

Humanities 2

Lecture 10

St. Augustine and the Confessions

“What Augustine remembered in the Confessions was his inner life.”

-- Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo

What is the nature of the self? How do we write autobiography? What is the relationship between the “inner life” and the external world of experience? What do we need to know about St. Augustine and his world to get the Confessions?

St. Augustine: his life: born in the town of Thagaste in 354, now in Algeria; 200 miles from the Mediterranean Sea. Roman colonial outpost. his father, Patricius, a small landowner with a wealthy patron, however, and with ambitions for his son. His mother, Monica, may have been of Berber heritage. Key point: Aug receives a Classical Roman education as a ticket to social and economic advancement; his mother is a Christian, his father not.



Late Antiquity: the period from roughly the Christianization of Rome under Constantine (who converted to Christianity in 312) and the advent of Islam into Europe and North Africa (the late 7th century).

The period is characterized by several key features:

a rich philosophical debate about the relationships between Christianity and the Platonic inheritance;

the consolidation of classical Latin literary and intellectual culture, together with the rise of a rich commentary tradition and teaching techniques;

the decline of Greek language and literacy in the West;

the increasing involvement of peripheral colonial leaders in Roman cultural life;

the political conflicts with the Germanic tribes and the eventual loss of Roman imperial control to the Germanic leaders;

the rise of certain literary genres, in particular narrative prose and hagiography.

The history of the book: during Late Antiquity, Western Christianity adopts the CODEX as its primary means of textual transmission. The codex is a bound book of leaves. The scroll (volumen) was the primary means of textual transmission for Greek and Roman classical writing and for Jewish scripture (i.e., the Torah).

The codex enables new forms of reading: skimming, selective textual engagement, page-to-page comparison, figural comparison with Old and New Testament, and a private, personal engagement with the book as object.

Augustine's Confessions:

Autobiography

Prayer

Philosophical treatise

Literary work and literary criticism

The important point about the Confessions and its cultural moment: With the official institution of Christianity, the narrative of tension and challenge changes:

“The Christian’s worst enemies could no longer be placed outside him; they were inside, his sins and his doubts; and the climax of a man’s life would not be martyrdom, but conversion from the perils of his own past”

(Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo, p.159).

The Confessions are a profound engagement with two major literary works:
The Psalms and The Aeneid.

The Psalms: the collection of prayers to God, the voice of the prophet, king, and poet David; the nature of poetry, of song, and of devotion.

Aeneid: the template for education and the paradigm for the wandering hero; errors of Aeneas; loves with Dido; the geographical passage: Rome, North Africa. The founding of a city – now, a city of God, not of men. Monica/Creusa/Dido.

The Confessions are a profound engagement with a major philosophical tradition:

NeoPlatonism: key tenets:

The preexistence of the soul

The nature of human life as a soul trapped in the body

The Fall of the soul

The unreliability of sense impressions as a form of understanding the world

The Confessions are a profound engagement with human feelings. Augustine stresses the way in which he feels things by reading, thinking, and living; e.g., when he comes to the Hortensius of Cicero in III.iv. he says, “it changed my way of feeling” mutavit affectum meum.

The Confessions are a profound engagement with the theater:

Theater as a habit of Roman life and culture

Theater as a literary genre

As a problem for philosophy: what is the nature of acting; what is the nature of character; how do we understand the idea of representation itself

As a problem of desire and feeling: why are we moved by the fictional representations of activities on the stage.

As a problem of control: who is the director, the author, the actor?

As a source of temptation: Book III: rapiebant me spectacula theatra.

The theater brings together the literary, philosophical, sexual, and cultural issues all at work in Augustine’s time and in his personal life.

The Confessions: Opening Book I; key episodes themes and passages

Opens with quotations from two Psalms; then quotations from St. Peter and St. Paul,
Then more Psalms: establishment of the voice of authority on Scriptural models

“Grant me Lord to know and understand”: two interlocking mental activities.

“Help me to find words to explain” (I.5): search for language.

I.6 – the idea of infancy (Latin: infans): attempts to communicate and understand the world: individual human development as a parallel to inner, emotional development; Augustine must relive his life from birth to understand himself

Learning of the self by observing others (I.6-7): Augustine as a kind of anthropologist or psychologist of the social and personal world

I.8: Boyhood: power of speech; language as keyed to the naming of objects; repetition and imitation as the principle of learning.

I.9-10: childhood and gaming; play and respect; learning to read; social literacy and forms of understanding; corporal punishment in school; compare the gaming scenes in Aeneid Book V.

Augustine the student: learning Latin and Greek; memorizing the Aeneid (I.13) falling for Dido; emotional response to literature; the nature of misplaced literary desire (“prefer empty romances”): “the wooden horse and its crew of soldiers the burning of Troy and even the ghost of Creusa made a most enchanting dream” : Augustine responds to the early parts of the Aeneid that center on the establishment of Aeneas as a hero through acts of narration.

“We learn better in a free spirit of curiosity than under fear and compulsion” (I.14)

Augustine is schooled in languages that are not his home language

God is the true teacher (I:15)

The educational experience “unmans” the young Augustine:

1.16: the recitation of the scene from Terence’s play Eunuchus

1.17: the recitation of Juno’s opening speech from the Aeneid

Education as already, inherently theatrical; Augustine as a creature of performance; but those performances involve gender impersonation and challenges to heroic manhood.

“I played the rest of the part well enough”: how is this a view of life?

Book II: stirrings of sexual desire:

II.2: “Bodily desires, like a morass, and adolescent sex welling up within me exuded mists which clouded over and obscured my heart.”

The humiliations of adolescence: Augustine at the Baths with his father:

II.3: Augustine on a kind of stage set of physical display; Augustine’s father as a figure of negative reinforcement; his mother as a figure of positive teaching;

And yet, Augustine doesn’t listen: “I took pleasure in the same vices not only for the enjoyment of what I did, but also for the applause I won.”

The Pear tree scenes: II;4-10:

Augustine steals pears with his friends

“The eye is attracted by beautiful objects”

“The pears we stole had beauty”

The Scriptures as a gloss on personal behavior:

Psalms and Romans as quoted within the story (II.7, II.8)

The Allegorical nature of the pear-stealing scene: forbidden fruit; the garden as the place of knowledge; the “fall” of Augustine.

For Tuesday: Read Books III, IV, and V

Focus on: Carthage and the theater; the frying pan of lust; the development of Augustine as a student; the death of his father; the emerging character of Monica

Augustine as a teacher of rhetoric; his liberal arts education

Augustine and Manicheism: the nature of this system of belief; the nature of Faustus as a teacher; what is the nature of teaching?

The Aeneid: how does Augustine's leaving Monica recast Aeneas's abandoning of Dido?