WORD ON FIRE
Classics

CONFESSIONS

ST. AUGUSTINE

FOREWORD BY BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

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FOREWORD

by Bishop Robert Barron

One of my mentors, Msgr. Robert Sokolowski, once observed that a handful of the truly classic texts of the tradition should be read every year of one's life. As a person ages, he explained, a truly great book opens up in new ways, delivering ever deeper and more variegated insights. I can't say that I've followed this advice with complete fidelity, but I have indeed read St. Augustine's *Confessions* numerous times in the course of my life, and the experience has confirmed Sokolowski's intuition. The *Confessions*' capacity to shed light seems inexhaustible; I find that each time I read it, it becomes more thoroughly my own story.

As many commentators have indicated, the *Confessions* is the first true autobiography. There had been, to be sure, numerous biographies in the ancient world, Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* being perhaps the most famous. But prior to Augustine, no author had ever turned his speculative gaze so intently upon his own life and interiority. Hence, without the *Confessions*, there would have been no Shakespearean soliloquies (in fact, Augustine coined the term *soliloquia*); Joyce could never have written *Ulysses* or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; Freud and Jung could never have developed psychoanalysis.

But as one of my philosophy professors, Thomas Prufer, argued, the category of autobiography is not entirely accurate, for the *Confessions* is best appreciated as "a prayer overheard." It does indeed contain remarkable feats of introspection, but from beginning to end, the *Confessions* is addressed to the Creator. It is an act of recounting to God what God has accomplished in Augustine's life and hence it is, finally, a gesture of praise. Augustine inherited from the Biblical tradition the

conviction that the human being is meant to worship aright. The *Confessions*, accordingly, is the story of how one man was led by grace from false forms of praise ("the region of unlikeness") to the correct praise of the true God.

One of the most extraordinary features of the *Confessions* is its combination of high intellectualism and profound emotion. There is no mistaking that this is the work of a man steeped in the most rarified academic culture of his time, but the pages of the book are replete with vividly remembered scenes and passionate feeling. Sometimes on one page of the text, Augustine will move from achingly abstract metaphysics, through wrenching emotion and personal reminiscence, right back to abstract metaphysics. When I was coming of age in the Church, in the period just after the Second Vatican Council, there was a tendency to drive a sharp wedge between intellectualism and experience, or in the preferred jargon of the time, "the head and the heart," with the latter always preferred over the former. But that jejune bifurcation simply wouldn't have made sense to Augustine, who chose to honor God with both his thoughts and his tears, both his searching mind and roiled emotions.

On the very first page of the *Confessions*, we find what, to my mind, is the best and most succinct statement of Christian anthropology ever formulated: "*Fecisti nos ad te, Domine, et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*." ("For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee"). We are, in a word, hardwired for God, and our very desire proves it, for nothing in this world finally satisfies the restless longing of the soul. I have used this Augustinian insight for years in my own work of preaching and evangelizing. We are living in a time when, to use Charles Taylor's phrase, "the buffered self" holds sway. This is the individual so conditioned by a secularist ideology that she cannot even imagine, much less access, the transcendent realm. I have found that Augustine's insistence that even the best things in life do not finally satisfy the longing of the heart very effectively punches holes in the buffered self, letting in some light from

a higher world. Part of the exquisite beauty of the *Confessions* is how the story that Augustine lays out is a relentless illustration of the truth that he abstractly articulates on the first page. He seems to say, "You believe that the heart can find peace apart from God? Let me show you why it can't."

"*Confessio*" in Latin has a double sense. It can mean, on the one hand, profession or testimony, which is why the Church speaks, for example, of great teachers as "confessors" of the faith. As we saw, Augustine is much preoccupied in his great work with giving praise to God and testifying to the Christian faith. But "*confessio*" also has the more conventional connotation of the confession of sins—and there is plenty of this in Augustine's autobiography as well. The most famous example is his admission of a childhood sin of stealing pears from a neighbor's orchard, even when he didn't eat the fruit he stole and had effortless access to much finer pears. What this early transgression showed, he thought, was the strange perversion at the heart of sin, a falling in love with wickedness (however objectively negligible) for its own sake.

When he was a teenager, Augustine made his way to Carthage, the largest city in his part of the Roman world, in order to engage in the formal study of rhetoric. He refers to the town, punning in Latin, as a cauldron: *Carthago-sartago.* At the same time repelled and fascinated, Augustine threw himself into the sensual maelstrom of the place: "I was not yet in love, but I was in love with love… My longing then was to love and to be loved… I wore my chains with bliss but with torment too, for I was scourged with the red hot rods of jealousy, with suspicions and fears and tempers and quarrels." How contemporary and universal that sounds! Like many others before and since, Augustine learned that the hunger of the heart would not be sated with the mere pleasures of the flesh.

Though it contains plenty of such confessions of guilt and remorse, the *Confessions* is finally a story of grace, of how God led Augustine by winding paths to the supreme good. In his providence, the Creator used

all sorts of means—books, failures, journeys, tears, and silence—but his preferred method was the influence of pivotal people: Monica, who prayed her son from indifference to faith; Alypius, the devoted friend; Antony of the Desert, who fired Augustine's heart; Simplicianus, master of the spiritual life; and perhaps most importantly, Ambrose, who taught Augustine how to read the Scriptures and who immersed the young catechumen in the waters of the baptistery underneath the Cathedral of Milan.

Bruce Springsteen echoed Augustine in one of his most popular songs: "Everybody's got a hungry heart." The lesson of the *Confessions* is that awakening this hunger and following it all the way will lead one, by however circuitous and dangerous a path, to God.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

When Frank J. Sheed's translation of the Confessions first appeared in 1942, it was met with a receptive and grateful audience. Augustine's masterpiece had already been rendered into English by Edward Pusey and J. G. Pilkington in the previous century, and there had already been a steady if polemical tradition of English translations since the 1500s. But in the years that separated Sheed's work from the genteel Oxford Movement of Pusey and Pilkington, a devastating World War, the increasingly mechanized rhythm of modernity, and the curt iconoclasm of a new generation of writers had changed the language of street and parlor as much as it did the fabric of society. What to an earlier audience was expressive and mellifluous was now being construed as archaic and incomprehensible. Sheed's smooth and pristine prose came at the right time, and was variously hailed for being "modern," "contemporary," and "intelligible"—all "without sacrificing dignity of expression" or accuracy.

Sixty years later, even in the company of the half dozen or so translations that have since come out, Sheed's rendering has lost none of its eloquence or timeliness. F. J. Sheed (1897–1982) had a gift for language, one that was shaped in the classroom, tested on the soapbox, and exercised in the lecture hall. Born and raised in Australia, Sheed studied law at Sydney University before emigrating to England, where he became involved in the Catholic Evidence Gild, a commitment that put him in London's Hyde Park every Sunday morning defending his religious beliefs from the stump. And when he was not parrying with hecklers in Britain's rawest marketplace of ideas, Sheed was running the remarkable publishing house he founded (Sheed & Ward), writing books on theology (for which he was awarded a doctorate in sacred theology from the Holy See), and—after he moved to the United States—

lecturing to vast audiences as part of what we now regard as the mid-twentieth century's Catholic Revival. Sheed even managed to continue these activities during the Second World War, traveling repeatedly across an Atlantic made perilous by German U-boats.

It was in the midst of this frenetic life that Sheed undertook one of his greatest labors of love, the translation of the *Confessions*. Sheed adored poetry and Latin more than anything (he took a Latin copy of Horace's *Odes* with him wherever he went), and so his translation of the rhetorically exceptional theologian had to be just right. His son Wilfrid—who would himself go on to become an accomplished author—remembers how his father would translate one page at a time on the New York subway en route to the offices of Sheed & Ward. After he arrived, he would dictate his work to the future Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Jean Stafford, checking and double-checking the cadence and sound.[1] Since Augustine intended his confessions be read aloud, this attention to euphony gave Sheed's translation a unique strength (see p. xxiii). To this day it remains the most canorous and resonant on the market.

Perhaps it is Sheed's unusual background that made him such a felicitous translator of St. Augustine. Like Augustine, Sheed had a rounder of a father and a Monica of a mother; like Augustine, he was schooled in the manipulation of words and arguments (if one wishes to give the practice of law a rather cynical definition); like Augustine, he had taught at a prestigious grammar school and was blessed with an incredible memory; like Augustine, he was a convert to Catholicism; and like Augustine, he spent the rest of his life dedicating his tongue to the greater glory of God and His Church.

But the more relevant affinity again draws us back to the crucible of language. As the Australia of Sheed's youth began to feel its British identity slip away, it responded with both originality and conservation:

1. I am indebted to Mr. Wilfrid Sheed for sharing these recollections with me on November 8, 2005. The details of Frank Sheed's life mentioned in the following paragraphs are taken from Wilfrid Sheed's biography *Frank and Masie: A Memoir With Parents* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

originality in its fostering of the spirit of national independence, conservation in its efforts to preserve all good things from its colonial founding. Subsequently, it was not uncommon to find Australians acting more English than their distant and now titular monarch. The fruit of this phenomenon was, among other things, a care for linguistic purism that surpassed even that of the mother country. Sheed, the drifter from the outback, was probably more exacting in his grammar and usage than most Chelsea headmasters.

Interestingly, something similar can be said of the linguistic formation of Augustine, who was likewise reared in an imperial outskirt that looked across the sea for its bearings, an outskirt not wanting, Augustine winces to tell us in the *Confessions,* in punctilious grammarians and rhetoricians. Hence, Augustine remarks elsewhere that when he was in Italy the locals grimaced at his North African accent, while he poked fun at their bad grammar.[2] Both Sheed and Augustine, it seems, were outsiders to the ring that unified their world, and their only ticket in was impeccable speech. Yet from this pressure emerged a gracefulness with words, a loving facility with language, and a rare ability to fuse or transcend different cultural clusters of sign and meaning. In Augustine's case, the combination of writing from the end of the Latin corridor with his own ability to preserve apostolic tradition in a bold and even novel way helped to make the *Confessions* groundbreaking not only philosophically and theologically but linguistically as well, pushing the conventions of classical Latin to their breaking point to effect a new synthesis of Ciceronian, biblical, and Late Latin (see pp. xxiii–xxiv).

One of the elements of Sheed's own linguistic style that requires some explanation today is his use of the word *thou*. In contrast to the rococo translations of the nineteenth century, Sheed employed the antiquated pronoun sparingly, using it only when it was clear that Augustine was addressing God in "straight prayer." As Sheed mentions in the original translator's note, he struck this compromise on the

2. *On Order* 2.17.45.

grounds that "Christians of the English tongue are so accustomed to using *Thou* in their prayers, that *You* would sound odd."[3]

Needless to say, however, most Christians of the English tongue now find *Thou* rather than *You* as the odd choice. Not only have the private habits of prayer changed, but even biblical translations and church services have for the most part adapted to modern usage. Further complicating this convention is that Augustine himself, as Sheed concedes, "knew nothing of *Thou* as a term reserved for religious use": Latin authors used *tu* when addressing a single person, be it maid, master, or Maker, and *vos* when addressing two or more individuals. Why, then, in the twenty-first century, should *thou* be retained as a valid component in a translation of the *Confessions*?

There are, in my opinion, three reasons. First, a well-placed *thou* is beautiful. Even to the modern ear it retains a sonorous and solemn ring, and its archaic quality ironically gives it a hint of the timeless and perduring. To flatten the magnificent line of *Confessions* 10.27 from "Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new," to "I have loved you lately, beauty so old and so new," would be a crime against beauty both ancient and new. Nor is this a matter of mere aesthetics, for as Augustine came to realize, true beauty adumbrates the beauty of truth. And since for that reason Augustine himself took great pains to make the *Confessions* achingly beautiful, anything that contributes to conveying this effect is to be commended.

Second, *thou* remains the only pronominal marker we have in English for expressing intimacy and familiarity. Students are often surprised to learn that *thou* is the second person singular pronoun that was used to speak to someone of lesser or equal rank while *you,* the second person plural, was used to address a superior. *Thou,* not *you,* is the language of closeness, comfort, and intimacy.[4] That traditional Christian

3. See Translator's Note, p. 322.

4. Indeed, one of the theories as to why *thou* was dropped in English was that it was a reaction to the excessive thou-saying of the Quakers, who addressed everyone, even their betters, colloquially. To redress this untoward familiarity, the rest of society responded with a heightened formality, addressing even their subordinates with the formal *you*.

parlance addresses God with the familiar rather than the formal pronoun tells us something significant about the intimacy between the lowly believer and his almighty Father. This is precisely one of the paradoxes that the *Confessions* excels in exploring, the God who is both highest and nearest (6.3), the God who is utterly hidden and utterly present (1.4), the God who is with us even when we are not with ourselves (10.27). And it goes without saying that the voice of Augustine the supplicant is one of touching intimacy with his transcendent Creator.

Third, the use of *thou* is a fitting way to express the liturgical character of the *Confessions*. Augustine's autobiography has been rightly recognized as a prayer or hymn, directly addressing as it does God rather than the reader; but recent scholarship, attentive to the work's doxological, sacramental, and even ritualistic dimensions, suggests that it is much more. Ever mindful of his responsibilities as bishop to his Christian brethren, Augustine has configured his *Confessions* not simply as praise of God, accusation of self, and profession of faith (the three meanings of *confessio*) but as a solemn sacrifice offered to God on their behalf.[5] As biographer Peter Brown puts it in his introduction to this volume (also a classic in its own right), "Augustine's back is turned to us" throughout the work;[6] his narrative voice is that of a bishop at the sacrifice of the altar, oriented toward the risen Christ in order to draw us, his readers, into the sacred mysteries. Sheed's use of *thou* is almost prescient, for changes in prayer and worship notwithstanding, *thou* lends to the text an unmistakably liturgical timbre. These dimensions and others are illustrated in Bartolomé Estaban Murillo's famous painting "The Prodigal Son among the Swine." The son, having spent his inheritance on riotous living, has been reduced to feeding husks to swine in an alien land. Murillo captures him—his hands not yet completely folded in prayer and his knees not yet fully suppliant—at that first quivering moment in which he resolves to return to his father and beg for

5. See "Confession," p. 407.

6. See p. xxiii.

forgiveness. Around him are the shadow lands in which he has been dwelling and, in the background, the eerily shaped livestock he has been serving. The only source of light is that which is above him.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) has a special resonance for Augustine. More than any other biblical story, it serves as a consciously chosen mirror of self-understanding. When, for instance, Augustine describes his stormy adolescence in book two, it is as one who has gone far from his Father, wasted his substance, fed swine, and rendered himself a wasteland. When he recounts his immersion in worldly learning and literature he likens it to the husks upon which the pigs in the parable feed and the harlots upon which the youth lavished his money (3.6, 4.16). Yet when Augustine mentions his newfound love of wisdom, it is as one who has "begun the journey upwards" that would return him to God, a close paraphrase of Luke 15:18 (3.4); and when he narrates the liberating effect of reading the books of the Platonists, he parallels Luke 15:17 by saying that it helped him come, or return, to himself (7.10). It is no surprise that Augustine—who in the memorable words of Ernest L. Fortin had more than his share of summer and high riot in the blood—would be drawn to the parable and to its central figure. Yet for Augustine the story is as universally applicable as it is personally significant. Like all of Sacred Scripture, it is a type or figure in light of which the enigma of our own existence is revealed.[7] The prodigal son's meanderings are, according to Augustine, spatial symbols of spiritual deviations:

> Thy prodigal son did not charter horses or chariots or ships, or fly with wings or journey on his two feet to that far country where he wasted in luxurious living what Thou as a loving father hadst given him on his departure… To be lustful, that is darkened, in heart, is to be far from Thy face. (1.18)

Like Nathan the prophet's tale about the lamb and the poor man that catches the conscience of the king, the story of the prodigal son

7. For more on this point, see "Typological Exegesis," p. 413

exposes the reader to himself with essentially the same chilling epiphany: "Thou art the man."[8] And if the parable is an especially good example of the mirror-like qualities of the Scriptures (see 13.15), it is also a beguilingly inconspicuous example of the *Confessions*' liturgical nature. Drawing from the association of pigs with demonic possession in Matthew 8:31–32, Augustine elsewhere interprets the swine in the story as fallen angels; hence, his own feeding of the hogs during the pear tree incident has sinister sacrificial connotations (2.4). But just as the prodigal son comes to his senses and joins his father's feast after figuratively sacrificing to devils, so too does Augustine, the erstwhile participant in evil sacrificial superstition (4.2), learn to offer himself up as a living sacrifice through his *Confessions* in union with the Eucharistic banquet.[9] Perhaps it is no coincidence that the only other time in which Augustine alludes explicitly to the parable in the *Confessions* is to describe its solemn proclamation during the sacrifice of the Mass (8.3).

Like Murillo Augustine has artfully used the Parable of the Prodigal Son to show the beauty of repentance from spiritual ugliness. Like Murillo he invites us to see ourselves in the figure of that intemperate youth so that we too may follow him in coming to ourselves and returning home. And like Murillo Augustine directs our gaze through a confession of prayer and sacrifice to the Father and to His voice trembling with joy:

> And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it, and let us eat and make merry: Because this my son was dead and is come to life again, was lost and is found. (Luke 15:23–24)

ABOUT THIS EDITION

While only a dozen minor but essential alterations have been made to Sheed's translation, the apparatus of this edition has been markedly improved. Paragraph numbers have been added to make citations of the

8. 2 Kings (2 Sam.) 12:7.

9. For Augustine's phenomenology of sacrifice, see 5.1 and 5.3.

text easier, and a substantive index is included for ease of reference.[10] A glossary of prominent names and subjects, a timeline of key dates, and a map showing Augustine's travels all contextualize Augustine's narration of ideas, places, and people. Readers interested in studying the *Confessions* in greater depth will benefit from consulting the updated Suggestions for Further Reading and the Select Bibliography.[11]

Moreover, extensive annotation on Augustine's numerous literary, philosophical, biblical, liturgical, and historical sources has been added. These citations testify to the breadth and depth of Augustine's conversation with the classical and Christian worlds and to the complexity of the *Confessions* itself as a tapestry of many different threads. The scope of the annotation, however, is not meant to imply that Augustine's own thought is reducible to these sources. When, for example, Augustine alludes to or incorporates a distinction made in Plotinus' *Enneads* it does not *eo ipso* mean that Augustine is consenting to a Plotinian metaphysical framework: it does not even mean that he is using the distinction in a way of which Plotinus would have approved. Perhaps the best analogy for the relationship of St. Augustine to his classical sources is that of a master musician deftly playing on and developing a number of different musical themes in a way that is beholden neither to them nor to their author's intentions.

It is our hope that these changes to Augustine's *Confessions* will continue Frank Sheed's work of introducing new audiences to an ageless and life-transforming classic.

Michael P. Foley April 25, 2006
Anniversary of the Baptism of St. Augustine

10. Paragraph numbers have been removed in this Word on Fire Classics edition of the text, to improve readability. Citations referencing specific paragraphs should still be easy to locate based on section and chapter number."

11. See pp. xl–xli and 445, respectively.

INTRODUCTION

In 397 A.D., Aurelius Augustinus, the Catholic bishop of Hippo Regius (modern Annaba, Algeria), a seaport on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, had every reason to feel an old, sick man. By August, he was confined to his bed by a series of debilitating inflammations:

> As for my spirit [he wrote to a friend] I am well, through the Lord's good pleasure . . . . pray for me, that I may not waste my days, and that I may bear my nights with patience. (*Letter* 38.1)

A man of forty-three, he saw life, on looking back, to have been broken at many points. Eleven years previously, in 386, in distant Milan, God had set him free. Of that he still had no doubt. On Easter day, April 24th, 387, he had "put on Christ," by receiving baptism at the hands of Ambrose, the Catholic bishop of Milan. Early Christian baptism was a formidable rite of renewal. To do justice to his imminent "twice-born" status, Augustine had, in the previous summer, vowed to adopt a life of permanent celibacy—no easy thing in a man accustomed, since he was nineteen, to sleeping, loyally if with evident pleasure, with a common-law wife. At the same time, he had condemned himself to relative poverty, by resigning from his post as an officially sponsored teacher of the much sought-after public-relations skill of rhetoric in the court-city of Milan. Resolutely chaste, if still pained by sexual memories, Augustine had settled down, in 387, at the age of thirty-three, to the shabby-genteel existence of an independent intellectual.

The lifestyle that Augustine had chosen at that time was one that had always enjoyed considerable prestige, because it was associated with the philosopher, a person engaged in a life-long search for wisdom. It had been a natural and eminently feasible choice for a man of his background. It was a relief to be out of a job. Roman society was more like

nineteenth-century Russia than our own, highly professional age: It was a society of "gentlemen," who would stoop to the time-consuming constraints of a fully professional career only when driven to it, by fear of poverty and a hunger for public office. It was more dignified to be at leisure. Augustine had made a natural choice, also, for a devout lay person, in a Catholic Church that had barely begun to develop stable monastic institutions and that had, as yet, no form of professional training whatsoever for its clergy. The undertakings of a clergyman, even a bishop, were regarded as a form of public service to the Christian community. Such service was sincerely admired, though from a safe distance, by many committed lay Christians.

The positions themselves were not identified with any superior measure of spiritual perfection. Indeed, many lay Catholics of Augustine's background (without being in any way anticlerical) sincerely feared that the run-of-the-mill duties of a priest would interfere with their own, more sheltered quest for God.

This was how Augustine had been in 387. Looking back a decade later, in 397, he saw those days as an oasis of innocence regained: "Now my mind was free from the cares that gnawed it" (9.1). But those days had passed. Augustine had returned to Africa; and the Catholic Church in Africa needed priests, not intellectuals. In 391, he was forced by the Catholics of Hippo to become their priest. He wept throughout the entire ceremony. Ordination meant the death of the life that he had chosen for himself. In 395, he became Catholic bishop of Hippo. Officially, at least, Catholicism was the sole established religion of the empire. A Catholic bishop was forced to be a public figure. He had to be an effective public speaker—which was why the congregation of Hippo was so anxious to grab Augustine for themselves. Acclaimed as leader by his flock, decried and resented by influential religious enemies, relentlessly scrutinized by all, the bishop was furthermore constrained, by his office, to act as judge in the equivalent of a small-claims court, run for the benefit of the Christian community. Its sessions kept Augustine busy until well into the afternoon, at a time when the office of the

Roman civil governor was firmly shut for the siesta. Despite these public services, the bishop, as yet, had little political clout. Augustine was frequently kept waiting in the governor's antechamber, only to find that his petitions were denied. The intellectual who remembered days given over to leisurely philosophical dialogues in a country villa within sight of the glistening Alps had been led back, by God, to face, in a faction-ridden North African seaport, all that he had feared most, for himself and in himself, when he had been a star figure in Milan: and this, the modern reader should remember, was not sexual temptation, but the far more serious temptation of *ventosa tempora,* of the "wind-filled times" of a public man, condemned to exercise power on the mercilessly lit stage of a Roman city. A chasm as sharp as that between hectic, ever-flowing time and the solid stillness of eternity now appeared to have opened between Augustine's present state and the life that he had put in order, between 387 and 391, so as to be close to his newly found God. Only the departed, it now seemed to him, could hope to stand still, to enjoy that eternity. Only they could experience the fullness of the presence of God, the taste of which, in Milan and elsewhere, had filled Augustine, for short, decisive moments, with a liberating sweetness. His mother, Monica, had passed on, to "enter into the joy of the Lord," all of ten years ago—taken by malaria in the seaport of Ostia, at the end of 387 (9.8–9.13). His dearest friend of that time, Nebridius, was now with God, "drinking his fill of wisdom, all that his thirst requires, happy without end" (9.3). And—a black hole in Augustine's life of which he draws for us only the sharp edges—his son, Adeodatus, was now dead, at a little over sixteen. All that remained of the boy was a book, "called *De Magistro* [*On the Teacher*]: it is a dialogue between him and me. . . . His great intelligence filled me with a kind of awe. But You took him early from this earth" (9.6).

This was the man—a man who had every reason to think that his past had dropped from him, leaving him with a future blocked by the mounting cares of public office—who now turned to write an utterly unexpected book. He entitled it with care: *Confessionum libri tredecim,*

"Confessions in thirteen books." It is the book that we now know as the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine. It would have struck late Roman readers as a book almost without parallel in the literature to which they were accustomed. But they would have recognized, instantly, a literary work of art.

Each book of the thirteen books of the *Confessions* was carefully constructed as a single whole. Though most probably written by hand (for the style was meticulous and the subject matter unusually intimate), it was composed so as to be read aloud. Each book was written as if it were a single speech, even if it was read through, as we would do, in silence. The chapter headings that now break up the text, like so many canal locks blocking the flow of a mighty river, would have appeared only as numbers inserted in the margins of the manuscript. Each book would have taken approximately one hour to "perform." Those who first heard it would have found themselves listening to a stunning, yet disturbingly "modern" piece of Latin verbal music. Echoes of the Christian Scriptures, most especially of the Old Testament Psalms, could be heard, winding in and out of the more accustomed classical phrases of a master of rhetoric in the old tradition—as so many haunting refrains from a still-exotic world, like the snatches of Slavonic folk tunes that play such an important role in the great Czech and Russian symphonies of the twentieth century. In the *Confessions* we listen no longer to a teacher of rhetoric, his voice trained to the rhythms of Cicero and Virgil, but to a Catholic bishop at prayer, creating a new sacred rhetoric, from a heart now filled with the Christian Bible.

It is a singular merit of this translation that Frank Sheed strove to retain the oratorical, even "oratorio-like," quality of Augustine's Latin by dictating his translation by word of mouth. And Sheed originally marked only a small number of the Biblical citations that fill the text with a strange music of their own. The standard Latin edition numbers almost a thousand such quotations.[1] For, as Catholic bishop, Augustine did not simply know "about" the Bible, or preach "on" the Bible. He

1. And the latest critical edition by James D. O'Donnell lists even more. (*Ed.*)

prayed out of it every day, using especially the book of Psalms, which he believed to be the direct, personal prayers of King David, and so the model of all Christian, as they had been of all Jewish, prayer. In a society where books were far more rare than they are today, and powers of memory were greatly prized as a result, Augustine had installed an "inner Bible" in his mind. Its phrases had, by 397, become part of his "thought flow." What he did in the *Confessions* was to break down the boundary between prayer and literature. He brought to a Latin world, used to compositions modelled on the great speeches of Cicero, the new, sweet sound of a sacred language that had long echoed in the Christian churches and that was now part of his own heart.

For this reason, the title of the book, *Confessions,* summed up a program in itself. The word did not mean what it has come to mean for a modern person. It was not the confession only of sins—and of interesting sins at that, as in the words of Lord Byron:

> As Saint Augustine in his fine *Confessions,* Which make the reader envy his transgressions. (Byron, *Don Juan* xlvii.375)

The word was taken from the Psalms. It summed up, for Augustine, the one true way in which every human being should talk to God, as this had been shown by King David at his prayers. Impassioned, insistent, even downright argumentative, the words of David were those of the one divinely inspired master of prayer known to Augustine. They provided Augustine with a model portrait of the inner world of the true servant of God, compared with which his own brilliant, but purely human prose (in his opinion) limped far behind. And for King David, to confess also meant to praise: to praise God for His being; to praise Him for His mighty acts of mercy and deliverance; to lay before Him a whole life, not only personal sins, but also those agonizing, unsolved problems that showed the extent of human ignorance and the ease with which the human mind could be misled by false solutions.

Augustine's back is turned to us throughout the *Confessions.* His attention is elsewhere. He is speaking with his God. The pronoun

tu—"Thou," "You"—occurs in 381 out of the 453 paragraphs of the *Confessions*. Praising, questioning, "confessing" sins in the modern sense, Augustine's prose works magic with us. It brings an invisible God almost unbearably close. Readers can feel that they have stumbled, unawares, on the most intimate of all scenes—a human being (themselves quite as much as Augustine) brought with joy and trembling into the presence of God, their judge and their friend. Of the thirteen books written in this manner, only the first nine are what we would call an autobiography. They take Augustine from his birth, in 354, in Thagaste—modern Souk Ahras (Algeria), in the dry plateau south of Hippo—to his baptism in Milan, in 387, and the death of his mother, Monica, at Ostia, at the end of that year. The next ten years are passed over, and, from book ten to the end, as we shall see, we are with Augustine the bishop in his study in Hippo, as he examines his present weaknesses and bends, in deep meditation, over an open Bible.

In the first nine books, the scene is clearly set. We are in Roman North Africa—in Thagaste, for a short time in Madaura (Mdaurouch, Algeria), and, later, in Carthage (1–5.8). From 383 onwards, we are in Rome (5.9–5.14), Milan (6.1–9.7), and, finally, at Ostia (9.8–9.12).

In the fourth century A.D., Roman North Africa (called, simply, in a manner calculated to confuse us moderns, "the province of Africa" and its inhabitants, Afri, "Africans") was very much part of a Mediterranean, Roman world. Italy and Africa looked inwards to each other across a short stretch of sea in a manner that they have not done since the Middle Ages, when the countries now known to us as Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia became Arabic-speaking and Muslim. Nor was this the "Africa" of modern usage. The Sahara desert, an ocean of burning sand as wide and, at the time, as trackless as the Atlantic, isolated the Mediterranean coastline of Roman North Africa almost entirely from the sub-Saharan world of West and Central Africa, from which African Americans claim their heritage.

Clinging to the coast, covering an area roughly equivalent to the inhabited parts of modern Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, Roman North

Africa was very much a world of its own. Berber farmers, from the highlands of what are now Algeria and Morocco, had brought the plateau to life. The Carthaginians had studded the coast with trading cities. Hippo was the Punic name for "port." Augustine would hear Punic, a Semitic dialect of the ancient Phoenicians, spoken by the peasantry of the region. The Romans had brought a Latin culture that flourished as in few other provinces. Bathed in a bright, southern light, "light, the queen of colours, suffusing all the things I see" (10.34), Africa was sheltered at that time from barbarian invasions and civil war. Augustine grew up in a province that had remained a little larger than life and that was, in many ways, more Roman than Rome itself. It turned out young men, reared in their local schools and finished off in style at Carthage, who were more than usually keen to show off their exuberant command of Latin culture, in the well-tried and ever-profitable careers of rhetoric and law. Rome and Milan (or at whatever temporary capital a restless court happened to reside) were their goals; and Latin, a Latin burned into their memories (as we will see in book one of the *Confessions*) by relentless grammatical drilling, followed by memorization and the dramatic reenactment, in self-composed speeches, of whole tracts of Cicero and Virgil—was the language that got them there. A classical Latin culture, geared to performance and learned in a manner as intensive as any modern drama school or musical conservatory, was as universal (and, frequently, as made to serve a cold-blooded careerism) as a modern computer language among successful young executives.

Augustine, we should have no illusion, was one of that group—all the more so as his parents, Patricius and Monica, though by no means paupers, were petty gentlefolk, who had to scrape to pay the high fees demanded by the great rhetors of Carthage (2.3). A late Roman reader of the *Confessions,* knowing the hard choices faced by young men on the make from the provinces, would have been less shocked than we are by the twists and turns of Augustine's early life. It was a Catholic family. Patricius, though originally a pagan, increasingly deferred to Monica's religious views (1.11 and 9.9). But it was not a modern Catholic

family, not even the sort of Catholic family that Augustine the bishop would have wished it to be. Even for Monica, in the 360s and 370s, a career came first. Augustine was neither baptized when young (1.11) nor married off when evidently ripe for matrimony, in his late teens (2.2). Baptism was considered too precious a sacrament to waste on a young boy with many sins ahead of him; and a wife, drawn from a small provincial town, would have been an impediment to him, once his career succeeded. The son of a good Catholic mother, Augustine was simply allowed to run wild, like a vigorous, unpruned vine (2.1).

By 372, the issue of sex, at least, was satisfactorily solved. Augustine settled down with a "concubine," that is, with the Roman equivalent of a common-law wife. Adeodatus was conceived, accidentally, it appears, in 373, and Augustine, a nineteen-year-old father, entered into a thirteen-year-long relationship that was entirely monogamous, to which he was entirely faithful, and which, by the social conventions of his time, was entirely innocent. What was much less innocent was the manner in which this relationship came apart in 386. It was sacrificed to his career, with the full support of his mother and, apparently, of Ambrose, bishop of Milan. By that time, Augustine had almost made it to the top. "I was all hot for honors, money, marriage" (6.6). In Roman society all three went together. Further promotion, maybe even a provincial governorship, was in the offing, and the way to it was a fully legitimate marriage to a Catholic heiress. The nameless mistress returned to Africa, protected, at least, by the Church, through becoming a nun:

> She . . . was torn from my side as a hindrance to my forthcoming marriage. My heart which had held her very dear was broken and wounded and shed blood. (6.15)

Augustine, the bishop (no longer a young careerist), had his own views on a man who did that sort of thing:

> if he takes a woman only for a time, until he has found another who better suits his rank and fortune; and if he marries another woman, because she is of the same class as himself, this man commits

> adultery in his heart, not to his upper-class bride, but to the woman with whom he had lived without offering marriage. (*On the Good of Marriage* 5.5)

But, in a success-driven world, people did just this the whole time. If Augustine had not eventually decided, with great difficulty, to become celibate, if he had made that advantageous match in 386, as most people took for granted that a man in his position would do, we might still know a little of him. A speech here might have come down to us, a treatise there, on grammar, even on philosophy; even an inscription might have turned up to inform the modern archaeologist of his name as a governor of some Roman province. The inscription would almost certainly, in the florid manner of the age, have praised him for his high regard for culture. A mandarin-like scholar-bureaucrat, serving a mighty empire that drew heavily on the ambitions of young provincials for whom high Latin culture was a passport to power, Aurelius Augustinus of Thagaste would have enjoyed success in a way entirely intelligible to any Roman of his time. But that man would not have been Augustine, Catholic bishop of Hippo; nor could we have guessed that he was the same man as the Augustine that we shall soon come to know in the *Confessions*.

For the *Confessions* is a very strange book. It was written to instill into those who first heard it a sense of how the most familiar landmarks in their world—education, careers, conventional sexual and marital arrangements, even current notions of religious and philosophical truth—were, in fact, profoundly unfamiliar. They were positively topsy-turvy if seen, as from an unexpected viewing point, with the quiet eyes of Augustine's God.

It is this God Whom we meet in the very first lines of the *Confessions:*

> For Thou has made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee. (1.1)

God is a looming presence. His very existence instilled in all human hearts (and, indeed, in the hearts of all His creatures, in the

hearts of the angelic hosts quite as much as in Augustine) a restless yearning, a sense of being, somehow, forever out of place. This was a sense as universal as the law of gravity, as ancient persons understood that law: that is, not as a law of attraction, so much as a desire for completeness, as fierce and as unfailing as the homing instinct of a bird; a wish to come to rest in the source of one's being. The heart fretted for God much as the flames of a fire flickered upwards, straining to rejoin the distant light of the stars, or a stone sank, with mute satisfaction, into the embrace of the earth (13.9). But why, in human beings, beings endowed with free will, did this take so long? This notion, and not the obvious facts of a career, had become, for Augustine, the true stuff of autobiography. The *Confessions* is not a book about the perceived ills of Augustine's past. It is a book about why what should have happened took so long to happen.

> Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee! For behold Thou wert within me, and I outside [but] . . . Thou didst touch me, and I have burned for Thy peace. (10.27)

Because of this, of course, the *Confessions* can never end. As Augustine saw himself in 397, and wished others to see him, the first nine books, which ended in 387, represent no more than the first, hesitant smouldering of a fire, heavily slaked down by so many conventional assumptions about what constituted success and happiness for a young man. The fire had, at long last, begun to crackle after 386. It had blazed up at the time of his baptism, in 387. Now it burned steadily, if still all too slowly, in the heart of the Catholic bishop. Only in heaven would it explode into that blaze of love, which all beings, human and angelic alike, had been made to enjoy, in the first dawn of creation. And so we leave Augustine, poring over the opening lines of the book of Genesis. It is not the way we would end an autobiography. But, along with many of his most intellectually daring Christian contemporaries, Augustine was convinced that the book of Genesis was not any book. It was an

intricately coded message, sent by God to mankind, through the unfamiliar Hebrew words of Moses (available to Augustine, of course, only in Latin translation). The account of the creation was a series of fascinating, yet authoritative verbal hints, demanding to be deciphered by patient meditation. The hints contained in the book of Genesis (when it spoke of God "resting" on the seventh day of creation) confirmed the mind's deepest yearning for some ultimate time of rest, some "seventh day" of a glorious work brought to completion, "the peace of repose, the peace of Thy Sabbath, the peace that has no evening" (13.35).

Hence each book of the *Confessions* provides a glimpse of a thoroughly familiar topic or set of topics (often topics on which Augustine, as a Catholic bishop, now had to offer an opinion for his flock) seen from an unexpected and often startlingly unconventional angle. What mattered most often was the slow growth of love. Because love was so strong a force in human beings, it was twisted with terrible ease from its true end by love of persons and things other than God. The early books of the *Confessions* are littered with accounts of failed experiments—misplaced and partial attempts to do justice to the fierce momentum towards truth and love that God had placed in every heart. For that reason, the books, together, comprise an account of a life in which Augustine the writer had been brought to see in himself, with the serenity of great distance, what God had always seen, with stern but loving eyes. Of the near-miss marriage, which had evidently had its full share of affection and loyalty before the debacle in Milan, he can now say:

> You, O God, saw me far from You . . . showing amidst much smoke some small spark of honour. (4.2)

Not surprisingly, it is the growth of Augustine's "heart" that holds the center of attention for large parts of the *Confessions;* and it has held our attention ever since. This is because the *Confessions* is a history of the schooling of the heart in love. It was a hard school. Love of anything or anybody to the exclusion of God came all too easily, but passed as easily as it came. God had taught him that by 397. Those

whom Augustine claims to have loved most intensely, in his youth, are precisely those who have no name. There was his friend in Thagaste, at whose unexpected death "My heart was black with grief" (4.4); and, of course, his concubine, after whose departure from Milan, "there was first burning and bitter grief; and after that it festered, and as the pain grew duller it only grew more hopeless" (6.15). Those who had come close enough to Augustine to shake his heart in that manner did not need a name. It was the wound that mattered—a further lesson to the heart, before it could be set right by the healing caress of God's own hands.

In his extraordinary capacity to evoke and analyze intimate and complex feelings, Augustine comes closest to our modern sensibility. But we must never forget the alien intensity of Augustine the late antique philosopher, and the trenchancy of Augustine the Catholic bishop. We meet a man from one and a half thousand years ago in these pages; and no matter how passionately, and with what skill, Augustine wished his readers to identify with him in praising God, as a man of the later Roman empire, he could not have foreseen readers as puzzlingly unlike himself as we are, in culture, geographical location, and historical experience. We must realize that we also would appear very odd indeed to the bishop of Hippo. We must extend to him the courtesy (a sincere courtesy, untouched by condescension) of not expecting him to be like us in every point.

Feeling was analyzed with such precision in the *Confessions* because it was to be trained to love properly. Only an individual with a strong commitment to service, backed by a wariness for danger, could adapt such vigorous loves to their true use—the love of God and one's neighbor. There is no suppression of emotion in the older Augustine, but a great concern that it should no longer be wasted. To take one revealing example: Augustine had loved the theater shows of Carthage, in his first days as an amorous young man about town (3.2). Not nearly as discreet as the modern cinema, the shows were great public "happenings"—celebrations of tragedy, pathos and frank sensuality—as

fully endorsed and celebrated by both the public and city officials as today's Rose Bowl parade. But Augustine the bishop now insisted that the shows had served only to turn a nascent capacity for true Christian compassion into mere sentimentality, a vehicle of vicarious grief held at a safe distance from the heart. That was what Augustine regretted and criticized about the theater. It mattered greatly to the bishop of Hippo, leader of a congregation among which piety, in the Early Christian manner, was considerably more "theatrical" than our own, where outbursts of weeping were normal and public acts of compassion to the poor were greatly valued, that the God-given gift of tears should not be wasted on mere theater.

Augustine the bishop believed this with a tenacity that only a philosopher in the tradition of Plato could command. Feelings with which we moderns identify most readily were only a small part of the deeper pain associated with the slow growth to adulthood of a thinking mind. We who, I suspect, tend to be involved in personal issues, such as sexual attraction, competitiveness, popularity, and envy, have to make some effort, as we read the *Confessions,* to share, with Augustine, the deeply impersonal passion for truth itself that runs through the book. We do not often stretch our minds to ponder, not only the existence of God (an issue to which Augustine gave little or no attention), but also the exact nature of God's relation to the physical world and the precise manner in which His eternity intersects with our existence in time. We are quite prepared (more prepared, indeed, than were our less psychologically oriented grandparents, who found Augustine's unveiling of negative qualities in childhood and of strong sexual drives in adolescence somewhat upsetting) to worry, with Augustine, as to exactly why a teenager should steal pears. But when Augustine wrestles, for pages on end and with evident intensity, with the problem of the origin of evil, we tend to grow uncomfortable. The mind sags at such thoughts. But almost all of books six and seven of the *Confessions,* and much more besides, were written to bring upon the reader just such a feeling of acute intellectual discomfort.

Augustine remained to the end of his life an unreconstructed ancient philosopher. He believed that human beings should take their lives in hand, and that no training of the self could hope to succeed if it were not grounded in reality—that is, in as true a view as was possible for humans to attain of the nature of God, of the universe, and of the human person. The philosopher was the man who lived by truth: he had put his life in order in the light of a higher reality, which the conventional wisdom of his contemporaries had evaded or blurred.

For this reason, a large part of the *Confessions* is about the emergence of that true view. We should remember the religious world in which Augustine grew up. A boy from a Catholic family, he was untempted by paganism. He believed that, somehow, no wisdom that did not carry the "name of Christ" could be entirely true (3.4). The intellectual drama of his adolescence and young manhood, from 373 onwards, consisted in repeated attempts to stretch his mind and heart to a view of God that was rooted in truth, and not in a series of facilitating fictions.

> O Truth, Truth, how inwardly did the very marrow of my soul pant for You . . . (3.6)

The religious movement known to us as Manichaeism attracted him not because it was an "exotic" religion. The Christian world was wider at that time than it is now. It stretched to the banks of the Tigris, where Mani (216–277) had received visions and had sent his followers to all Christians, to reveal to them the deeper meaning of the Gospels and of the letters of Saint Paul.[2] In the Manichean system, Jesus was the bearer of Truth to a ruined world; and the Manicheans of Carthage grappled seriously, in a series of myths of the origin of the cosmos that Augustine later found to be mere fantasy, with the agonizing and seemingly permanent tension between good and evil in each person. From book three onwards, we are made to feel the terrible, alluring power of an imagined religious universe. Augustine does not spare us the claustrophobic horror of a religious mind caught, for lack of any other way of

2. For more on this topic, see "Manichaeism," pp. 409–10. (*Ed.*)

understanding the nature of evil, in a world in which God was trapped and impotent. Only by God's failure to be present in the material world as an active force could the power of evil be explained. Evil matter weighed upon the soul in an imagined universe of vast dimensions in which God had been exiled to the very margins—a faraway, luminous being, driven out by a gigantic cosmic catastrophe.

We follow Augustine as he thought himself out of this dilemma, in Rome and Milan, like a man gasping for air. At last, in the summer of 386, he broke free. A few nameless books, written by nameless "Platonists translated from Greek into Latin," were lent to him by a nameless intellectual—"a certain man—an incredibly conceited man" (7.9). (Books that really changed Augustine's mind, like the friends whose departures had really cut into his heart, remain nameless: a source of much fruitful frustration to the modern scholar, but characteristic of the whole tone of Augustine's narrative of this crucial time.) Within a month or so, the system which we now know as the Catholic Platonism of Augustine slipped into place. No more gripping summary of it can be read than in chapter nine onwards of book seven of the *Confessions*. He had stumbled on a truth so profound, so dazzlingly obvious once realized and so universal that it had been shared by total non-Christians. The "books of the Platonists" in question may well have been a few of the *Enneads* of Plotinus, a pagan philosopher who had taught in Rome (205–270), or works of Plotinus' pupil, Porphyry (233–ca. 305), a bitter critic of Christianity. Yet Augustine never doubted that such men had seen God. They had experienced a truth that cut across all religions. But to do justice to that momentary glimpse, to make the lightning flash of the realization of the presence of God stand still was a different matter. Augustine wished to put his life in order to enjoy a God set free, at last, from the trap of evil. He came to think (instinctively in 386 and with utter clarity by 397) that those who wished to see God must face the weight of evil in themselves. This was a weight which only Christ could lift from the soul; and this could only happen through baptism into the Catholic Church.

Augustine only tells us the high points of his remarkable itinerary. It was an ancient, not a modern, person's form of a conversion to Catholicism. Seen by Augustine, at that time, it was a decision to join truth and religion, to support the metaphysical certainties according to which pagan sages believed that a wise man's life might be lived (with great religious seriousness but without the support of a specific religious institution) by a sacramental rite without which, so Christians of his age believed in an uncompromising manner, no life pleasing to God could so much as begin. This is what had led to his baptism at the hands of Ambrose, in a baptistery whose ruins have recently been found beneath the present fabric of the great Gothic cathedral of Milan.[3]

So it is with truth that we end the *Confessions*. Surprisingly enough, the books that have attracted least interest in modern readers are those on which Augustine's contemporaries would have fastened with the greatest avidity. It was, after all, important to know what Augustine, the former Manichee and star rhetor, was like, now that he had become, for good or ill, Catholic bishop of Hippo. For this reason, Augustine skipped over the uncertain years between 387 and 397. He was now a "candelabrum" set up in the Catholic Church, in an office he could not abandon. It was also comforting for many to be told the truth. Augustine was not the only well-educated convert of his age. He lived within a whole network of spiritual friends. They were men and women who, like himself, had followed unfamiliar paths and had made a new life for themselves in middle age. We know many of them. Paulinus, a Gallic aristocrat, had retired to Nola to live as a monk, along with his wife, in a continent marriage. Their friend, Sulpicius Severus, a thoroughly alienated lawyer, wrote the model biography of a Roman staff officer turned saint, the *Life of Saint Martin*, in the same years as the *Confessions*. Paulinus and Augustine corresponded. The tone of their letters already resembles that of the *Confessions*. Later ages came to regard these persons as saints, as marmoreal pillars of a new Catholic order.

3. The Baptistery of San Giovanni alle Fonte, containing the large octagonal font in which St. Augustine was baptized, was excavated in the early 1960s under the Piazza del Duomo. (*Ed.*)

At the time, however, they were peculiarly vulnerable men and women. They faced the pain of self-exile, the loss of friends, sharp criticism and misplaced adulation, theological choices of unexpected complexity, and the shame of continued temptation. Augustine showed rare charity—a charity which his magnificently ego-centered style of self-analysis often causes us to overlook—in exposing himself to them, in terms of his own weaknesses and unsolved problems, for their comfort. People such as these, middle-aged converts to a new life, frequently isolated in stolid Catholic communities that did not share their idealism, were the first readers of the *Confessions*.

In book ten, Augustine told such readers how his temptations had continued. They were muted, now, but all the more real for being seen with microscopic precision. His friend Alypius (now installed as Catholic bishop of Thagaste) had once roared with the crowd at the sight of blood spurting from the wound of a dying gladiator in Rome: "he drank deep of the savagery" (6.8). (The incident is a reminder to us somewhat queasy moderns that many ancient Christians had far heavier burdens on their consciences than sexual pleasure and found such scenes more shocking by far than promiscuity.) But why, if such passions had totally died away from the soul of the convert, did the bishop still find that his attention wandered, as he sat at his desk, so that his eye rested on a spider grappling with a fly, in the miniature amphitheater of a dusty window? It was a subdued reminder, very different from the cruel voice of the crowd, of weaknesses which would only drop from us at the end of time (10.35). The self remained forever a puzzle.

> As for the allurement of sweet scents, I am not much troubled. . . . At least so I seem to myself; perhaps I am deceived. For that darkness is lamentable in which the possibilities in me are hidden from myself: so that my mind, questioning itself upon its own powers, feels that it cannot lightly trust its own report: because what is already in it does for the most part lie hidden, unless experience brings it to light . . . (10.32)

In the ensuing books, Augustine let his friends see him doing what he had once seen Ambrose do in Milan. It was what he, now, did as a Catholic bishop.

> No one was forbidden to approach him . . . but when we came into him we often saw him reading and always to himself . . . . his eyes travelled across the page and his heart sought into the sense . . . (6.3)

The Scriptures were now Augustine's way to God. Only in them could the fleeting vision of God enjoyed by the Platonists become a reality. For God still spoke to each soul through them. The technique of commentary that we moderns label (and tend to dismiss) as "allegorical exegesis" was, for those who practiced it, a long-drawn-out, controlled ecstasy of the mind. It involved a perpetual effort to open the heart, through patient reading, so as to catch the full resonance of God's voice, which had once spoken to His servant Moses and which now spoke the same truths, if in a softer voice, to every soul. It was by such an approach that many Early Christians sought to make the Bible present to themselves, in a manner that a modern biblical scholar would not do. For Moses' account of the beginning of time was seen as a mirror set up for them by God, in which they saw reflected the creation of their own souls, through conversion, baptism, and a steady growth of love in the miraculous "new creation" that could take place in every believer. The solemn conjuring up of order from potential chaos and the flowering of a whole new world, in the heart of each Christian, that resulted from God's grace, took place according to exactly the same rhythms as had God's first act of grace—the creation of the world, as this was recounted by Moses.[4]

A commentary of this kind was not an easy task. Many exegetes had been misled. Strange though it may appear to us, there would have been many Catholic intellectuals at that time who found it more thrilling (even more titillating) to hear that Augustine was determined to

4. For more on this topic, see "Typological Exegesis," p. 413. (*Ed.*)

remain puzzled by the Holy Scriptures than to be told that he was still troubled by sexual feelings in his dreams (10.30). What mattered in both was truth.

> Let me know Thee who knowest me, *let me know Thee even as I am known* . . . For behold Thou lovest the truth, and *he that does the truth comes to the light.* (10.1)

What Augustine had discovered, by 397 A.D., was that this truth was not only an unflinching principle of reality, though it might appear as such at first encounter with it. It was his God—and what a God:

> I do love light and melody and fragrance and food and embrace when I love my God—the light and the voice and the fragrance and the food and embrace in the soul, when that light shines upon my soul which no place can contain, that voice sounds which no time can take from me, I breathe that fragrance which no wind scatters, I eat the food which is not lessened by eating, and I lie in the embrace which satiety never comes to sunder. (10.6)
>
> And I talked with You as friends talk . . . (9.1)

How could Augustine not speak the truth with such a friend?

We should have no doubt about it, Augustine's *Confessions* is an adult book. It was written to make the minds and hearts of its readers grow to its measure. What we know of its circulation and distribution at the time reinforces this impression. In a world without printing presses, the *Confessions* did not appear in a cheap format on the shelves of bookstores, in the expectation of instant sales. It was prepared and circulated in a hesitant manner that was closer to the Russian *samizdat* of the 1960s than to our image of a capitalist publishing venture. Written by hand by Augustine himself (though composed in such a way as to catch the cadences of the spoken voice), a small set of copies of the original manuscript may have been made, by hand or through dictation. Each copy would have taken over two weeks to prepare. If sold on the open market, such a book would have been ruinously expensive, a luxury item by modern standards. A professor would have had to teach fifteen

students for one month to pay for it, and a respectable artisan would have paid the equivalent of two months of wages.

More usually such books were first given to friends. Little groups of like-minded Christians would assemble—similar to the circle that Augustine had gathered around himself in Hippo, settling some in a little monastery in the bishop's garden, to whom he read aloud the letters of Paulinus when they arrived. Public readings would take place, over a series of days. What we would call an "edition" happened when Augustine indicated to his friends that they could go ahead and make their own copies of the manuscript they had received. A team of copyists and stenographers would be assembled (no small item in the budget of a bishop's palace or in the expenses of learned monks, such as Paulinus and Jerome), and further copies would be made, to serve the needs of distant friends of friends. Slowly the strange work seeped through the veins of Catholic reading groups, many of whom felt as intellectually isolated as did Augustine himself.

The *Confessions* was not an instant best-seller. One leisured gentleman in the Balearic islands, indeed, obtained a copy, and then left it unread on his shelves for eleven years: He said that he preferred the more smooth, classical prose of other Christian writers ([*New*] *Ep.* 12*.1–2). Western Catholicism would have to change profoundly, under the influence of other, more widely known books of Augustine, such as his *Explanations of the Psalms* and his *City of God,* before the *Confessions* came to be taken as the classic, representative statement of his mind.

As for Augustine, he had come close to death around 397 A.D. One reason that he wrote the *Confessions* was the down-to-earth wish of a good Catholic son to ensure that his dead parents, Monica and Patricius, would be remembered in the prayers of all who read the book (9.13). He himself wrote that he lived as one who walked *in the valley of the shadow of death* (*Letter* 38.1). But he was spared for another third of a century. As if a dam had broken in him, a torrent of words seemed to burst from the bishop of Hippo. The *Confessions* was eighty thousand words long. By the time he died, he had written another million and a

half words. *On Christian Doctrine* (begun in 396, finished in 426), *The Literal Commentary on Genesis* (401–414), and *On the Trinity* (399–419) continued explorations begun in the *Confessions*. The fall of Rome in 410 forced him to come to terms with his own classical heritage, in the *City of God* (413–427). The emergence of Pelagius the Briton, after 413, drew him into a prolonged defense of the views on human nature that he had rendered so memorable in the *Confessions*. All over the West, things happened that Augustine the young man, the successful product of a sheltered province, could not have imagined might happen. He died in 430, as Vandal war bands closed in around his city.

By that time, Augustine had written some ninety-three books. They lay on their sides in the cupboardlike shelves of his library, in 232 bound volumes. In 427, he worked through them all, in chronological order, noting where he had made mistakes and where he had changed his views. In a world of burning cities, books at least might survive, to give a clear message to future ages. The *Confessions* was number 33 on his list:

> Thirteen books of my confessions, which praise the just and good God in all my evil and good ways, and stir up towards Him the mind and feelings of men. As far as I am concerned, they had this effect on me when I wrote them, and they still do this when I read them. What others think is their own business: I know at least that many of the brethren have enjoyed them and still do. (*Retractations* 2.32)

A historian can only tell prospective readers, as candidly as possible, what they may find in this remarkable book and what, as modern persons, they should not expect to find. What the book finds in them, of course, he cannot presume to know.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

On the *Confessions* themselves we are more than fortunate: James J. O'Donnell's *Augustine: Confessions,* 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

1992) now provides a commentary that has put all other studies in the shade—a monument, rare in our times, of philological erudition combined with fine judgment. Augustine's thought is handled with unusual clarity and concision by Henry Chadwick, *Augustine,* Past Masters (Oxford University Press, 1986) and is illustrated by Mary T. Clark, *Augustine of Hippo: Select Writings,* The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1984). For Augustine's life and times, see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo. New Edition, with an Epilogue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), where the Epilogue at pp. 441–520 covers all new discoveries of works of Augustine and sums up the most recent developments in scholarship concerning Augustine, from 1967 to 2000. For details of Augustine's personal life and views on sexuality, see the same author's *Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Augustine's relations with his "concubine" have been reexamined by D. Shanzer, "Avulsa a Latere Meo: Augustine's Spare Rib," *Journal of Roman Studies* 92 (2002): 157–176. His spiritual evolution is poignantly characterized in Robert A. Markus, *Conversion and Disenchantment in Augustine's Spiritual Career* (Villanova University Press, 1989). Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early*

Theology (Oxford University Press, 2006) emphasizes the continuity of his specifically Christian Platonism. Twenty-nine hitherto unknown letters from the 410s and 420s cast fascinating new light on the old Augustine: they are translated by R. Eno, *Saint Augustine: Letters VI (1*–29*),* Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1989). A further 27 long and vivid sermons, mainly from Augustine's early years as a bishop, have now been translated by Edmund Hill, *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine, A Translation for the Twenty-First Century, Sermons III/1: Newly-Discovered Sermons* (Hyde Park, New York: City Press 1997). Both the new letters and the new sermons are discussed in Brown, *Augustine of Hippo, New Edition,* Epilogue, pp. 443–473. On Manichaeism, see S.N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism* (Manchester University Press, 1985). Further discoveries of

Manichaean letters and texts from the Dakhleh Oasis of Western Egypt show that the Manichees considered themselves to be a sect of "reforming and more 'spiritual' Christians": I. Gardner and S.N.C. Lieu, "From Narmouthis (Medinet el-Madi) to Kellis (Ismant el-Kharab)," *Journal of Roman Studies* 86 (1996): 146–169. On the "books of the Platonists," O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, sums up years of scholarly debate. Two short studies remain the best introduction to the Platonic tradition of Augustine's age, a tradition known to scholars (but not to contemporaries) as Neoplatonism: E.R. Dodds, "Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus," *Journal of Roman Studies* 50 (1960): 1–7 and H.A. Armstrong, *Saint Augustine and Christian Platonism* (Villanova University Press, 1967). Last but not least, we are fortunate to have *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 1999).

—Peter Brown

TIMELINE

A.D.

354 November 13: Aurelius Augustinus is born in Thagaste, a town in the Roman province of Numidia, Africa.

ca. 361: Becomes seriously ill and recovers.

ca. 366–369: Studies in Madaura, Africa, until lack of funding forces him to stop.

369–370: Returns to Thagaste. Augustine and "friends unfriendly" steal pears from a neighbor's tree.

370–371: Studies in Carthage. Patricius, Augustine's father, dies. Augustine takes a concubine, or mistress.

373: Reads Cicero's *Hortensius.* Augustine's illegitimate son Adeodatus is born.

374: Becomes a Manichean Hearer. Reads Aristotle's *Categories*.

375: Returns to Thagaste to teach grammar (literature), rhetoric, and dialectic.

376: Augustine's close but unnamed friend dies. Returns to Carthage to teach; two friends, Nebridius and Alypius, accompany him.

ca. 381: Writes *On the Beautiful and the Fitting.*

383: Meets the Manichean bishop Faustus of Milevis. Departs Carthage for Rome, where Alypius is already practicing law.

384: Appointed professor of rhetoric in Milan. Nebridius and Alypius accompany him.

385: Monica follows Augustine to Milan. Augustine gives panegyric of Emperor Valentinian II. Betrothed to a younger woman, he sends his mistress home. Takes a second mistress.

385–386: Embraces Academic skepticism. Later, reads the "books of the Platonists," which enables him to understand immaterial reality.

386 February: Persecution of Catholics in Milan by Empress Justina.

386 June: Miraculous discovery of the bodies of Saints Gervasius and Protasius.

386, a few days before August 23: Reads some of St. Paul's epistles. Hearing the voice in the garden, converts to the Catholic faith.

386 November–387 January 5: Prepares for baptism at a villa in Cassiciacum (north of Milan) owned by friend and patron Verecundus. Joined by friends, family, and two pupils, including Monica, Adeodatus, and Alypius. Writes *Against the Academics, On the Happy Life, On Order,* and *The Soliloquies*. Returns to Milan by January 6 and writes *On the Immortality of the Soul*.

387 April 24–5: During the Easter Vigil liturgy (which began on Holy Saturday night and ended early Easter Sunday morning), Augustine, Adeodatus, and Alypius are baptized by Ambrose in the cathedral of Milan.

387 Spring–Summer: Augustine and company travel to Ostia to take a ship back to North Africa. Augustine and Monica share a "mystical" vision as they overlook a garden. Not long after, Monica dies and is buried in Ostia.

387–388: Travels back to Rome, then Carthage. Returns to Thagaste and founds a monastic community with Adeodatus and friends. Begins writing *On Music, On Grammar, On Rhetoric, On Geometry, On Dialectic, On Arithmetic, On Philosophy* (except for *On Music,* these were never completed or are lost). Writes *On the Magnitude of the Soul* and begins writing *On Eighty-Three Varied Questions*.

388–389: Begins writing *On Free Choice of the Will*. Writes *On Genesis Against the Manichees*, *On the Ways of Life of the Catholic Church and the Manichees*.

389: Writes *On the Teacher*.

390: Writes *On True Religion*. Adeodatus and Nebridius die.

391: Ordained a priest by Valerius, bishop of Hippo Regius. Writes *On the Usefulness of Believing*.

392: Begins his first *Explanations of the Psalms*. Writes *On the Two Souls*. Begins corresponding with St. Jerome. Successfully debates the Manichean Fortunatus in Hippo on August 28 and 29, later published as *Debate with Fortunatus, a Manichee*.

393: Begins writing *On the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*.

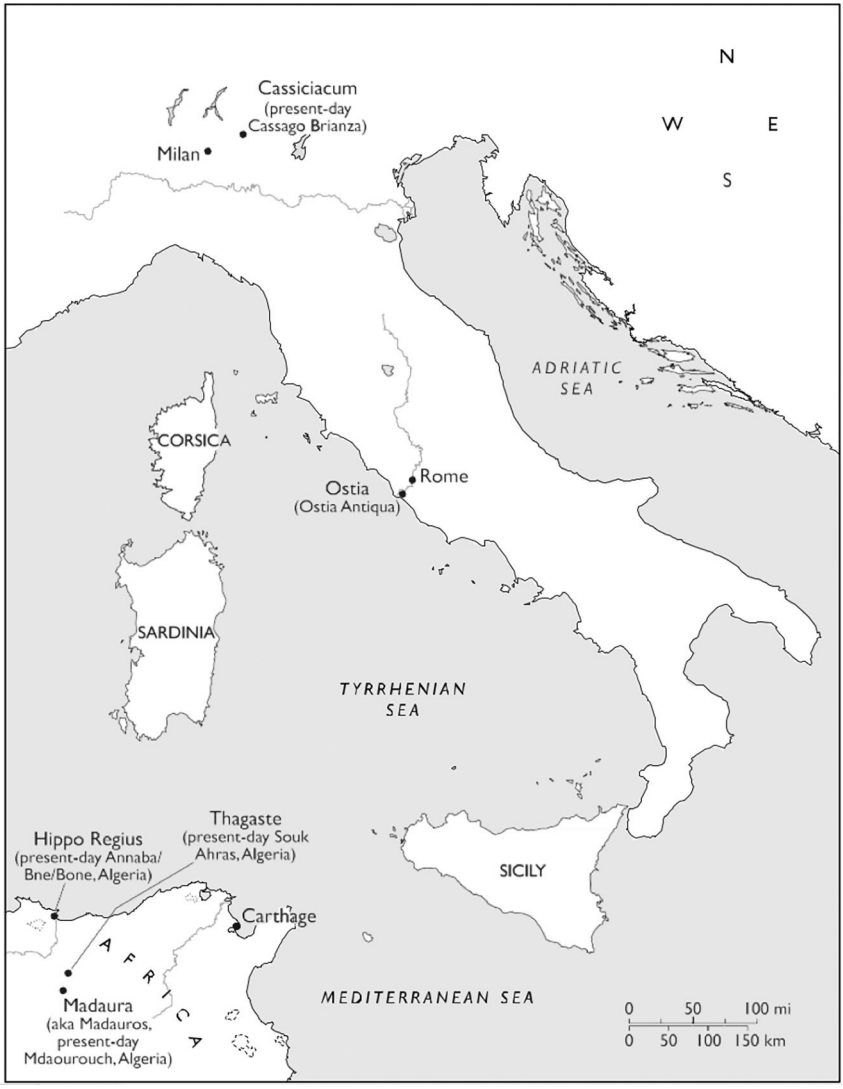
393 October 8: Delivers *On Faith and the Creed* to the bishops at the Council of Hippo.

394: Writes *Against Adimantus a Disciple of Manes* and *A Psalm against the Donatist Party*. Alypius made bishop of Thagaste.

395: Writes *On Lying*.

396: Becomes co-bishop of Hippo; later, after Valerius' death, becomes sole bishop. Writes *On Christian Struggle* and begins writing *On Christian Doctrine*.

397: St. Ambrose dies (when Augustine is informed of this is uncertain). Writes *Against the So-called Foundation Letter of the Manichees* and begins writing *Against Faustus the Manichee*. Writes the *Confessions*.



The Northern-Central Mediterranean Basin, Fourth Century A.D.

BOOK ONE

The First Fifteen Years

I–V *Prayer to God and Meditation upon God*

I Prayer, and questions about prayer
II Since God is in man, why do we pray that God should come to us?
III How is God everywhere?
IV Praise of God
V Prayer for forgiveness and for light

VI–VII *Augustine's Infancy*

VI The providence of God; did infancy follow some earlier age?
VII Where is the innocence of infancy?

VIII *Learning to Speak*

IX–XIX *Schooldays*

IX Going to school; the idleness of boys and of men
X Love of play
XI Early illness and postponement of baptism
XII Dislike of learning
XIII Useful and less useful studies
XIV Learning Latin and learning Greek
XV Prayer that he may rightly use what he has learned
XVI The moral danger of classical studies
XVII Contest in declamation
XVIII The rules of grammar and the laws of God
XIX His faults of character

XX *Reasons for Gratitude to God*

I

GREAT ART THOU, *O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power,*[1] *and of Thy wisdom there is no number.*[2] And man desires to praise Thee. He is but a tiny part of all that Thou hast created. He bears about him his mortality, the evidence of his sinfulness, and the evidence that *Thou dost resist the proud:*[3] yet this tiny part of all that Thou hast created desires to praise Thee.

Thou dost so excite him that to praise Thee is his joy. For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee. Grant me, O Lord, to know which is the soul's first movement toward Thee—to implore Thy aid or to utter its praise of Thee; and whether it must know Thee before it can implore. For it would seem clear that no one can call upon Thee without knowing Thee, for if he did he might invoke another than Thee, knowing Thee not. Yet may it be that a man must implore Thee before he can know Thee? But, *how shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? or how shall they believe without a preacher?*[4] And, *they shall praise the Lord that seek Him;*[5] for those that seek shall find;[6] and finding Him they will praise Him. Let me seek Thee, Lord, by praying Thy aid, and let me utter my prayer believing in Thee: for Thou hast been preached to us. My faith, Lord, cries to Thee, the faith that Thou hast given me, that Thou hast inbreathed in me, through the humanity of Thy Son and by the ministry of thy preacher.[7]

1. Ps. 95(96):4; cf. 144(145):3. Psalm citations are given according to the Old Latin and Vulgate Psalters, which correspond to the Greek Septuagint numeration rather than the Masoretic Hebrew manuscript. (Citations of the Authorized Version, which are based on the Hebrew numbering, follow in parentheses.) St. Augustine primarily used the Old Latin translation of the Bible, which was used prior to the promulgation of St. Jerome's Vulgate. Readers unfamiliar with Latin may wish to consult the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible for an approximation of the texts with which Augustine worked, for even though the Douay-Rheims is based on the Vulgate rather than the Old Latin, it is closer to the Old Latin than other modern English translations.

2. Ps. 146(147):5.

3. Prov. 3:34; 1 Pet. 5:5; Jas. 4:6.

4. Rom. 10:13–14.

5. Ps. 21:27(22:26).

6. See Matt. 7:7–8; Luke 11:9–10.

7. The reference is likely to St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan (339–397). Cf. Augustine, *Letter* 147.52.

II

BUT HOW CAN I CALL UNTO MY GOD, MY GOD AND LORD? FOR in calling unto Him, I am calling Him to me: and what room is there in me for my God, the God who made heaven and earth? Is there anything in me, O God, that can contain You? All heaven and earth cannot contain You for You made them, and me in them. Yet, since nothing that is could exist without You, You must in some way be in all that is: [therefore also in me, since I am]. And if You are already in me, since otherwise I should not be, why do I cry to You to enter into me? Even if I were in hell You would be there *for if I go down into hell, Thou art there also*.[8] Thus, O God, I should be nothing, utterly nothing, unless You were in me—or rather unless I were in You, *of whom and by whom and in whom are all things*.[9] So it is, Lord; so it is. Where do I call You to come to, since I am in You? Or where else are You that You can come to me? Where shall I go, beyond the bounds of heaven and earth, that God may come to me, since He has said: *Heaven and earth do I fill*.[10]

III

BUT IF YOU FILL HEAVEN AND EARTH, DO THEY CONTAIN YOU? Or do You fill them, and yet have much over since they cannot contain You? Is there some other place into which that overplus of You pours that heaven and earth cannot hold? Surely You have no need of any place to contain You since You contain all things, and fill them indeed precisely by containing them. The vessels thus filled with You do not render You any support: for though they perished utterly, You would not be spilt out. And in pouring Yourself out upon us,[11] You do not come down to us but rather elevate us to You: You are not scattered over us, but we are gathered into one by You. You fill all things: but with Your

8. Ps. 138(139):8.

9. Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6.

10. Jer. 23:24.

11. See Isa. 44:3; Zach. 12:10; Joel 2:28–9; Acts 2:17–18.

whole being? It is true that all things cannot wholly contain You: but does this mean that they contain part of You? and do they all contain the same part at the same time? or do different parts of creation contain different parts of You—greater parts or smaller according to their own magnitude? But are there in You parts greater and smaller? Or are You not in every place at once in the totality of Your being, while yet nothing contains You wholly?

IV

WHAT THEN IS MY GOD, WHAT BUT THE LORD GOD? *For who is Lord but the Lord, or who is God but our God?*[12] O Thou, the greatest and the best, mightiest, almighty, most merciful and most just, utterly hidden and utterly present, most beautiful and most strong, abiding yet mysterious, suffering no change and changing all things: never new, never old, making all things new,[13] *bringing age upon the proud and they know it not;*[14] ever in action, ever at rest, gathering all things to Thee and needing none; sustaining and fulfilling and protecting, creating and nourishing and making perfect; ever seeking though lacking nothing. Thou lovest without subjection to passion, Thou art jealous but not with fear; Thou canst know repentance but not sorrow, be angry yet unperturbed by anger. Thou canst change the works Thou hast made but Thy mind stands changeless. Thou dost find and receive back what Thou didst never lose; art never in need but dost rejoice in Thy gains, art not greedy but dost exact interest manifold.[15] Men pay Thee more than is of obligation to win return from Thee, yet who has anything that is not already Thine? Thou owest nothing yet dost pay as if in debt to Thy creature, forgivest what is owed to Thee yet dost not lose thereby. And with all this, what have I said, my God and my Life and my sacred Delight? What can anyone say when he speaks of Thee? Yet

12. Ps. 17:32(18:31).
13. Wis. 7:27.
14. Job 9:5.
15. See Matt. 25:27; Luke 19:23.

woe to them that speak not of Thee at all, since those who say most are but dumb.[16]

V

WHO SHALL GRANT ME TO REST IN THEE? BY WHOSE GIFT SHALT Thou enter into my heart and fill it so compellingly that I shall turn no more to my sins[17] but embrace Thee, my only good? What art Thou to me? Have mercy, that I may tell. What rather am I to Thee, that Thou shouldst demand my love and if I do not love Thee be angry and threaten such great woes? Surely not to love Thee is already a great woe. For Thy mercies' sake, O Lord my God, tell me what Thou art to me. *Say unto my soul, I am Thy salvation*.[18] So speak that I may hear, Lord, my heart is listening; open it that it may hear Thee say to my soul *I am Thy salvation*. Hearing that word, let me come in haste to lay hold upon Thee. Hide not Thy face from me.[19] Let me see Thy face even if I die,[20] lest I die with longing to see it.

The house of my soul is too small to receive Thee: let it be enlarged by Thee. It is all in ruins: do Thou repair it. There are things in it that must offend Thy gaze, I confess and know. But who shall cleanse it? or to what other besides Thee shall I cry out: *From my secret sins cleanse me, O Lord, and from those of others spare Thy servant?*[21] *I believe, and therefore do I speak*.[22] Lord Thou knowest, *Have I not confessed against myself my transgressions against Thee, and Thou, my God, hast forgiven the iniquities of my heart?*[23] *I contend not in judgment with Thee*,[24] who art

16. A possible reference to the Manichees, whom Augustine characterizes as insufferably loquacious (see 3.6, 5.7, "Manichaeism," pp. 409–10). Augustine may also have in mind anyone who expatiates on the divine without the benefit of genuine humility.

17. Literally, "that I should forget my evils." See Jer. 44:9.w

18. Ps. 34(35):3.

19. See Deut. 31:17, 18; 32:20; Ezek. 39:29; Mich. 3:4.

20. According to Exod. 33:20, no one may see the face of God and live.

21. Ps. 18(19):13.

22. Ps. 115(116):10.

23. Ps. 31(32):5.

24. Jer. 2:29; Job 9:3.

the truth; and I have no will to deceive myself, *lest my iniquity lie unto itself.*[25] Therefore I contend not in judgment with Thee, for *if Thou, O Lord, wilt mark iniquities, Lord, who shall endure it?*[26]

VI

YET, THOUGH I AM BUT DUST AND ASHES,[27] SUFFER ME TO UTTER my plea to Thy mercy; suffer me to speak since it is to God's mercy that I speak and not to man's scorn. From Thee too I might have scorn,[28] but Thou wilt return and have compassion on me.[29] What have I to say to Thee, God, save that I know not where I came from, when I came into this life-in-death—or should I call it death-in-life? I do not know.[30] I only know that the gifts Your mercy had provided sustained me from the first moment: not that I remember it but so I have heard from the parents of my flesh, the father from whom, and the mother in whom, You fashioned me in time.

Thus for my sustenance and my delight I had woman's milk: yet it was not my mother or my nurses who stored their breasts for me: it was Yourself, using them to give me the food of my infancy, according to Your ordinance and the riches set by You at every level of creation. It was by Your gift that I desired what You gave and no more, by Your gift that those who suckled me willed to give me what You had given them: for it was by the love implanted in them by You that they gave so willingly that milk which by Your gift flowed in the breasts. It was a good for them that I received good from them, though I received it not *from* them but only through them: since all good things are from You, O

25. Ps. 26(27):12.

26. Ps. 129(130):3. The first five chapters of book one function in part as an overture to the *Confessions*' key themes.

27. See Gen. 18:27; Job 42:6.

28. See Ps. 2:4, 36(37):13; Wis. 4:18.

29. See Jer. 12:15.

30. Though Augustine entertains several different theories about the origin of the soul throughout his life, he never endorses a specific position.

God, and from God is all my health.[31] But this I have learnt since: You have made it abundantly clear by all that I have seen You give, within me and about me. For at that time I knew how to suck, to lie quiet when I was content, to cry when I was in pain: and that was all I knew.

Later I added smiling to the things I could do, first in sleep, then awake. This again I have on the word of others, for naturally I do not remember; in any event, I believe it, for I have seen other infants do the same. And gradually I began to notice where I was, and the will grew in me to make my wants known to those who might satisfy them; but I could not, for my wants were within me and those others were outside: nor had they any faculty enabling them to enter into my mind. So I would fling my arms and legs about and utter sounds, making the few gestures in my power—these being as apt to express my wishes as I could make them: but they were not very apt.[32] And when I did not get what I wanted, either because my wishes were not clear or the things not good for me, I was in a rage—with my parents as though I had a right to their submission, with free human beings as though they had been bound to serve me; and I took my revenge in screams. That infants are like this, I have learnt from watching other infants; and that I was like it myself I have learnt more clearly from these other infants, who did not know me, than from my nurses who did.

That infancy of mine died long since, yet I still live. But there is something I would enquire of You, Lord, because Your life is for ever and in You nothing dies: for before the beginning of time, before anything that can even be called "before," You are—and You are the God and Lord of all that You have created: and before Your face stand the causes of all things transient and the changeless principles of all things that change, and the eternal reasons of all the things of unreason and of time. Therefore, O God, tell me I beg, in pity to a creature who needs pity, whether my infancy followed upon some earlier age of my life that had passed away before it. Was the time I spent in my mother's womb

31. See 2 Kings (2 Sam.) 23:5.

32. Augustine has been playing on the fact that the Latin *infans* literally means "nonspeaking."

such another age? I have heard something of [my mother's condition at] that time, and I have seen women big with child. And before that again, O God of my joy? Was I anywhere? Was I anyone? There is none to tell me—neither my parents, nor any man's experience, nor any memory of my own. Perhaps You laugh at me[33] for seeking to know of such things since it is Your will that I adore You and praise You for what I do know.

And I do truly, Lord of heaven and earth,[34] adore You and praise You for my first being and the infancy of which I have now no memory: for You have left man to learn these things about himself from others, to accept much that touches him so closely on the word of his womenfolk.

Clearly then I had being and I had life: and toward the end of my infancy I tried hard to find ways of making my feelings known to others.

Whence could such a living being come but from You, Lord? Could any man be his own maker? Or is there any other channel through which being and life should flow into us, save that we are made by You, Lord, to whom "being" and "being alive" are not two separate things, since infinite Being is identical with infinite Life?[35] For You are infinite and in You is no change, nor does today pass away in You.[36] Yet in another sense in You it does pass away, for in You are all such things—they could not even have any being that could pass away unless You upheld them in being. And because Your years do not pass, Your years are today;[37] and no matter how many our days and our fathers' days have been, they have all passed in Your undying day and from it have received such being and measures as they had: and all the days to come shall similarly pass in Your undying day and shall receive from it their being and measures. But You are still the same. All our tomorrows to the end of time You shall make to be in this Your day; and all our yesterdays from the beginning of time You have made to be in this Your day. What is it to me, if anyone does not understand this? Let him rejoice

33. See Ps. 2:4, 36(37):13; Wis. 4:18.

34. Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21.

35. Cf. 9.4; Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.6.6.15.

36. See Mal. 3:6; Jas. 1:17.

37. See Ps. 101:28(102:27); Heb. 1:12.

as he asks: *What is this?*[38] Let him rejoice, and let him prefer to find You even if he does not find this, rather than to find it and not You with it.

VII

O GOD HEAR ME! WOE UNTO MEN FOR THEIR SINS! WHEN MAN cries thus, You have mercy upon him, for You made man but not the sin in him. Who shall remind me of the sins of my infancy: *for in Thy sight there is none pure from sin, not even the infant whose life is but a day upon the earth*.[39] But who is to inform me? Perhaps this or that tiny child in whom I can see what I no longer remember of my self [if he is to teach me] what then were my sins at that age? That I wailed too fiercely for the breast? For if today I were to make as gluttonously and as clamorously, not of course for my mother's breasts, but for the food I now eat, I should be ridiculed and quite properly condemned. This means that what I did then was in fact reprehensible, although, since I could not understand words of blame, neither custom nor commonsense allowed me to be blamed. As we grow older we root out such ways and cast them from us: [which means that we hold them to be bad]—for no man engaged in removing evil would knowingly cast out what is good. Surely it was not good, even for that time of life, to scream for things that would have been thoroughly bad for me; to fly into hot rage because older persons—and free, not slaves—were not obedient to me; to strike out as hard as I could, with sheer will to hurt, at my parents and other sensible folk for not yielding to demands which could only have been granted at my peril. Thus the innocence of children is in the helplessness of their bodies rather than any quality in their minds. I have myself seen a small baby jealous; it was too young to speak, but it was livid with anger as it watched another infant at the breast.

There is nothing unusual in this. Mothers and nurses will tell you that they have their own way of curing these fits of jealousy. But

38. Exod. 16:15.

39. Job 14:4–5. Old Latin version. See note on 1.1.

at any rate it is an odd kind of innocence when a baby cannot bear that another—in great need, since upon that one food his very life depends—should share the milk that flows in such abundance. These childish tempers are borne with lightly, not because they are not faults, or only small faults; but because they will pass with the years. This is clearly so: for though we bear with them now, the same things would not be tolerated in an older person.

You, O Lord my God, gave me in my infancy life and a body; and You supplied the body with senses, fitted it with limbs, gave it shape and proportion, and for its general well-being and security implanted in it all the instincts of a living being. And You, Lord, doer of all these things, command me to praise You in them, *to confess unto Thee and sing to Thy name, O most high;*[40] because You are God, omnipotent and good, even if You had done these things alone: for none other can do them save You, the One, who are the exemplar of all things, the All-Beautiful, who form and set in order all things by Your law.[41]

Thus, Lord, I do not remember living this age of my infancy; I must take the word of others about it and can only conjecture how I spent it—even if with a fair amount of certainty—from watching others now in the same stage. I am loth, indeed, to count it as part of the life I live in this world. For it is buried in the darkness of the forgotten as completely as the period earlier still that I spent in my mother's womb. But if *I was conceived in iniquity, and in sin my mother nourished me in the womb,*[42] then where, my God, where, O Lord, where or when was I, Your servant, innocent? But I pass now from that time. For what concern have I now with a time of which I can recall no trace?

40. Ps. 91:2(92:1).

41. The depiction of God as an exemplar (*modus*) who forms all things (*forma*) and sets them in order (*ordo*) is a likely reference to the three Persons of the Trinity. Trinitarian allusions in the *Confessions* are inconspicuous but pervasive.

42. Ps. 50:7(51:5).

VIII

From infancy I came to boyhood, or rather it came to me, taking the place of infancy.[43] Yet infancy did not go: for where was it to go to? Simply it was no longer there. For now I was not an infant, without speech, but a boy, speaking. This I remember; and I have since discovered by observation how I learned to speak. I did not learn by elders teaching me words in any systematic way, as I was soon after taught to read and write. But of my own motion, using the mind which You, my God, gave me, I strove with cries and various sounds and much moving of my limbs to utter the feelings of my heart—all this in order to get my own way. Now I did not always manage to express the right meanings to the right people. So I began to reflect. [I observed that] my elders would make some particular sound, and as they made it would point at or move towards some particular thing: and from this I came to realise that the thing was called by the sound they made when they wished to draw my attention to it. That they intended this was clear from the motions of their body, by a kind of natural language common to all races which consists in facial expressions, glances of the eye, gestures, and the tones by which the voice expresses the mind's state—for example whether things are to be sought, kept, thrown away, or avoided. So, as I heard the same words again and again properly used in different phrases, I came gradually to grasp what things they signified; and forcing my mouth to the same sounds, I began to use them to express my own wishes. Thus I learnt to convey what I meant to those about me; and so took another long step along the stormy way of human life in society, while I was still subject to the authority of my parents and at the beck and call of my elders.

43. In books one through seven, Augustine narrates his earlier development vis-à-vis four of the so-called six ages of man: infancy, boyhood, adolescence, youth, young manhood, and old age. See 2.1, 6.1, 7.1.

IX

O GOD, MY GOD, WHAT EMPTINESS AND MOCKERIES DID I NOW experience:[44] for it was impressed upon me as right and proper in a boy to obey those who taught me, that I might get on in the world and excel in the handling of words to gain honour among men and deceitful riches. I, poor wretch, could not see the use of the things I was sent to school to learn; but if I proved idle in learning, I was soundly beaten. For this procedure seemed wise to our ancestors: and many, passing the same way in days past, had built a sorrowful road by which we too must go, with multiplication of grief and toil upon the sons of Adam.

Yet, Lord, I observed men praying to You: and I learnt to do likewise, thinking of You (to the best of my understanding) as some great being who, though unseen, could hear and help me. As a boy I fell into the way of calling upon You, my Help and my Refuge;[45] and in those prayers I broke the strings of my tongue—praying to You, small as I was but with no small energy, that I might not be beaten at school. And when You did not hear me (*not as giving me over to folly*[46]), my elders and even my parents, who certainly wished me no harm, treated my stripes as a huge joke, which they were very far from being to me.

Surely, Lord, there is no one so steeled in mind or cleaving to You so close—or even so insensitive, for that might have the same effect—as to make light of the racks and hooks and other torture instruments (from which in all lands men pray so fervently to be saved) while truly loving those who are in such bitter fear of them. Yet my parents seemed to be amused at the torments inflicted upon me as a boy by my masters, though I was no less afraid of my punishments or zealous in my prayers to You for deliverance. But in spite of my terrors I still did wrong, by writing or reading or studying less than my set tasks. It was not, Lord, that I lacked mind or memory, for You had given me as much of these as my age required; but the one thing I revelled in was play; and for this I

44. Terence, *Adelphoe* 867.

45. See Ps. 93(94):22; 17:13(18:2).

46. Ps. 21:3(22:2).

was punished by men who after all were doing exactly the same things themselves. But the idling of men is called business;[47] the idling of boys, though exactly like, is punished by those same men: and no one pities either boys or men. Perhaps an unbiased observer would hold that I was rightly punished as a boy for playing with a ball: because this hindered my progress in studies—studies which would give me the opportunity as a man to play at things more degraded. And what difference was there between me and the master who flogged me? For if on some trifling point he had the worst of the argument with some fellow-master, he was more torn with angry vanity than I when I was beaten in a game of ball.

X

YET IN ACTING AGAINST THE COMMANDS OF MY PARENTS AND schoolmasters, I did wrong, O Lord my God, Creator and Ruler of all natural things, but of sin not Creator but Ruler only: for I might later have made good use of those lessons that they wanted me to learn, whatever may have been their motive in wanting it. I disobeyed, not because I had chosen better, but through sheer love of play: I loved the vanity of victory, and I loved too to have my ears tickled with the fictions of the theatre which set them to itching ever more burningly: and in my eyes a similar curiosity burned increasingly for the games and shows of my elders.[48] Yet those who put on such shows are held in high esteem. And most people would be delighted to have their sons grow up to give similar shows in their turn—and meanwhile fully concur in the beatings those same sons get if these shows hinder study: for study is the way to the prosperity necessary for giving them! Look down in mercy,

47. Cf. Lactantius' citation of Seneca in *Institutiones Divinae* 2.4.14.

48. Augustine's vain love of play, victory, and titillation echo the lust of the flesh, pride of life, and lust of the eyes in 1 John 2:16 (see 10.30). Augustine implicitly links these three types of vice to the Platonic tripartite division of the soul—physical appetites, spiritedness, and reason—in their disordered condition (see "Tripartite Soul," pp. 412-13). Augustine is thus indicating here the comprehensive extent to which his boyhood was anything but innocent.

The theatrical fictions, games, and shows referenced here include circuses (chariot-racing), games (gladiator fights), and theatrical plays (in Late Antiquity, usually lewd in character). These spectacles were the object of both Christian and pagan criticism. See 3.2, 6.8.

Lord, upon such things; and set us free who now beseech Thee: and not only us, but those also who have never besought Thee—that they may turn to Thee and be made free.

XI

EVEN AS A BOY, OF COURSE, I HAD HEARD OF AN ETERNAL LIFE promised because the Lord our God had come down in His humility upon our pride. And I was signed with the sign of His cross and seasoned with His salt as I came new from the womb of my mother,[49] who had great trust in You. When I was still a child, I fell gravely ill with some abdominal trouble and was close to death. You saw, Lord—for You were even then guarding me—with what earnest faith I besought the piety of my own mother, and of the Church which is the mother of us all, that I might receive the baptism of Your Christ, my Lord and my God. The mother of my flesh was in heavy anxiety, since with a heart chaste in Your faith she was ever in deep travail for my eternal salvation, and would have proceeded without delay to have me consecrated and washed clean by the Sacrament of salvation, while I confessed You, Lord Jesus, unto the remission of sins: but I made a sudden recovery. This caused my baptismal cleansing to be postponed: for it was argued that if I lived I should inevitably fall again into the filth of sin: and after baptism the guilt of sin's defilement would be in itself graver and put the soul in graver peril. I then believed, as did my mother and all our household, except my father: yet he did not prevail over the hold my mother's piety had upon me, to lead me not to believe in Christ because he did not as yet. She used all her endeavour, O God, that I should hold You for my father rather than him: and in this with Your aid she overcame her husband, in her greater virtue serving him because in serving him she served Your command likewise.

49. In the Latin West, initiation into the catechumenate was signified by receiving the sign of the cross on one's forehead and salt on one's lips. These rituals remained a part of the Roman rite of baptism until they were made optional in 1969. See "Catechumenate," p. 405.

I ask You, my God—for I would know, if it is Your will to tell me— to what end was my baptism deferred? was it for my good that I was left to sin with a loose rein, or was the rein not truly loosed? Why do we constantly hear such phrases as: "Let him alone, let him keep on with what he is doing, he is not yet baptised"? In the matter of the body's health we do not say: "Let him be wounded worse, he is not yet cured." It would have been far better had I been made whole at once and had so used my own efforts and the aid of my friends that the health brought to my soul should be safe in Your keeping, by whose gift it was given me. Far better, I say. But it was obvious that many mighty waves of temptation threatened to break upon me as I grew out of boyhood. So my mother knew: and she thought it better to let them break upon the clay before it was moulded to Christ's image rather than let the clay be moulded and then assailed.[50]

XII

BUT TO CONTINUE WITH MY BOYHOOD, WHICH WAS IN LESS peril of sin than my adolescence. I disliked learning and hated to be forced to it. But I was forced to it, so that good was done to me though it was not my doing. Short of being driven to it, I certainly would not have learned. But no one does well against his will, even if the thing he does is a good thing to do. Nor did those who forced me do well: it was by You, O God, that well was done. Those others had no deeper vision of the use to which I might put all they forced me to learn, but to sate the insatiable desire of man for wealth that is but penury and glory that is but shame. But You, Lord, *by whom the very hairs of our head are numbered*,[51] used for my good the error of those who urged me to study; but my own error, in that I had no will to learn, you used for my punishment—a punishment richly deserved by one so small a boy and so great

50. As Augustine elaborates later, the sea represents the bitterness of fallen human society, clay/earth our frail and unmolded natures, and Christ's image/form that into which the grace of baptism reshapes us (13.12 and 13.17).

51. Matt. 10:30.

a sinner. Thus, You brought good for me out of those who did ill, and justly punished me for the ill I did myself. So You have ordained and so it is: that every disorder of the soul is its own punishment.

XIII

TO THIS DAY I DO NOT QUITE SEE WHY I SO HATED THE GREEK tongue that I was made to learn as a small boy. For I really liked Latin—not the rudiments that we got from our first teachers but the literature that we came to be taught later. For the rudiments—reading and writing and figuring—I found as hard and hateful as Greek. Yet this too could come only from sin and the vanity of life, because *I was flesh, and a wind that goes away and returns not*.[52] For those first lessons were the surer. I acquired the power I still have to read what I find written and to write what I want to express; whereas in the studies that came later I was forced to memorise the wanderings of Aeneas—whoever *he* was—while forgetting my own wanderings; and to weep for the death of Dido who killed herself for love, while bearing dry-eyed my own pitiful state, in that among these studies I was becoming dead to You, O God, my Life.

Nothing could be more pitiful than a pitiable creature who does not see to pity himself, and weeps for the death that Dido suffered through love of Aeneas and not for the death he suffers himself through not loving You, O God, Light of my heart, Bread of my soul, Power wedded to my mind and the depths of my thought.[53] I did not love You and I went away from You in fornication: and all around me in my fornication echoed applauding cries, *Well done! Well done!*[54] *For the friendship*

52. Ps. 77(78):39.

53. Literally, "power wedding together my mind and the bosom of my thought." For the use of "bosom" as a metaphor for thought see Prov. 6:27; *Confessions* 9.2 (translated as "depths"), 10.8 (translated as "caverns"), 10.8 (translated as "recess").

54. Latin translations of the Bible retained the Greek expression *Euge! Euge!* In the Old Testament, it is used as an expression of derision, sarcasm, or worldly acclaim. See Ps. 34(35):21, 25, 39:16(40:15), 69:4(70:3); Ezek. 25:3, 26:2, 36:2.

of this world is fornication against Thee:[55] and the world cries *Well done! Well done!* so loudly that one is ashamed of unmanliness not to do it. And for this I did not grieve; but I grieved for Dido, slain as she sought by the sword an end to her woe,[56] while I too followed after the lowest of Your creatures, forsaking You, earth going unto earth. And if I were kept from reading, I grieved at not reading the tales that caused me such grief. This sort of folly is held nobler and richer than the studies by which we learn to read and write!

But now let my God cry aloud in my soul, and let Your truth assure me that it is not so: the earlier study is the better. I would more willingly forget the wanderings of Aeneas and all such things than how to write and read. Over the entrance of these grammar schools hangs a curtain: but this should be seen not as lending honour to the mysteries, but as a cloak to the errors taught within.[57] Let not those masters—who have now lost their terrors for me—cry out against me, because I confess to You, my God, the desire of my soul, and find soul's rest in blaming my evil ways that I may love Your holy ways. Let not the buyers or sellers of book-learning cry out against me. If I ask them whether it is true, as the poet says, that Aeneas ever went to Carthage, the more ignorant will have to answer that they do not know, the more scholarly that he certainly did not. But if I ask with what letters the name Aeneas is spelt, all whose schooling has gone so far will answer correctly, according to the convention men have agreed upon for the use of letters. Or again, were I to ask which loss would be more damaging to human life—the loss from men's memory of reading and writing or the loss of these poetic imaginings—there can be no question what anyone would answer who had not lost his own memory. Therefore as a boy I did wrong in liking the empty studies more than the useful—or rather in loving the empty and

55. Jas. 4:4.

56. Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.456–57.

57. The "grammar schools" that Augustine attended held rather advanced courses in literature and composition in addition to basic grammar. Like other buildings in the Roman Empire, these schools often had veils or curtains over the entrance as a sign of rank and dignity: the more the curtains, the greater the honor (see Sermon 51.4.5). Augustine's language here may also suggest a suspicious, quasi-religious component to his teachers' behavior.

hating the useful. For one and one make two, two and two make four, I found a loathsome refrain; but such empty unrealities as the Wooden Horse with its armed men, and Troy on fire, and Creusa's Ghost,[58] were sheer delight.

XIV

But why did I hate Greek literature, which is filled with similar tales? Homer is as skilled in the invention of such things, and has the same charm and the same unreality: yet as a boy I could not abide him. I suppose that Virgil affects Greek boys when they are compelled to learn him as Homer affected me. For the drudgery of learning a foreign language sprinkled bitterness over all the sweetness of the Greek tales. I did not know a word of the language: and I was driven with threats and savage punishments to learn. There had been a time of infancy when I knew no Latin either. Yet I learnt it without threat or punishment merely by keeping my eyes and ears open, amidst the flatterings of nurses and the jesting and pleased laughter of elders leading me on. I learned it without the painful pressure of compulsion, by the sole pressure of my own desire to express what was in my mind, which would have been impossible unless I had learnt words: and I learnt them not through people teaching me but simply through people speaking: to whom I was striving to utter my own feelings. All this goes to prove that free curiosity is of more value in learning than harsh discipline. But by Your ordinance, O God, discipline must control the free play of curiosity—for Your ordinance ranges from the master's cane to the torments suffered by the martyrs, and works that mingling of bitter with sweet which brings us back to You from the poison of pleasure that first drew us away from You.

58. Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.772.

XV

Hear my prayer, O Lord;[59] let not my soul fail under Thy discipline, nor let me fail in uttering to Thee Thy mercies: by them Thou hast drawn me out of all my most evil ways,[60] that I should find more delight in Thee than in all the temptations I once ran after, and should love Thee more intensely, and lay hold upon Thy hand with all my heart's strength, and be delivered from every temptation unto the end.[61]

O Lord, my King and my God:[62] may whatever of value I learnt as a boy be used for Thy service, and what I now do in speaking and writing and reading and figuring. When I was learning vain things, Thou didst discipline me: and the sin of the delight I had in those vain things, Thou hast forgiven me. Among those studies, I learnt many a useful word, but these might have been learnt equally well in studies not vain: and that surely is the safe way for the young to tread.

XVI

But [in this matter of classical studies] how woeful are you, O torrent of established custom. Who can resist you or when will you run dry? How long will you continue to roll the sons of Eve into that vast and terrible sea in which even those who mount the cross scarcely escape drowning?[63] In you I read of Jove, both as the god of thunder and as an adulterer. How could he be both? But so the story goes: and so sham thunder is made to legitimise and play pander to real adultery: yet these robed and gowned masters[64] are furious when Cicero, a man trained in their own school, protests: "Homer invented these stories, ascribing things human

59. Ps. 60:2(61:1); cf. Est. 13:17.

60. See 4 Kings 17:13; 2 Chron. 7:14; Bar. 2:8; Ezek. 33:11.

61. Ps. 15:10(16:11), 37:7(38:6); 1 Cor. 1:8.

62. Ps. 5:3(2), 43:5(44:4), 83:4(84:3).

63. Literally, those who "climb up on the wood." The wood alludes to the cross of Christ but it may also refer to Noah's ark (see Wis. 14:7).

64. Literally, "hooded teachers," a possible reference to the custom of some orators who wore their hoods when delivering speeches.

to the gods: would that he had brought down things divine to us."[65] It would have been even truer to say that Homer invented them, attributing divinity to the vilest of men, with the result that crimes are held not to be crimes, and those who do commit them are regarded as acting not like abandoned men but like gods from Olympus.

And still, O torrent from hell, the sons of men pay fees to be hurled into you in order that they may learn such things. And there is great interest when this sort of teaching is carried on publicly in the forum under the very eye of laws allotting salaries to the masters over and above the fees paid by the pupils.[66] And all the while the torrent lashes its rocks and roars: "By these studies words are learned and the eloquence acquired which is so necessary for persuasion and exposition." Apparently the argument is that we should not have come to know words like "golden," "shower," "lap," "deceive," "the temple of heaven," and others of the sort, unless Terence had brought a vicious youth upon the stage, setting up Jove as a model for his own fornication, and all the while gazing upon a picture on the wall of Jove deceiving Danae by descending into her lap as a golden shower. Note how the youth incites himself to lust as though commanded from heaven:

> And what a God! [Jove] who shakes the temples of heaven with the roar of his thunder!
>
> And I, a mere mortal, should I not do what he does? I have done it, and with joy.[67]

The words are not learned one whit more easily because of all this vileness: but the vileness is committed all the more boldly because of the words. I make no accusation against the words, which in themselves are choice and precious vessels, but against the wine of error that is in them, and is poured out to us by teachers already drunken with it. And we, unless we drank, were flogged and had no right of appeal to any

65. Cicero, *Disputationes Tusculanae* 1.26.65. For Cicero, see note on 3.4.

66. The rates of the fees that pupils were obliged to pay their teachers—fees that supplemented a teacher's base salary from the government—were inscribed in public places.

67. Terence, *Eunuch* 583–91.

sober judge. And I, my God, in whose sight I can now recall these things without peril, learnt them willingly, and sinfully delighted in them, and so was regarded as a youth of much promise.

XVII

Give me leave, O my God, to speak of my mind, Your gift, and of the follies in which I wasted it. It chanced that a task was set me, a task which I did not like but had to do. There was the promise of glory if I won, the fear of ignominy, and a flogging as well, if I lost. It was to declaim the words uttered by Juno in her rage and grief when she could not keep the Trojan prince from coming to Italy.[68] I had learnt that Juno had never said these words, but we were compelled to err in the footsteps of the poet who had invented them: and it was our duty to paraphrase in prose what he had said in verse. In this exercise that boy won most applause in whom the passions of grief and rage were expressed most powerfully and in the language most adequate to the majesty of the personage represented.

What could all this mean to me, O my true Life, my God? Why was there more applause for the performance I gave than for so many classmates of my own age? Was not the whole business so much smoke and wind? Surely some other matter could have been found to exercise mind and tongue. Thy praises, Lord, Thy praises through Thy Scriptures, might have upheld the fresh young shoot of my heart, so that it might not have been whirled away by empty trifles, defiled, a prey to the spirits of the air. For there is more than one way of sacrificing to the fallen angels.[69]

68. Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.37–49.

69. The passage can also be translated, "for there is more than one way of *being sacrificed* to the fallen angels." Augustine's chilling image is adapted from the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13.4, Mark 4:4, Luke 8:5) and, to a lesser extent, Virgil's *Georgics* (2.60). The Patristic critique of Greco-Roman religion included the contention that its gods were in fact demons or fallen angels (see *City of God* 2.24).

XVIII

YET IT WAS NO WONDER THAT I FELL AWAY INTO VANITY AND went so far from Thee, my God, seeing that men were held up as models for my imitation who were covered with shame if, in relating some act of theirs in no way evil, they fell into some barbarism or grammatical solecism: yet were praised, and delighted to be praised, when they told of their lusts, provided they did so in correct words correctly arranged. All these things Thou seest, O Lord, and art silent: for Thou art patient and plenteous in mercy and truth.[70] But wilt Thou always stay silent?[71] Even now Thou dost draw out of this pit of horror[72] the soul that seeks Thee and thirsts for Thy joys, *the heart that says to Thee I have sought Thy face: Thy face, Lord, will I still seek:*[73] for to be darkened in heart is to be far from Thy face. It is not on our feet or by movement in space that we go from Thee or return to Thee: Thy prodigal son did not charter horses or chariots or ships, or fly with wings or journey on his two feet to that far country where he wasted in luxurious living what Thou as a loving father hadst given him on his departure—loving when Thou didst give, more loving still to Thy son when he returned, all poor and stripped.[74] To be lustful, that is darkened, in heart, is to be far from Thy face.

Behold, O Lord my God, and, seeing, see patiently, with what anxious care the sons of men observe the rules of letters and syllables taught by the speakers of our tongue before us, while they neglect the eternal rules of everlasting salvation taught by You. The learner or teacher of the established rules of pronunciation is held more contemptible if he drops an "h" and speaks of a 'uman being—thus breaking a law of language—than if he hates a human being—thus breaking a law of God. It is strange that we should not realise that no enemy could be more

70. See Ps. 102(103):8, 144(145):8, 85(86):15.

71. See Isa. 64:12, 42:14.

72. See Ps. 85(86):13. The pit of horror, or *immanissimum profundum*, may also be a reference to the vast and terrifying sea mentioned in 1.16. See Ps. 106(107):24.

73. Ps. 26(27):8.

74. Augustine infuses the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) with images from Plotinus' *Enneads* (1.6.8.29) and classical mythology.

dangerous to us than the hatred with which we hate him, and that by our efforts against him we do less damage to our enemy than is wrought in our own heart. Obviously the knowledge of letters is not more deeply engraved in us than the law of conscience[75] against doing to another what one would not bear if done to oneself.[76] How hidden art Thou, O God the only great, dwelling in silence in the high places,[77] and by Thy untiring law sending blindness as the punishment for unlawful lusts. A man seeking the fame of eloquence—before a judge who is also a man, with a multitude of men standing about—inveighs against his adversary with inhuman hatred. Such a man will be most vigilantly on guard lest by a slip of the tongue he drop an "h" and murder the word "human": yet worries not at all that by the fury of his mind he may murder a real human.

XIX

THESE WERE THE WAYS OF THE WORLD UPON WHOSE THRESHOLD I stood as a boy, and such was the arena for which I was training—more concerned to avoid committing a grammatical error than to be void of envy in case I did commit one and another did not. This I say and confess to Thee, O my God: and in this I was praised by those whom my one idea of success was to please. I did not see the whirl of vileness into which I had been cast away from Thy eyes:[78] for what was more unclean than I, seeing that I did not win the approval even of my own kind: I told endless lies to my tutors, my masters and my parents: all for the love of games, the craving for stage shows, and a restlessness to do what I saw done in these shows.

I stole from my parents' cellar and table, sometimes because I was gluttonous myself, sometimes to have something to give other boys

75. Rom. 2:15.

76. Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31.

77. A common biblical expression. See Ps. 148(149):1; Ecclus.(Sir.) 1:5, 22:21, 43:10; Isa. 33:16; Mark 11:10; Luke 19:38; Heb. 1:3.

78. See Ps. 30:23(31:22).

in exchange for implements of play which they were prepared to sell although they loved them as much as I. Even in games, when I was clearly outplayed I tried to win by cheating, from the vain desire for first place. At the same time I was indignant and argued furiously when I caught anyone doing the very things that I had done to others. When I was caught myself, I would fly into a rage rather than give way.

Is this boyhood innocence? It is not, Lord. I cry Thy mercy, O my God. Yet as we leave behind tutors and masters and nuts and balls and birds and come to deal with prefects and kings and the getting of gold and estates and slaves, these are the qualities which pass on with us, one stage of life taking the place of another as the greater punishments of the law take the place of the schoolmaster's cane. Therefore, O God our King, when you said, *of such is the kingdom of heaven*,[79] it could only have been humility as symbolised by the low stature of childhood that you were commending.

XX

YET, LORD, I SHOULD HAVE OWED THANKS TO YOU, MY GOD and the most excellent Creator and Ruler of the universe, even if it had been Your will that I should not live beyond boyhood. For even then I was; I lived: I felt: even so early I had an instinct for the care of my own being, a trace in me of that most profound Unity whence my being was derived;[80] in my interior sense I kept guard over the integrity of my outward sense perception, and in my small thoughts upon small matters I had come to delight in the truth. I hated to be wrong, had a vigorous memory, was well trained in speech, delighted in friendship, shunned pain, meanness and ignorance. In so small a creature was not all this admirable and reason for praise? Yet all these were the gifts of my God, for I did not give them to myself. All these were good and all these were I. Therefore He who made me is good and He is my Good: and in Him I

79. Matt. 19:14.

80. A faint vestige of the Triune God, in whose image man has been made, may be traced in the triad of Augustine's existing, living, and feeling.

shall exult for all the good qualities that even as a boy I had. But in this lay my sin: that I sought pleasure, nobility, and truth not in God but in the beings He had created, myself and others. Thus I fell into sorrow and confusion and error. Thanks be to Thee, my Joy and my Glory and my Hope and my God: thanks be to Thee for Thy gifts:[81] but do Thou preserve them in me. Thus Thou wilt preserve me, and the things Thou hast given me shall increase and be made perfect, and I shall be with Thee: because even that I exist is Thy gift.

81. The desires for pleasure, nobility, and truth correspond to the three parts of the soul (see "Tripartite Soul," pp. 412-13). The passage is significant because it outlines Augustine's theology of desire. The appetite for physical pleasure is ultimately a groaning for happiness in God, and thus the attempt to satisfy it with created goods instead of the Creator ends in sorrow rather than Joy (used here as an epithet for God Himself). The same is true both with the desire for nobility—which when pursued outside of God results in confusion and humiliation rather than Glory—and with the desire for truth, which when misdirected leads to error rather than Hope or confidence (*fiducia*), the fruit of faith. Put differently, even our carnal longings are restless until they rest in God (see 1.1).