INTRODUCTION

1 *CONFESSIONS* IN THE LIFE AND LITERARY CAREER OF AUGUSTINE

In a list of writings that Augustine (hereafter A.) drew up late in life, he indicates that his book *Confessions* dates from approximately the year 397, when he was 42 or 43 years old. That puts it a little over a decade into a writing career that would continue steadily until his death in 430. During that time, on the evidence of the *Corpus Augustinianum Gissense*, the online database of his works, he produced a corpus totaling well over 5,000,000 words, which is many times more than survive of such prolific predecessors as Plato, Aristotle, or Cicero.

Yet throughout A.'s life, writing was a sideline to his principal career. At the time he began *Confessions*, he was newly installed as a Christian bishop in the port city of Hippo Regius in north Africa (= Annaba in present-day Algeria), where his major preoccupations were the care of souls and the administration of his diocese. As a Christian bishop, however, he was also concerned to defend, regularize, and ground the wider church practices of his day, and to combat deviations from what he held to be orthodoxy. A majority of his writings are devoted to religious issues and controversies, often in response to appeals for guidance from clergy and laity who were less intellectually resourceful or less energetic than he was.

But not *Confessions*, which has the least overtly pragmatic purpose of any of his works. It consists of a narrative about himself, from birth to the age of almost 33, followed by a long interpretative exploration of the opening verses from the book of Genesis. This mixing of disparate ingredients in one work is the first of many puzzles about *Confessions*. Although A. implies that they form a natural unity, critics have struggled to articulate the nature of the connection between the two parts. Moreover, the interpretation of Genesis was A.'s third attempt at explicating that text. He had already composed two tracts defending the book of Genesis against criticisms of it by the Manichees, a professedly Christian sect to which he had belonged in his teens and twenties. But their core belief concerned a struggle between good and evil cosmic powers, for which they found the Old Testament less appealing than the New. When A. broke with them, he set about rehabilitating the cosmology of Genesis. But curiously, in his discussion of it in *Confessions*, the Manichees are hardly mentioned, despite the anti-Manichean polemic that pervades the narrative portion of that work.

The narrative books present a puzzle of their own that has to do with chronology. The writing of *Confessions* may have stretched out for some years beyond 397. According to A.'s own testimony, other books of his—most notably *On free will*, *On Christian teaching*, *On the Trinity*, and *City of God*—were written at intervals over a period of time rather than in single spurts. Parallels between writings of the early 400s and passages in *Confessions* have been taken to suggest that composition of the latter may have been similarly protracted (see Hombert 2000: 9–23). In any case, there is a gap of at least ten years between the last event recorded in the work, which belongs to the latter half of the year 387, and the moment at which A. began writing. This hiatus is curious in itself, and A. makes readers conscious of it throughout. He emphasizes that the story he tells is an exercise in memory, and often cautions that his memory may be fallible. More perplexing is that he keeps shifting the standpoint from which he reports events. Some episodes of his earlier life he tries to present as he experienced them at the time, while he looks back on others from his later perspective as a committed Christian and leader of his church. In some parts of *Confessions*, it is not clear which perspective he has adopted.

The long interval between events and the recording of them has naturally prompted questions about what launched A. on the project of setting down his *Confessions*, and why he ended the narrative where he did. Answers have been sought in various areas of his life that are peripheral to his presentation of it in the text. In the context of his ecclesiastical career, for example, he may have felt a need to affirm his current orthodoxy by publicly disavowing his unorthodox Manichean past. In relation to his ongoing writerly agenda, he may have wanted to offer a case study in support of his approach to the interpretation of Scripture, or of his theological understanding of God's grace in the work of salvation. Or reflection on his life may have served as a form of psychological self-help, as A. tried to come to terms with having accepted a daunting new vocation in middle age. Decisions often have multiple causes, and more or less plausible arguments can be advanced for these and other hypotheses about the origin of *Confessions*.

The text, however, does not offer ready confirmation for any of them. At the usual point where readers could expect to find some orientation to an author's purpose, A. dispenses with conventions. His book does not open with a preface in which he introduces himself, nor does he put the spotlight on a dedicatee for whose benefit or at whose request it has been written. Although the book carries a title, it is anything but self-explanatory. The word "confession" had never figured in a literary title until A. turned it into one, and he has compounded its strangeness by using it in a way unfamiliar to many of his contemporaries, to mean giving praise to God.

A further peculiarity is that, from the first sentence to the last, *Confessions* is framed as a prayer to God, and yet as a book, it necessarily presumes an audience of human readers. But what human audience A. had in mind is difficult to pin down. At different points, *Confessions* appears to be directed to fellow believers (5.10.20), the Manichees (8.10.22), critics (12.15.22), readers (9.13.37), and the human race (2.3.5).

Since in other parts of his voluminous output, A. follows conventional practices regarding title, introduction, and dedicatee, his avoidance of them in *Confessions* must represent a choice. He evidently preferred not to explain the origin of his account, but to plunge readers into it with no mediation, allowing them to judge it for themselves. He says as much in his entry for *Confessions* in the bio-bibliography mentioned earlier (*Reconsiderations* 2.6.1). After commenting that his books serve to rouse our understanding and feeling toward God, he adds, "at any rate, as far as I am concerned, they had that effect on me when they were being written, and have it still when they are read. What others make of those books is up to them" (*quod ad me attinet, hoc in me egerunt cum scriberentur et agunt cum leguntur. quid de illis alii sentiant, ipsi uiderint*).

A.'s disinclination to categorize his narrative is also apparent in the way he refers to it. Biographical or autobiographical writing in Latin was conventionally identified by some use of the word *uita* "life," as for example in reference to a "book concerning the life and character" (*liber de uita et moribus*) of someone, or to a person's "memoir of his life" (*commentarius de uita sua*). But although *uita* is in fact a key word of *Confessions*, appearing nearly 200 times, A. rarely uses the phrase "my life" in that work, and he never characterizes his book as "a life." His only specific form of reference to it is by its enigmatic title, "these confessions of mine" (5.10.20, 9.8.17, 9.13.37, 12.30.41). Otherwise, he has recourse to neutral designations such as "this writing" (2.3.5, 9.12.33, 10.3.4, 12.24.33), "my composition" (10.1.1), "narratives" (11.1.1), or simply "these things" (11.1.1). Although the content of his work presents elements that may suggest associations with established forms such as autobiography, memoir, apologia, or protreptic, A. himself shies away from any sort of generic label for it.

2 THE LATINITY OF *CONFESSIONS*

But if the overall purpose and genre of *Confessions* continue to elude definition, some attributes that characterize it as a text can nevertheless be surveyed. Readers of Cicero will find most elements of A.'s Latin broadly recognizable, which is hardly surprising given that even after four centuries, Cicero remained a model taught in Roman schools. But by A.'s time, a number of usages that were infrequent or unknown in the prose

of Cicero and his contemporaries had come to take their place alongside the conventions of classical grammar. Most noticeably, indirect statements appear not only in the form of accusative and infinitive constructions, but also as *quod* clauses with indicative or subjunctive verbs; sometimes the two constructions appear side by side in the same sentence. In A.'s Latin, indirect questions can feature indicative verbs as well as subjunctives. Purpose clauses are often introduced by *quo* instead of *ut* even when the clause does not contain a comparative adjective or adverb. Negative commands can be expressed with *non* as well as *ne*. A. employs the imperfect subjunctive as a mood of past potentiality more often than classical writers do, in both main clauses and subordinate clauses, and he turns participles into substantives and uses infinitives as substantives more freely than they do. Classical distinctions between the pronouns *ipse* and *idem* and *ille* and *iste* are blurred. Phrases consisting of *de* + the ablative sometimes take the place of the simple ablative of means. These are usages that A. shares with other writers of his time.

Peculiarities of syntax, however, are less extensive than lexical differences between A.'s Latin and classical Latin. When he is speaking entirely in his own voice, as often in passages of argument or narrative, his language comes mostly from the classical lexicon, or is easily understandable in terms of it (the fullest survey of A.'s diction in *Confessions* is Hrdlicka 1931). As a Christian, however, he also had occasion to draw on predominantly Greek-derived terms that related to institutions and beliefs of his church, such as the words *christianus* and *ecclesia* themselves, *euangelium* ("gospel"), *propheta*, *baptismus* (the Christian sacrament of initiation), *catechumenus* (an as yet unbaptized Christian), *angelus* and *diabolus* ("angel" and "devil" respectively), *apostolus* and *martyr*, *presbyter* and *episcopus* ("priest" and "bishop"), *monasterium* (a community of monks), *elemosyna* ("almsgiving"), *catholicus* (designating whatever characterizes orthodox or "universal" Christianity in terms of belief or practice), and *haeresis* ("heresy" or "sect"). The Latin language supplied him with *trinitas* (the triune unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

A more sizable portion of A.'s vocabulary consists of well-established Latin words that had acquired distinctive new Christian meanings. Among the more important are *fidelis* (a baptized Christian), *peregrinus* (a "pilgrim" or Christian imagined as merely traveling through earthly life on the way to heaven), *sancti* ("saints," in life or after death), *gentes* and *gentilis* ("pagans" and "pagan" respectively), *saeculum* (the material, passing world in contrast to eternity), *peccatum* ("sin" as alienation from God), *iniquitas* (in the sense of "wickedness"), *dimittere* ("to forgive"), *caro* ("flesh," referring to the lower components of human nature that are in conflict with the spiritual), *conuersio* (the turning of an individual away from sin and back to God), *oratio* ("prayer"), *confessio* (acknowledgment

of God's greatness and goodness as well as of one's own sinfulness), *gratia* ("grace"), *sacramentum* (any vehicle of God's grace to human beings), *iudicium* (God's verdict of condemnation or salvation on each individual after death), *salus* ("salvation" from the consequences of sin), *requies* (the state of eternal rest enjoyed by the blessed in the afterlife), *scriptura* and *testamentum* (the Bible and either of its two major divisions), *dominus*, usually referring to God or Christ, and *spiritus*, sometimes referring to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

A.'s language in *Confessions*, however, is not simply a result of importing isolated words from Christian discourse into the literary and scholastic Latin of his day. Sometimes he spins entire sentences out of quotations, paraphrases, idioms, or reminiscences of Scripture, as in the opening lines, "Great are you, Lord, and worthy of praise exceedingly; great your virtue, and of your wisdom there is no number" (*Magnus es, domine, et laudabilis ualde; magna uirtus tua et sapientiae tuae non est numerus*), which combines adaptations of Psalms 95:4 and 146:5. Shorter biblicisms are even more frequent. To a greater degree than any writer before him, and in *Confessions* to a greater degree than elsewhere in his works, A. fuses his own Latin together with that of the Bible. The Latin Bible is the ultimate source of most of the "Christian" words or word usages already mentioned, along with several other words which A. borrows, and which eventually passed into English, like *abyssus*, *acceptabilis*, *blasphemia*, *concupiscentia*, *contritio*, *corruptibilis*, *creatura*, *fornicatio*, *mammona*, and *resurrectio*.

But what makes the diction of *Confessions* distinctive is less its lexical novelties than the arrangement of familiar words in unfamiliar patterns. The opening contains no word that was not known to Cicero, but it is not a combination of words that any classical writer would have put together. In psalmic fashion, it consists of a statement about God which is then rephrased as a parallel statement about the attributes of God. The parallel opens with a repetition of the predicate "great" in clause-initial position, but it is disrupted by a divergence between attributes, one of which is phrased positively and the other negatively, and one of which is the subject of a verb, and the other not. Normal Latin word order is unbalanced by the positioning of "exceedingly" at the end of its clause rather than before the adjective it modifies, and by a reversal of order between the divine attributes and what is predicated of them in "great your virtue" and "of your wisdom there is no number." Sense is challenged by the strangeness of combining the word "number" with "wisdom." A reader of these simple lines confronts a form of expression that sounds un-Latin at every step, yet A. offers them to the reader as his own prose. They are not separated from his text like a modern epigraph, and in fact they do not constitute a literal quotation from Scripture. Not only has A. created the opening by conflating passages from the psalms, but he has turned it

into a personal address to God with the words "Great are *you*, Lord." (The psalmist had said "Great is the Lord.")

The language and rhythms of the Bible are the most salient feature of A.'s Latin, and they are perceptible on page after page (demonstrating remarkable mastery for someone who had begun seriously reading the Bible little more than a decade before beginning *Confessions*). As in the opening lines, A. usually incorporates biblical language into his own prose without identifying the passages on which he draws, and unlike modern readers, his original readers did not enjoy the advantage of having them annotated by an editor. But whether they recognized the source of the words or not, they would have recognized a succession of intrusive elements in A.'s text, and for cultured Romans, that would have been disconcerting. Except in satire, classical Latin writers had tried to avoid stylistic dissonance. They left no model for A.'s blending of his own prose with borrowings from the Bible. Furthermore, the descriptor "biblical language" hardly does justice to the wildness of the mixture in *Confessions*. The Bible is itself a congeries of styles and genres, and A. took from all of them—psalms, prophets, gospel parables, missionary epistles, and an apocalypse, to name only some. In addition to its polyphony, the Bible featured a number of prominent metaphors and images that carried different associations, or no particular associations, for readers schooled in classical literature, such as the mountain, the desert, the sea, the pearl, the cup, and the cross. They would have added to its exotic quality.

Other church writers contemporary with A., such as Paulinus of Nola, and many afterwards also made a habit of blending biblical expressions with their own, with the result that it can sometimes seem a generic mannerism or decoration. But that is seldom if ever the case with A. His recourse to Scripture is above all a method of countering a problem he had pondered as a teacher of rhetoric long before his conversion: that human language is an imperfect and at times untrustworthy medium of communication. It is a particularly inadequate medium in relation to the divine. But A. could in some measure compensate for its inadequacy by aligning his own words with the words of Scripture, which he accepted as the words of God.

So far from using scriptural language as decoration, A. sometimes relies on it to do the main work of argument. In book 7 of *Confessions*, for example, describing the impression made on him by his investigation of Neoplatonic philosophy, he says that he valued it because it harmonized with Christian theology at important points. But instead of quoting the philosopher Plotinus, or explaining that he saw a partial parallel between the Christian idea of the Trinity and Plotinus' conception of an incorporeal One from which emanates an incorporeal Intellect, he trusts readers to recognize the parallel in a passage of Scripture. At 7.9.14 he writes,

"I read there [= in Neoplatonist texts] that the Word God was born not from flesh, not from blood, nor from the will of a man, nor from the will of the flesh, but from God" (*legi ibi quia uerbum deus non ex carne, non ex sanguine non ex uoluntate uiri neque ex uoluntate carnis, sed ex deo natus est*), quoting from (a variant version of) John 1:12–13. A.'s borrowings are integrated into his text in a way that obliges readers first to work out the meaning of each in its own right, and then to consider how each relates to the direction of his argument.

Two factors complicate this operation, however. As A. explains at *Confessions* 5.14.24, he became convinced that the meaning of the Old Testament was primarily allegorical. And so even a reader who successfully parsed the literal meaning of his excerpts would in many cases not understand what A. thought was meant by them without further guidance. A good illustration is his treatment of Psalm 4 at 9.4.8–11, which is not easily comprehensible unless one knows what he wrote about Psalm 4 in *Expositions of the psalms*.

The passage from John's gospel just quoted reveals one last hurdle in the way of reckoning with A.'s use of Scripture. A.'s text refers to the Word God, born not from flesh and blood but from God. The generally accepted text of John, however, speaks of "sons of God" in the plural, meaning those who believe in Christ—those to whom Christ "gave power to become children of God, who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God," in the words of the Revised Standard Version. This discrepancy points to the important fact that there was no commonly accepted Latin translation of the Bible at the time when A. was writing. And in the case of the Old Testament especially, not only did Latin translations diverge, but the Greek versions from which they were made were themselves divergent. (A translation directly from the Hebrew did not become available until Saint Jerome began producing one during the same decade when A. was composing *Confessions*.) The consequence is that even a reader familiar with the Bible is apt to be baffled by many of A.'s quotations from it, in the Old Testament more often than in the New, and in the psalms more often than anywhere else.

3 RHETORIC AND STYLE IN *CONFESSIONS*

Although the language of the Bible contributes powerfully to the effect of *Confessions*, it does not outweigh effects that A. was able to obtain by exploiting the techniques of speech long taught in Roman schools. He has often been characterized as a "rhetorical writer," by which is meant that he employs an abundance of devices like personification and metaphor, alliteration, assonance, and rhyme, anaphora and antithesis, puns and epigrams, and paired phrases balanced in syntax and number

of syllables. These are a teacher of rhetoric's stock in trade, and A. had taught rhetoric for at least a decade before the conversion that led him to renounce his profession in 386. In rhetorical treatises, such devices are mostly classified as "figures of speech" or "figures of thought," and treated under the general heading of "elaboration" (*ornatus*).

Like biblical language, they are not evenly distributed across *Confessions*, which is noticeably more rhetorical on some pages than on others. Often they serve the practical function of punctuating A.'s narrative by drawing attention to words that close or open a segment of it. One of the more showy examples is the elaborate metaphor of a lost wayfarer stranded on a mountaintop that ends book 7. More subtle is a sentence which introduces A.'s account of his recovery from a bereavement: "times are not empty, nor do they roll passively over our senses: they create wondrous effects in the mind" (*non uacant tempora nec otiose uoluuntur per sensus nostros: faciunt in animo mira opera*, 4.8.13). But it comprises a personified (or animated) abstraction, antitheses of negative and positive and of sensation and thought, and a variation on A.'s recurrent metaphor of the river of human custom. Even very simple figures can serve as punctuating devices. In book 5, A. describes a deception that enabled him to prevent his mother from taking passage with him when he sailed from Carthage to Italy. The narrative ends with a glimpse of the two of them finally separated: his ship pulls out of the harbor, and "she went away to her old routines, and I to Rome" (*abiit ad solita et ego Romam*, 5.8.15).

To A.'s mind, however, such devices also served a larger purpose. In the fourth book of his essay *On Christian teaching*, he discusses what qualities he thinks make for effective church preaching, and not surprisingly, he approaches the question from the standpoint of what he knows about effective public oratory. Though disavowing any suggestion that the clergy should be trained in rhetoric, he says that when they speak, they do have to know how to fit their style to their objectives. And style he discusses in terms of the traits long distinguished by rhetoricians as the plain, middle, and grand styles. Following Cicero, A. holds that an effective speaker will have recourse to all three styles even within a single discourse. But the grand style draws most of his attention. As models of Christian eloquence, he analyzes several passages from Saint Paul and the prophets. He breaks them down into the phrase units which rhetoricians termed "commata," "cola," and "periods," and he shows that many of the phrases take the form of rhetorical figures. And again he follows Cicero in linking them with the grand style, and treating it as a means of rousing the emotions (*affectus*) in order to impel the mind to action.

A.'s discussion of style in *On Christian teaching* is consistent with his practice in *Confessions*, even though it was written many years later. It explains the rise and fall of rhetorical temperature as he shifts mode between prayer,

meditation, narrative, and argument, and it provides a rationale for the proliferation of figures in certain passages. Above all, it connects his style with the effect he says he was aiming for at *Confessions* 11.1.1: "Why, then, do I set out the narratives of so many things for you [God]? … I am rousing my own emotion toward you, and that of those who read these things, so that we may all say 'the Lord is great and greatly to be praised'" (*cur ergo tibi tot rerum narrationes digero? … affectum meum excito in te, et eorum qui haec legunt, ut dicamus omnes "magnus dominus et laudabilis ualde"*).

Another stylistic refinement that A. discusses in *On Christian teaching* is the use of metrically patterned cadences at the end of phrases and sentences. Though he notes their absence from the Latin Bible, he acknowledges his own use of them at 4.20.41. And *Confessions* has been shown to reproduce the same quantitative rhythms as are found in Cicero's works (examples are set out in Zwierlein 2002).

4 BOOK DIVISIONS AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN *CONFESSIONS*

The book divisions of *Confessions*—which reflect A.'s own organization of his text, not that of a later editor—are strikingly uneven. The mean length of a book would be a little over 6,000 words. But the nine narrative books are on average shorter than that and the three interpretative books are longer, while the hinge between them, book 10, dwarfs all others at over 11,000 words. Even the narrative books vary in length, ranging from book 2 at under 3,000 words to book 9 at more than double that number. It is equally clear that the length of books is not proportionate to the segments of A.'s life that they track. The short book 2 covers only about one year of his life. But so do books 6 (about 5,500 words), 7 (6,000 words), 8 (5,700 words), and 9 (6,100 words), and they are all longer than books 3 (3,900 words) and 4 (5,100 words), which cover stretches of about four years and nine years respectively.

At various points, A. divides his past into periods of infancy (*infantia*), boyhood (*pueritia*), adolescence (*adulescentia*), and youth (*iuuentus*). He mentions particular episodes as having occurred when he was 18 years old (3.4.7), 20 (4.16.28), 26 or 27 (4.15.27), 28 (5.3.3), or 30 (6.11.18). He regrets more than once the nine years of his life he spent as an adherent of Manicheism (4.1.1, 5.6.10, 9.1.1). But with two exceptions, the structure of his narrative does not appear to be organized around such dates and periods. Book 2 he makes coterminous with his 16th year (2.2.4, 2.3.6, 2.6.12), and book 5 leads off with an event of his 29th year (5.3.3). Otherwise, however, books commence and end without being tied to dates that he mentions. And he mentions few dates to begin with. Although scholars like Courcelle 1968 and Perler 1969 have established a

chronology for most events in A.'s life, he himself assigns dates to no more than the handful just indicated. The fact that certain books of *Confessions* overlap, such as 3 and 4 or 6 and 7, also contributes to the blurring of its timeline, as do a number of flashbacks to earlier points in his narrative.

The paucity of dates in part reflects a paucity of reported events. A.'s self-presentation in *Confessions* is highly selective. Over the course of nine books covering thirty-three years, he chronicles relatively few episodes of his life—something on the order of 35, from large to very small. What he focuses on, whether large or small, are experiences that he can interpret; almost nothing in *Confessions* passes without interpretation, explicit or implicit. The most famous stories that A. tells, like the theft of pears in book 2, the death of a hometown friend in book 4, the desertion of his mother in book 5, and the conversion in the garden in book 8, do not involve complex, dramatic, or lengthy actions. They owe their elaboration to meanings he reads into them. The same holds for small-scale stories, like one he relates about meeting a Milanese beggar in book 6.

Furthermore, it is important to the way *Confessions* is constructed that A. does not view these and other events of his life in isolation from one another, or their meanings as unrelated. As he says repeatedly, he believes (at least in retrospect) that all his experiences enacted a plan God had for him. At the narrative level, the all-encompassing pattern of meaning that he discerns becomes a pattern of themes and ideas. This is often expressed in correlations between different parts of *Confessions*, as in the theme of rest which is sounded both at the outset and at the end of it: "our heart is restless until it rests in you" (*inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*) at 1.1.1, and "we hope that we shall rest in your great consecration" (*nos requieturos in tua grandi sanctificatione speramus*) at 13.38.53. But thematic patterns have often been noticed in the structure of individual books as well. Book 5 develops a contrast between A.'s disappointment with the Manichean bishop Faustus at the beginning and his enthusiasm for the Christian bishop Ambrose at the end. His narrative of his conversion in book 8 is balanced by a series of parallel conversion stories that precede it. The account of his new birth as a baptized Christian in book 9 is juxtaposed with recollections of the death of four persons close to him. The brevity of book 2 has as its cause the fact that the actions to be told in it have been reduced to only two: A.'s discovery of sexuality in the first half and the theft of pears in the second; here he is likely to have had in mind the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, which also coupled a theft of fruit with new consciousness of sex. A.'s readers might have been made all the more aware of such correspondences if *Confessions* circulated in the codex format which by the late fourth century was replacing the book roll (Gamble 1995: 49–81). One of the great advantages of the codex was that it allowed for easy navigation between one point in a text and another.