Introduction

Augustine's *confessio* brings "an invisible God almost unbearably close."[1] God's presence gives his testimony the urgency and earnestness of an eye-witness recounting under oath what God has done with him. His theology has an existential feel so much so that Karl Jaspers says that Augustine thinks with his "blood."[2] He witnesses to the values and beliefs that created him and that he lived to the full. The immediacy and intensity of his witness still commands a hearing, so that the *Confessions* are still read by an audience wider than patristic scholars, philologists, historians, philosophers, and theologians. Other than the Scriptures, and liturgical, devotional, and mystical writings (whose genres the *Confessions* in part share), they are, perhaps, the only pre-Reformation Christian texts from the Latin West read by anyone other than these specialists.

The *Confessions* hold our attention even though what Augustine confesses is alien to our secular world. Viewing Augustine as a confessor, as a witness telling the story of his life, does not mean bringing him closer to us but, as Walter Benjamin says of the storyteller, "increases our distance from him. Viewed from a certain distance, the … outlines which define the storyteller stand out … just as in a rock a human head or an animal's body may appear to an observer at the proper distance and angle of vision."[3] Distance makes the traditional outline of a confessor visible in Augustine. In the main stream of our culture, we rarely meet people with the ability to confess. Fundamentalist subcultures cherish the ability but are unable to witness outside of the circle of their in-group. When they do, their testimony is received with general embarrassment and growing incomprehension. The ability to exchange religious experience, which was a secure possession for Augustine and his contemporaries, has been lost. With less and less experience to communicate to our culture, the religious world grows silent.

In the silence, we hear Augustine witnessing. His alien voice can still speak to us, but we miss the freshness with which it spoke to his contemporaries. His *Confessions* resonate with reasons of the heart, disciplined thought, a community lovingly participating in ideas, and a tradition of rhetoric deriving from the Latin classics, Platonism, and the Psalms. In his great work of art, Augustine testifies with learned self-consciousness, gives counsel, and tells the story in which he won his wisdom. We are still drawn to Augustine the storyteller:

> The storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel – not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others …). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. This is the basis of the incomparable aura about the storyteller … The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.[4]

The righteousness we encounter in Augustine is strange, his counsel alien. His teachings on original sin, grace, election and predestination, and authority are all alien to the ethos of the modern university. Its strangeness could be its attraction. But his testimony has been drowned in cultural noise so that even his confessional voice begins to fade. The Enlightenment and its modern and late modern heirs have interposed themselves between him and us, making his voice alien but not exotic, stale as belonging to last year's speech.

I have searched for ways to bring him closer, to bridge the gap, so that I could hear his *Confessions* with the same shocking freshness it had for his contemporaries. I thought that if I had the means to cross-examine his testimony, to call him as a witness before the bar of modernity and our late modernity, I could see why for more than a thousand years his *Confessions* were the high watermark of a self-conscious and dominant confessional tradition. Why for the medievals Augustine is simply the Master: "Magister dixit …"[5] Why, down through the ages, his "brethren" believed that he, above all others, speaks rightly of God.

I turned to the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Although critical in particulars, Ricoeur has sympathy for Augustine's thought. If Ricoeur is close to any theological tradition, that tradition must surely be Augustine's.[6] But it is also true that Ricoeur identifies himself as a philosopher and not as a theologian. So I turned to Ricoeur primarily for philosophical aid. I thought Ricoeur's philosophy might provide the witness stand on which I might conduct a theological cross-examination of Augustine's testimony.

In common with all testimony, Augustine's is defeasible. Defeasibility makes Augustine's testimony amenable to cross-examination and contestation. If we are to hear Augustine witness today with the freshness that it had for his contemporaries, it must undergo the crisis of false testimony. To expose any falsity I introduce, following Ricoeur, the critical methods and philosophical insights of Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and their descendants, plus the internal critique of demythologization. The two critiques clear a common ground and open up a shared interval of interrogation, where, I hope, Augustine may share his experience of God with us as he did with his contemporaries.

It may be helpful to identify my approach by way of a contrast. Imagine a community of scholarly contemporary Augustinian Christians who have grown weary of antiquarian attachment to the lost Augustinian consensus and the doomed attempt to answer the secular critique with a revamped Augustinianism. What then would be their approach to Augustine, and who is their audience? I imagine that, as a community of fellow seekers, they would examine the history of their current religious attachments, their heritage, handed down in the Augustinian language that 'spoke them before they spoke it.' Though certainly not a "view from nowhere," their authorial identity would not help their modern readers to understand the "where" of their Augustinian identity and so to understand the criteria for deciding what they would retain of Augustine's thought for their current Augustinian identity. They would have difficulty explaining on what grounds they decide to include, reject, or perhaps even exclude from consideration certain, though infrequent, parts of Augustine's thought. For example, as professors, they might wisely heed their own and, among others, their female students' indignation at Augustine's attitude to women and his treatment of his mistress. They would make expert appeal to the best exegetical, sociological, and historical methods. Their response, mind, would owe nothing to secularism – they are faithful to their Augustinianism. In this book, I do exactly the reverse. I use, in so far as I am able, the same methods, but, additionally, by identifying Ricoeur's theory of marriage and sexuality, for example, I examine Augustine's attitude to marriage and treatment of his mistress. I rely on Ricoeur's philosophy to identify "where" I stand when I call Augustine and his witness for cross-examination by modern and late modern thinkers – Freud, Nietzsche, and their heirs – to indict and to exculpate, to deconstruct and to reappropriate. But, and this is the main difference between my putative Augustinian teachers and myself, I am not declaring for or against "an Augustinian Christian" identity. I am claiming as my authorial identity, and here I am proud to be in their company, that of an Augustinian scholar – a much less existential

and, possibly, less interesting identity. I am writing for those, including my fellow scholars, and building on their cumulative erudition, who are trying to understand how Augustine's original readers – his "brethren" (along with the word's gender chauvinism) – received Augustine's shocking new testimony, which superseded the religious attachments and heritage of Augustine's own contemporaries. If my work also resonates with modern Augustinian Christians, I will be doubly grateful.

Although this book introduces alien categories to Augustine's thought, I respect the integrity of Augustine's experience by examining the texts in which his theology is documented in ways that are faithful, in so far as I am able, to the best exegetical and historical traditions of Augustinian studies. I try to follow Ricoeur's interpretive maxim which aims not at "an interpretation *of* the text or an interpretation *about* the text, but an interpretation *in* the text and *through* the text."[7] Only then will I introduce such deconstructive and recuperative methods as Freudian and Nietzschian suspicion, Hegelian phenomenology, or Kantian dialectic. My purpose has been to create a common ground where Augustine may speak. My hope is that the reader will have the same reaction as one anonymous reviewer who thought that my "use of Ricoeur appears as more instrumental, than categorical."

I identify five sets of problems where Augustine's testimony has become incredible for the modern reader. The idea of testimony itself is the first casualty (Chapter 1). Augustine believes that his *Confessions* can yield an experience of God if his hearers are willing to accept testimony as evidence (10.3.3–4), but "we immediately see the enormity of the paradox that the philosophy of testimony evokes. 'Does one have the right … to invest with an absolute character a moment of history [such as Augustine's conversion narrative]?' "[8] Modernity's scientific rigor and our historical and cultural pluralism have rendered us ever less willing to accept such evidence. Reliance on the self-sufficiency of reason – autarky – still characterizes modern and late modern philosophy despite the trenchant critique of the self-founding claims of reflexive or positivist philosophies.

Disbelief – where Augustine's " 'available believable' " (*croyable disponible)* has become our "unavailable believable," so to speak; where his "natural believable" has become our unnatural, discredited believable in "the *false scandal* of a cultural vehicle which is no longer ours"[9] – also clusters around the content of Augustine's testimony. His testimony to a rewarding and punishing father God with its penal view of salvation is discredited as religious neurosis. This is the subject of Chapter 2. Religious narcissism coupled with pessimism, ascetical detachment, and salvation, with its consoling sense of an ending, form a third node of incredulity – the subject of Chapter 3. The

doctrines of original sin, election, and predestination constitute Augustine's response to the problems of evil and suffering. These doctrines have been largely discredited and discarded, and along with them his theodicy – Chapters 4–9. Finally, on Augustine's resurrection ideal of a celibate, male community – marriage versus celibacy – along with the Christian sense of an ending with its consoling plot which acts as a vital lie, see Chapters 10 and 11. The eleven chapters of this book correspond to eleven specific places where the culturally incredible has made it difficult and, for many, even impossible to hear his testimony. By clearing these obstacles, these chapters aim to reconnect the narrative of his testimony and make it possible to follow his confessional story as his first readers followed along. By renewing the connections, I hope to present Augustine the storyteller and his righteousness to an age in which confessing is largely discredited.

1

Confessio

THE LYRICAL LIFE

Augustine's *confessio* draws on several genres: praise, hymn, lyric, lamentation, and repentance. It unites speculation with scriptural exegesis and exhortation with testimony, soliloquy with wisdom. *Confessio* culminates in the self-portrait of Augustine the bishop, seeker after wisdom, exegete, philosopher-theologian, seated in his study at Hippo Regius, immersed in these diverse genres as he writes his *Confessions* within the narrative of salvation history. When these *Confessions* are read aloud, as at Paulinus of Nola's dinner table or by the brethren at Hippo, they advance that history by creating the confessing community.

Confessio unites existentially the speculative and reflexive thought of the philosophers with the testimony of scripture to create a new rhetoric.[1] For ten books, Augustine's testimony recalls a moral and intellectual asceticism elevating the soul to affirm and to touch the immutable God. His ascetical ascent retraces the steps he had learned in Milan from Ambrose and his circle, but his ascent prompts an affirmation that cannot sustain itself as a purely internal act of the soul. Ineffable, the affirmation cannot be expressed externally; transcendent, the affirmation cannot be maintained internally. The affirmation can only be avowed inasmuch as the ascent becomes an

In this chapter, I examine Augustine's use of *confessio* in the light of Ricoeur's concept of testimony in Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," David Stewart and Charles E. Reagan (trans.), Lewis S. Mudge (ed.), *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 119–54); Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, Kathleen Blamey (trans.) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Paul Ricoeur, "Emmanuel Levinas, Thinker of Testimony," *Figuring the Sacred*, pp. 108–26. To my knowledge, Ricoeur has not applied his concept of testimony to the *Confessions* or any other work of Augustine.

incarnational descent: "weary at last [of trying to ascend to the One] they [the proud Platonists of Book 7] might cast themselves down upon His [Christ's] humanity and rise again in its rising" (7.18.24).[2]

What sort of an affirmation is in play? Is this a mystical experience? Or is Augustine a failed mystic? John Kenney distinguishes between what contemporary phenomenologists of mysticism, following William James, are looking for and what Augustine seeks. The phenomenologists want to know "what was actually experienced by the mystic."[3] Kenney says that "focusing only on the episodic aspects is an act of distortion. To understand why any of this mattered to Augustine, indeed to comprehend what meaning these visions had, one must place the theology of the accounts at the center of one's efforts."[4]

Augustine uses the mystical ascents recounted in Book 7 to make two theological points. First, Augustine is advancing an epistemic argument against the Manicheans. He has been in debate with the Manicheans since Book 4 and will continue this debate on into Book 9 and beyond. In Book 7, Augustine tells how he frees himself from Manichean materialism. Materialism, Augustine says, was the chief cause of his theological errors concerning the nature of God and evil. The two Plotinian ascents of Book 7 (7.10.16 and 7.20.26) are an "epistemic success," "introduced as a conclusive antidote to Manichean materialism.... Platonic transcendentalism receives more than just notional assent; it is discovered by the contemplative soul to be true, and Manichaeism to be false."[5] *Confessions* 7.10.16 is not "an abortive effort at ecstatic union with the One, but rather ... a prolonged meditation of the incipience of transcendence in the soul, the quiet dawning of spiritual latency."[6]

In Book 7, Augustine discovers that the absolute affirmation of God as truth is an experience mediated by finite judgment: "Enquiring then what was the source of my judgment, when I did so judge ["things mutable"] I had discovered the immutable and true eternity of truth above my changing mind" (7.17.23). Augustine's discovery of the source of judgment mediates the absolute:

> Thus in a thrust of a trembling glance my mind arrived at that which Is.[7] Then indeed I saw clearly Your 'invisible things which are understood by the things that are made'; but I lacked the strength to hold my gaze fixed, and my weakness was beaten back again so that I returned to my old habit, bearing nothing with me but a memory of delight. (7.17.23)

Mutable things, external things are just that; they mediate "That which Is" in hope of something better, something immutable. Augustine's experience of the absolute conveys delight and desire: "I returned ... bearing nothing with

me but a memory of delight [*amantem memoriam*] and a desire as for something of which I had caught the fragrance but which I had not yet the strength to eat" (7.17.23).

Second, with his claim that he "had not yet the strength to eat," Augustine is making a moral point against the Neoplatonists. James O'Donnell says, "It is not that he discovered that the Plotinian method did not work (that is Courcelle's position in essence); he discovered that it did work, and that it was not enough."[8] It fell short on two counts, one moral and the other salvific: "If Plotinian ascent is disappointing, how then is God to be reached? The moral renovation of the individual through direct contact with Christ (in the garden scene at 8.12.29 and in baptism at 9.6.14), prepares the way for a more fully satisfactory ascent – fleeting and frustrating but full of hope of permanence beyond."[9] Plotinian ecstasy "allowed the pilgrim soul to encounter the transcendent world," but despite the Plotinian "doctrine of the soul's undescended aspect," the soul's moral weakness meant that Plotinian ecstasy failed salvifically, offering only "perception without access, vision without restoration, presumption without confession."[10]

The mystical ascent in Book 9, at Ostia, makes an additional two very different theological points. The first of these (my third theological theme overall) is already hinted at by O'Donnell when he describes the visions of Book 7 as "fleeting and frustrating but full of hope of permanence beyond."[11] The ascents in Book 7 are inefficacious[12] inasmuch as they cannot give him the strength to eat: "Eucharist is 'the food that I was incapable of taking' – as clear an indication as one could want that Augustine sees his problem at this moment in his life as arising from his inability to participate in Christian liturgical worship."[13] "So," Augustine says, "I set about finding a way to gain the strength that was necessary for enjoying You" (7.18.24). He finds the strength in external testimony, in the reading of Scripture in the garden at Milan, in baptism, and in liturgical worship.[14] As a result, Augustine with Monica can, at Ostia, make the same ascent from the mutable to the immutable. Again, the experience of Wisdom is in the comparison and the judgment: "It simply is, for it is eternal: whereas 'to have been' and 'to be going to be' are not eternal. And while we were thus talking of this wisdom … we did for one instant attain to touch it" (9.10.24).[15]

At post-baptismal Ostia, real progress is possible; ten years later, Augustine the bishop makes the same ascetical ascent as often as he has the time: "And all this I do often; for it gives me pleasure and whenever I can relax from the duties necessity lays upon me, I have recourse to this same pleasure" (10.40.65).[16] In his search for God, Augustine ascends via the testimony of created things. He interrogates "the whole frame of the universe …

and it answered … 'I am not He but He made me'" (10.6.9). Nor can he, by turning inward, find God in his memory as the Neoplatonists claimed, in the "innermost seat of my mind" because memory too "suffers change." He asks God "In what place then did I find You to learn of You? For You were not in my memory, before I learned of You. Where then did I find you to learn of You save in Yourself, above myself?" God dwells in himself as truth: "You, who are Truth, reside everywhere to answer all … and in one act reply" (10.26.37); "You are that unfailing Light which I consulted upon all these things [that he remembers], as to whether they are, and what they are and what they are worth" (10.40.65). As truth, he says to God, "I trusted You.… You did touch me, and I have burned for Your peace" (10.27.38). Whenever, he can relax from his duties, he has "recourse to this same pleasure" (10.40.65), to "this true happiness" (10.23.33) so that "all that is scattered in me is brought into one" (10.40.65). The joy can be very intense: "And sometimes you admit me to a state of mind that I am not ordinarily in, a kind of delight which could it ever be made permanent in me would be hard to distinguish from the life to come" (10.40.65). All this is "full of hope of permanence beyond."[17] Augustine uses "a different theistic grammar than that of Plotinus"[18] to describe the Vision of Ostia. At Ostia, Platonic metaphysics is used to describe Christian contemplation, but God is "distinct from the soul … not the reassuring discovery of the presence of the One at the depth of the soul … instead profoundly disquieting, exhibiting the soul's state as a contingent and fallen being." However, there is Christian "reassurance … as the soul discerns the voice of God calling at its depth. The God who calls from afar is also attentive to the soul's plight.… Augustine succeeds in discovering a God of Being and of Love, whose existence he will never be able thereafter to doubt."[19]

Although we call the ascent at Ostia the Vision of Ostia, Augustine himself uses the metaphor of "touch" – the Touch of Ostia. McGinn observes that despite the visual context, "what is remarkable in the two parallel descriptions" of ascent in Book 7 also "is the way in which he piles up metaphors taken from the senses of touch and of hearing rather than that of seeing to try to describe what took place."[20] At Ostia, Augustine says that while he and his mother were talking about the eternal Wisdom, "we did for one instant attain to touch it" (9.10.24). Augustine immediately adds that the "weight" of his "imperfections" makes his happiness temporary: "I am swallowed up by things customary: I am bound, and I weep bitterly, but I am bitterly bound" (10.40.65). Here are two important caveats: this bondage, and the stripping away that it requires, plus "touching" rather than "seeing," are together the second theological theme of the Vision of Ostia – together they are my fourth

theological theme. Commenting on Psalm 99, McGinn, paraphrasing Augustine, says that "we, like blind persons, do not have the eyes to see him.... Augustine's language here abandons the spiritual sense of sight to emphasize the other spiritual senses. Only such experiential contact with God can produce the higher form of knowledge that perceives that we can really say nothing about him."[21]

The "touch" affirming the absolute, the "delight" mediated in judgment, strips away so that "all other visions so different [are] quite taken away,[22] and this one [of the eternal Wisdom] should so ravish and absorb and wrap the beholder in inward joys that his life should eternally be such as that one moment of understanding for which we had been sighing" (9.10.25). Monica's question, which concludes the scene at Ostia – "What then am I doing here?" (9.10.26) – flows quite naturally from the experience of being stripped away from passing things and anticipates her imminent death. The absolute affirmation of true happiness in mediated immediacy constitutes a stripping away, but this stripping has taken the form of a long journey. On the first step in his itinerary, Augustine, the seeker, must, with St. Paul, ethically "put off" the old nature and speculatively renounce the unaided search for mystical ecstasy. Christian worship is the necessary aid for, unlike Plotinus, Augustine needs a savior.

This first stripping away anticipates a second divestment. Augustine claims to touch God and not to see God. If by seeing we mean understanding, then we must heed van Bavel's caution. Augustine, van Bavel says, excludes the possibility of a positive apprehension of God: "The word *apprehensio*, which means 'to grasp' or 'to understand,' seems to me inappropriate in this context, for Augustine always denies that we can apprehend God."[23] What kind of understanding is achieved through the sense of "touch"? Van Bavel replies that Augustine "uses the term *attingere* (to touch, or to come in contact with), which expresses, rather, a real relationship between the human person and God."[24]

Augustine uses all his considerable rhetorical resources with the aim of revealing the God who is beyond our knowledge, "a revealed Unknowable," in which "the order of positive language has to be changed into a positivity of ignorance. God has the initiative in a knowledge of which the human being is not the master. What does matter is to learn how one does not know."[25] The "emptying out of every kind of representation" means that our seeking intellect knows God only by "*attingere*," by touching and coming into contact; by "*conjiciens*, i.e., seeing by conjecturing;" and as "*palpans*, i.e., seeking one's way by touch," seeking "gropingly without seeing."[26] These three ways of knowing are the way of *learned unknowing* (*docta ignorantia*[27]).