CHAPTER 8

Augustine’s Soliloquia in Old English1

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Until recently, Augustine’s Soliloquia and its vernacular twin in Old English have received little significant attention from the world of scholarship. For Augustinians there is much else to celebrate in the major works of the Bishop of Hippo, which would be easy to number as the Confessions, the City of God, On the Trinity and even perhaps On Christian Doctrine. These works have paid and repaid interest, while the early Augustine, notably in the Cassiciacum dialogues, has received the circumscribed study traditionally reserved for works seen as proleptic to a career or otherwise preliminary or introductory.2 The Soliloquia, which is the last of these early dialogues, has now become the subject of a major study, Brian Stock’s Augustine’s Inner Dialogue, which gives new interpretations of the early dialogues and the significance of the philosophical soliloquy.3 One may note here as well Gerard Watson’s edition with its helpful introduction, commentary, and translation.4 Yet Augustine did not admire his own work, stressing in the Retractions (a.k.a Revisions) 1.4 and 1.5 that Soliloquia had remained “imperfectum,” presumably meaning “incomplete” or...

1 I would like to thank Susan Irvine, Nicole Guenther Discenza, and Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe for their suggestions improving this chapter. Any errors that remain are mine.
2 These works include The Happy Life, Answer to Skeptics (Contra Academicos), Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil (De Ordine), and Soliloquies (Soliloquiorum libri duo). Henceforth I shall follow the convention established by Milton McC. Gatch in using Soliloquia to refer to Augustine’s work and Soliloquies to refer to the Old English work: “King Alfred’s Version of Augustine’s Soliloquia: Some Suggestions on its Rationale and Unity,” in Studies in Earlier Old English Prose, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany, NY: 1986), 17-45, at 25. For background information on the Soliloquia see Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, et al. (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: 1999).
“unfinished.”\(^5\) For Anglo-Saxonists the situation is more fundamental: how can one explain the survival of a vernacular “translation” into Old English, traditionally ascribed to Alfred the Great (c. 849–899), which is one of the earliest witnesses to the Latin and indeed the earliest vernacular rendering? Anglo-Saxonists have been wary of this Old English work.\(^6\) This chapter will describe the issues and themes embedded in the question above and offer suggestions and approaches that can provide a fruitful response. The major topics include manuscript evidence and its problematical features; the structure of the Old English text; the devotional temper of the Soliloquies; the “Alfredian” flair for metaphor; the personal dimension of the Soliloquies; other sources, especially in Book III; the relation to the Old English Boethius; and finally the Soliloquies as the first witness to vernacular philosophy. Comparative source study will be the major approach informed by close reading. Soliloquies is the target text, but Soliloquia will help provide the context. There are, however, important preliminaries that must open the discussion.

**Manuscript Evidence and Editions**\(^7\)

There are two manuscripts containing Soliloquies:

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\(^5\) See Sancti Aurelii Augustini Retractionum Libri II, ed. Almut Mutzenbecher CCSL 57 (Turnhout: 1984), 13–15 for I.4 Soliloquiorum libri duo, and 15–17 for I.5, De immortalitate animae liber unus. For a translation see Saint Augustine: The Retractions, trans. Mary Inez Bogan, The Fathers of the Church 60 (Washington, DC: 1968). It is clear that Augustine saw De immortalitate as the completion of Soliloquia, if an unsuccessful one. In Retractions I.5 he writes that the unfinished De immortalitate somehow got into circulation against his will, continuing to say: “qui primo ratiocinationum contortione atque brevitate sic obscurus est, ut fatiget cum legitur etiam intentionem meam, uix que intellegatur a me ipso” (“The book is so obscure, through both the tortuousness of reasoning and its brevity, that the reading strains even my own concentration, and the contents are hardly understood even by myself”).

\(^6\) Stanley B. Greenfield and Fred C. Robinson list five editions, one translation, and eleven studies (mainly on text and language) of the OE translation through 1972 in their classic Bibliography of Publications on Old English Literature to the End of 1972 (Toronto and Buffalo: 1980). 313–314 (items 5456–71, but Cockayne’s collection does not receive its own number). In the OEEN Bibliography Database there are seventeen items between 1973 and 2006, some of which cover more than one Alfredian translation, and one of which is an edition and translation into Italian. The bibliographies for 2007 and 2009 have one item each, while the 2008 bibliography has none.

\(^7\) This treatment of manuscript evidence and related issues derives from my article “Alfred's Soliloquies in London, B.1, Cotton Tiberius A.iii (art. 9g fols. 50v–51v)” in Latin Learning and