'the faculty of making things described *almost* visible' (ἐνάργεια τοῦ σχεδὸν ὁρᾶσθαι τὰ

ἀπαγγελλόμενα)[1] and argue that *ekphrasis* '*tries* to turn listeners into spectators' (πειρᾶται θεατὰς τοὺς ἀκούοντας ἐργάζεσθαι).[2]

The discrepancy between narrative and experience comes to the fore in conversion stories. In the case of such extraordinary experiences in the context of mystery rituals, the shortcomings of a verbal rendering are felt with particular force. The conversion figures not only as an event that itself is beyond the reach of words, it also tends to generate strongly teleological narratives that are distanced from the experiences reported. Marking a, if not *the* crucial turning-point, it is difficult not to use the conversion as a vantage-point from which to envisage and narrate the preceding life. This creates a deep chasm between the experiences of the character on the one hand and the perspectives of narrator and reader on the other.

The autobiographical part of Augustine's *Confessions* is a case in point. Augustine recounts his own life, and yet a wide gulf separates his narratorial persona from the character in the narrative. The conversion furnishes the horizon against which the narrator sees his earlier experiences. The account of Augustine's errings is suffused with the illumination that he would undergo in the garden of Milan. Beside explicit prolepses, the frequent apostrophes to God and the dense net of biblical quotations are indebted to and bespeak the conversion. They give the reader a perspective which is markedly different from that of the experiencing character. The strong teleology inferred by the conversion in the *Confessions* makes the general gap between experience and narrative palpable.[3]

It is therefore noteworthy that Augustine's account of the conversion itself relates narrative and experience in a way which ignores this gap and implies a seamless transition. I shall first take a fresh look at the embedded conversion stories in *Confessions* 8. Instead of falling short of the experience, these stories rather trigger new conversions, entwining experience and narrative in a dialectic that seems to erase the boundary between *Life* and life. I will then use Petrarch's report of his ascent to Mount Ventoux as a stepping stone to Lucian's *Nigrinus* which, against chronology, I shall read as a response to Augustine. While Petrarch transforms Augustine's idea of conversion, Lucian trenchantly satirises the kind of chain between conversion and narrative envisaged by Augustine. There is of course no direct relation between *Nigrinus* and *Confessions*, and yet the juxtaposition of the two texts gives us a glimpse of what may have been a rich tradition of protreptic conversion

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1   Theon, *Progymnasmata* 11 (Spengel II, 119).
2   Nicolaus, *Progymnasmata* 12 (Spengel III, 491).
3   For an analysis of the teleological character of the *Confessions*, see Grethlein 2013a, 329–336.

literature in the Hellenistic and Imperial Eras. While the remains of this tradition are scant, the discrepancy between the takes of Lucian and Augustine lets us sense the piercing reflections devoted to the interaction between conversion and narrative. At the same time, their comparison with the much later reception of the *Confessions* in Petrarch will throw into relief the common ground which Lucian and Augustine share.

1 Augustine's *Confessions*: Conversion from *Life* to life

The account of Augustine's spiritual breakthrough in *Confessions* 8 features several other conversions:[4] Simplicianus reports how the famous rhetor Victorinus finally arrives at publicly confessing his Christian belief; the narrator touches on Paul in Damascus; Ponticianus mentions *The Life of Antony* and gives a detailed account of the more recent conversion of two Imperial officials at Trier. The exemplary function of these stories for Augustine's own conversion is made explicit: 'Now when this man of yours, Simplicianus, had told me the story of Victorinus, I was on fire to imitate him: which indeed was why he had told me' (8.5.10: *sed ubi mihi homo tuus Simplicianus de Victorino ista narravit, exarsi ad imitandum: ad hoc enim et ille narraverat*). Ponticianus' report turns Augustine towards himself (8.7.16) and makes him compare his own miserable situation with the salvation of the two Imperial agents (8.7.17).[5]

   It has been further pointed out that the impact of the conversion stories on Augustine mirrors the effect the narrative of his conversion is striving for.[6] Just as the embedded conversion stories pave the way for Augustine's conversion, the reader is meant to follow the model laid out in the *Confessions*. This has been used as an argument in favour of labelling the *Confessions* a protreptic treatise.[7] While it is doubtful that this label grasps the Protean structure of the *Confessions* any better than the genre of autobiography, the analogy between the embedded stories and Augustine's account merits our attention. I would like to show that the entanglement of conversion stories is even tighter than commentators have seen so far. There is a seamless recession that obliterates the boundary between narrative and life.

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4   E. g. Courcelle 1950, 197–202; Stock 1996, 89–111; Kotzé 2004, 173–181; Ayres 2009.
5   See further 8.11.27 where Augustine ponders *gregibus bonorum exemplorum*.
6   E. g. Johnson 1991, 45. For the intricacies of the appeal to the reader to convert, see Keevak 1995.
7   Kotzé 2004, 173–181.

At the same time, it is intimated that the process of conversion is not without obstacles.

Let us muster the conversions and consider their relation to Augustine's own conversion. Paul's conversion, or commissioning, as the experience in Damascus is also called, is mentioned only in passing. The anonymous voice left aside, there is little that underlines the parallels in the experiences of Paul and Augustine. Of course, the fact that it is a passage from the *Epistle to the Romans* which brings about Augustine's illumination highlights the importance of Paul, but he is present theologically rather than narratively. Augustine, as one reader puts it, 'sees in Paul, and especially in Romans, the charter for the introspective self as the premier theological category, the setting for the drama of human will and divine grace'.[8]

Victorinus lends himself as a model for Augustine: he, too, is a rhetor. Moreover, as Simplicianus notes, Victorinus translated the Neoplatonic books, which had permitted Augustine finally to approach the Bible. While already believing in God, Victorinus was afraid of going public. This not yet complete form of Christian faith can be compared with the situation of Augustine, whom the narrator, quoting Rom 1:21, counts among 'the men who knowing God have not glorified him as God or given thanks' (8.1.2: *qui cognoscentes deum non sicut deum glorificaverunt aut gratias egerunt*). That being said, Augustine's spiritual experience in the garden of Milan is rather different from the public confession that marks Victorinus' breakthrough.

The conversion of the two *agentes* narrated by Ponticianus provides a closer parallel that is reinforced through verbal echoes:[9] like Augustine, the officials peregrinate through gardens. Reading is crucial in both cases: the role of Paul's Epistle corresponds to that of the *Vita Antonii*. In Milan as well as in Trier the conversion of an individual leads to further conversions: Alypius follows the *exemplum* of Augustine just as the official reading the *Vita Antonii* is joined by his fellow. While the officials further persuade their fiancées to adopt their new way of life, Augustine and Alypius inform Monica who, while not in need of a Christian infusion, is overjoyed by the news.

Not only the analogy with the story of the officials ties Augustine's conversion to his conversation with Ponticianus. The narrator goes out of his way to stress that the codex of Paul's Epistle is the reason for Ponticianus' discussion of conversions.[10] Seeing the codex and concluding that Augustine is seriously engaged in Christian studies, Ponticianus changes the conversa-

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8 Fredriksen 1986, 27.
9 For a list of verbal echoes, see Grethlein 2013a, 325 n. 44. See also Courcelle 1950, 197–198.
10 Stock 1996, 99: 'The story of Anthony is a by-product of the mutual recognition of Paul.'

tion and starts to speak of Antony: 'I told him that I had given much care to these writings. Whereupon he began to tell the story of the Egyptian monk Antony' (8.6.14: *cui ego cum indicassem illis me scripturis curam maximam inpendere, ortus est sermo ipso narrante de Antonio Aegyptio monacho …*). From there he goes on to discuss monastic fraternities (8.6.15: *inde sermo eius devolutus est ad monasteriorum greges …*) and finally comes to the officials at Trier (8.6.15: *unde incidit, ut diceret nescio quando se et tres alios contubernales suos …*). Simultaneously triggering Ponticianus' narration and playing a lead role in Augustine's illumination, the codex aligns the conversions told with the conversion lived. Even more incisively, the narrator makes the trigger of Ponticianus' narration prefigure the central moment in the garden: 'he picked it up, opened it, and found that it was the Apostle Paul' (8.6.14: *tulit, aperuit, invenit apostolum Paulum*) chimes with Augustine's 'I snatched it up, opened it, and read' (8.12.29: *arripui, aperui et legi …*). Augustine's final step, it seems, is already encapsulated in the view of the Epistle that initiates Ponticianus' narration. An intricate net of similarities as well as a causal nexus hence links the story of the officials at Trier to Augustine's own conversion.

The enmeshment of conversion story with conversion experience is further deepened by narrative economy. While describing in lavish detail Augustine's inner turmoil, the narrator says next to nothing about the peace of mind brought about by his reading of Paul's Epistle. As Stock notes perceptively, he 'does not provide an account of how the reading affected his thinking, having already done so in the story of the first convert at Trier.'[11] The force of the illumination is only described for the conversion of the officials. The blank in the account of Augustine's conversion is thus filled by the embedded narration.

Inversely, the circumstances of Antony's conversion about which the official arguably reads are not given in the Ponticianus narrative, but supplied later right before the conversion of Augustine: 'For it was part of what I had been told about Antony, that from the Gospel which he happened upon he had felt that he was being admonished, as though what was being read was being spoken directly to himself: Go, sell what thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me. By this experience he had been in that instant converted to you' (8.12.29:[12] *audieram enim de Antonio, quod ex evangelica lectione, cui forte supervenerat, admonitus fuerit, tamquam sibi diceretur quod legebatur: vade, vende omnia, quae*

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11 Stock 1996, 110.
12 Cf. Johnson 1991, 51; Keevak 1995, 266.

habes, da paperibus et habebis thesaurum in caelis; et veni, sequere me, et tali oraculo confestim ad te esse conversum). Here, the account of Augustine's illumination helps fill a blank left in the embedded narrative. The mutual supplementation of gaps welds together Augustine's conversion with the other conversion stories and erases the boundary between *Life* and life.

The detailed reference to Antony's conversion deserves further comment: when Augustine opens the codex, he directly follows the model of Antony, hoping for another 'oracle'. This drives home the importance of conversion narratives for Augustine's conversion. Interestingly, Augustine refers not to the story on which his own conversion is closely modelled, but to the story which triggered the conversion of the officials at Trier. This shortcut highlights the chain of conversions into which his own experience is inserted. Note that the description of Antony's religious rebirth opens up a further recession, as it is itself provoked by another story, namely the story of the young rich man consulting Jesus. As the story stems from the New Testament, it provides a ground to the spiral unfolding in *Confessions* 8: the story of Jesus and the young rich man prompts Antony to become Christian. The narrative of Antony inspires the *agentes* to follow the same path. Their story, again as told by Ponticianus, triggers the final phase of Augustine's conversion. Alypius, in following his model, finally prefigures the response which the *Confessions* invites from its readers. A long chain of conversions thus links Augustine's readers to Jesus.

There is continuous traffic between narrative and experience: narrative inspires experience which generates another narrative that again translates into experience, and so on. The gap that separates narrative from experience is thus bypassed. Instead of highlighting that narratives can never fully grasp experiences, *Confessions* 8 links them causally in a dialectical chain. That this interlacing ultimately blurs the boundary between narrative and experience comes to the fore in the use of the word *arripere* which occurs in the conversion scenes at Trier as well as at Milan: In the latter, we read: 'I snatched it up, opened it and in silence read the passage upon which my eyes first fell' (8.12.29: *arripui, aperui et legi in silentio capitulum, quo primum coniecti sunt oculi mei.*). *Arripere* is used at exactly the same pivotal point in the conversion of the officials (8.6.15):

There they found a small book in which was written the life of Antony. One of them began to read it, marvelled at it, was inflamed by it. While he was actually reading he had begun to think how he might embrace such a life, and give up his worldly employment to serve you alone.

quam (i. e. codicem, in quo scripta erat vita Antonii) legere coepit unus eorum et mirari et accendi et inter legendum meditari arripere talem vitam et relicta militia saeculari servire tibi.

The official's 'taking up' of a new life is echoed in Augustine's 'taking up' of the book, marking the elision of the difference between narrative and experience. Reading and reforming one's life seem to be identical.

That being said, Augustine's invocation of Antony infuses the chain of conversion stories with ambiguity. Right before Augustine's illumination, Jesus' appeal to the rich young man to abandon his wealth and to follow him (Matt 19:21) is quoted as the text that inspired Antony. It is possible to detect an allusion to the passage earlier at the beginning of Book 8 when Augustine's state of mind is dissected: 'I had now found the pearl of great price, and I ought to have sold all I had and bought it. But I hesitated still' (8.1.2: *et inveneram iam bonam margaritam, et venditis omnibus, quae haberem, emenda erat, et dubitabam*).[13] How, though, does the young man respond to Jesus' request? 'When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions' (Matt 19:22: *Abiit tristis: erat enim habens multas possessiones*).[14] Matthew does not report if he later changed his mind, but caps the story with Jesus' comment on the exclusion of the rich from Heaven. Augustine's own conversion is thus framed by a conversion that, if it has not failed entirely, remains pending. Ironically, the conversion standing at the beginning of our *catena imitationis* seems to be a conversion manquée. The Biblical ground on which the spiral of conversions in *Confessions* 8 is built is less than firm.

The seamless translation of narrative model into religious experience is also undercut by the ending of Ponticianus' account. The official reading in the codex of *Vita Antonii* persuades his fellow friend to join him, and later both are followed by their spouses, but the two other officials with whom they reunite after their walk do not follow their example (8.6.15):

Ponticianus and his friend, though not changed from their former state, yet wept for themselves, as he told us, and congratulated them in God and commended themselves to their prayers. Then with their own heart trailing in the dust they went off to the palace.

isti autem nihil mutati a pristinis fleverunt se tamen, ut dicebat, atque illis pie congratulati sunt et commendaverunt se orationibus eorum et trahentes cor in terra abierunt in palatium …

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13 An echo of Matt 19:21 may be made more likely by the preceding quotation of Matt 19:12 (8.1.2).
14 Cf. Marc 10:22; Luke 18:23.

Together with the story of the rich young man in Matthew, the withdrawal of the second group of officials drives home that not everybody will re-enact the model laid out in conversion stories.

This qualification notwithstanding, it is striking that Augustine artfully enmeshes his own conversion with several conversion stories. A causal nexus, analogies and narrative interlacing bind Augustine's experience in the garden of Milan closely to the conversion of the two officials at Trier and its model, the *Vita Antonii*. Flitting through *Lives* and lives, the idea of conversion erases the line that separates narrative from experience. How, we must finally ask, does this relate to Augustine's reflections on words as signs opposed to real things?

In several works including *de dialectica, de magistro* and *de doctrina Christiana*, Augustine tackles the question of what words are and what they do.[15] We can stick with the *Confessions* to find evidence for a clear separation of *verbum* and *res*: 'When we relate the past truly, it is not the things themselves that are brought forth from our memory – for these have passed away: but words conceived from the images of the things: for the things stamped their prints upon the mind as they passed through it by way of the senses' (11.18.23: *quamquam praeterita cum vera narrantur, ex memoria proferuntur non res ipsae, quae praeterierunt, sed verba concepta ex imaginibus earum, quae in animo velut vestigia per sensus praetereundo fixerunt*). Words are merely signs that evoke images of the things in our minds. They are carnal: 'The reason why all these utterances have to be physically spoken is the abyss of the world and the blindness of the flesh which cannot discern thoughts, so that it is necessary to make audible sounds' (13.23.34: *quibus omnibus vocibus corporaliter enuntiandis causa est abyssus saeculi et caecitas carnis, qua cogitata non possunt videri, ut opus sit instrepere in auribus'*). It is due to sin that humans have to rely on language as a means of communication.

While not directly contradicting Augustine's reflections on language, the entwinement of narrative with conversion in *Confessions* 8 takes a markedly different stand. Words are not envisaged as an ambiguous and deficient means of signification, but come into play as an essential catalyst of Augustine's illumination. I suggest that the alignment of narrative with experience ultimately expresses the activity of God's word which is 'above me and endures forever' (11.6.8: *verbum autem dei mei supra me manet in aeternum*). The *verbum dei* is sharply distinguished from human utterance (11.7.9): 'Clearly You are calling us to the realisation of that Word – God with You.

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15 On Augustine's reflections on language, see, for example, Ando 1994; Stock 1996, 138–206.

God as You are God – which is uttered eternally and by which all things are uttered eternally. For this is not an utterance in which what is said passes away that the next thing may be said and so finally the whole utterance be complete: but all in one act, yet abiding eternally: otherwise it would be but time and change and no true eternity, no true immortality' *(vocas itaque nos ad intellegendum verbum, deum apud te deum, quod sempiterne dicitur et eo sempiterne dicuntur omnia. neque enim finitur, quod dicebatur, et dicitur aliud, ut possint dici omnia, sed simul ac sempiterne omnia: alioquin iam tempus et mutatio et non vera aeternitas nec vera immortalitas).* God's word is not only exempt from the temporal restrictions that apply to human language, but also equals action (11.7.9): 'Thus it is by a Word co-eternal with Yourself that in one eternal act You say all that You say, and all things are made that You say are to be made. You create solely by thus saying. Yet all things you create by saying are not brought into being in one act and from eternity.' *(et ideo uerbo tibi coaeterno simul et sempiterne dicis omnia, quae dicis, et fit, quidquid dicis ut fiat; nec aliter quam dicendo facis: nec tamen simul et sempiterna fiunt omnia, quae dicendo facis).*

In his conversion, Augustine writes himself into God's narrative, the history of salvation.[16] This is narratively expressed by the multiple literary and especially biblical foils against which Augustine projects his own life.[17] Ferrari, for one, makes a case for a grand narrative architecture that rests on 'arborial polarisation': while the pear-theft in Book 2 parallels the story of Adam and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the tree in the garden of Milan evokes the Tree of Life that is 'represented at the redeeming death of Christ by the tree of the Cross'.[18] Through the two trees, Augustine's life is a miniature mirror of the story of mankind, from the Fall of Adam to the redemption through Jesus Christ. Augustine's conversion is not only linked causally to other conversions; in re-enacting the salvation history of man, it is also part of God's narrative which transcends the juxtaposition of words with world as well as temporal sequence. The effortless metamorphosis of narrative into experience is thus predicated on Augustine's theology, notably the idea of *verbum dei*. As expressed by the dense net of biblical quotations

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16 For the metaphor of a book of God, see *en. Ps.* 93.6. In the *Confessions*, see 13.15.16, where the heaven is compared to a book and 13.15.18 about the angels: 'For they forever see Your face, and in Your face they read without syllables spoken in time what is willed by Your eternal will.' See also *en. Ps.* 93.6. On the metaphor, see Koep 1952; Hübner 1997, 181–191.
17 See especially Courcelle 1950; Courcelle 1963.
18 Ferrari 1970, 238.

and the move from narrative to exegesis,[19] Augustine's voice merges with that of God. The *Confessions* are of course couched in human language and thus subject to all its restrictions, and yet they let us glimpse, albeit 'through a glass darkly', a narrative that is neither posterior nor opposed to experience.

2 Interlude: Petrarch's response to Augustine's *Confessions*

In the *Confessions*, the biblical tale of the rich young man as well as the account of the officials in Trier and their companions subtly undermine an all too smooth idea of conversion. I now wish to argue that a work of Lucian can be read as a full-blown deconstruction of the chain between narrative and conversion envisaged by Augustine. The *Nigrinus*, I shall argue, satirically highlights the gap separating narrative from conversion experience. Needless to say, there is no direct link between *Confessions* and *Nigrinus*, but their juxtaposition gives us an idea of the intellectual engagement with conversion and its narrative representation in Imperial literature.

Before turning to Lucian, however, let us take a brief look at an actual, if much later response to the *Confessions*. As I pointed out, the *Confessions* propel the reader to model herself on Augustine and thereby to continue the *catena imitationis*. A famous letter by Petrarch recounts such a response, which, however, disfigures the notion of conversion and brings the chain to an end. In a letter dated to 1336, but in all likelihood written much later, Petrarch describes his ascent of Mount Ventoux (*Familiares Res* 4.1).[20] This letter has been hailed, though not without objections, as a pivotal document for the emergence of the modern self.[21] For my purposes here, only its reference to Augustine matters. In order to illustrate that 'I am not yet in port that I might think in security of the storms I have had to endure' (4.1.19: *nondum enim in portu sum, ut securus preteritarum meminerim procellarum*), Petrarch quotes from the beginning of *Confessions* 2: 'Let me remember my past mean acts and the carnal corruption of my soul, not that I love them but that I may love Thee, my God' *(recordari volo transactas foeditates meas et carnales corruptiones animae meae, non quod eas amem, sed ut amem te,*

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19 Cf. Grethlein 2013a, 336–352; Grethlein 2013b for an attempt to read the narrative form of the *Confessions* in light of their reflections on human temporality and divine eternity.
20 The literature on *Familiares* 4.1 is vast. For a survey, see Beecher 2004, 56–58. On the date, see Billanovich 1966.
21 E. g. Cassirer 1972, 143–144; Blumenberg 1983, 341–342.

Deus meus). Petrarch thus models his quest for wisdom on Augustine's spiritual journey.

He then randomly opens the copy of the *Confessions* that he habitually carries with him, hence using Augustine's work in the same way as Augustine uses Paul's Epistle in the garden of Milan. Petrarch not only re-enacts the final step in Augustine's conversion, but explicitly states that he continues the chain set up by Augustine and Antony (4.1.32):

And as Antony on hearing these words waited for nothing more, and as Augustine upon reading the Apostle's admonition sought no farther, so I concluded my reading in the few words which I have given.

Et sicut Antonius, his auditis, aliud non quesivit, et sicut Augustinus, his lectis, ulterius non processit, sic et michi in paucis verbis que premisi, totius lectionis terminus fuit.

Despite the carefully wrought analogy, Petrarch's experience is a far cry from Augustine's religious enlightenment. The passage on which his eyes fall is *Confessions* 10.8.15 (4.1.27):

And men go about to wonder at heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they leave behind.

Et eunt homines admirari alta montium et ingentes fluctus maris et latissimos lapsus fluminum et occeani ambitum et giros siderum, et relinquunt se ipsos.

While Augustine is made to turn to God, a movement that is narratively expressed in the metamorphosis of the *Confessions* from autobiography to reflection and exegesis, Petrarch's attention is steered toward his own soul: 'I turned my inward eye upon myself …' (4.1.29: *in me ipsum interiores oculos reflexi* …).

Unlike Augustine who takes pains to emphasise the rupture marked by the conversion, Petrarch remarks (4.1.35):

I hurriedly jotted down these experiences on the spur of the moment, lest, in case my task were postponed, my mood should change on leaving the place, and so my interest in writing flag.

Haec tibi, raptim et ex tempore, scripturus; ne, si distulissem, pro varietate locorum mutatis forsan affectibus, scribendi propositum deferveret.

The last sentence of the letter drives home that he is far from having gained the tranquillity that the experience in Milan bestows on Augustine (4.1.36):

And I beseech you, in turn, to pray that these vague and wandering thoughts of mine may some time become firmly fixed, and, after having been vainly tossed about from one interest to another, may direct themselves at last toward the single, true, certain and everlasting good.

Pro quibus ora, queso, ut tandiu vagi et instabiles aliquando subsistant, et inutiliter per multa iactati, ad unum, bonum, verum, certum, stabile se convertant.

The life-changing experience in the *Confessions* has become 'a precarious and fleeting disposition.'[22]

Besides having a different thrust and being of lesser intensity, Petrarch's change of mind also brings the chain of conversions to a halt.[23] Like Augustine, Petrarch has a companion and witness. Augustine shows the passage he has read to Alypius who continues to read and then unhesitatingly joins Augustine in his new state of mind. Petrarch, too, lets Gherardo, his brother, read what he has just read, but when Gherardo is 'anxious to hear more' (4.1.28: *audiendique avidum*), Petrarch asks him not to annoy him and does not speak a single word until their arrival at the foot of the mountain. While the response of Alypius continues the chain of conversion beyond Augustine and furnishes a model for the readers of the *Confessions*, the exclusion of Gherardo indicates that Petrarch's conversion is an individual experience not to be passed on to others.

It has also been argued that Petrarch's quotation from the *Confessions* undermines the claim to spiritual renovation. The context of the quote shows that Augustine, instead of discussing mountains, seas, and stars themselves, deploys them as examples of the capacity of words to conjure up images in us. What Petrarch takes to be a comment on man's engagement with the world is a discussion of man's inner life: 'Petrarch, in taking the Augustine text to mean "seeing mountains", re-enacts the very error he thinks he is correcting (looking outside instead of inside) … In Augustinian terms, Petrarch's misreading could be called "carnal" because he seems to mistake a discourse about signs for a discourse about things.'[24] Seen from this perspective, Petrarch's turn inwards, besides disagreeing with Augustine's focus on God, is rendered questionable.[25]

Petrarch's account of his ascent of Mount Ventoux seems to respond to the protrepsis of Augustine's *Confessions*, but at the same time undercuts its idea of conversion. Now, I will argue that Lucian's *Nigrinus* encapsulates a critique of Augustine's take on conversion which is different from Petrarch's response. Juxtaposing the *Confessions* with a piece by Lucian is less obvious than comparing it with Petrarch's *Familiares Res* 4.1. The *Nigrinus* was not only composed earlier than the *Confessions*, it also stems from a non-Chris-

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22 Asher 1993, 1054.
23 Cf. Robbins 1985, 540.
24 Robbins 1985, 543–544.
25 The relation between the sensual and the spiritual is also disturbed if we follow Asher 1993 who reads the climb as a figure for the letter and its transgressive self-revelation.

tian context. Its topic is not religious conversion, but the conversion to philosophy. Nonetheless, the *Nigrinus* can be read as a satirical invective against the link between narrative and conversion on which Augustine's report on his illumination is premised. At the same time, it will emerge that Lucian and Augustine share an outlook that Petrarch does not similarly maintain.

3 Lucian's *Nigrinus*: Conversion challenged

The *Nigrinus* is multiply framed in a way that has reminded scholars of Plato's *Symposium*:[26] it starts with a brief letter in which a narrator named Lucian[27] addresses the philosopher Nigrinus, presenting the following dialogue as an expression of 'how deeply I have been moved by your discourse' (*praef.*: ὅτι μὴ παρέργως εἴλημμαι· πρὸς τῶν σῶν λόγων). The dialogue features two unnamed interlocutors: Interlocutor A notices the exalted and haughty attitude with which interlocutor B has returned from a trip. B explains that a meeting with Nigrinus has completely changed his mind. He goes on to report the lecture on the vices of Rome and virtues of Athens with which Nigrinus has managed to convert him to philosophy. We thus have three levels of recession: Nigrinus' meeting with B, as reported by B in his conversation with A, which is itself framed by a letter of 'Lucian' to Nigrinus. What makes the *Nigrinus* so appealing to my argument is that A, listening to the report of Nigrinus' lecture, immediately joins B and also becomes a disciple of philosophy. As in the *Confessions*, the story of a conversion, here to philosophy, generates an actual conversion that is closely modelled on it.[28]

Scholarship on the *Nigrinus* embraces a remarkably broad spectrum of interpretations.[29] The text is read at face value as the account of Lucian's conversion to philosophy,[30] as an engagement with a real philosopher – Nigrinus, it is suspected, is the mask of the Platonic philosopher Albinus[31] – and as a piercing critique of Roman decadence[32] as well as an encomium of

26 Hall 1981, 159; Whitmarsh 2001, 267.

27 Against an easy identification of the narrator with the author Lucian, see Clay 1992, 3422–3423. To distinguish the two, I will refer to the narrator as 'Lucian'.

28 It is striking that Nock 1965, in his classical investigation of conversion in antiquity, does not mention the *Nigrinus*. On the *Nigrinus* as conversion story, see Schäublin 1985; Cancik 1999.

29 For older scholarship, see Tackaberry 1930, 65–66; for later works, see Hall 1981, 157–161; Macleod 1994, 1389–1391; Berdozzo 2011, 217.

30 E. g. Peretti 1946.

31 E. g. Praechter 1926, 547; Tarrant 1985.

32 E. g. Peretti 1946.

Athens.[33] To be upfront in a rather un-Lucian fashion, I do not think that such straight readings do justice to the complexity of the *Nigrinus*. Its wit and irony are grasped better by readings that approach the text as satire. Whitmarsh, for example, reads the *Nigrinus* as playing with authorial voice. A narrator bearing the name of 'Lucian' has a character lend his voice to the lecture of a philosopher who, Whitmarsh thinks, sounds like Lucian, but is not him: 'For the reader, the pleasures of this text lie in testing the simultaneous embodiment and evanescence of the author's ego.'[34] From a different perspective, Kasulke homes in on the tension between the haughty comportment of the convert and the modesty befitting a philosophical lifestyle: 'Der *Nigrinus* karikiert also, zusammenfassend betrachtet, wie auch andere Schriften Lukians das krasse Missverhältnis zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit in Auftreten und Selbstverständnis zeitgenössischer Philosophen.'[35] In the eyes of other readers, notably Baltes and Dörrie, it is the ending of the *Nigrinus* that subverts the appraisal of philosophy.[36] Here, I will pursue another path and argue that the *Nigrinus* deconstructs the notion of conversion.

The two dialogues framed by the letter mirror each other: the report of Nigrinus' lecture prompts the internal recipient to convert just as Nigrinus' original lecture itself had turned its listener towards philosophy. The parallel is strongly marked: A notes that B is really 'chock-full of your ambrosia and your lotus' (38: … πολλῆς ὡς ἀληθῶς τῆς ἀμβροσίας καὶ τοῦ λωτοῦ κεκορεσμένος), thus confirming B's initial assertion: 'he poured enough ambrosial speech over me to put out of date the famous Sirens (if there were any) and the nightingales and the lotus of Homer' (3: … τοσαύτην τινά μου λόγων ἀμβροσίαν κατεσκέδασεν, ὥστε καὶ τὰς Σειρῆνας ἐκείνας, εἴ τινες ἄρα ἐγένοντο, καὶ τὰς ἀηδόνας καὶ τὸν Ὁμήρου λωτὸν ἀρχαῖον ἀποδεῖξαι.). A's confession that he is 'wounded' (τέτρωμαι, 38) takes up the shooting imagery employed by B to describe the impact of Nigrinus' lecture on him (35–37). He further compares philosophy to rabies (38):

And no wonder! for you know that people bitten by mad dogs not only go mad themselves, but if in their fury they treat others as the dogs treated them, the others take leave

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33 Most recently, Berdozzo 2011, 217–237.
34 Clay 1992, 3421; Whitmarsh 2001, 274. Schröder 2000 also emphasises the similarities between Nigrinus and Lucian. On the 'I' in Nigrinus, see also Saïd 1993, 263–264.
35 Kasulke 2005, 122–123.
36 Baltes and Dörrie 1993, 372, while Baltes believes that the comparison of the conversion with rabies presents philosophy as 'gefährliche Volksseuche', Dörrie (372 n. 1) concentrates on A's statement that only meeting Nigrinus would heal the wound his lecture has inflicted on them. This, he argues, implies that actually meeting with Nigrinus would free them from the illusion created by Lucian.

of their senses too. Something of the affection is transmitted with the bite; the disease multiplies, and there is a great run of madness.

καὶ μὴ θαυμάσῃς· οἶσθα γὰρ ὅτι καὶ οἱ πρὸς τῶν κυνῶν τῶν λυσσώντων δηχθέντες οὐκ αὐτοὶ μόνοι λυσσῶσιν, ἀλλὰ κἄν τινας ἑτέρους ἐν τῇ μανίᾳ τὸ αὐτὸ τοῦτο διαθῶσιν, καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔκφρονες γίγνονται συμμεταβαίνει γάρ τι τοῦ πάθους ἅμα τῷ δήγματι καὶ πολυγονεῖται ἡ νόσος καὶ πολλὴ γίγνεται τῆς μανίας διαδοχή.

Besides harking back to B's description of his new state of mind as madness (5), the reflection on the infectiousness of philosophical discourse also reworks Alcibiades' comparison of philosophy's spell on him with a snakebite and mania in the *Symposium* (217e–218b).[37] Bolstered by the Platonic intertext, the comparison of philosophy with rabies underlines the force with which a conversion narrative triggers an actual conversion. Narrative, it seems, translates immediately into experience. We are in the immediate neighbourhood of the *Confessions* and its dialectic of conversions.

The closeness to the *Confessions* becomes even greater when Schäublin claims that the conversion of the internal recipient prefigures the response expected from the reader of the *Nigrinus*: 'Der Zuhörer im Rahmengespräch verkörpert das erste Publikum des Dialogs, er steht mit dem Leser auf einer Ebene und macht ihm die Konversion vor, die von ihm erwartet wird.'[38] This would indeed be the plausible continuation of the dynamics of conversion and narrative unfolding in the dialogue, and yet it is denied by the structure of the *Nigrinus*. The dialogue is framed by the letter which stops the circle of conversions for its addressee is Nigrinus himself. Instead of unleashing a spiral that reaches into the world of the reader, the framing of the *Nigrinus* generates a short circuit: the destined reader of the conversion narrated is the one who triggered the conversion on which it is modelled.

That the circle returns to its origin is demonstrated in the introductory statement that toys with the proverb of sending owls to Athens: 'If I wanted to display my command of language, and were sending Nigrinus a book written for that purpose, I should be exposing myself to ridicule as a genuine importer of owls' (*praef.*: ἐγὼ δ᾽ εἰ μὲν δύναμιν λόγων ἐπιδείξασθαι βουλόμενος ἔπειτα Νιγρίνῳ γράψας βιβλίον ἔπεμπον, εἰχόμην ἂν τῷ γελοίῳ γλαῦκας ὡς ἀληθῶς ἐμπορευόμενος). There is irony in the fact that 'Lucian' would carry owls not to Athens, but to Rome – Nigrinus, despite embodying Athenian wisdom, lives in Rome. Despite the unreal condition in which he couches the thought, 'Lucian' does import owls to Athens, for he addresses to Nigrinus a dialogue that invites the reader to continue its chain of conversions.

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37 Cf. Hall 1981, 160; Clay 1992, 3425.
38 Schäublin 1985, 127.

The *Nigrinus* also questions the easy transition from narrative to experience. The rabies metaphor confers on the description an uncanny note.[39] At the end of another dialogue of Lucian, Hermotimus, who has just been cured from philosophy, in particular Stoicism, remarks: 'If in the future I ever meet a philosopher while I am walking on the road, even by chance, I will turn round and get out of his way as if he were a mad dog' (Hermot. 86: φιλοσόφῳ δὲ ἐς τὸ λοιπὸν κἂν ἄκων ποτὲ ὁδῷ βαδίζων ἐντύχω, οὕτως ἐκτραπήσομαι καὶ περιστήσομαι ὥσπερ τοὺς λυττῶντας τῶν κυνῶν). More incisively, the sudden conversion of A conflicts with the extensive apparatus of caveats that introduce the report of Nigrinus' lecture. A urges B to repeat Nigrinus' lecture, but B delays the report by elaborating on the impossibility of fully reproducing the lecture: he claims to run the same risk as actors who ruin even prize-winning plays through their deficient acting. A, he is afraid, 'may gradually be led to condemn the play itself' (8: κᾆτα προαχθῆς ἠρέμα καὶ αὐτοῦ καταγνῶναι τοῦ δράματος). B spins the theatre comparison further (8–9) until he is cut short by A, who adds several other topoi that B was sure to bring forth (10): that he is unprepared, that the recitation will fall short of its model and that his memory is not sufficient. B agrees and even adds yet another point, namely that he does 'not intend to quote him without a break and in his own words' (11: κἀκεῖνα δέ, ὅτι οὐχ ἑξῆς οὐδὲ ὡς ἐκεῖνος ἔλεγε, ῥῆσίν τινα περὶ πάντων ἐρῶ). He will avoid the first person and, instead of wearing 'a mask altogether too big for my head' (πάνυ μεῖζον τῆς ἐμαυτοῦ κεφαλῆς προσωπεῖον), speak with his 'own face bare' (11: ἀπὸ γυμνοῦ … τοὐμοῦ προσώπου).

The massive qualifications of the report are thrown into relief by the preceding description of how B manages to conjure up Nigrinus before his eyes: 'sometimes, especially when I put pressure on my soul, his face appears to me and the sound of his voice abides in my ears' (7: ἐνίοτε δέ, καὶ μάλιστα ὅταν ἐνερείσω τὴν ψυχήν, καὶ τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ μοι φαίνεται καὶ τῆς φωνῆς ὁ ἦχος ἐν ταῖς ἀκοαῖς παραμένει). While he succeeds in actually seeing and hearing Nigrinus, his representation of Nigrinus' lecture, as already strongly asserted, is a far cry from the original lecture. How, then, can B's speech drive A into such frenzy, especially as it 'consists of the tritest moral commonplaces, churned out for generations by rhetoricians quite as much as by philosophers'?[40] A's response to the report on Nigrinus' lecture equals

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39 See Baltes and Dörrie 1993, 372. Against this, see Anderson 1978, 372 n. 18 and Berdozzo 2011, 233.

40 Hall 1981, 19. See also the authors listed in Berdozzo 2011, 220 n. 12. Clay 1992, 3423 and Baltes and Dörrie 1993, 371 correctly note that the conversion of A after the tedious lecture is surprising.

B's reaction to the lecture itself, but the emphasis on the gap separating, one is tempted to say, idea and copy makes the strong response of A deeply implausible. The *Nigrinus* presents an easy transition from narrative to conversion and simultaneously challenges it. It satirises the idea that a mere account of a conversion can trigger the spiritual experience itself.

There is also a tension between content and form that raises the question of whether the two interlocutors can actually have converted to the values which Nigrinus' lecture proclaims. Nigrinus casts Rome as the incarnation of vices, and yet his effect on B as well as B's representation of his message hinge on rather Roman devices. The corruption of Rome, one could say, has infiltrated the discourse of philosophy. Rome belongs to people that are 'full of trickery, deceit and falsehood' (15: ἀνάπλεως γοητείας καὶ ἀπάτης καὶ ψευδολογίας). This makes it disconcerting that B draws on ἀπάτη to make Nigrinus present: 'I am in the same case with lovers. In the absence of the objects of their fancy they think over their actions and their words, and by dallying with these beguile their disease into the belief that they have their sweethearts near' (7: καὶ ὥσπερ οἱ ἐρασταὶ τῶν παιδικῶν οὐ παρόντων ἔργ᾽ ἄττα καὶ λόγους εἰρημένους αὐτοῖς διαμνημονεύουσι καὶ τούτοις ἐνδιατρίβοντες ἐξαπατῶσι τὴν νόσον, ὡς παρόντων σφίσι τῶν ἀγαπωμένων). Jarringly, the mode in which B integrates Nigrinus into his life hinges on a salient feature of Roman life criticised by Nigrinus.[41]

Nigrinus himself not only lives in Rome, but is part of its deceitful world.[42] In order to describe his situation in exile, he compares himself to Odysseus (19):

It is no small matter to make a stand against so many desires, so many sights and sounds that lay rival hands on a man and pull him in every direction. One must simply imitate Odysseus and sail past them; not, however, with his hands bound (for that would be cowardly) nor with his ears stopped with wax, but with ears open and body free, and in a spirit of genuine contempt.

οὐ γὰρ μικρὸν ἀντισχεῖν τοσαύταις μὲν ἐπιθυμίαις, τοσούτοις δὲ θεάμασί τε καὶ ἀκούσμασι πάντοθεν ἕλκουσι καὶ ἀντιλαμβανομένοις, ἀλλὰ ἀτεχνῶς δεῖ τὸν Ὀδυσσέα μιμησάμενον παραπλεῖν αὐτὰ μὴ δεδεμένον τὼ χεῖρε – δειλὸν γάρ – μηδὲ τὰ ὦτα κηρῷ φραξάμενον, ἀλλ᾽ ἀκούοντα καὶ λελυμένον καὶ ἀληθῶς ὑπερήφανον.

B, however, compares Nigrinus himself with the Sirens to illustrate the spell he has cast on him: 'he poured enough ambrosial speech over me to put out of date the famous Sirens (if there were ever any) and the nightingales and

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41 See also the description of the rich man who receives the adulation of his flatterers (21): 'And the man stands for hours and lets himself be duped!' (ὁ δ᾽ ἕστηκεν παρέχων ἑαυτὸν εἰς πλείω χρόνον ἐξαπατώμενον).

42 Cf. Whitmarsh 2001, 278–279.

the lotus of Homer' (3: τοσαύτην τινά μου λόγων ἀμβροσίαν κατεσκέδασεν, ὥστε καὶ τὰς Σειρῆνας ἐκείνας, εἴ τινες ἄρα ἐγένοντο, καὶ τὰς ἀηδόνας καὶ τὸν Ὁμήρου λωτὸν ἀρχαῖον ἀποδεῖξαι). The parallel comparison of the appeal of Nigrinus and the temptations in Rome with Sirens lets us wonder if they are that different.

The Roman entanglements of Nigrinus and his representation through B become tangible in the theatre imagery. Nigrinus castigates Rome for its theatricality. Not only do theatres figure as institutions of corrupting entertainment (29), but the entire social life of Rome has a strongly theatrical slant: Nigrinus caricaturises the staged character of the morning ritual (21) and outright labels the funeral a drama (30). Of self-declared philosophers he says: 'His dress only marks him out among the rest and makes him more conspicuous. What irritates me most is that they do not change their costume: certainly they are consistent play-actors in everything else' (24: ἐπισημότερον δὲ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπὸ τοῦ σχήματος ὄντα καὶ φανερώτερον; καὶ ὃ μάλιστα ἀγανακτῶ, ὅτι μὴ καὶ τὴν σκευὴν μεταλαμβάνουσι, τὰ ἄλλα γε ὁμοίως ὑποκρινόμενοι τοῦ δράματος).

At the same time, the real philosopher has his place in the theatre (20):

One has cause to admire philosophy when he beholds so much folly, and to despise the gifts of fortune when he sees on the stage of life a play of many roles, in which one man enters first as servant, then as master, another first as rich, then as poor …

ἔνεστι δὲ καὶ φιλοσοφίαν θαυμάσαι παραθεωροῦντα τὴν τοσαύτην ἄνοιαν, καὶ τῶν τῆς τύχης ἀγαθῶν καταφρονεῖν ὁρῶντα ὥσπερ ἐν σκηνῇ καὶ πολυπροσώπῳ δράματι τὸν μὲν ἐξ οἰκέτου δεσπότην προϊόντα, τὸν δ' ἀντὶ πλουσίου πένητα …

Of course, the philosopher is not cast as one of the actors who fail to notice the transience of their successes, and yet as beholder he is part of the show. The comments on flatterers highlight how crucial the role of the beholder is to the spectacle (23):

For my part I hold that the toadies are far worse than the men they toady to, and that they alone are to blame for the arrogance of the others. When they admire their possessions, praise their plate, crowd their doorways in the early morning and go up and speak to them as a slave speaks to his master, how can you expect the rich to feel? If by common consent they refrained but a short time from this voluntary servitude, don't you think that the tables would be turned, and that the rich would come to the doors of the poor and beg them not to leave their happiness unobserved and unattested and their beautiful tables and great houses unenjoyed and unused?

ἐγὼ μέντοι γε πολὺ τῶν κολακευομένων ἐξωλεστέρους τοὺς κόλακας ὑπείληφα, καὶ σχεδὸν αὐτοὺς ἐκείνοις καθίστασθαι τῆς ὑπερηφανίας αἰτίους· ὅταν γὰρ αὐτῶν τὴν περιουσίαν θαυμάσωσιν καὶ τὸν χρυσὸν ἐπαινέσωσιν καὶ τοὺς πυλῶνας ἔξωθεν ἐμπλήσωσιν καὶ προσελθόντες ὥσπερ δεσπότας προσείπωσιν, τί καὶ φρονήσειν ἐκείνους εἰκός ἐστιν; εἰ δέ γε κοινῷ δόγματι κἂν πρὸς ὀλίγον ἀπέσχοντο τῆσδε τῆς ἐθελοδουλείας,

οὐκ ἂν οἴει τοὐναντίον αὐτοὺς ἐλθεῖν ἐπὶ τὰς θύρας τῶν πτωχῶν δεομένους τοὺς πλουσίους, μὴ ἀθέατον αὐτῶν μηδ᾽ ἀμάρτυρον τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν καταλιπεῖν μηδ᾽ ἀνόνητόν τε καὶ ἄχρηστον τῶν τραπεζῶν τὸ κάλλος καὶ τῶν οἴκων τὸ μέγεθος;

Spectacles are predicated on beholders. Even in their detached position, philosophers like Nigrinus are constitutive to the drama they criticise so piercingly.

B's report is also theatrically infiltrated. We have already seen that theatre imagery looms large in the qualifications with which the report of Nigrinus' lecture is framed (11):

Time and again, when they have assumed the role of Agamemnon or Creon or even Her-acles himself, costumed in cloth of gold, with fierce eyes and mouths wide agape, they speak in a voice that is small, thin, womanish, and far too poor for Hecuba or Polyxena. Therefore, to avoid being criticised like them for wearing a mask altogether too big for my head and for being a disgrace to my costume, I want to talk to you with my bare face, so that the hero whose part I am taking may not be brought down with me if I stumble.

οἳ πολλάκις ἢ Ἀγαμέμνονος ἢ Κρέοντος ἢ καὶ Ἡρακλέους αὐτοῦ πρόσωπον ἀνειληφότες, χρυσίδας ἠμφιεσμένοι καὶ δεινὸν βλέποντες καὶ μέγα κεχηνότες μικρὸν φθέγγονται καὶ ἰσχνὸν καὶ γυναικῶδες καὶ τῆς Ἑκάβης ἢ Πολυξένης πολὺ ταπεινότερον. ἵν᾽ οὖν μὴ καὶ αὐτὸς ἐλέγχωμαι πάνυ μεῖζον τῆς ἐμαυτοῦ κεφαλῆς προσωπεῖον περικείμενος καὶ τὴν σκευὴν καταισχύνων, ἀπὸ γυμνοῦ σοι βούλομαι τοὐμοῦ προσώπου προσλαλεῖν, ἵνα μὴ συγκατασπάσω που πεσὼν τὸν ἥρωα ὃν ὑποκρίνομαι.

B explicitly distances himself from actors on stage, and yet this self-fashion-ing is undercut: the verb ὑποκρίνεσθαι with which he signifies his report is the *terminus technicus* for stage-acting. More subtly, the πρόσωπον that B opposes to the προσωπεῖον not only belongs to the same stem, but can sig-nify 'mask' as well as 'face'. The face, it seems, can be yet another mask.[43]

A responds to B's musings: 'Will this man never stop today talking so much stage and tragedy to me?' (12: οὗτος ἀνὴρ οὐ παύσεται τήμερον πρός με πολλῇ τῇ σκηνῇ καὶ τῇ τραγῳδίᾳ χρώμενος). Impatiently, he takes issue with B's extensive caveats that are steeped in theatrical imagery. But his re-sponse can also be understood along different lines, not so much as a cri-tique of B's endless ramblings as a critique of the way in which B introduces his report. A then castigates the artful staging of B's speech. Not only the rehearsal of Nigrinus' lecture, but also its introduction is highly theatrical. Like his master, B is enmeshed in the theatrical and deceitful world of Rome which he criticises.

Read along these lines, the *Nigrinus* furnishes a powerful response to Au-gustine's *Confessions*. Lucian describes the turmoil which the convert under-goes in similar colours as Augustine, but while in *Confessions* 8 all tension is

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43 Cf. Whitmarsh 2001, 272–273.

finally resolved and gives way to peace and tranquillity, the converts in the *Nigrinus* remain in a state of frenzy that is compared with rabies and mania. Alluding to the mythical figure of Telephus who could only be healed by the cause of his injury, B recommends that they go 'to the man who inflicted the wound and beg him to heal us' (38: ἐπὶ τὸν τρώσαντα ἐλθόντας ἰᾶσθαι παρακαλεῖν). Even if we leave aside the sinister repercussions of the imagery and assume that it only serves to express the force of the experience, conversion cannot be seen as a moment that resolves all tensions.

More poignantly, the *Nigrinus* challenges the idea of a chain of conversions in which narrative metamorphoses effortlessly into experience. There is of course no automatism in the *Confessions*, which draw on a full arsenal of rhetorical figures to dramatise the pangs and throes of Augustine's illumination, and yet, as we have seen, the *Confessions* tightly intertwine Augustine's conversion and conversion narratives. Lucian, on the other hand, short-circuits the chain of conversions by addressing the dialogue to the philosopher who initiated the first conversion. Additionally, he makes the transition look all too easy – the rabies-like frenzy of the convert is triggered by what is no more than 'the stale, flat, and unprofitable fare of Roman satire and the Greek diatribe'.[44] Most importantly, the introductory comments of B highlight the gap separating his report from the original lecture. Lucian thereby throws into relief the chasm between narrative and conversion that *Confessions* 8 bypasses by dialectically entwining narrative with experience.

Now, Lucian was very clever, but he was not able to respond to a later text. It seems, though, that the *Nigrinus* engages with a Hellenistic genre of protreptic conversion stories.[45] Our fragments give us mere glimpses of this tradition, but the fact that Lucian plays with the idea of conversion in other writings suggests that he took aim at an established genre: *The Dance* features the conversion of the Cynic Craton to dance and in *The Parasite* Simon initiates Tychiades into the art of being a parasite. While these texts provocatively apply the notion of conversion to realms that seem rather remote from philosophy, the *Hermotimus* gives us the story of an 'aversion' – here the sceptic Lycinus succeeds in ridding Hermotimus of his Stoic convictions. In satirising conversion narratives, the *Nigrinus* seems to aim at a literary genre which may have been among the many literary influences on

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44 Clay 1992, 3423.

45 Cf. Schäublin 1985, 129; Cancik 1999, 41–42. It is also worth wondering whether or not the *Nigrinus* responds to a treatise on how to respond to instruction, Plutarch's *de audiendo*. While the description of a strong physical reaction and the shooting metaphor are topical (16=46D–F), both Plutarch and Lucian refer to Telephus in order to drive home that he who is 'hit' by philosophy ought to stick with it (16=46F).

the *Confessions*. The differences notwithstanding, Lucian and Augustine apparently relate to the same literary tradition. Taken together, they show not only that narrative was an important medium for recording conversion experiences, but that the relation between narrative and conversion was an object of reflection.

As descriptions of individual experiences, conversion accounts constitute material precious to the current exploration of ancient religion and the individual. As Rüpke and others point out, the focus on polis religion has made us insensitive to the significance of religion at the level of the individual.[46] The parameters of individual religious experience in antiquity, however, may not directly map onto modern notions. At the least Augustine's *Confessions* and Lucian's *Nigrinus* seem to view individual religious experiences differently from concepts that become prominent in the Modern Era. Here, the comparison with Petrarch's transformation of the idea of conversion is instructive. While Petrarch describes his illumination as a turn inwards which he does not share, even with his brother, the dialectical chain between narrative and experience envisaged by Augustine and mocked by Lucian puts the individual in a long chain. Just as Augustine's spiritual biography mirrors the Biblical history of salvation, his conversion repeats and continues the dynamics of earlier conversions.

This does not mean that ancient authors lacked the sense of self that defines modern identities.[47] Augustine's meticulous account of his experience in the garden of Milan looms large among the texts that speak powerfully against viewing ancient psychology as deficient. And yet, in this case, more important than the specific experience of the individual is what it shares with others. The emphasis is not so much on distinct individual aspects as on common features. This focus ties in with the 'objective-participant' conception of self that Christopher Gill considers as dominant in the ancient world.[48] While modern approaches tend to privilege the subjective sense of self, ancient authors seem to emphasise communal mental states and moral judgments. For such a notion of self, the individual experience of conversion is trumped by its exemplary character, which serves to guide the reader in the *Confessions*, but, as the *Nigrinus* illustrates, also lends itself to parody.

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46 See e. g. Kindt 2012; Rüpke 2013; Rüpke and Spickermann 2012.
47 For various approaches to the notion of self in antiquity, see Arweiler and Möller 2008.
48 Gill 1996; Gill 2006.

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Jonas Grethlein
Seminar für Klassische Philologie
Universität Heidelberg
Marstallhof 2–4
69120 Heidelberg
Deutschland
jonas.grethlein@skph.uni-heidelberg.de

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