

I Title, Time, and Circumstances of Composition: The Genesis of the *Confessions*

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Augustine lived through two imperial dynasties, the Valentinian (364–392) and the Theodosian (392–455), and eleven emperors (counting both east and west). The *Confessions* describes events from the year 354 when he was born in North Africa, until 386 when he was baptized, shortly before the death of his mother Monnica. It was completed and published a decade or more after the events it described, but nothing is known for certain about the process of its composition. This prompts questions about the relationship between history and memory – the writer as recorder of events, and the author as protagonist, in the text – which complicate the task of interpretation.

THE AUTHOR OF THE *CONFESSIONS*

The originality of the work is difficult to overstate. Augustine's modern biographer, Peter Brown, describes the *Confessions* as an "astounding novelty" written by a man who "felt compelled to reveal himself."¹ His conversion to Catholic Christianity in 386, which led to the composition of this *sui generis* work, was – so Augustine claims – partly prompted by the story of another conversion, that of Antony of Egypt a century before (*conf.* 8.6.14). That story was written in the third person (supposedly by the fourth-century Greek bishop and theologian, Athanasius). The gulf between such third-person biographical writing and the *Confessions* is wide, while earlier texts narrated in the first person focused on iconic deaths, not human self-discovery. No literary forebear comes close, in terms of genre, to Augustine's story of his birth and growth into Christianity. Although the text is written in the first person, as (for the most part) a dialogue between the author and God, the *Confessions* is not an autobiography. It is not even a *bios*, a birth-to-

¹ P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, a new ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 153.

12 Carolyn Hammond

death story of a distinguished or inspiring individual. In terms of narrative scope it is more akin to the *Iliad* than to the *Odyssey*; a diagnostic slice through a whole, not a comprehensive narrative.

Understanding what the *Confessions* is begins with how Augustine himself described it (not only in the years that followed its composition, but also toward the end of his life); and what he may have meant when he chose to call it by that name. The text's range carries readers beyond any stated or presumed "authorial intention" into disciplines not even invented in the author's own time, such as psychology. Yet, authorial intention, although only one aspect of the meaning of any work of art, remains a vital one. The aim, therefore, is to orientate readers of the *Confessions* as to what Augustine's careful linguistic choices (he was, after all, a professor of rhetoric) were meant to evoke in them. This will clarify why he wrote what he did when he did – the timing and circumstances of the *Confessions* composition, intended influence, and dissemination. Referring to the *Confessions* as a "book" (*liber*, *uolumen* – a book in scroll form, not a *codex*) that has been "published" could be misleading: in the ancient world, "publication" meant that an author's composition had been recorded in writing, and read aloud and/or copied for others to read, and was therefore *editus*, "in the public realm," without further authorial rights over the work. Its chances of survival depended on its being copied and so disseminated further.²

The author of the *Confessions* is famous enough to be known by the single name "Augustine" (abbreviated in English antique theological writings to "Austin"). While a *praenomen* "Decimus" (often attached to premodern editions) can be dismissed as a corruption of *doctor* or *dominus*, the *nomen*, "Aurelius," which attaches to his name in many of the best manuscripts, is not so easily disposed of. If he did have a *praenomen*, no convincing record of it survives. There is good reason to suppose, however, that the *nomen* "Aurelius" is as authentic as it is unimportant. Salway refers to the "edict known as the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, by which the emperor Caracalla granted all free subjects Roman citizenship in A.D. 212"; it bestowed the name "Aurelius" on all persons thus enfranchised, and their descendants.³ By Augustine's time it would have been invisible by reason of its very ubiquity. Other

² See J. J. Phillips, "Atticus and the Publication of Cicero's Works," *The Classical World* 79 (1986), 227–237; cf. R. Winsbury, *The Roman Book: Books, Publishing and Performance in Classical Rome* (London: Duckworth, 2009).

³ B. Salway, "What's in a Name? A Survey of Roman Onomastic Practice from c. 700 B.C. to A.D. 700," *Journal of Roman Studies* 84 (1994), 124–145, at 131.

Title, Time, and Circumstances of Composition 13

writers were content to refer to him only by the name "Augustinus," which – insofar as the Roman system of *tria nomina* is relevant at this date – would have been his *cognomen*. De la Bonnardière's attempt to dismiss the *nomen* "Aurelius" as a corruption based on a misreading leaps from a persuasive case that a text of Orosius has been mispunctuated⁴ to a less convincing thesis that the *nomen* has, by fallacious attribution, infected the texts of other works.⁵

The names of Augustine's closest relations also attract interest: they point to a more polyglot hinterland than the thoroughly Roman text of the *Confessions* seems to indicate. Although his father's name "Patricius" has a grand Roman resonance, his mother's, "Monnica," points to a Punic origin; as does the name Augustine chose for his own son – Adeodatus. Adams explains it as a calque of a Punic name, either *Iatanba'al* or *Mutunba'al* ("Baal-has-given," or "Gift-of-Baal"), "Baal" being the Punic word for "Lord," a divine descriptor.⁶

CONTEXT AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF COMPOSITION

Toward the end of his life, in 427, Augustine declared his intention of surveying all his writings to date, and commenting on flaws or weaknesses in them:

(1) I should not put off reviewing my modest output [*opuscula mea*], whether books, letters or theses, with a kind of forensic rigor [*iudiciaria severitate*], marking down whatever I now dissent from, as with a censor's pen ... (3) I will even include what I wrote when I was still a catechumen ... still puffed up in the way of secular writings [*saecularium litterarum inflatus consuetudine*] ... Perhaps the reader will discover how my writing has progressed [*quomodo scribendo profecerim*], if they read this modest output in the order in which it was written [*ordine quo scripta sunt*]. (Augustine, *retr.* Prol. 1 and 3)

⁴ "The fathers ... who are now at rest: Cyprian, Hilary, and Ambrose ... and those still living: Aurelius[,] Augustine, and Jerome" (Orosius, *Liber Apologeticus* 1).

⁵ Cf. M. M. Gorman, "Aurelius Augustinus: The Testimony of the Oldest Manuscripts of Saint Augustine's Works," *Journal of Theological Studies* 35 (1984), 475–480.

⁶ Punic was a language of migrants from the eastern end of the Mediterranean (Phoenicia) who had colonized western areas like the northern coast of Africa centuries before (see J. N. Adams, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], 238–240). He notes that Augustine's friend Quodvultdeus has a similarly calqued name.

14 Carolyn Hammond

This work, *Retractationes*,⁷ has its own claim to be *sui generis* alongside the *Confessions*, not least for its novel thesis that there is something to be learned from tracing the chronological unfolding of an author's oeuvre. What he says in *Retractationes* about the *Confessions* not only helps to date that work, but also makes explicit some of its aims and even achievements. It was the sixth book he wrote after his consecration as a bishop, an event that probably took place in 395. In *retr.* 2.6, before explaining two passages that he now finds unsatisfactory, he states:

The thirteen books of my own confessions/*Confessions*,⁸ and about my evil and good deeds [*de malis et de bonis meis*], praise God as righteous and good; and they enthuse the human mind and emotion [*humanum intellectum et affectum*] towards God. At any rate, so far as I am concerned, this was how they operated in me when I was writing them [*hoc in me egerunt cum scriberentur*] and how they affect the people who read them [*et agunt cum leguntur*]. What others may feel about them, is their business; but I do know that they have delighted many of my brothers, and continue to delight them. From book one to book ten they are about me [*de me scripti sunt*]; the other three books are about the holy Scriptures, from where it is written "In the beginning God made heaven and earth" [Gen 1:1] up to "rest on the seventh day" [Gen 2:2].

That first sentence gives a content-based descriptor for the work: thirteen books of "confessions." Augustine also provided a more traditional kind of title, an incipit, as he did for every book referred to in *Retractationes*: "This work begins, 'Great are you, O Lord' [*Hoc opus sic incipit: magnus es, domine*]." So we know that he himself had two ways of referring to his *paruum opus*; either by its incipit, or as "the books of my confessions." It is noteworthy that he remarks on the effect reading his confessions/*Confessions* has, not only on other readers, but also on himself: whether he is referring to the work in its final form, or to the divine praises it contains (and so his original experience of uttering them, rather than the later one of recording them), is not clear.

The position of the *Confessions* within *Retractationes*, then, gives a narrow window for relative dating. The *terminus ante quem* is set by

⁷ It should be translated not as *Retractions*, but as *Revisions* or *Recensions*.

⁸ Because there is no distinction between upper- and lower-case letters in early manuscripts, only context can show whether Augustine has the title (*Confessions*) or contents ("confessions") in mind.

Title, Time, and Circumstances of Composition 15

Retractationes' following item, a reference to Augustine's thirty-three books against Faustus the Manichaean written between 397 and 401.⁹ The relative importance of that work in Augustine's early output is signaled by its length, and by references to the dangerous teachings of the Manichaean bishop and teacher in the *Confessions* (*conf.* 5.3.3; cf. 6.11.18; 7.9.13). The *terminus post quem* is set first by a work no longer extant, and before that by the first three of his four books *De doctrina Christiana* (*On Teaching Christianity*).¹⁰ These were composed in 395–396. It is at least possible that the incomplete state of *De doctrina Christiana*¹¹ and the beginning of composing the *Confessions* are interrelated. The detached, analytical approach to Scripture of the former made way for a spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and – above all – *personal* approach in the latter.

The *Confessions* could, therefore, have been composed as late as 400–401. But if the relationship between Augustine's breaking off from writing *De doctrina Christiana* and his starting on the *Confessions* is given weight, it pushes the probable date back to 396 or 397. The fact of his having been baptized ten years before 396 might add a little weight to the earlier dating. More persuasive is the case O'Donnell makes in his commentary for 397, on the grounds that, at the time of writing the *Confessions*, Augustine seems to have been unaware that Ambrose had died, and Simplicianus had succeeded him as bishop of Milan, in April 397. Not so compelling is O'Donnell's suggestion that on rhetorical and stylistic grounds the whole text "must" have been composed as a single unit at a single time.

The question of dating is complicated because limited external evidence encourages conclusions based also on theories about what the text is intended to be, and how it is intended to be read; as well as conjectures about the genesis of the text in its final form. So working from the theory that parts of the text have a separate origin in a history centered on Augustine's friend Alypius;¹² or that Books 1–10 and 11–13 (or 1–9 and 10–13; or 1–9, 10, and 11–13) were originally separate, can lead to different views of when the act of writing began; and how the

⁹ Augustine's *Contra Faustum* was written between 398 and 400 (*retr.* 2.7).

¹⁰ *Retr.* 2.4. The first phase of composition broke off before the end of Book 3, which was then completed together with Book 4, in 426.

¹¹ It is not the incompleteness that is atypical of Augustine's writings, but the decision to go back decades later and finish what he had earlier set aside.

¹² P. Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Boccard, 1968), 31–36; cf. J. J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), vol. 2, 360–362.

16 Carolyn Hammond

text is interpreted. Augustine himself suggested a 1–10/11–13 book division (*retr.* 2.6); but for a modern reader the text reaches a more natural cadence at the end of Book 9, when the story of his growth into Christianity ends. It is marked by a *sphragis*,¹³ and by its subject-matter – the death of Monnica – which brought the period of the author's Christian adolescence to an end as he left behind his mentor to grow up into mature Christian independence. Book 10 then effects the transition from microcosm to macrocosm. This can still be understood as following Augustine's own division of the *Confessions*: for in Book 10 he lays bare his thinking at the actual time of writing. As he lets go of what lies behind and reaches forward to what lies ahead, he furnishes readers with a cluster of confession-terminology, such as is scattered throughout the text (as a unifying explanatory factor), but never in greater density than here:

I want to accomplish [truth] in my heart, in making my confession openly before you [God] [*in corde meo coram te in confessione*]; but with my pen I want to do so before many witnesses [*coram multis testibus*]. (conf. 10.1.1)

I have already declared the benefits which have brought about my confession to you ... When I am bad, confessing to you is nothing more than dissatisfaction with myself: whereas when I am devout, confessing to you is nothing more than not giving myself the credit for it ... So my confession to you, O my God, is made silently in your sight, and yet not silently [*tacite ... et non tacite*]: it is a silence without uproar, but it resounds with affection [*tacet enim strepitu, clamat affect*]. (10.2.2)

What have I to do with other people, that they hear my confessions [*audiant confessiones meas*], as if they are going to cure all my weaknesses? (10.3.3)

I too, Lord, will therefore go on confessing to you so that others can hear [*ut audiant homines*]. (10.3.3)

When the confessions of my past misdeeds [*confessiones praeteritorum malorum meorum*] – which you have forgiven and covered to make me glad in you, changing my soul through faith and your sacrament – are read about and heard [*cum leguntur et*

¹³ Or "seal" – a device familiar from Classical poetry, a brief element of self-revelation at the end of a work or, as here, a section of a work.

Title, Time, and Circumstances of Composition 17

audiuntur], they animate the heart, to stop it sleeping in despair and saying, "I can't!" [*ne dormiat in desperatione et dicat, non possum*].
 (10.4.4)

This torrent of confessing culminates in statements that confirm that Augustine is, albeit obliquely, telling readers why he is writing; and what he is writing – reflections that are taking place at the same time as they are being composed:

What good is it, my Lord (when each day my conscience makes confession to you [*cotidie confitetur conscientia mea*], more certain in its hope of your mercy than in its own lack of guilt), what good is it, I wonder, that in these writings I also make confession to other people in your presence [*hominibus coram te confiteor per has litteras*], not of what I have been, but of what I am now? . . . As for who I am now, at this time of [composing] my confessions [*in ipso tempore confessionum mearum*], look! There are plenty of people who want to know that . . . but their ear is not attuned to my heart, where I truly am whoever I am. They want, therefore, to listen to me confessing what I am deep within [*confitente me quid ipse intus sim*], in that place where neither eye nor ear nor mind can penetrate. (*conf.* 10.4.4)

Just a few lines later, he makes his most definite statement about the genesis of the work – "this is the harvest of my confessions [*fructus confessionum mearum*]"; and about its imagined audience – "I make this confession not only before you, but also in the hearing of those sons of men who are believers, companions in my joy and sharers in the transience of my humanity [*confitear non tantum coram te . . . sed etiam in auribus credentium filiorum hominum*]" (*conf.* 10.4.6). The opening of Book 10, then, is a reminder of the need to be sensitive to how the text is focalized: by distinguishing Augustine-the-narrator (within the text) and Augustine-the-historical-individual (composing the text). Beyond the meager external materials, and this complex internal material, there remains plenty of room for theorizing and conjecture, but none for certainty.

RESONANCES: TITLE AND CONTENT

Perhaps the most difficult of the introductory questions faced by the reader of the *Confessions* is the range of meanings of this firmly attested title – "thirteen books of [my] confessions/*Confessions*." That range

18 Carolyn Hammond

covers both the internals of the text (content, themes, and ideas) and also external referents – how to understand the terminology – *confiteor* and *confessio* and cognates – by comparison with other writings. Augustine had two types of literary model for his writing.

First, there were the Latin Classics, which influenced him in terms of style, diction, and genre; and which made up the whole of his formal education. His overall debt to Latin Classical¹⁴ literature has been comprehensively analyzed by Hagendahl.¹⁵ Going by frequency of reference, his chief influences for the *Confessions* are Virgil and Cicero: but they appear there as hooks on which to hang explorations of wisdom, and of the power of mythic narrative, so the debt is thematic rather than linguistic or literary.

Second, there were the holy writings of Christianity, both the canonical Scripture and early Christian writers conventionally known collectively as “the fathers.” These he encountered in church worship and in private reading.¹⁶ At that early period, before his encounter with Ambrose, bishop of Milan, he approached Scripture in the same way as he would have approached Classical writers of Latin prose, and judged them by the same standards:

Scripture seemed to me unworthy of comparison with the merit of Cicero's writings. My pomposity was repelled by its restraint, while my powers of perception could not penetrate its depths [*tumor . . . meus refugiebat modum eius et acies mea non penetrabat interiora eius*]. (*conf.* 3.5.9)

He was certainly sensitized by his education in rhetoric to stylistic and figurative features in the Latin Bible,¹⁷ and sometimes commented on them in that light.¹⁸ But, later on, for him Scripture came to stand apart, in a separate category from what we might call “literature,”¹⁹ as being of divine origin, and open to different interpretative criteria from other writings.

¹⁴ The conventional umbrella term for non-Christian literature of this period, “pagan,” is pejorative and misleading. No non-Christians of the late imperial period thought of themselves as “pagans.”

¹⁵ H. Hagendahl, *Augustine and the Latin Classics*, two vols., *Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia* 20 (Göteborg: Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1967).

¹⁶ Augustine, *conf.* 3.3.5 and 3.5.9.

¹⁷ The Bible version Augustine knew best was that known as the *Vetus Latina* (VL). He was unenthusiastic about Jerome's Vulgate (Vg).

¹⁸ E.g., Augustine, *doc. Chr.* 4.7.11, referring to Rm 5:3–5.

¹⁹ A term for which there is no precise equivalent in antiquity.

Title, Time, and Circumstances of Composition 19

Both these types of writing influenced his use of the term *confessio* and its cognates in the composition of the *Confessions*. It is generally clear from the context which resonance is uppermost in the text. The language of the *Confessions* is rich in features that would not be found in Ciceronian prose, but this should not be taken as evidence that Augustine's Latin was of a debased or vulgar type. Rather, the content (an intimate conversation) drives his choice of style and diction.²⁰

As for the title itself, Ratzinger observed long since that in Classical sources the noun *confessio* has a predominantly negative flavor, indicating an admission of guilt, not praise.²¹ The positive sense of "declaration of praise," on the other hand, is "innate in the word's biblical usage."²² Verheijen produced an invaluable analysis of the language of the *Confessions*,²³ in which he drew attention to the equivalent Greek term within Scripture, *exhomologēsis*; a Greek text attributed to Origen points to the praise/sin range of meaning, "'Confession' means thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) and praising (*doxologia*). It also occurs in the sense of admitting sins."²⁴

A predominantly positive resonance, then, is the default in Scripture, with a clear equivalence between Latin *confessio* and Greek *exhomologēsis*. Augustine's contemporary, and sometimes correspondent, Jerome also drew attention to this lexical range:

"Who will confess [*confitetur*] you in hell?" In this verse "confession" is used not in the sense of repentance, but of glorification and praise [*non pro poenitentia sed pro gloria et laude accipitur*], such as we also read in the gospel, "I confess to you, Lord of heaven and earth." (Ps 6:6; Mt 11:25)²⁵

This double-meaning, *confessio*-positive and *confessio*-negative, provided Augustine with material for preaching on more than one occasion. In a sermon (c. 412), he took the same gospel text as Jerome to reflect on

²⁰ M. R. Arts, "The Syntax of the Confessions of Saint Augustine." PhD dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1927, 126–127.

²¹ J. Ratzinger, "Originalität und Überlieferung in Augustins Begriff der *confessio*," *REtAug* 3 (1957), 375–392, at 377. Unlike the compound verb *confiteor* ("I confess"), the simple verb form *fateor* retains the predominantly negative resonance of guilt (e.g., "I admit it, I know it [*fateor et scio*]" [*conf.* 1.5.6]).

²² O'Donnell, *Augustine Confessions*, vol. 2, 3; citing Verheijen's *Eloquentia Pedisequa* (see fn. 23).

²³ M. Verheijen, *Eloquentia Pedisequa: Observations sur le style des Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Nijmegen: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1949), 69.

²⁴ Origen(?), *Selecta in Psalmos* (PG 1653D–6A).

²⁵ Jerome, *Comm. in Is.* 11.38.16 (PL 24:394.16).

20 Carolyn Hammond

the meaning of confession. It is a passage worth quoting at length not only for that reflection, but also as a reminder that not everyone in his congregation was awake to the subtle distinctions in which he, and his fellow language-professionals, took delight, and detected meaning.

We find that when we read the word "confession" [*legimus confessionem*] in the Scriptures, we must not always understand it as a word for sinners [*peccatoris*] . . . Once, when the reader spoke the word, there followed the sound of you beating your breasts, though what you had actually heard was the Lord saying, "I confess [*confiteor*] to you, Father." At that precise word, "I confess," when it was uttered, you beat your breasts. But what does beating the breast mean, if not to make clear what is hidden in the breast, and by openly striking it to admonish the concealed sin? Why have you done this, if not because you heard "I confess to you, Father"? You certainly heard "I confess," but you did not pay attention to who is confessing [*qui confitetur, non attendistis*]! So pay attention now. If Christ said, "I confess," and Christ is completely free from every kind of sin, then [confession] is not an act of sinners only, but sometimes also of those who praise God. So whether we praise God, or admonish ourselves, we are "confessing." Both kinds of confession are devout [*pia est utraque confessio*], whether you censure yourself because you are not sinless; or whether you praise God, who has nothing to do with sin. (Augustine, *s.* 67.1)

Augustine's concern with verbal precision here is theological rather than lexical. Both here and elsewhere he stressed that if the noun *confessio* or the verb *confiteor* attach to Christ, who was without sin, the only meaning possible must be praise. For the reader of the *Confessions*, then, the question at issue is whether he would have chosen the title of his extraordinary book to evoke primarily the sense of Classical *confessio*, in which admission of sin predominates; or Christian *confessio*, in which laudatory acknowledgment of God predominates. There is a further usage of *confessio* in a Christian context, also positive, linked to confessions specifically of faith, declarations of belief, even creedal formulations.²⁶ That adds to the multivalence of the title, while drawing it further into the realm of the positive. Against this must be set the intratextual criterion of the emphasis within the *Confessions* on

²⁶ In this sense a Christian who maintains faith under torture or threat of death is called a "confessor."