

WHITE, Peter (ed.), *Augustine. Confessions. Books V-IX* (Cambridge Greek and Latin classics), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York 2019, xii + 358 p.

There is no shortage of scholarly resources for Augustine's *Confessiones*. There is the splendid 1992 edition with commentary by James O'Donnell, freely available online to readers all over the world ([www.stoa.org/hippo](http://www.stoa.org/hippo)); there are fresh and adequate translations in all major languages (in my native language, Dutch, I mention the fine version by Wim Sleddens, O.S.A., published in 2009), and bibliographical tools are at hand through the usual channels, as well as in specialized books, journals, and online resources ([www.augustinus.de](http://www.augustinus.de) ranking among the finest examples). Furthermore, Augustinian scholars can use such tools as the *Augustinus-Lexikon* and the breathtaking amount of primary textual material presented at sites such as [www.augustinus.it](http://www.augustinus.it), to mention just some major items among all that has been made available.

This prompts a simple but relevant question: why would anyone bother to publish a new commentary on the *Confessiones*, and why merely on a specific part?

For one thing, as a matter of principle, any new edition and commentary must be welcomed in advance. Every scholar may have something new or interesting to contribute or may address a part of the Augustine readership that has somehow been neglected. Classical works such as the *Confessiones* can never receive *too much* attention. Since so many books and papers about Augustine and his *Confessiones* are published year after year, it is surely not exaggerated if new commentaries keep on appearing as well. Since O'Donnell's 1992 edition, almost thirty years have passed. It seems that nearly everything in our field must be repeated or reworked at least once in every

generation. On a more practical level, a good reason to publish a work may be that it is the logical sequel to an existing publication.

The new book by Peter White (University of Chicago) offers an edition with commentary of Augustine's *Confessiones*, books 5 to 9. It comes in a well-known and highly appreciated series: the Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics, commonly known among classicists as 'the Green & Yellows'. Anyone who has ever leafed through such a volume knows what to expect: a succinct but useful introduction, solidly based on recent scholarship but without extensive discussion; a reliable Greek or Latin original text without translation; and above all: a helpful commentary, clearly organized and with mostly short, easily accessible lemmata that stay as close to the original as possible, while also enabling the reader to deepen his or her understanding of wider issues concerning the text, its historical background, and its literary composition.

That is, the series is clearly intended for readers who wish to study the original Greek or Latin text, and are already fairly proficient in the relevant classical language. Philosophers and theologians may find much from which they will profit, but they are not among the primary target groups of the series.

The practical reason why Peter Green has devoted himself to books 5 to 9 seems obvious: the 'Green & Yellows' already offer an edition of *Confessiones*, books 1 to 4, which was edited by Gillian Clark (University of Liverpool) back in 1995. Readers have had to wait quite a while, but now all popular parts of the *Confessiones* are covered in the series. (One wonders if books 10 to 13 will ever receive similar attention; White does not announce anything that would lead one to think so.)

Books 5 to 9 can be read in Latin with useful help from Peter White's notes. The thirteen-page introduction, which is brief even for 'Green & Yellow' standards, discusses the work in the life and literary career of Augustine, the Latinity of the *Confessiones*, rhetoric and style, book divisions and narrative structure, the content of books 5-9, and practical remarks on the present edition and commentary. All is adequate, helpful, and to the point. I would be happy to have my undergraduate students read this text as a first introduction to the subject, and in a way even to Christian Latinity in general.

The Latin text does not offer much that is new, as it is substantially the text of the 1992 edition by O'Donnell. Far from being a disadvantage, this ensures that the book may be conveniently used alongside other editions of the *Confessiones*, avoiding confusion about the Latin text. (Any teacher who has taught a canonical text, with students bringing along different texts, often from the internet, knows the practical problems that can arise in class.)

The book explicitly targets ‘students of classical or patristic literature who wish to read Saint Augustine’s *Confessiones* in Latin, but who find that that work presents elements with which they are unfamiliar’ (opening words of the preface, p. IX). Accordingly, the commentary notes, comprising 266 pages (for 64 densely printed pages of Latin), mainly deal with primary matters such as syntax, unclassical word forms, and basic meaning. As a rule, the notes stay close to the Latin. Longer periods or difficult sentences are translated, references to Bible passages or Roman authors are given and explained, historical and other backgrounds are elucidated. Wider issues, such as Augustine’s views on his own past, his relations with Monnica and others, and his essential religious ideas, receive attention, but with moderation and usually briefly.

As books 5 to 9 contain some of the most intense scenes of the *Confessiones*, such as Augustine’s baptism or the preceding ‘tolle... lege’ garden scene (8.12), the commentary is bound to disappoint readers who are eager to delve further into any such matters. The lemma on the crucial words ‘tolle... lege’ (pp. 275-276) is a case in point: in fourteen lines the editor discusses whether the phrase may be understood as ‘pick up [and] read’, and whether Augustine actually heard them being spoken by someone outside his head. This is more than just Latin grammar, but not enough for an avid reader wanting to know everything there is to know here.

Having said this, there seems little room indeed for complaint. Peter White does not promise to give readers all there is to know, but rather to help and guide them in approaching the often difficult Latin of the *Confessiones*, and to offer just a bit more than the earlier commentator, Gillian Clark. His book does so in a convincing and reliable manner, within the clear cut format of the ‘Green and Yellows’ series. If the commentary will stimulate readers to undertake further studies into the *Confessiones*, for which there is ample material and occasion, it will have served its purpose well.

The book is a valuable contribution to *Confessiones* scholarship, and an indispensable tool for students and scholars. It should be purchased by any serious library of classics, as is true of any other volume in the series.

It is to be hoped that the earlier 1995 volume by Gillian Clark, which now seems out of print (it is no longer listed at the series website) and is not easy to obtain, will be given an update in the near future, to make it stand on a par with this very welcome book.

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