CHAPTER TWENTY

SINGING TOGETHER IN CHURCH:
AUGUSTINE'S *PSALM AGAINST THE DONATISTS*

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The present paper may seem something of a paradox. It focuses on one of the most prolific *writers* of antiquity, St. Augustine. The sheer quantity of his works, the mass of books he wrote, inspires awe or even disbelief. The bulk of his writings comprises no less than sixteen massive volumes of the *Patrologia Latina*.[1] It seems nearly impossible for a single reader to read them completely in his or her lifetime. If anyone can be called an early Christian writer, it is surely Augustine.

On reflection, however, the oral aspect is quite important in a large part of his oeuvre. This is particularly true in the case of his numerous *sermones*, of which some 600 remain.[2] The largest category among them, the *sermones ad populum*, comprises sermons delivered to the church audience at large, in which Augustine explains passages from Scripture or discusses the lives and deeds of saints and martyrs.[3] In these sermons, Augustine employs a plain style of Latin proper to his purpose. Sentences are relatively short and display a syntax that is markedly less complex than in his other works. Much the same goes for word order and choice of vocabulary.[4] The oral setting of the sermons also shows a certain

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[1] PL vols. 32–46; vol. 47; and Supplementum 2. For a survey of no fewer than 131 titles, see Van Reisen (2002) 56–60. Information (in Dutch) can also be obtained online: www.augustinus.nl 〉 Augustinus' werken 〉 opera omnia. A great number of excellent texts and translations can be obtained freely at www.augustinus.it.

[2] As a whole, the collected volume of these sermons is about three times that of *De civitate Dei*. For numerous years, Augustine preached many times a week, sometimes several times a day. The total number of his original sermons must have been several thousands, perhaps as many as 4,000. For a complete survey of Augustine's sermons, see Pellegrino (1990); cf. also the general remarks by Mechlinksy (2004) 11–20 with references.

[3] In the last few decades, the large corpus of Augustinian sermon texts was even increased due to new finds. Among the recently discovered sermons at Erfurt library, there are sermons on such saints as Cyprian and Perpetua; see Schiller (2008).

[4] The sermons have also been studied on account of their specifically Christian linguistic colour; see Mohrmann (1932).

degree of repetition, and often a relatively loose structure of the text, characterized at many places by associative reasoning and improvisation. The sermons have been studied in general terms, mainly on account of their theological content, but there remains much to be done in terms of their 'oral' aspects. It is only recently that these have raised some interest.[5]

## *Unclassical Text*

Apart from the sermons there are other works by St. Augustine which show clearly oral features. One work stands out here on account of its distinctively oral origins: the so-called *Psalmus contra partem Donati*, the 'Psalm against the Donatists'.[6] After a short description of the structure and background of this rather neglected text, which even specialists of Augustine do not often read, I will discuss its principal aspects as a product of oral performance.

The *Psalmus* is a poem-like text dating from the year 393, intended for the common believers in church. In it Augustine deals at some length with his discussions with the sectarian 'Donatists'. The text is rather long, counting 297 lines, and it has the following structure. After a refrain of one line, *Omnes qui gaudetis de pace, modo uerum iudicate* ('all you who rejoice in peace, now consider what is true'), that will be repeated 21 times, and a prologue of 5 deceptively simple lines, there follow 20 stanzas of 12 lines each, and each starting with subsequent letters of the alphabet ('abecedarian pattern'); this is rounded off with an epilogue of 30 lines.[7] Each line has a strong caesura that divides it into two halves of some eight syllables.[8] Most lines form clear syntactic unities (complete

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[5] Cf. notably Mechlinksy (2004).

[6] The standard edition is now Rosati (1957), also adopted in Finaert/Congar (1963) and Geerlings (1994). The text is based on the critical edition by Lambot (1935), in which the Leiden manuscript Vossianus lat. 8° 69 fol. 68 (from the 9th century) was used for the first time. This manuscript is the only source for the prologue and three other lines, which had all been missing until Lambot's publication. For recent literature on the *Psalmus*, cf. Geerlings (2002), 83 and items mentioned in the present paper, notably Moreno (1999) and Pizzani (2007).

[7] I quote the Latin text of the older editions, as it is still printed in Lambot (1935) and readopted in Hunink (2005). I will shortly return to the discussion about the refrain.

[8] Curiously, Tilley (in Fitzgerald (1999) 688) speaks about two times seven syllables. She also calls the rhyme scheme 'irregular', which it obviously is not: every line ends in the sound -e (occasionally spelled as -ae). Such careless and imprecise remarks are, perhaps, typical of the lack of appreciation and interest generally given to the *Psalmus*. Negative comments about it abound in earlier secondary literature.

sentences) and are marked by rhyme of final -e. The overall impression is one of a decidedly 'unclassical' text.

In the prologue (lines 2–6), Augustine immediately sets the tone, both in terms of style and content. He refers to schismatics who 'tear up', literally, a garment, a simple image for the peace of Christ, and he tries to mobilize the hearers against them. Their name remains unmentioned for a long time; it is only in line 101 that Donatus is first named. To the audience, however, it will be quickly made clear who the targets are.

The conflict with the heretic Donatists is a dispute of theological origin, which gradually broadened to a social conflict as well (the church of Africa as opposed to the church of Rome).[9] Its origins date back to the days of Diocletian (early 4th century). The Donatists blamed the Catholics for obeying the emperor's orders and handing over the sacred books under the threat of death. They saw themselves as clearly distinct from this line of *traditores* ('those who give in [books]'). In Carthage one of the alleged *traditores*, bishop Felix, appointed a certain Caecilianus as archbishop in 311 or 312, whereas the Numidian bishops appointed Majorinus in this same position. Caecilianus could stay in office because he was supported by Constantine, but his position remained disputed. Majorinus was succeeded by Donatus, the man after whom the local opposition was named. The regionally oriented Donatist movement disputed the validity of sacramental acts by Catholics, and thus instituted the practice of 'rebaptism'.

The conflict remained unresolved until Augustine's time. After Augustine was ordained as a priest (391), he first sought dialogue with the movement (which he considered dangerous for the unity of the Church), but the present text shows a rather more polemical stand. In the course of the text, Augustine explains the history of the conflict and adds many details, such as a Donatist attempt to gain the upper hand through an intermediary from Rome, whom they rejected as soon as the outcome did not suit them.

In the *Psalmus*, Augustine speaks as the defender of the Catholic Church. The text is written in the first person plural and has many addresses in the second person plural and descriptions about 'them' in

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[9] This paper is not the proper place for a full theological and historical discussion of Donatism. Cf e.g. Lancel (1999) 602–622 and editions of the Psalmus as mentioned above, note 6.

the third person plural. Some variations are possible: often it is the absent Donatists who are addressed, and in the epilogue it is not Augustine who speaks but Mother Church herself.[10]

In the course of his plea, Augustine combines severe reprimands and harsh criticism with softer notes and even urgent appeals to restore unity, such as in the final speech by Mother Church. In his view, perfection (such as aimed at by the Donatists) was impossible on earth, and in church believers should learn how to support each other's weakness, leaving the final judgement to Christ himself.

### Simple or Refined?

Whenever the *Psalm* has attracted scholarly attention, it is because of its form rather than its subject matter. It seems obvious that the *Psalm* is quite unlike Augustine's other, well-known works, such as the *Confessions* and the *City of God*, and indeed unlike anything earlier at all. It is generally regarded as an almost painfully primitive text for the illiterate believers, and so as something at the margin of his works. This is partly due to Augustine himself. In his *Retractationes*, there is an important testimonial about the text, which is worth quoting in full.

> 'Because I wished, too, to familiarize the most lowly people and especially the ignorant and uneducated, with the cause of the Donatists and to impress it on their memory to the best of my ability, I composed a psalm to be sung to them, arranged according to the Latin alphabet, and only as far as the letter *V*, that is, in the so-called abecedarian style. However, I omitted the last three letters, but in their place at the end, I added an epilogue, so to speak, as though Mother Church were addressing them. Moreover, the refrain which is repeated again and again, and the proemium to the cause which we wanted sung, are not in alphabetical order. In fact, the alphabetical order begins after the proemium. Furthermore, I did not want this psalm composed in any form of metrical verse lest the metrical requirements force me [to use] some words which are not familiar to the common people. This psalm begins thus: All you who delight in peace now judge what is true," which is its refrain."[11]
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> (*Retr.* 1,20 (19), trans. Bogan (1968) 86, with a change)

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[10] On that passage see notably Springer (1987).

[11] *Volens etiam causam Donatistarum ad ipsius humilissimi uulgi et omnino imperitorum atque idiotarum notitiam peruenire, et eorum quantum fieri posset per nos inhaerere memoriae, Psalmum qui eis cantaretur, per Latinas litteras feci: sed usque ad V litteram. Tales autem Abecedarios appellant. Tres uero ultimas omisi, sed pro eis nouissimum*

So this seems to be a deliberately simple, effective text meant to make rather complex theological subject matter comprehensible to the common, illiterate folk. Throughout the text, the vocabulary is plain and clear, syntax is predominantly simple and easy to follow, and there are many paratactic constructions and repetitions of words. For instance, a brief look at the T-stanza (lines 242–253) about re-baptizing will show a striking lack of variety in both idiom and syntax.[12] This sort of language certainly classifies the *Psalmus* as sub-literary in ancient terms, its style being 'low'.

The text of this famous church Father even shows a number of elements of 'Vulgar Latin'. For instance, some lines end in *-ae*, a certain proof of its pronunciation as *-e*.[13] Unclassical use of the infinitive, of *habere* or a loose use of the second person plural are among the phenomena one comes across.[14] In general, the whole pattern of argumentation seems suited to the occasion of an oral performance: not only is the author as clear and plain as he can, he also does not shun harsh language at the expense of the Donatist enemies.[15]

On the other hand, it must be said that careful analysis shows that the overall form is anything but primitive or careless. Above all, there is the basic pattern of the abecedarian 'psalm' after the Jewish model,[16]

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*quasi epilogum adiunxi, tamquam eos mater alloqueretur Ecclesia. Hypopsalma etiam quod responderetur, et prooemium causae, quod nihilominus cantaretur, non sunt in ordine litterarum. Earum quippe ordo incipit post prooemium. Ideo autem non aliquo carminis genere id fieri uolui, ne me necessitas metrica ad aliqua uerba quae uulgo minus sunt usitata compelleret. Iste Psalmus sic incipit: 'Omnes qui gaudetis de pace, modo uerum iudicate', quod eius hypopsalma est.*

[12] E.g. repeated sentence or clause beginnings with *quid* (244, 245), with *si (me) maculat* (246, 248, 250); line endings with *fide* (242, 245) or *rebaptizare* (244, 254); repeated words, such as *tu* (246, 248, 253), *sanctus* (143, 249, 250) and forms of *nescire* (248, 250, 252).

[14] Cf. e.g. *Si iudex Christus hoc dicat, quid* habetis *respondere?* (136), ... *tunc est tempus* separare (17), *Vestem alienam* conscindas *nemo potest tolerare* (2).

[15] For an example of lines that do not allow for any misunderstanding: cf. *Congregauit multos pisces* omne genus hinc et inde, / *quos cum traxissent ad litus*, tunc *coeperunt separare:* / bonos *in uasa miserunt, reliquos* malos *in mare*. (11–13). Some examples of insulting language are: *Erant Botrus et Caelestius hostes Caeciliano ualde,* / impii, fures, superbi, *de quibus longum est referre* (54–55); *Ipsi tradiderunt libros et nos audent accusare,* / *ut peius committant* scelus *quam quod commiserunt ante* (26–27); *Custos noster, Deus magne, tu nos potes liberare* / *a* pseudoprophetis *istis, qui nos quaerunt deuorare* (34–35); ... *sed* furor, dolus, tumultus, *qui regnant in falsitate* (78); *Sed superbia uos ligauit in cathedra* pestilentiae (123); '*Vos me quare dimisistis et crucior* de uestra morte?' (290, Mother Church speaking).

[16] Cf. Springer (1984) 67.

with many allusions and quotations from the Gospels, and the abundant use of basic rhetorical instruments such as antithesis, paradox, anaphora, rhetorical questions, change of addressees, and metaphors. In addition, it must be said that the subject matter in itself is not particularly easy. For instance, lines 216–266 deal with the vexed question of rebaptism, and the text also offers some abstruse detail about events in the distant past, such as the embassy from Rome in lines 99–136. All of this must have been quite hard to follow.

It seems that Augustine is consciously mixing 'simple, harsh effects' with 'refined effects of literary styling' to achieve what must have been his aim: to strengthen his own, Catholic audience and keep them from joining the Donatists.[17] The rudest notes must have been effective for the most primitive members of his audience, whereas the literary ornaments must have appealed to those who possessed a little education.

## A Carmen After All?

The most important problem regarding the *Psalmus* is, without a doubt, its specific poetical and metrical nature.[18] What is the nature of this text?

Some things it is obviously not: it is not a poem in quantitative metre. There is no way of reading these lines according to a pattern of long and short syllables. As Augustine puts it: this is written *non aliquo carminis genere.* (*Retr.* 1,20).[19]

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[17] Given the polemical, insulting language used against the Donatists, it is hard to believe that Donatists were present in church themselves. If they were, it remains difficult to imagine them being convinced by the speaker. Rather, they would have reacted by persisting in what they saw was their rightful cause. Augustine's formulation *psalmum qui eis cantaretur* in *Retr.* 1,20 (cf. note 11) also suggests that his own faithful were the target audience. On the grammatical interpretation of *eis*, see further below, p. 000.

[18] This has been the main object of research in modern scholarly contributions on the *Psalmus.* As exceptions, one may refer to Alfonsi (1958), whose interest is mainly doctrinal, and the articles by Springer (1984, 1987), which concentrate on literary technique.

[19] A curious attempt to consider the *psalmus* as a classical poem after all, in spite of the evidence from Augustine himself and the *communis opinio* that it is not, may be found in the paper by Pighi (1963). Pighi tries to analyse the lines as dactylic hexameters. For this, he has to assume that all normal prosodical values have been dropped, producing a 'Scheinprosodie' not unlike the verses of Commodian (p. 267). Augustine, then, would use a new form of 'heroic verse' in which only the strong caesura would recall the ancient hexameter, and no scansion would be possible. In the end, one might say, even Pighi gives up the notion of a quantitative metre, as his alleged 'heroic verse' seems hardly more than a form of prose. Pighi's theory has not gained further support, but remarkably Pizzani (2007) 32 still mentions it.

A majority of scholars now argue that the key to understand this poem is the number of syllables: sixteen per verse. The *Psalmus*, then, would be an early example of *rhythmical poetry*, involving a pattern of stressed and non-stressed syllables, with a major role for the natural word accent. The pattern would have to be analysed as a trochaic acatalectic tetrameter.[20] For Augustine then, it is tacitly assumed, a rhythmical pattern would not qualify the text as a *carminis genus*, as a quantitative pattern would do.

There are, however, some major problems. First, many lines do not count exactly 16 syllables, but one or two more or less, especially if all cases of alleged elision and aphaeresis are left out of account. Some fine examples may be found as early as at the start of the poem. According to Augustine's own quotation (cited above), the *hypopsalma* (refrain, line 1) counts 17 syllables: *omnes qui gaudetis de pace, modo uerum iudicate*. In line 2a one would have to read *foeda_st res causam audire* (with aphaeresis of *est*, but without elision of -am) or, conversely, *foeda est res caus_audire*, which sounds even more awkward, to make it count as the first half of 16 syllables. In both cases the metrical pattern can only be applied with some force. Much the same goes for line 4a *uestem alienam conscindas*, and many more lines could be adduced here.

The refrain also shows the ultimate consequence of the notion that the *Psalmus* does have a fixed metrical pattern: the Latin text itself has been changed. All recent editions follow the 'metrically convenient' variant of the Leiden MSS discovered around 1930: *Vos qui gaudetis de pace, modo uerum iudicate* (16 syllables), even though all other *codices* and Augustine himself quotes it as starting with *omnes*. In many lines in the Leiden codex, minor and major changes have been adopted so as to make the Latin fit the metrical pattern, and sometimes also softening the tone. A number of them have found their way right until the critical edition by Anastasi.[21]

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[20] Cf, most recently, Pizzani (2007) 31. Among earlier studies arriving at this conclusion, one may mention Vroom (1933) 33–47 and Luiselli (1966) 35–36. Cf. also O'Donnell (2006) 118: 'instead of measuring long and short syllables (…) he counts accented and unaccented syllables'.

[21] For instance, *Erant* Botrus et Caelestius hostes Caeciliano *ualde*, changed to: *Erant et alii inimici Caeciliano iniusti ualde* (54), *Multos nunc habetis* prauos, *qui uobis displicent ualde* ⟩ *Multos enim nunc habetis, qui uobis displicent ualde*(88); *Finxerunt se nimis iustos, cum totum uellent* perturbare ⟩ *Finxerunt se nimis iustos, cum totum uellent* turbare (98). In the first 100 lines major examples may be found in lines 21, 23, 29, 52, 64, and 93. Some striking other cases are to be found in lines 116, 120, 142, 191, 222, 279, and 281.

But even then, many of such 'restored' lines present considerable diffi-
culties if one tries to pronounce them according to the alleged rhythmical
pattern, since in numerous cases, the metrical ictus would clash with the
natural word accent. There seems a certain tendency of correspondence
between the two, but not much more.[22]

To return once more to the refrain: here too, there is debate, even
among the few defendants of *omnes*. Do we read *omNES qui GAUdeTIS
de PAce*, with an extra syllable to mark the start of the refrain,[23] or with
elision of -i- *OMnesQUIgauDEt(i)s de PAce*,[24] or without elision (but
extra fast, producing two extra short syllables in the same time as one
normal syllable!) *OMnesQUIgauDEtis de PAce*?[25] The real answer is: the
matter remains impossible to decide.

Meanwhile, I would suggest that the initial question and basic assump-
tions are wrong. All scholars now agree: this text is not a *carmen*, in the
classical sense of a text constructed on the basis of a quantitative, metrical
pattern. Instead, it is commonly argued, the text is dominated by a rhyth-
mical pattern. But surely, Augustine would have noticed that this would
merely be replacing one strict system with another one, making the text
no less a *carmen* but merely another type.[26] I repeat that Augustine explic-
itly argues that he did not use any form of *carmen* so as to avoid *necessi-
tas metrica* restricting him in his vocabulary. Surely, a *trochaic acatalectic
tetrameter* would impose definite limits on his idiom, whether it be taken
as a quantitative or a qualitative scheme.

It seems amazing that the scholarly world seems so keen on explaining
some sort of a metrical pattern for this text, in spite of all the textual prob-
lems this involves, and in spite of Augustine's explicit and indubitable
statement that he did *not* write a *carmen*.

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[22] Even here, the lines of the prologue can be adduced. 2a would have to be *Et perSOnas
ACciPEre*, while line 6 also would be much of a problem. Some have tried to solve the
problem by freely assuming that Augustine does not produce all cases of ictus, but only
the antepenultimate of each of both cola in a verse; thus Vaccari (1958) 254.

[23] Vroom (1933) 23–25.

[24] Baxter (1952) 21–22.

[25] Moreno (1999) 426–427. Given his terminology ('Ocho tiempos monosilábicos', 'en
un mismo tiempo rítmico', 427) one wonders whether Moreno is tacitly reintroducing a
quantitative element in his analysis.

[26] Augustine was a clever thinker, who also wrote at great length about music; cf.
notably his *De Musica*. In book 6 of that work he extensively discusses the various forms
of *numerus*; cf. the summary in Jacobsson (2002) lxxxix–xciii.

### *Psalm*

So what did he write? The answer is so simple as to seriously confound scholars. Augustine himself tells that it is not a *carmen* but a *psalm*.[27] This too is the word in the title of the piece.[28] Obviously the term here does not refer specifically to the psalms from Scripture.

As a matter of fact, there is evidence that in Augustine's day new psalms were written for instruction of the masses. For Augustine the 'abecedarian' order, and its Hebrew background, was an essential element of the term.[29] Better still, it is the Donatist movement which seems to have made use of new 'Psalms' for propagandistic purposes, as emerges from a passage in Augustine's letters.[30] About the Donatist Parmenianus, a contemporary of Augustine, it is attested in an anonymous text that he went through the province Africa spreading psalms 'against us'.[31]

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[27] In fact, this elementary point has not been made by scholars who discuss the metre. Chatillon (1955) 120 comes nearest, quoting Raby, (History of christian Latin poetry [n. 30], 22): 'The earlier rhythmical verse was a kind of prose, with no fixed accentual rhythm carried throughout the line, although, as in Augustine's *Psalm*, there might be a regular cadence in the middle and at the end of the line.' Attempts to analyse the *Psalmus* as prose are also briefly discussed by Luiselli (1966) 32–33, who personally favours the analysis as *trochaic octonarii* (p. 36).

[28] Augustine himself refers to it as the *Psalmus contra partem Donati*, with *pars* used in the sense 'party', 'faction' (LSh s.v. II A), and as *Psalmus*; cf. *Retr.* 1,20. The *Indiculum Possidii* refers to it as *Psalmus abecedarius* and several manuscripts in their 'incipit' call it *Abecedarium* with some added words (V: *Abecedarium beati Augustini de Donatistis*; C: *Abecedarium Augustini contra Donatistas*; other variants of the 'incipit' in MSS are listed by Lambot, 318). With all modern editors I assume that the title as it is given by Augustine himself seems the most likely choice.

[29] Cf. *Enarr. in psalm. 118*, serm.32,8 (PL 37,1596). Interestingly, Augustine argues that in the Hebrew psalms, all lines of a stanza start with the same letter, whereas new Greek and Latin texts in the genre only follow the alphabet in the first line of each stanza.

[30] Epist. 55,18,34 … *ita ut Donatistae nos reprehendant, quod sobrie psallimus in ecclesia diuina cantica Prophetarum, cum ipsi ebrietates suas ad canticum psalmorum humano ingenio compositorum, quasi ad tubas exhortationis inflammant.* '… so that the Donatists reproach us because in church we sing the divine songs of the prophets in a sober manner, while they inflame their revelry as if by trumpet calls for the singing of psalms composed by human ingenuity …', transl. McKinnon (1987) 164–165.

[31] Anon. "Praedestinatus" 1,44 (PL 53,600). *Parmenianos a Parmeniano; qui per totam Africam libros contra nos conficiens, et nouos psalmos faciens circumibat, contra quem noster scripsit Optatus.* 'Parmeniani (named) after Parmenianus. He made books against us and wrote new psalms, with which he went round in all Africa.' The anonymous text has often been associated with Augustine, but it does not belong to his genuine works. For some interesting observations on the "Praedestinatus" and its reception of Augustinian thought on heresies, see O'Donnell (2006) 285–286.

So it seems that Augustine merely took over the practice of writing a psalm from the very opponents he attacks.[32] Of course, as many places in his work confirm, he was particularly sensible to the emotional effect of music on the soul, and so he may also have felt personally attracted to the medium of a text that is sung.[33] By all means, in his day the singing of psalms had become very popular.[34]

The logical question then is: how was this psalm performed? And does this give us a clue as to its structure and text? The first question regarding its performance is impossible to answer with certainty. No musical scores have been transmitted, and Augustine never gives a clear cut description of the performance of this sort of psalm. However, there are essentially two sources to obtain further information: a close reading of the testimony about the *psalmus*, and external evidence about Biblical psalms.

To start with the former, the passage in *Retractationes* again produces a few helpful details. First it is clear that the psalm is *sung*: *qui eis cantaretur*. One could discuss *eis*: is this an ablative (or dative) of agent ('that was to be sung by them')? I would suggest it is better and grammatically more natural to take it simply as a dative 'that was to be sung to them', i.e. by one or more singers. For shortly afterwards, it is said about the *hypopsalma* (refrain): *quod responderetur* 'which would be given in answer'. The most reasonable explanation is that the audience at large is supposed to join in singing the simple line in response after each successive stanza. This is a simple method, highly effective to confirm the bond between the author of the psalm and his audience: it is as if they are fighting together against heresy, as if they can support Augustine and the cause of the church, just by singing, time and again: *omnes qui ...*, presumably in exactly the same tone over and over again.

Scattered remarks by Augustine himself elsewhere give an impression of the variety of psalm performances in his days. Psalms could be sung or recited, by the reader or singer, as part of liturgy, as responsorial psalms or with a refrain.[35]

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[32] For this notion cf. e.g. Luiselli (1966) 46–47; Luiselli (1979) 74; Springer (1984) 68. Many scholars also acknowledge Augustine's familiarity with the rhythmical *hymns* of Ambrose, which may have influenced him. However, the hymns do follow a strict metrical scheme, and need not to be taken as a direct model for the *Psalmus*.

[33] Cf. e.g. Elsere (1988) with further references.

[34] Cf. McKinnon (1994) 516–519.

[35] Cf. McKinnon (1987) 153–168. A particularly clear testimony of the use of a psalm verse in response to a singer, is McKinnon's nr 374: Sermo 352,1,2 (PL 39,1548–1550):

About the melody as such little can be said. But when combined with the important detail in *Epist.* 55,18,34[36] that the Donatist psalms were performed in an excessive, loud manner, whereas the normal psalmody is performed *sobrie*, it follows that the *Psalmus contra partem Donati* must have been performed in a natural, calm way. It has been suggested that psalmodizing in Augustine's days may have sounded rather similar to modern practice: reciting a verse in one, constant tone, with a strong pause in the middle and a slight change of tone both before the pause and at the end.[37]

A regular line of psalm could then have sounded like the following (with accents denoting a lowering or raising of pitch):

> *omnes iniusti non possùnt ‖ regnum Dei possidére*

or

> *omnes iniusti non póssunt ‖ regnum Dei possidère*

Of course additional, small melodic lines or variations seem perfectly possible as well:

> *omnes iniusti non póssunt ‖ regnum Dei pòssidére*
>
> *omnes iniustí nòn possúnt ‖ regnum Dei pòssíidere.*[38]

A seemingly 'irregular' line with more or less than 16 syllables would easily fit in for the singer, who would simply have to adapt this mode of psalmody by keeping his or her tone for a one or two syllables more or less:

> *quanto magis pacem Chrísti ‖ qui conscindit dignus est mòrte*

Such a system is easy and quite flexible, without becoming shapeless or amorphous. It can still be heard in modern performances of psalms

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*uox poenitentis agnoscitur in uerbis quibus psallenti respondimus: 'Auerte faciem tuam a peccatis meis, et omnes iniquitates meas dele'* 'The penitent's voice can be heard in the words with which we respond to the psalmodist: "Turn away your face from my sins, and destroy all my iniquities." (Ps.50,11).' A remarkable passage about singing of psalms is *De ordine* 1, 21–22, where Licentius, who has given up poetry, sings a psalm at a place where he relieves himself, which greatly annoys Monica, who thinks this behaviour is irreverent.

[36] Quoted above, note 000.

[37] Cf. notably Vroom (1933) 25–27.

[38] These suggestions of possible oral performance are given merely *exempli gratia*, and could be multiplied. They are not meant as reconstructions with a claim to historical truth.

in Gregorian chant. Many readers and singers will also know similar flexible modes of singing lyrics from popular culture, e.g. from pop songs or amateur occasional poems to accompany gifts, which mostly derive their status as songs or poems from their melody or general flow and particularly the rhyme at the end. In the *Psalmus* too, it is the sustained tone and the constant ending in -e (rather than a fixed pattern of either long and short, or stressed and unstressed syllables) which underscores the unity of the line.

I would tentatively suggest that the stanzas, with their essential message, were psalmodized by one, or, more excitingly, two singers (the rhythm and syntax of the lines would be perfect for that).[39] The audience at large then, would answer by singing the refrain, presumably at the top of their voice.

Of course, with its nearly 300 lines the *Psalmus* is rather long. But Augustine actually implies that it was sung at length. For a singer psalmodizing a single stanza loudly and clearly, and the audience to respond, some 90 seconds would seem to suffice.[40] That would bring the performance of the whole *Psalmus* at some 35 minutes. This may seem long but is by no means impossible in church practice in Augustine's time. The sheer length of some of his sermons, some of them extending to several hours, suggests that the average endurance of believers to remain standing and listening must have been quite unlike common practice in most modern churches.

*Conclusion*

If the suggested manner of singing the text is plausible, and if a much less rigid form for the *psalmus* should be envisaged for the oral performance for which it was intended, this is of some consequence for the constitu-

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[39] That is, one singer would voice the first half of each line, the second singer the latter half. Of course, variations seem possible here too. For example, two (half) choirs rather than two singers might be performing. In addition, one could imagine that during every 12-line stanza, there would be some variation in tone, e.g. a minor raising of the pitch in successive groups of three lines (or $3 \times 4$ or $2 \times 6$, or even $6 \times 2$ lines).

[40] I did a short singing experiment with some colleagues from the Augustinean Institute at Eindhoven, Netherlands (www.augustinus.it). It was our experience that performing this text was unexpectedly pleasurable and far from tedious or tiresome. I thank Joke Gehlen-Springorum, Annemarie Six-Wienen and Hans van Reisen for their kind assistance.

tion of the text. Earlier editors invariably considered the text as a metrical poem, and accordingly emended the text at many places, particularly after the discovery and publication of the Leiden MS.

It may even be so that the text suffered from attempts to normalize it as early as in the Middle Ages.[41] Of course it is impossible to go beyond the medieval manuscripts, and we cannot reconstruct the *Psalmus* as it must have been in Augustine's days. However, it does seem possible to return to attested older readings that show a greater prosodical variety than is offered in present editions.

Therefore, a new critical edition of the Latin text seems due, based on a different principle than the extant ones, showing the essentially oral nature of the text through some extent of variety and flexibility in the length of lines. That is, as far as the MSS allow us to restore old readings.[42] So in the end, this new attention for orality will affect even our most fundamental approach of any ancient text: the constitution of the text itself.

And perhaps some day, some choir will take up the challenge and perform the *Psalmus* in a concert hall, not to instruct us in abstruse doctrinal matter (for a contemporary audience, the conflict of Catholics and Donatists has become nearly meaningless), but as a work of art.[43]

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[41] Cf. Chatillon (1955) 120–121, who suggests that medieval poets could not profit from the liberties of the *Psalm*, and that the type of verse inevitably developed into an increasingly regular, 16-syllable verse.

[42] It would not seem a good idea to introduce new emendations or text proposals, so as to make lines more variable in length.

[43] The *Psalmus* has partly been set to music by the Hungarian composer Sándor Veress (1907–1992) in 1943–1944. See Schaber (2006) 104–105, who describes it as a 17-minute composition for solo bass, mixed choir, and great orchestra. Obviously, this is rather different from the psalm-like form proposed in this paper. In addition, Veress only used the first strophe (*Abundantia peccatorum ...*), with its imagery of good and bad fish that will be sorted out, because of the ethical dimension of these lines in the context of the Second World War.

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