CHAPTER TWENTY

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

Vincent Hunink

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 sermons, 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

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.  

*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’. 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. Each line has a strong caesura that divides it into two halves of some eight syllables. Most lines form clear syntactic unities (complete

---


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.