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Review of *The Shadows of Poetry: Vergil in the Mind of Augustine*, by Sabine MacCormack

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multiplication of introductions, and the distribution of glosses between a short explanatory list and the notes also induce frequent page-turning.

**Dennis Trout**  
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***The Shadows of Poetry: Vergil in the Mind of Augustine.*** By Sabine MacCormack. Transformation of the Classical Heritage 26. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. xx + 258 pp. \$40.00 cloth.

In *The Shadows of Poetry*, Sabine MacCormack undertakes an almost impossible project: to lead her reader through Augustine's many interpretations of the "many layers" (xviii) of Vergilian meaning. Moreover, the path is largely untrodden: only Courcelle has previously attempted anything similar. Well might she insist on the importance in her discussion of keeping "a certain openness toward different resolutions" (xvi). Augustine, after all, elevated multivalence to a theological stance (see, for example, *Conf.* 12. 31. 42); and one of his many reflections on the importance of process is cited by MacCormack, though for other purposes: "not only to go, but actually to arrive was nothing other than *to wish to go*" (99 n. 28, my translation and emphasis). So MacCormack is reading a notoriously ambiguous poet who in Augustine's time already had four hundred years of interpretation layered upon him, through "Vergil's most intelligent and searching"—but also, perhaps, his most slippery and variably committed—"ancient reader" (xv).

MacCormack is thereby producing a book that will optimally appeal both to those interested in classical *Nachleben* and to church historians—whose respective gaps in knowledge she must seek to fill without simultaneously boring one group and patronizing the other. She succeeds in this to a remarkable degree (though sometimes seeming to favor a nonclassical audience with her extensive summaries of and quotations from the *Aeneid*)—not least, perhaps, due to her determination to avoid the "armor of academic prose" (xvii).

MacCormack's approach to Augustine's reading of Vergil is broadly thematic: she seeks not to track specific quotations in the manner of Hagendahl, but to look at associations of ideas that Augustine picked up from, or felt were crystallized by, Vergil. Moreover, MacCormack sets Augustine's response to Vergil within the context of more or less contemporary pagan commentators, especially Macrobius and Servius. She also accompanies her text with sixteen plates from the fourth-century manuscripts of Vergil, the Vaticanus and Romanus respectively. This is rather a missed opportunity: she contents herself with summarizing the contents of the images and quoting the pertinent passage from Vergil, rather than tying them in more closely with her text. For example, the fact that "Di" and "Penates" are labelled separately (fig. 11) could be related to her argument (around 170) that this was a distinction that Augustine failed to observe.

In its range and suggestiveness, but also in its sometimes obscure connections of thought, MacCormack's study is practically impossible to summarize. Rather, I attempt to highlight some of the most interesting issues raised.

Chapter 1 discusses Vergil's posthumous stature, and outlines the themes that appealed to pagan and Christian readers alike and lent him his enduring quality: for example, his complex interpretation of history, in which events

were explicable “by reference to the feelings . . . of individuals” (21). The fourth *Eclogue*, of course, proved particularly problematic for Christian readers: to what degree was Vergil a “witness”? How authoritative was his text (26)? Through this and other passages MacCormack contrasts Servius’s commentary—“a process of addition, modification, and comparison” (37)—with the nuanced responses of Lactantius and Augustine, who used Vergil as a “gateway” to Christian understanding. Vergil’s rich ambiguities “defied . . . characterizations” (43) that demanded certainty. It is not clear whether MacCormack includes Augustine among those who demanded such certainty. One hopes she would not.

Chapter 2 discusses ideas about language and grammar as inherited by the fourth century from the classical tradition, and how, through them, the relationship with Vergil was negotiated. MacCormack emphasizes that Augustine, while dependent on traditional *disciplina*, wished to move beyond it to inner understanding (57). This led him to emphasize the “arbitrary” nature of language as opposed to Macrobius’s more “organic” appreciation (88; neither adjective is adequately explained). This is not explicitly linked with the emphasis in *De Doctrina Christiana* on “drawing out . . . the Bible’s hidden meanings” (67), but surely there is an important connection here: language is of far more than direct signification. Augustine was interested in language not *per se* but as a means of communication (51): having made this extraordinarily significant point, MacCormack fails to follow it up with, for example, a discussion of the audience with whom Augustine might have been communicating.

This absence of audience becomes more problematic as the work proceeds. It elides the crucial difference between the reception of Vergil and of the Christian Scriptures: if each “somehow enshrined everything that was worth saying” (73), the volumes contained in that “somehow” are left suspiciously unexamined. Christian reception even of the quasi-messianic fourth *Eclogue* never accorded it biblical status. Augustine, in fact, goes about as far as one could in a passage that MacCormack, mysteriously, does not discuss (*civ.* 10. 27: “[in *Ecl.* 4] Christ is revealed in another’s persona, but accurately, if one relates it to him”). Lack of attention to audience also elides the immense difference between Augustine’s works: his style, approach, even latinity vary constantly according to his expected audience. For example, it is surely no coincidence that in *Sermon* 81 (see 189), preached to a congregation that would have included refugees from the Sack of Rome, Augustine chose to counterpose the *Aeneid* with ideas about the heavenly city. Similarly, MacCormack is right to emphasize a shift in Augustine’s attitude to the classical literature with which he had been educated: but characterizing it, as she does, in terms of rupture and rejection leaves unexplained the extensive and complex use of Vergil in the early books of the *City of God*: could this not again be significantly linked with Augustine’s audience? Finally, Augustine’s developed awareness of himself as audience is underestimated: to refer *tout court* to “his high regard for the literary merits of the Scriptures” (87) is to ignore the process of conscious self-education by which he persuaded himself of those merits.

This rather attenuated appreciation of the rich complexities of text and audience affects the core of the book: chapters on the emotions, and the longing of soul for body; on the problems of interpretation presented by the pagan gods; and on the relationship between Augustine’s idea of the earthly city, which was intermittently inspired by a Vergilian Rome, and of the

heavenly one. The themes are suggestive, and suggestively explored. MacCormack's work here is very valuable, but for rather different purposes than her preface would lead us to suppose. The "many layers" of Augustine's response to Vergil remain largely unexplored. She has, however, produced for us an unparalleled guide to the themes in Vergil that were relevant and stimulating to Augustine and his contemporaries.

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*God and Gold in Late Antiquity.* By **Dominic Janes**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xiv + 211 pp. \$59.95 cloth.

Since Gervase Mathew's *Byzantine Aesthetic* appeared in 1964, scholars of late antiquity and Byzantium have been reluctant to define or characterize these overlapping cultures in terms of an aesthetic. In *God and Gold*, Dominic Janes elucidates the paradox of the Christian message finding intelligible expression through lavish display consisting of gold and other costly materials. The early centuries of Christianity in the Mediterranean world, principally the fourth through sixth centuries, saw the church drawing adherents at an astounding rate through the use of verbal and visual rhetoric. Janes argues that literary interpretation and exegesis of Scripture worked in tandem with precious materials, often donated by individuals, to make the church an irresistible force. Positive messages of excellence and virtue were sent simultaneously by allusions to heavenly splendor in literary works and through the use of gold mosaics in churches. A growing public responded to these messages. Misgivings derived from the Second Commandment were overcome by an aesthetic that Janes asserts was inherited from pagan antiquity. Such a campaign mounted by the church, he explains, was so powerfully evocative in its symbolism that it accomplished what imperial decrees and military force never could have done.

Janes combines several modern approaches in his attempt to "construct a narrative that includes what people thought they were doing" (4). He uses archaeological, art historical, and anthropological approaches in analyzing the visual culture of late antiquity. His analysis of the written dissemination of the message makes use of literary criticism in establishing the allegorical framework of thought revealed in commentaries on Scripture, mainly Song of Songs and Revelation. Unfettered by any of the theoretical approaches to which he alludes, he explains why the language of *ekphrasis* appealed so widely and was meaningful within this society. Janes also draws on discussions by modern historians and art historians. His eclectic and combined methodology effectively aligns language and art to address fundamental questions of symbolic communication and interpretation in late antiquity.

In the book's five chapters, the seemingly contradictory evidence is presented, starting with the use of treasure to convey Christian ideals. In chapter 2, the ancient Roman connotations of the splendid "jeweled style" and its use to bolster imperial power are explored. In chapter 3, Scripture and its exegesis are shown to associate precious objects and divinity, light and an emanation from God, and gold and moral good. Chapter 4, "The Age of Persuasion," brings triumphal imagery and its symbolic effectiveness into focus, especially through its analysis of gold mosaics with their depictions: thrones, crosses, and other jeweled and colorful objects in early Christian churches. He dwells