

Humanities 2

Lecture 11

St. Augustine's Confessions and the theaters of desire: Books III, IV, V

REVIEW

St. Augustine: 354-430; product of Roman provincial, colonial education and cultural aspiration

Late Antiquity: the period from the Christianization of the Empire (312) to the advent of Islam (late 7th c); philosophical engagements with Platonic tradition; decline of Greek; peripheral figures who recast the central cultural narrative; rise of prose hagiography as a genre; rise of the CODEX as the vehicle for literacy;

Confessions: autobiography, prayer, philosophy, literature and criticism

The search for a voice: infancy to boyhood; education as memorizing and reciting; use of the Aeneid as template for learning and self-narration; use of the Psalms to establish spiritual authority and engage with scriptural allegory;

Theatricality: performance as a feature of Roman culture; the theater as a personal love of Augustine; the theater as a provocation to philosophical theories of representation

Theatricality and childhood

The theater of the classroom

Performance “unmans” Augustine: performance of Terence,
Eunuchus and Juno’s speech from the Aeneid

Gender impersonation as a fact of the Roman stage

Gender imposition as a fear of the Roman child

“Weeping for Dido”: emotion and humiliation in the act of literary engagement

Augustine and his father at the baths: II.3

key imagery now: not just sexual anxiety but the imagery of food and drink

“the world is drunk with the invisible wine of its own perverted earthbound
will”

Augustine the sinner: “I took pleasure in the same vices not only for the
enjoyment of what I did but also for the applause I won”

Augustine as figural self narrator

The Pear stealing episode in Book II:

personal narrative of youthful errancy

allegorical narrative of temptation and fall

literary narrative to engage the reader

BOOK III: Carthage: “I went to Carthage, where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust.” (III.1)

Veni Karthaginem, et circumstrepebat me undique sartago flagitiosorum amorum.

The central transformation of the imagery of ritual ingestion and purification into an image of befoulment and depravity.

“I was much attracted to the theater . . .” (III.2)

Rapiebant me spectacula theatra,

What is the nature of theatrical representation? Why do we enjoy suffering on the stage? What is misery? What is pity? What is the purpose of dramatic fiction?

“I enjoyed fables and fictions” (III.2)

Augustine studies the works of Cicero because he wants to train as a rhetorician. YET, he also looks at “holy scriptures” to see what it was all about. (III.5)

“Its gait was humble, but the heights it reached were sublime”
sed incessu humilem, successu excelsam

“I fell in with a set of sensualists”; “my hunger and thirst were not even for the greatest of your works, but for you, my God, because you are Truth itself . . . yet the dishes they set before me were still loaded with dazzling fantasies, illusions with which the eye deceives the mind . . . But I gulped down this food” (III.6). AGAIN, FOOD IMAGERY; FOOD FOR THOUGHT; THE CENTRALITY OF THE EUCHARIST AS THE FUNDAMENTAL ACT OF CHRISTIAN SACRALITY

BUT ALSO: THE LANGUAGE OF DREAM, IMPRESSION, AND ILLUSION FROM THE AENEID; AUGUSTINE USES THE LANGUAGE OF THE SENSES TO DEFINE HIS PRE-CONVERSION LIFE AS SENSORY

NOTICE THE FOOD IMAGERY THROUGHOUT BOOK III (III:10, THE IMAGE OF THE FIG) “I was gradually led to believe such nonsense that a fig wept when it was Plucked, and that the tree which bore it shed tears of mother’s milk” (p.67).

MONICA

She is a figure of dreams and imagination, too; what differentiates her dreams from those of others? III.11: “She dreamed she was standing on a wooden rule . . .” and “this is what happens in visions.” (our translation, pp.68-69)

She is, from the first, presented in imagery borrowed from Dido: weeping; dreaming; seeking interpretations. But she is EXPLAINED through quotations from the Psalms. **This is the key point:** Augustine gestures towards a Virgilian framework, only to recast it through Old Testament devotion.

BOOK IV:

Augustine, ages 19-28

“I was led astray myself and led others astray in my turn”
seducebamur et seducebamus

“We would hunt for worthless popular distinctions, the applause of an audience, prizes for poetry, or quickly fading wreaths won in competition.”

BUT “what am I but a creature suckled on your milk and feeding on yourself, the food that never perishes? (IV.1)

He is a teacher of public speaking (IV.2)

He lives with a woman who is not his wife; he enters competitions; he consults astrologers. (IV.2-3)

IV.3: opening a book at random as a form of divination (p.74); this moment prefigures the scene of conversion in Book VIII, when Augustine will open the Epistles of St. Paul at random.

QUESTION: is reading an act of recovering meaning or making meaning?
What is the relationship between chance and the foreknowledge of God?

General overview: Books IV and V have the feel of “academic” prose because they present themselves in the remembered voice of Augustine the “professor.”

They contrast the secular teachings of performative rhetoric with the sacred teachings of the books of scripture that are to be read privately and inwardly.

Augustine encounters the belief system of the Manichees (Manicheanism) and its teacher Faustus (V.3).

“trapped by his charming manner of speech”

Trying to “distinguish between mere eloquence and the real truth”

“garnish the dish”

BUT BEFORE WE DISCUSS MANI, WE MUST RETURN TO MONICA

Monica in Book V: chapter 8

Augustine finds that he must go to Rome to continue his education

He finds the students at Carthage unmanageable (p.100)

Rome is a professional step up for him.

“life at Carthage was a real misery and I loathed it: but the happiness I hoped to find at Rome was not real happiness.”

Monica: “She wept bitterly to see me go and followed me to the water’s edge . . .

“I deceived her with the excuse that I had a friend . . .

“It was a lie I told . . .”

“During the night, secretly I slid away . .

“The wind blew and filled our sails . . .

HOW DOES THIS SCENE RECAST AENEAS’S DEPARTURE FROM DIDO IN AENEID IV?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LEAVE A WOMAN ON THE NORTH AFRICAN SHORE?

HOW IS MONICA LIKE, AND UNLIKE, DIDO HERE?

WHAT IS THE LITERARY AND EMOTIONAL EFFECT OF TELLING THIS STORY IN VIRGILIAN TERMS?

Augustine says of his mother: “She had inherited the legacy of Eve.”

He effectively sets her up as Dido only to recast her as Eve

What is **Manichaeism** and why should it matter? Mani: teacher and preacher; executed by Persian authorities in 276; highly influential in the Near East and Central Asia; perceived as “eastern” by the Roman world.

It was a DUALIST religious system: evil could not come from a benign God, so (they reasoned) there must be another entity, an evil one. Hence, a force of light and a force of darkness.

Manichees were focused, direct arguers, with a self-contained, rigorous system of belief.

The straightforwardness and unambiguous quality of Manichaeism was appealing to Augustine

NOW: Manichees were viewed as heretics by observant Catholics; Monica is appalled.

Notice how Peter Brown, in his biography of Augustine, characterizes this world:

“For the Manichaeism of Africa in the 370s and early 380s was rather like Communism in England in the 1930s: it had spread rapidly and, despite an exotic and highly doctrinaire core, it could still mean many things to many people. The Manichaeism of Augustine was the Manichaeism of a specific group, of the cultivated intelligentsia of the university of Carthage.”

The issue for us is less a review of the details of Manichaeist belief than the feel, the flavor, the social moment of Manichaeism: that it offered a clear way of understanding the world.

From a Manichaean text: “If he knows how to observe the rituals, he will awaken: the fragment of luminous mind in him will return to its full purity; and the ‘foreign’ nature of good that resides, temporarily in his body, will disengage itself from all dangers.” (quoted in Brown, Augustine, p.59)

The KEY POINT IS: there is no room, in Manichaeism for growth, healing, gradual development, introspection, philosophical and spiritual reflection.

It revelation just HAPPENS and then that’s it.

SO:

The young Augustine is on a search for knowledge and the ability to express that knowledge. He is looking for groups to which he can belong: family, friends, religious groups, institutions and schools.

He presents himself as a creature of desire

He begins to present Monica through Virgilian idioms

He uses food imagery to show how the experiences of his youth were false forms of nourishment

I came to Carthage, and I was surrounded in the noise in a frying pan
of perverse loves.

Veni Karthaginem, et circumstrepebat me undique sartago flagitiosorum amorum.

