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THE BOOK OF SAND

Abstract

The title of this essay belongs, of course, to Jorge Luis Borges. Can you remember? The narrator receives a visit from a weird fellow. The stranger offers him a book. At first, the narrator is skeptic. He browses the book and finds the pages in a terrifying disarray. He is informed that the visitor had received the book a long time ago, in a slum in Bikanir, from an illiterate guy, in exchange for a copy of a modern bible. Eventually, he accepts the transaction. He offers the stranger some money and the heretic bible of John Wiclif. He then realizes that he had received an infinite book, that doesn't have neither a first page nor a last one. In the contents of this book of sand, there is, therefore, no beginning and no end. The infinite book resembles the universe: it is eternal. Unlike one of saint Augustine's books, a short polemic work. It was edited on one of the walls of a church that had been visited by a heretic community of the donatists, to forever remind them their error. Against the author's hope, the temple didn't survive (and maybe neither did the memory of the mistake). Saint Augustine's book, as well as the walls of the church, turned to dust. Nobody remembers it. As a conclusion, sand can suggest infinity. That was Borges' thought. But the same sand could suggest instability and the perishable. And that was my thought.

Keywords: late Antiquity, Saint Augustine, donatist heresy, history of book

It is less known (or unknown) the fact that one of saint Augustine's polemic books had been edited in stone. Of course, editing a book in the IVth - Vth centuries meant a very different thing than modern editing by means of the printing press. In saint Augustine's times, the books were multiplied by hand, one at a time, with inevitable mistakes, after a princeps edition, authorized by the writer¹. This copy was held by a keeper, a depositary man, who supervised the correctness of the copying and the moral quality of the clients. The keeper is already a well known figure. We have met him in a passage from The Gospel of Luke, giving the book of

¹ Books editing in late Antiquity: cf. Henri-Irénée Marou, “La technique de l'édition à l'époque patristique”, *Vigiliae Christianae*, 3 (1949): 208-224; Robert A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988, pp.9-95: the status of *grammaticus* in late antiquity; see also Tiziano Dorandi, *Le stylet et la tablette: dans le secret des auteurs antiques*, Paris: Éditions Les Belles Lettres, 2000, ch. 5.

the temple to the readers (4: 16-20). We will be meeting him until late Dark Age, as a *stationarius*².

A letter of saint Augustin (to a certain Firmus), certifies his presence and his newer job, as a keeper and guardian of the books, as an “editor”. Most of the times, notwithstanding the guardian, the works are copied without the approval of the author, for own use. There is no such thing as copyright, the text often circulates without his name, it can be taken over and used by anyone. The bookseller sells a book but cannot control, after the transaction, the destiny of the bought copy. Until the invention of censorship, nobody can. That’s why the copy can be counterfeited.

The history of the book refers to some cases of heretic manipulation of an orthodox text, to forgeries. The heretic revises the phrases or takes them out of the context in order to justify his hasty beliefs. Origen complains, at a time, against this procedure and asks permission to verify with his own eyes the works that have been attributed to him by the malevolents. He had never said that the devil would find salvation, as written in the book, and he couldn’t have said this, although he beliefs in free agency. The devil chooses freely the apostasy and could, theoretically, choose penitence also. But by his first choice, the devil decides his later nature, which prevents him from making a second choice, in the direction of soteriology. The devil will refuse, so says Origen, due to his corrupt nature, reconciliation with God. Therefore, he will not find salvation. Even so, theologically speaking, we can but suspect what God’s intention is, or the result of His final judgment. Just like the devil, God acts freely. Origen doesn’t acknowledge his guilt for the heretics’ statements. The outrageous work doesn’t belong to him. He wasn’t the one who published it:

“...a certain heretic with whom I had discussed in the presence of others, in a written dispute, taking the manuscript from the secretary’s hands, added and erased everything he wanted, placing instead anything he thought better”.

It is probably Candidus, a heretic from Athens, or maybe someone else, an outlaw from another place. Consequently, the adamantine theologian asks an expert concilium from Antioch to watchfully examine his texts “so my style will be recognized by my brothers that know for sure what I usually discuss”. We know Origen’s problem from his latin translators’ works, Rufinus and Hyeronimus. Origen is confronted to the possibility of editorial fraud, that hasn’t disappeared nowadays, to the cunning and wickedness of the plagiarists, to the treacherous initiatives of the heretics. There isn’t a long way to go until censorship appears.

² Maxime Dury, *La censure. La prédication silencieuse*, Paris: Publisud, 1995, p. 179: “Stationnaires, vulgairement appelés libraires”.

Another well known case is linked to the name of saint Cyprian, Carthage's bishop. In *De adulterationis librorum Origenis* (a more than eloquent title), Rufinus says that a group of pneumatologist heretics, in order to spread their theological nonsense more easily, have included in the middle of the saint martyr's epistles (overseen by him, when he was still alive, before publishing them) the injurious treatise of Tertullian, entitled *De Trinitate*. Moreover, they had released a great number of copies of the heretic work in Constantinople, so the price of the codex dropped in book shops.

In telling this story, Rufinus is wrong, at least about some details. It is not Tertullian's, but Novatianus' work, with the same title (*De Trinitate*). This specification comes from Saint Hieronimus (*Adversus Rufinum*, II, 19). Even though the event is apocryphal and Rufinus' and Hieronimus' sayings contradict (those two translator theologians didn't love each other very much), the textual initiatives of the heretics are a certainty for this times (IVth century). They modify texts, sign them with someone else's name, known for his sanctity, or hide their vicious sentences among those of the unique truth, relying on the good faith of the readers. Otherwise, the heretics do not fear the text, they undermine its sanctity and prestige³.

Anyway, I find no point in commenting on the luxurious apocryphal literature from the IIInd-IVth centuries, that contains a few so called letters sent by Jesus Christ to Saint Peter and Paul or an alleged letter exchange that can be summed up to a few polite words between saint Paul and Seneca, the philosopher (eight letters are said to belong to the latter, six to the martyr apostle).

I now return to saint Augustine's book, edited in stone. The author mentions in it a chapter of *Retractiones* (II: 27), after referring to a series of works having a similar finality: fighting the donatists' heresy. This isn't a real theological debate but a polemic about the value of sacraments. The sacrament a priest administers remains valid even though the priest is merely a poor sinner, says saint Augustine: the one who baptizes is the divine archiereus himself, *Christus est qui baptizat*.

The opinion of the bishop from Hippo is priceless today, when a certain donatist chill bothers us all. During the polemic, unexpectedly, emperor Honorius' decree ends any conjectures, with the well known suavity of an infallible instance. One side and the other. This is the only way these phrases can be explained:

“And I published it so the first theme [of discussion] could be read on the walls of the church that has been the donatists'- *eumque librum editi ut in*

³ Cf. Henri Crouzel, *Origen. Personajul – exegetul – omul duhovnicesc – teologul*, Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 1999, pp. 60-68.

parietibus basilicae quae Donatistarum fuerat propositus legeretur..." (*Retractationes*, II: 27)⁴.

Therefore, the book hadn't been edited in the middle of the debate, but after the decision of the Emperor, who had found the donatists far from the truth. It is only so that I can explain the weird editing of Saint Augustine's response, *in parietibus basilicae*, engraved in the stone walls of the church.

These circumstances obviously imply a short book. That everyone can see. Imperishable. Admonishing. That reminds the former heretics, after their formal conviction through Honorius' decree, the exact formula of the ignored truth. But why was it written in stone, in a "lapidary" way? There could be some hypotheses. Saint Augustine's book is, firstly, a sign of triumph (for the orthodox) and a sign of defeat (for the heretics). Its immobility forewarns and humiliates at the same time. It depends on which side you're looking from. Secondly, the book's material suggests the idea of the perpetual sentence, the eternal text, the intangible truth. When you're editing a book in stone, you think about it as being immovable and perennial as the stone is. For a similar reason, the Decalogue was also written on two stone tablets, of confession, by God's finger (Exodus, 31: 18). And thirdly, a stone book rules out the heretics' mystifying intervention. The letters cannot be modified at your own will.

One last observation. Because it was transcribed firstly on parchment and then in our hearts, the Decalogue has been preserved until today. But saint Augustine's book of stone, from the donatists' church, hasn't. What has remained of it is just an empty name.

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⁴ Augustin, *Retractationes: Revizuire*, tr. N. I. Barbu, București: Editura Anastasia, 1997, p. 142.