AUGUSTINE AT CASSICIACUM: OTIUM HONESTUM AND THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF CONVERSION

BY

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At the commencement of the vintage holidays in the late summer of A.D. 386, Augustine resigned his post of professor of rhetoric in Milan. Shortly thereafter, with family, friends, and several students, he withdrew from the city to the nearby country estate of Verecundus at Cassiciacum, remaining there until the approaching winter encouraged his return to the city, where he began preparations for an Easter baptism. During the months he spent at Cassiciacum Augustine composed four dialogues: the Contra Academicos, De beata vita, De ordine, and the Soliloquia. As the earliest surviving pieces of Augustine's writing, these works have attracted considerable attention, but scholars most often have approached them either as evidence for the character of Augustine's Christianity in the months after his famous conversion in the garden, or as examples of the art of dialogue composition in antiquity. Less attention has been paid to these dialogues by historians of late Roman society, although, as is argued here, these works offer valuable insights into the social as well as the intellectual dimensions of the conversion of the elite in the later fourth century.

It is, of course, often remarked that Augustine's life at Cassiciacum had clear affinities with the traditions of aristocratic otium honestum or dignified leisure. In his biography of Augustine Peter Brown noted that "the ancient tradition of otium liberale appealed to Augustine just because his life had, recently, been far too complicated. He needed a firm, traditional mode of life, ..." It is less frequently noted, however, that the literary works of Cassiciacum also reveal another, less tranquil side of the "synthesis of great traditions" that is one of their distinguishing features. Not only do the dialogues of Cassiciacum illustrate the confidence with which a portion of the Christian elite at Milan laid claim to a vital secular tradition, but, somewhat paradoxically, they also reveal the limitations which that secular tradition placed
upon the social and spiritual vision of that same elite. In fact, in 386, as Augustine attempted to define for himself the proper Christian life, at least part of the personal anguish he experienced should be credited to the ultimate incompatibility of the tradition of *otium honestum* and the logic of a still nascent ascetic ideal. In order to demonstrate this thesis this paper discusses the social and religious context of Augustine's retirement; considers Augustine's attitudes toward wealth and public reputation as he expressed them in the autumn of 386; and concludes with several comments on a letter of Paulinus of Nola.

Augustine had achieved a notable degree of professional success by the summer of 386. He had arrived in Italy in 383 as an ambitious young rhetor, and through the office of the urban prefect Q. Aurelius Symmachus had acquired an appointment to a chair of rhetoric in Milan, the imperial residence. In January 385 he had delivered before the imperial court the official panegyric on the western consul, the Frankish *magister militum* Flavius Bauto. As a rhetor and man of letters Augustine was eminently successful; both his teaching and his public oratory introduced him to the wealthy and educated strata of Milanese society and he could reasonably have expected further advancement of his public career. His hopes for an advantageous marriage and an appointment to a governorship were not illfounded in an age when prominent literary men and orators were often rewarded with administrative posts.

Yet, despite this apparent success by the age of thirty-two, Augustine was disillusioned at Milan. His unhappiness establishes the tone of books seven and eight of the *Confessions*, written some ten years after the events, and is the immediate backdrop to his newfound contentment in the more nearly contemporaneous works from Cassiciacum. The duties of teaching students motivated more by the love of praise than the love of learning, of writing works for the *scholastici* to buy, or of fulfilling the obligations of fourth-century social relations—that is, courting *maiores*—assumed a particularly onerous and distasteful guise with the hindsight of the *Confessions*. Already in the dialogues, however, a more general dissatisfaction with the values inherent in his career looms beneath these specific complaints. The gifts of this world are deceptive and hollow, he informed Romanianus, a fellow townsman from Thagaste, a patron of long standing, and the honoree of the *Contra Academicos*; they ensnare the unwary and they are incapable of offering true happiness: "*[beata] quae sola beata est.*" "Long enough