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EDITED BY  
ELEONORE STUMP  
*St. Louis University*  
AND  
NORMAN KRETZMANN



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# I

JAMES J. O'DONNELL

## Augustine: his time and lives

Our knowledge of Augustine's world has transformed itself in the last generation. Ever since the work of Gibbon, at least, the fourth and fifth centuries had been marginalized in the historical imagination even of specialists. Gibbon described the decline of the Roman empire as "the triumph of barbarism and religion" (in the form of Christianity). This was too good a story to disregard, and the evidence was overwhelming and unambiguous.

But from the 1960s onward, the concept of "late antiquity," born earlier in the century, was used to transform our grasp of the period. French Catholics, Italian Marxists, and German philologists all had a part to play, but late antiquity's most persuasive apologist and the real shaper of the revolution is the liminal figure of Peter Brown – an Irish-born Protestant on whom, as an infant, the emperor Haile Selassie laid ecclesiastically potent hands claiming descent from Solomon. Brown made his mark as Augustine's biographer and leads, thirty years later, the continuing reimagining of Augustine's age. The diversity of that world and the ambiguity of its transformations are painted in richer and richer colors, and with each few years new tracts of space and time are infused with fresh vitality. The barbarians and the Christians of the age now appear to have had more in common with each other and with their fellow Romans than we once thought, and the many cultures of that Roman world now stand out in greater and more differentiated relief.

Old conventionalisms about Augustine are quite true. He was born in the reign of Constantius II, in a Roman world flea-bitten at its borders by outside armies but fundamentally secure, and he died in the reign of Theodosius II in a part of the empire that no longer recognized Constantinople's sway, in a city surrounded by besieging armies that all agreed were "barbarian" in origin and that would capture his city and his province shortly after his death. In the world of his youth, it was still easy to imagine a world without Christianity; in the world of his old age, it was beginning to be impossible to do so. Augustine continued to live in the imaginary world of his youth and never fully realized the implications of a Christianized society. He lived most of his life as a member of one religious

minority or another, and yet his writings have had wide influence among his followers in ages when they were in an unchallenged position of dominance.

Augustine's physical world was far smaller than the whole of the Roman empire. Apart from a few years in Italy in the 380s, he lived his life chiefly in three places: Tagaste, Hippo, and Carthage. His trips elsewhere in north Africa were few and limited. Though his words traveled widely, his spatial limitations are important to remember, not least because they kept him chiefly in the more urbanized and coastal north of Africa, away from the high plains and the frontier, away from the districts where a rougher form of life and perhaps a more native form of religion held sway.<sup>1</sup>

Augustine himself is a figure whose life we know too well.<sup>2</sup> He has offered us such a variety of materials, of such high quality, for reconstructing his life that it would be almost impossible not to use them, gratefully, to good advantage. But if we would use them, it is equally almost impossible not to use them to tell the story in the way he would have us tell it – and therein lies the danger.

The evidence of the danger lies in the biographies of Augustine, on large canvas or small, that accumulate in our libraries. In the case of Brown, fully 40% of the book is taken up with the narrative of Augustine's life before his ordination as bishop – before he achieved the position that made it possible for him to exercise a significant influence in his lifetime and after. Narratives of briefer compass regularly find it impossible to restrain the narrative of early life into even so little as 40% of their bulk.

The reason for this preoccupation is famously not far to seek. The *Confessions* are not, indeed, an autobiography in any useful sense of the word, as those of us who write on them regularly aver. But they contain autobiographical narrative and vignettes whose power no recounter of Augustine's life can resist. Consider the episode at the end of *Conf.* 2 in which Augustine tells how he and a few youthful friends stole pears from a neighbor's tree and threw them to the pigs. An hour at most, ten minutes more likely, in the life of a man who lived near half a million waking hours, but the episode is unavoidable, even for those (the majority of readers today) who are baffled or disapproving at finding the episode at all or at finding it made much of.

The *Confessions* are the chief instrument by which Augustine shaped the narratives of his life. The achievement of that self-presentation lies in the way the narrative is made to revolve around a defining moment of conversion, localized to a specific place and time and dramatized in a particular way. From infancy to age 18 and again from age 27 until his death, any reasonable person who knew Augustine and was asked his religious affiliation would have said "Christian." For the intervening nine years, many would still have said the same, while others would have named a group, the Manichees, that non-Christians would have distinguished from Christianity at large only with difficulty. And yet Augustine has

persuaded us that the religious drama of the years 386–387, when he decided to accept Christian baptism at the hand of Ambrose, is the interpretive key to his whole life. The issue has generally been not whether he is right in the frame he gives his narrative, but rather whether we have adequately tested his narrative in detail at all points against the other facts.

But he is virtually our sole source of facts. Even those documents of Augustine's life that come from other pens usually reach us because he allowed them to. We have today some five million words from Augustine's pen, vastly more than we have from any of the famous writers of antiquity. None of that material survives against Augustine's will. Though from time to time we hear of scandalous accusations made against him, we hear of them only from him, or if he quotes them to take polemical advantage.

Augustine shaped his own survival with great care. Late in life<sup>3</sup> he compiled a catalogue of his own written works under the evasive title *Retractationes* ('Reconsiderations').<sup>4</sup> Each work was listed with some description of the circumstances of its composition and its purpose, as well as corrections or explanations of difficult or controversial passages. The work does not so much record changes of mind as dig defensive trenches around things said imprudently, or simply in a different spirit, when he was young. The result is a catalogue of Augustine's authentic works, reinforced by the survival of a hand-list from Augustine's library, written by his disciple and authorized biographer Possidius (bishop of Calama, not far from Hippo, and a lifelong follower of Augustine).<sup>5</sup> Possidius' list not only includes "books" but also lists sermons and letters. Augustine left for the afterlife with a vastly better than average chance that his works would survive, be collected, and be read as his. The survival of so much of what he wrote is extraordinary.<sup>6</sup> (At least we may be sure that the surviving books are his. Judicious skepticism will stand alongside piety in the presence of the relics of his body presented to view in Pavia.)

The purposes of the modern student of Augustine may best be served if we come to the personal core of his life from the outside, working in. Accordingly, this essay will present Augustine's life not as a conversion narrative but as the unfolding of a dazzling piece of origami. We will begin with the textual Augustine who lies heavy on our shelves, proceed through the public Augustine (or rather the several Augustines known to different publics in his lifetime), and come only at the end to the man and his ultimate self-presentation. Such an approach gives more value to the social context within which he worked and more value to his social interactions with others. It will remain an open question how far the imperial individualism that Augustine practices and implicitly teaches is a useful discipline, whether for self-presentation or for historical analysis.

Augustine's books range from the highly personal and polemical to the lofty and abstract, but even the loftiest and most abstract are charged with a

clear idea about where error lies and how it is to be opposed. For modern philosophical readers, the most important titles are well known: *Confessiones*, *De civitate Dei*, *De Trinitate*, *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, and the brace of early works written during and after Augustine's post-conversion winter of 386/387 – *De Academicis* (also known as *Contra Academicos*), *De ordine*, *De beata vita*, *Soliloquia*, and *De libero arbitrio voluntatis*. Philosophers today generally quail before, but then reluctantly plunge into, the late works against the Pelagians, looking for but not often finding solid ground on which to assess Augustine's views on free will and predestination. But the most generous armload of accessible and interesting works, available in translation and regularly read today, still adds up to only a small fraction of the surviving oeuvre. Least well represented in modern readings of Augustine are his letters (by happenstance of bulk and relative rebarbative-ness – the annotation needed for each letter and its moment of pedagogy or polemic can be annoying) and his sermons (because of their bulk, running to approximately one-third of the surviving oeuvre, and their short and scrappy focus on issues of pastoral urgency).

Augustine today, moreover, dances for us behind numerous veils. His Latin is correct and clear, but can be read effortlessly by few today. Accordingly, he penetrates contemporary thought in ways conditioned by the history of his translations, and there is no modern language that has yet seen a translation of his *complete* works.<sup>7</sup> The prestige of French scholarship on Augustine has been undoubtedly enhanced by the fact that French Augustinians published, beginning in the 1950s, an extraordinarily valuable series of editions of Augustine's works, with Latin text and French translation, accompanied by learned and helpful notes. They remain a vital path into Augustine's work and thought for serious readers, even while they implant in those readers a style of interpretation characteristic of that particular Paris.

Augustine's books are for the most part today presented to us by those in the contemporary world who see themselves as his co-religionists. Modern Augustinian scholarship was in its formative decades overwhelmingly baptized, and indeed baptized Roman Catholic. It remains extraordinary that a provincial religious writer and churchman of sixteen centuries ago should be so fortunate as to have his works presented to our world by a relatively homogeneous and sympathetic body of interpreters. Here again, as with the *Confessions*, we know him too well. If we could forget that he is "Christian," and if we could forget the story he tells us of his own life, what would we think of him?

Here is one way to answer that question. Who was Augustine to his contemporaries in his lifetime? Beyond a circle of friends and colleagues, he came to public attention in a series of roughly concentric or at least overlapping circles.



### Augustine the bane of “Pelagianism”

This Augustine was known farthest and widest, beginning in the early 410s, when he was nearing 60. This renown was both good and bad for him, in that it propagated his name but won him influential and ferocious enemies. He ended his life in a futile and dispiriting literary combat with a learned Christian bishop from Italy, Julian of Eclanum, with whom he sparred endlessly before a Christian literary public on all Latin-speaking shores of the Mediterranean. At the end of his life, his reputation had penetrated erratically into the Greek Church and an invitation was sent for him to attend the council of Ephesus – but he had died before it could reach him in Africa.

The controversy in which Augustine found this fame was largely factitious. The “Pelagianism” that he attacked was a construct of his own, founded on his imputations of implications and logical conclusions to a writer who disowned most of them. When Pelagius was himself examined for his beliefs by a relatively independent and unbiased ecclesiastical court, in Palestine in 415, he came away vindicated.<sup>7</sup> Augustine could not accept this and pounded away for a few years more on Pelagius himself, winning the Pyrrhic victory of papal approval for some of his own condemnations. The victory backfired when, in his last decade, Augustine found himself under fire for it from the doctrinaire Julian (who was willing to accept some of the conclusions that Pelagius himself shied from), and from devout Christian ascetics to whose belief and practice Augustine would have ordinarily been closely attuned. These last (some of them in Africa, rather more in Gaul) saw defeatism in Augustine’s ideas and feared that his view of predestination denied value to their ascetic achievements. Although Augustine’s most extreme ideas were hotly confuted in these circles, he himself was rarely condemned as a heretic and his opponents were strikingly reluctant to mention him by name, so great was the prestige he had created for himself.

### Augustine the literary lion

That prestige had come in good measure from long years of assiduous literary self-promotion. Beginning in the early 390s, while not yet himself a bishop, Augustine had carefully built for himself a choice audience of readers for his works beyond his homeland. Though his works doubtless circulated in Hippo and Carthage, we know he had found ways of bringing them to the attention of distinguished literary Christians elsewhere. Paulinus of Nola, in particular, a retired Christian gentleman in Italy, poet and literary man, seems to have been one conduit for Augustine’s reputation and for his works themselves.<sup>9</sup> More strikingly, we have a fairly full record of Augustine’s correspondence with Jerome in Bethlehem, showing a fierce but repressed competition of egos between the

two ambitious men.<sup>10</sup> Though Jerome was a clergyman of the second rank, he had carved out a position of authority based on his learning and his status as impassioned and persuasive writer. Augustine came on the scene years after Jerome and set out to achieve a similar kind of reputation. Writing to Jerome in the early 390s was a way of calling himself to the older writer's attention and entering into the literary public that Jerome dominated. Over the years that followed, Augustine's books became well known outside Africa in upper-class Christian circles.

His time in those circles led to one of his two most famous and lasting books, *De civitate Dei*.<sup>11</sup> The ostensible point of departure of that work is "pagan" reaction to the sack of Rome by Visigoths in 410 AD and the learned debates of upper-class refugees in Carthage. What if, so they supposedly argued, the fate of the city of Rome is due to our impiety toward the ancient gods and to our adhesion to the new Christian god? Should we perhaps revive ancient practices? Augustine overwhelms those arguments in the first five books of *De civitate Dei*, which he wrote within a couple of years of the controversy's eruption, but he then continued for another decade and more to add another 17 books to the work, going far beyond what the moment of controversy called for. The work in the end outlines a large view of human history, from creation to apocalypse, and situates Roman, and indeed all Mediterranean, history within that perspective. It refutes every form of "paganism" that Augustine cared about, but chiefly the Neoplatonism that he understood from what he knew of Plotinus and Porphyry. The style of the first books shows that Augustine could play the part of the learned traditionalist to a fare-thee-well and take pleasure in using a pastiche of quotations from the most classical of Latin authors to demolish the pretensions of Roman religion.

### Augustine the anti-Donatist

Augustine's most widely known public persona, however, was one that requires a distinct effort of historical construction for us today. Augustine the anti-Pelagian has been made current to many following generations by the timelessness of the debates over grace and free will that he instigated and guided. Augustine the anti-"pagan" makes a case against a straw man enemy that moderns understand readily, so familiar are we with the glib juxtaposition of "pagans" and Christians in the Roman world.<sup>12</sup>

But Augustine the anti-Donatist is a figure who has spoken directly only to a few moderns and, I venture to suggest, to none of our contemporaries. The most notable example of a modern resonating with Augustine on these points is Newman, who quoted a line of Augustine's directed against the Donatists as though it were his own mantra of conversion.

Augustine found the widest (if not always receptive) public for his writing and speaking as an opponent of Donatism.<sup>13</sup> He surely spent more of his energies as bishop of Hippo on this one issue than on all the other controversies of his career combined. After the last wave of official persecution of Christianity in the early 300s had ebbed, Christians in North Africa fell into two camps. To name them is to take sides, but perhaps one may characterize them as rigorist and latitudinarian. The rigorist camp held that those who had in any way compromised the ferocity of their Christian allegiance in time of persecution had thereby exiled themselves from the Christian community and required sacramental initiation in order to re-enter. Particular hostility was directed towards clergy who had handed over the books of scripture to the Roman authorities to be burnt. *Traditores* (“traitors,” lit. handers-over) they were called, and they were thought to have disqualified themselves as clergy by that act. Ordinary faithful who had fallen in similar ways were to be rebaptized, and clergy, if such there were, who had fallen and sought clerical status again would have to be reordained.

The latitudinarian camp took no less harsh a view of the betrayals of the time, but took a higher view of the sacraments of the Church. Baptism could only be administered once for all. If you lapsed from grace after baptism, then only by a tedious ritual of repentance could you, in principle, be readmitted to communion. This may not sound latitudinarian, indeed is in some ways even more rigorist in theory than the other position, but in practice this community pursued lapses with less fervor and was more inclined to let bygones be bygones.

To make matters more complicated, the whole fourth century in Africa was punctuated by arguments over who the *traditores* had really been. Had the first bishops of the post-persecution latitudinarians really been themselves *traditores*? Or on the other hand (as was alleged, with good evidence), had the leaders of the rigorist faction themselves included some who had fallen away and never been rebaptized? Each side accused the other of bad faith and bad behavior at every level, most persuasively.

But the rigorist faction inherited the traditions and practices of the church of Africa, and throughout the fourth century it dominated African life, despite numerous attempts by the latitudinarian party to invoke imperial authority against it. When Augustine became priest and then bishop at Hippo, he was a member of the minority community there. Moderns debate the social roots of both communities, cautiously concluding that the rigorists were more broadly planted in African society at a variety of levels (including the highest), while the latitudinarians tended to be confined to the more Romanized and urbanized segments of society.

Augustine made it his business as bishop of Hippo to fight for the latitudinarians against the rigorists – hence for the “catholic” Church (he uses the adjective in its root meaning of “universal”, and he made much of the fact that *his* church

was in communion with churches all over the Roman world) against the “Donatists” (so-called after a charismatic founding figure). He made common cause with Aurelius, his faction’s bishop in Carthage, and for twenty years they were a tireless team, working together for the defeat of their opponents. Augustine wrote book after book, and together they pulled every lever of government influence. Eventually they prevailed by the latter route, when the emperor sent a commissioner to convene a hearing and resolve the issue. The commissioner, Marcellinus, was a devout layman who immediately fell in with Augustine. There was never any doubt at the conference, held in the baths at Carthage in June of 411 (we have the stenographic transcript of most of the three days of the conference), that he would find for Augustine’s catholic party, and he did so. From that day onward, “Donatism” had no legal standing in Africa and effectively vanished from history.

In all this period, Augustine often spent half his year in Carthage, preaching, writing, and debating against the Donatists. Those audiences saw a learned and fluent preacher with a taste for the kind of debater’s tricks of language and argument that audiences loved. They knew about his books and they knew about his influence with powerful people, and some of them encountered those books and that influence more directly. But he was pre-eminently a public and visible figure. Augustine always traveled reluctantly, but he took his anti-Donatist persona on the road from time to time, debating with Donatist leaders and seeking converts. When he came to one or another small city, it was very much as a publicly recognized visiting dignitary, absorbed in the high politics of the moment. Many of those who knew him this way loathed him as a powerful figure in a party they abhorred, but such is the pathology of celebrity that the loathing was part of his power. This Augustine reached the most people, however superficially, and this Augustine shaped the impressions of Africans about all the other Augustines.

### Augustine at Hippo

For all that Augustine made himself known to a wider world through his writings and his involvement in the affairs of the day, he still spent more of his time, from 391 until his death in 430, at home in Hippo than anywhere else. There he invented and struggled to define his role as bishop and leader of his community and there he performed the sacramental acts in which he and his followers believed that divine power flowed through his hands. (He tried to be in Hippo every year for the most sacred rituals of Easter, when new members were initiated to the community and received baptism.) He appeared serene before his congregation as they stood, row on row, straining to hear his voice. It troubled him that they venerated him so, for he was acutely aware of his own failings – even to the point of what later churchmen would call scrupulosity. Did he delight to

a fault in the beautiful music of the church service? When his mind wandered from prayer, did he return to the task promptly *enough*? He judged himself against a high standard and found himself wanting, and so felt unworthy in the eyes of his congregation. The writing of the *Confessions* was, among many other things, an attempt at self-understanding that would permit him to continue as bishop with this acute consciousness of imperfection.<sup>14</sup>

But it is unlikely that Augustine's congregation shared his sense of those imperfections. To them he was a hieratic figure, dispenser of God's word and God's sacrament, but judge and jury as well. In increasing numbers, they came to him, divinely authorized and reliable, to settle their petty legal cases, in an age when Roman justice was more remote, more expensive, and more unreliable than ever. He expressed his frustration at the time he spent on this kind of business and finally, in his early seventies, designated a successor in order to hand over the worldly business of the bishopric so that he, Augustine, could retire to his study and his studies.

Those studies took place in a privileged space that Augustine carved out for himself. It is conventional but anachronistic to call it a "monastery": Augustine used the word *monasterium* a few times, specifically to speak of the little community he created in Hippo, but the word was so new and he used it so infrequently that it must have rung far more strangely on his contemporaries' ears than it does on ours. The word and the thing would have been unfamiliar: a household of men without women, men without social status (or at least without property), dressed in a way that set them apart, pursuing activities of marginal social value – study and prayer. The ethos of the ascetic who separated himself from civil society was still a novelty in Africa, and the choice to set himself apart in *this* way from civil society made Augustine relatively unusual among clergy of the time. Augustine's choices in Hippo made him more visible and better known and at the same time more remote than a more conventional cleric would have been.

### The young Augustine

Augustine came to Hippo when he was almost 37 years old. He lived another 39 years and from that period come most of the five million words that survive of his œuvre for us. Half the ordinary life of a man on this earth he passed before he came to the city where he would make his lasting reputation. It is that half of his life that he tells us about in his *Confessions*, and about which we know less than we know about the later years.

For the years in Hippo, from 391 to his death in 430, are amply attested in his own voice, year by year, in his letters, sermons, and books. And in many ways such a self-presentation is more reliable than the retrospective and self-serving

narrative of the *Confessions*. We know by name, moreover, no contemporary reader of the *Confessions* who was persuaded by its narrative.<sup>14</sup> (In the *Retractationes* [2.6, ed. Mutzenbecher] Augustine suggests that there were other readers who thought the book a great success, but he does not tell us their names and we have no way to interrogate them.) Of most interest are the two readers, one a Manichee, the other a member of a small sect that broke off from the Donatists, who both knew Augustine when he was a young man on the make. He recalls himself as a libertine: they recall him as a prig.<sup>16</sup> Augustine's narrative leaves them unmoved.

Can we recover a true narrative of Augustine's early years? No. The most we can do is hold to the elements of his narrative that are most likely to have been verifiable to his contemporaries. No reader will long resist the power of the *Confessions*, but for as long as we can maintain it, resistance is far from futile. What do we learn if we resist?

Augustine was born on the margins of gentility. To the poor, he was an aristocrat; to aristocrats, he was a scion of a provincial, down-at-heel family. His father had connections who were wealthier and who could be drawn upon shamelessly to support, for example, the son's education. One scholar has astutely seen, indeed, in the way Augustine's father pressed to find resources for his son's education what he calls a "Balzacian novel before its time": a family that chose to invest heavily in the education of one precocious older son (there were at least two other children, one son and one daughter) in whose career the whole family would advance.<sup>17</sup>

Because Augustine invests the story of his schooling with philosophical and religious narrative (reading Cicero he somehow falls among the Manichees, and he is reading Cicero again 15 years later when he is about to fall among the orthodox Christians), modern readers linger over the personal side of the story and pay little attention to the familial. In brief, the story is that Augustine left home at a very early age to pursue his schooling, pursuing it eventually with vigor and success all the way to Carthage. A year's rustication in his home town as a teacher was prologue to a bright near-decade teaching in Carthage and then a daring leap first to Rome and then to Milan to seek the heights of his profession. No sooner did he land, on his feet, in Milan, exalted at the age of 30 as imperial professor of rhetoric, called on to deliver formal court panegyrics and with every hope of a political career, than his whole family – his mother, his brother, his sister, and at least one or two other junior relatives and hangers-on – turned up in Milan, looking to hitch their wagons to his star. Their hopes began with, but were not limited to, a lucrative governorship. Had he ascended higher still, the profit for his retinue would have multiplied itself.

But in Milan Augustine's philosophical and religious interests derailed his self-interest. Controversy has raged for a century and more about just what happened

in Milan and, since we have only Augustine's retrospective and self-serving narrative of a decade later to go by, we are unlikely to achieve certainty. He came under the influence of bishop Ambrose<sup>18</sup> and became convinced that his own personal well-being depended on abandoning a worldly career and devoting himself to God in a special way – not just joining the Christian Church (though he did that formally in Milan in 387, taking baptism at the hands of Ambrose) but renouncing the life of the flesh and in particular abandoning the quite ordinary sexual life he had led with one quite respectable common-law wife (and mother of his child) and then with a somewhat less respectable “mistress” (the term is anachronistic: he took up temporarily with a lower-status woman when he was engaged to a higher-status fiancée). Nothing about Christianity required him to abandon sexual activity in order to be baptized, but Augustine sought something higher: the life of a Christian philosopher, separate and distinct from the ordinary run of Christian and excelling the most ascetic and ethereal of non-Christian philosophers.

Having made this choice of celibacy and science in the fall of 386, not yet baptized, Augustine took his household to the country for the winter – there perhaps to test his sexual resolve in a setting less tempting than the cosmopolitan capital, and there certainly to pursue his philosophical studies. From those months at the country estate of Cassiciacum we have the earliest books surviving from his pen, dialogues written (and indeed enacted by himself and his friends and family) in a consciously Ciceronian vein. The first of them, *De Academicis* (usually and wrongly titled *Contra Academicos*), takes up the radical skepticism to which Cicero himself was more than tempted and finds in it the basis for a mystical philosophy of Christianity. Certain knowledge is impossible, Augustine accepts from the Academics, and so one must give oneself over in faith to the fount of true knowledge who is (as it is revealed on the last pages of an otherwise quite secular book) Christ.

The philosophy to which Augustine gave himself at this moment in his life was one he eagerly sought in later years to assimilate to orthodox Christianity. Believing that Christianity could rival the ancients in every way, Augustine pursued a philosophy that got its doctrine from scripture, interpreted that doctrine in the light of Plotinus, and hedged it around with mystical expectations that mixed Plotinian intellectualism<sup>19</sup> and ritual purification. To us today, this particular mixture of ideas is difficult to grasp and seems remote and artificial, but to Augustine it was indeed the new-age religion and philosophy for a truly elite intellectual of his time, more appealing even than Manichaeism – his first new-age enthusiasm – had been.

And so it made perfect sense that he retired from his public career, retired from Milan, and went back home to become a more refined version of his father. He settled in Tagaste, the little town he came from, residing on the family property

there, discharging the obligations of a gentleman and pursuing a life of philosophical leisure, writing contentious books and exchanging letters with like-minded friends. There he stayed for three years, from 388 to 391.

Why Augustine ever left Tagaste we will never know. The assumption of pious biographers has always been that his religious interests were consistent and persistent and that it was chance that took him in 391 to Hippo where chance again seized him and made him a clergyman: for so he tells the story himself, to the congregation at Hippo 35 years later.<sup>20</sup> But it is remarkable that he did not leave the isolation of Tagaste and did not think of accepting a life elsewhere until after his son had died – until, that is, the worldly hopes of his family had been extinguished and until there was no son to whom to leave the property he had himself inherited from his father. Only with his son's death was Augustine properly rootless, only then eligible to take up easily the disconnected life of the monk.

Even then, he seems to have resisted. A letter by Augustine to his new superior, Valerius the bishop of Hippo, was clearly written a few months after his ordination – forced ordination to hear him tell it – at Hippo. It seems to be a letter of request to Valerius for permission to spend some time away from Hippo pursuing the study of scripture.<sup>21</sup> Modern readers have seen in this the devoted and studious Augustine of whom they are fond, casting a fresh eye on the Christian scriptures he was now bound to obey and preach. But there are several odd things about the letter, and a more credible interpretation would see it as a piece of politic revisionism. The subtext is this: seized and ordained a priest at Hippo, Augustine's natural impulse had been to flee, and he followed that impulse back to Tagaste. Once there, regretting his choice, perhaps fearing divine retribution, he wrote the letter to his bishop (to whom he would not have needed to *write* this request if both were in Hippo, and if there were no reason for a public declaration about his whereabouts and activities), putting a good face on what he has done and thus implicitly promising to return. And return he did, to become the Augustine of history. It could have been otherwise.

But even if that speculation about reluctance is ill-founded, it is worth underlining just how much the Augustine of 387–391, the man who had abandoned his worldly career and returned to Africa, was ready to disappear from view as a mild-mannered country squire with philosophical and literary interests. The role of a Paulinus of Nola is the most to which he might have aspired there, and nothing in his literary product of those years suggests that he would have had even that renown. It was only with his clerical ordination that he took up epistolary utensils to enter the eye of a broader Christian literary public, and only with the *Confessions* that he succeeded in producing work of a sort that would merit broad and lasting attention. Augustine of Tagaste in 390 is one of the great might-have-been-a-has-beens of world history, his father's son in more ways than one.



### The Augustine of the *Confessions*

But if we trace the Augustines whom his contemporaries knew – the bishop known for his books, the bishop known for his politics, the bishop known by his flock, and the young man who disappeared from view when the clergyman appeared – it must be admitted that the Augustine of the *Confessions* does not disappear from history. Augustine the son of Monica, Augustine the confessor, is one of the greatest creations of self-presentation that our literary past has to offer. And he holds and shapes the attention of readers more than the historical Augustine ever could.

The Augustine of the *Confessions* can be spoken of in various almost-too-familiar ways. He invents (if Marcus Aurelius did not already invent it) a textual self whose interiority is not only on public display but seems to be the chief object of the narration. Events of past life are recounted and circumstances of present life are examined in order to reveal the inner man. But who is speaking in this narrative? Is it the inner man himself? Or is the inner man the object of attention of some subject lurking more deeply within the person? To ask those questions is to enter into the spirit of the book almost too wholeheartedly. At any rate, he provides a model, unexampled in antiquity and unrivaled until at least Aelred of Rievaulx (and perhaps we must wait for Pascal or Montaigne), of self-presentation through meditative analysis of thoughts, emotions, and memories in a swirling and impressionistic dance of words. The ease with which twentieth-century readers have leapt to their Freudian task, quite sure that Augustine's narrative of his relations with his mother offers the key to his character, is a sign of the power of the text. A conscientious analyst would recognize this text not as the unself-conscious revelation that the Freudian couch seeks to elicit but rather as something closer to the first narrative that the analyst tells, defensive and disarming, diverting and deceiving, on entering the analyst's care. Breaking down that narrative and finding insight is a task that still remains to be done.<sup>22</sup>

A central feature of the narrative lies in Augustine's creation of himself as a man driven by philosophy, persuadable by Cicero's dictum (*De finibus bonorum et malorum* 1.2.3) that the true student of philosophy never goes by half-measures but pursues truth relentlessly and endlessly. He shows us that philosophical urge turned into Christian faith but still undiminished, and generations of intellectualizing Christians have found comfort and example in that. The philosopher's Augustine takes three particular directions from the *Confessions*.

First, it is the book of memory. Book 10 of the *Confessions* famously divagates into a consideration of memory and its workings that has been widely influential if curiously under-studied throughout modern philosophical history.<sup>23</sup> Augustine blends metaphors of space and of interiority in a persuasive and vivid

portrayal of a huge and capacious hall, rich in furnishings, and yet so vast that valuable contents often go missing, contained in memory but somehow not present. Memory, moreover, seems at times in that account almost to *become* the self, and many readers find this persuasive – we are the concatenation of our own experiences, present to ourselves. There are grave difficulties for Augustine’s view to be derived from cognitive psychology, but he remains so sympathetic a figure that we forgive him his difficulties and admire his imagination.

Second, the *Confessions* are the book of time. The eleventh book no less famously pursues the question of a definition of time through scriptural and Plotinian byways, ending with a definition of time as a “distension of the mind” – a strikingly mentalistic reading. Here too, Augustine is quoted, admired, and rarely criticized directly – so great is his prestige.<sup>24</sup>

Third, and in a different vein, the *Confessions* provides a narrative within which to read the self-indulgent and sometimes pretentious dialogues of Cassiciacum – *De Academicis*, *De beata vita*, *De ordine* – and the associated works, especially *Soliloquia* and the fragmentary and frustrating *De immortalitate animae*. In the winter after his determination to renounce sexual activity once for all, Augustine and his students, friends, and family retired to a country villa to re-create Ciceronian philosophical leisure. They read Virgil of a morning, and of an afternoon would play-act the philosophical dialogue. The books report that stenographers took down their every word and swear that the texts represent debate as it really was. Modern readers have doubted that dialogue could naturally have unfolded so neatly, but omit to recognize (1) that the dialogues are carefully-sewn-together segments of conversation – out of several months’ residence in the country, barely two weeks of time turn up represented in the texts of these works; and (2) that the people who participated in these dialogues were quite consciously playing parts, recreating Cicero’s Tusculum, whose texts they knew only too well. The books remain interesting as sophisticated readings and reapplications of Ciceronian thought and method in a Christianizing context. If nothing else from Augustine survived, these texts would be minor classics, of the order of the works of Minucius Felix or the emperor Julian, but the fact of Augustine’s later career and the persuasive reading offered for them by the *Confessions* have given them a special place as charter texts in Augustine’s way of thinking. For all that they were written by an unbaptized rhetorician going through a bout of something approaching depressive withdrawal, they loom large in modern readers’ attention to Augustine because of their authorized place in the autobiographical narrative.

The Augustine of the *Confessions* has also given rise in modern times to the most lasting and ferocious of quarrels over his philosophical ancestry and affiliation. The text of the *Confessions* explicitly tells us of his discovery of the “books of the Platonists” in Milan in 385 and the powerful influence those books

exercised. Now, the text in which the discovery is reported tells us with no apology that what Augustine thought he found in those books was identical with the content of the first words of John's Gospel.<sup>25</sup> There are various ways to interpret that assertion, but behind it clearly lie some distinct acts of reading. Particularly since Pierre Courcelle's epoch-making book of 1950, much modern Augustinian scholarship has concentrated on identifying the nature of those books and the time and place of Augustine's various readings of them (presumably, at the outset, under the influence of Ambrose).<sup>26</sup> After a half-century of scholarship, debate still rages. There are two chief questions:

1. What did he read and when did he read it? The "what" question centers on the proportions of Platonic material that came to Augustine in the words of Plotinus and of Porphyry. Given that Augustine read the texts in Latin translations that had to be (given the difficulty of the Greek originals) exceedingly difficult and frustrating, finding the exact mix of Plotinus and Porphyry has been impossible. (Since Porphyry was Plotinus' disciple, biographer, editor, and abridger – in the work under his own name called "Sentences" – it is also likely that Augustine found some things that *he* thought were Plotinian but that were in fact Porphyrian.) The "when" question tries to trace Augustine's readership through 385 and 386 most closely, but is also concerned to know what later readings, particularly of Porphyry, occurred. The Augustine of 386 seems not to have known that Porphyry had notoriously written "Against the Christians" – a work lost to the intolerance of his enemies. By about 399, Augustine seems to have discovered Porphyry's hostility, and that becomes a leitmotif of his later discussions of Platonism, notably those in Books 8–10 of the *De civitate Dei*.
2. A different kind of debate has centered on Augustine's reception of Plotinian ideas and has pitted scholars against one another. Robert O'Connell, S.J., has held out *contra mundum* for over a generation for the position that Augustine was through most of his life a crypto-Plotinian, espousing a doctrine of the soul that he received from Neoplatonism according to which the souls of human beings had entered matter by a "fall" from the purity of incorporeal existence. Human life was hence a struggle to free the soul of corporeality. A broader consensus of scholars holds that Augustine's frequent protestations of his inability to determine an answer to the question of the soul's origin can be taken at face value. O'Connell's story requires us to complicate the traditional narrative of conversion with an inner conflict of lingering attachment to a central piece of unconverted doctrine through the years of Augustine's public profession as bishop. To be sure, Augustine is noticeably marked as he grows older by his fear of his own past, and he externalizes that fear: he attacks the Platonists in *De civitate Dei* and then strikingly turns his quarrel with Julian of Eclanum into a reprise of his attack on the Manichees. The last

words of the last book Augustine wrote – was working on when he fell ill to die – are part of a slanging match in which Augustine and Julian take turns accusing the other of crypto-Manichaeism.<sup>27</sup> O’Connell’s view suggests bad conscience about Plotinus: a minority view, but one that needs to be given serious attention.

What other Augustines are there yet undiscovered? I will close by suggesting that there are two, at least.

The first may perhaps just be coming into view. This is the Augustine who revealed himself at vast length in his letters and sermons, texts which constitute over 45% of the bulk of his surviving works. These texts have been mined for facts that fit the pre-determined structure of biographical narrative, but have received far too little attention for their literary and philosophical content. Some new studies have begun to take these texts seriously, but it is striking that even these still tend to come from European Catholic scholars essentially accepting the portrait we have received. The impetus from the new Divjak letters and Dolbeau sermons (see note 6) will prove most fruitful if it broadens to include reconsideration of these long-known but under-studied masses of text.

The second Augustine I have tried to sketch here, one whose life is not defined by the narrative he himself supplies. This Augustine does not succeed in imposing his interiority upon us, does not succeed in making his own interpretation of his religious history the armature of everything we are to know about him. We cannot escape from the Augustine of the *Confessions*, but we owe him and ourselves the effort to see him in other lights, to find other ways of reading his narrative. When we do, he becomes less the extraordinary figure who wrote dazzling books and more readily understood as a man of his time and place. In important ways, this then makes it easier to give proper respect to the thinker and the writer.

Beyond and behind even those Augustines was a man whose privacy we never penetrate. His earliest biographer closed with an account of the dying Augustine asking to have the seven penitential psalms written out and posted on the walls of his chamber, then asking to be left alone with those sobering words for his last hours and days.<sup>28</sup> Many structures of interpretation could be erected around such a report, but we should not fail to see the image presented, of an old man who knows he is dying, choosing to be alone with words that come from his God and that tell him insistently, and that are meant to let him tell himself, how far he falls short of divinity. Our last impression of Augustine is of a man who never made things easy for himself.

#### NOTES

- 1 Perler 1969 is a meticulous guide to Augustine’s movements and evokes some of the flavor of his Africa.

- 2 For readers seeking to consult this essay as a source of information or to refresh memories, I supply here a few key dates in Augustine's life.

- 13 November 354: born at Tagaste. Parents Patricius and Monica.
- 360s–370s: studied at Madauros and Carthage, taught at Tagaste, then at Carthage again; while in Carthage, his father died and Augustine took a common-law wife and had a child.
- 384: pursued his teaching career to Rome, thence in the same year to Milan.
- 386/87: abandoned teaching career, produced first surviving literary works, was baptized, and determined to return to Africa, and did so in 388. Monica died while he was in Italy.
- 388–391: lived life of gentleman of literary and philosophical leisure at Tagaste; death of his son.
- 391: was pressed into service as *presbyter* (roughly = “priest”) of the church of Hippo Regius.
- 395/96: ordained bishop of Hippo.
- 397: *Confessions*.
- 411: final public defeat of Donatism; beginning of work on *City of God* and beginning of Pelagian controversy.
- 28 August 430: died at Hippo.

Brown 1967 is so masterly a narrative that I have annotated only specific references and matters where Brown's book might not serve as an adequate guide. The freshest recent recounting of Augustine's life is Wills 1999, with especially fresh and effective translations from Augustine. I have written at length on many of the issues here in my commentary on the *Confessions* (O'Donnell 1992).

- 3 But he had been thinking about it for 15 years: *Ep.* 143.2–3.
- 4 Englished as *Retractations*, trans. Bogan 1968.
- 5 Never translated to my knowledge; Latin text available in *Miscellanea Agostiniana* 1930, 2.149–233.
- 6 In the last two decades, two precious finds have added to the corpus. Johannes Divjak brought to light over two dozen letters never before published and François Dolbeau a like number of sermons. The best approach to the new letters is Divjak 1987, in the series “Bibliothèque Augustinienne,” vol. 46B, with text, French translation, and notes; English translation by Eno 1989. The sermons have been published as Dolbeau 1996; translated by Hill (1997).
- 7 The French Bibliothèque Augustinienne (described in the text here: now published by the Institut des Etudes Augustiniennes in approximately four dozen volumes) has come closest, but is now being rivaled by the English “A Translation for the Twenty-First Century,” under the general editorship of John Rotelle, OSA; but both sets are far from complete at the present writing.
- 8 On this period and the gap between Augustine's imagination and Pelagius' teachings, see Wermelinger 1975.
- 9 Courcelle 1963, 559–607.
- 10 Hennings 1994.
- 11 Dyson 1998 is the newest version; Brown 1967, 287–329, is still the best introduction to the circumstances of writing.
- 12 That familiarity lubricates our reading of *De civitate Dei*: a little less familiarity might bring greater understanding, howbeit at the price of greater effort. The notion of “pagan,” making no sense except as a Christian theological category, hurries us

- into thinking in ways quite alien to the period. See O'Donnell 1979.
- 13 Frend 1985 is still the best connected narrative of the sect's history, but is marked by a certain partisanship that must be kept in mind.
- 14 Books 10–13 of the *Confessions* (see O'Donnell 1992 passim) show Augustine struggling with the role he had undertaken and the inadequacies he felt.
- 15 The skeptics represent the breadth of Augustine's polemical opponents: Secundinus the Manichee (object of Augustine's *Contra Secundinum*), Pelagius (described reacting to *Conf.* 10 at *De dono persev.* 20.53), Vincent the Rogatist (*Ep.* 93.13.51), and Julian of Eclanum.
- 16 The Manichee was Secundinus (*Epistula Secundini* 3 – transmitted with Augustine's *C. Secundinum*), the renegade Donatist Vincent (see previous note).
- 17 Lepelley 1987.
- 18 McLynn's *Ambrose of Milan* (1994) is a first-rate study and in many ways the best new book on *Augustine* in many years.
- 19 Augustine wrote, in the habit of that period, books of the “liberal arts” during that winter and spring of 387, books meant to purify the mind from earthly matters by showing it the eternal patterns through which one could ascend from language to number to the heavens and then to peace beyond. See Hadot 1984.
- 20 *Sermon* 355.
- 21 *Ep.* 21.
- 22 On the Freudian reading and misreading of the *Confessions* and of Augustine, see O'Donnell 1992, 1.xxx–xxxii, esp. n. 32. The best modern essay on the topic is Fredriksen 1978.
- 23 See O'Daly 1987.
- 24 See Meijering 1979 and Sorabji 1983.
- 25 *Conf.* 7.9.13, and see O'Donnell 1992 *ad loc.*
- 26 Courcelle 1950; see O'Donnell 1992 on *Conf.* 7.9.13 for a summary of the issues.
- 27 *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum* 6.41.
- 28 Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 31.