

AUGUSTINE, MEMORY, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

AT THE start of Book X of the *Confessions*, Augustine appears to question the whole enterprise of self-confession and hints that he is even tempted to lay it aside:

Why, then, does it matter to me whether men should hear what I have to confess, as if it were they who were to cure all the evil that is in me? Why do they wish to hear from me what sort of man I am, though they will not listen to you when you tell them what they are? . . . What does it profit me, then, O Lord, to whom my conscience confesses daily, confident more in the hope of your mercy than in its own innocence, what does it profit me . . . also to make known to men in your sight, through this book, not what I once was, but what I am now?¹

One senses that Augustine has some doubts as to the validity of confessing himself; but he seems determined to overcome his own hesitations: "I shall therefore confess both what I know myself and what I do not know" (X, 5, 211). It seems as if Augustine is about to continue the narrative of his life; but he switches to a mode of discourse that is suddenly quite different from that of the previous nine books. After speculating about what it means to "love God," a love that is different from the love of beautiful things perceived by the senses (Ch. 4-7), Augustine opens a long inquiry into the nature of memory, based upon a close, empirical scrutiny of the workings of his own memory (Ch. 8-26). For all intents and purposes the "autobiographical" part of the *Confessions* (Books I-IX) seems over. Until the end of Book XIII, the philosophical mode of discourse will not be relinquished.

Readers of the *Confessions* have wondered about that "break" at the start of Book X. The shift from a subjective to an objective mode of inquiry, to questions as disparate as the nature of memory, the nature of time, and the nature of creation, has prompted Augustinian scholars to ask whether the *Confessions* are a unified work and have a single purpose after all. J. J. O'Meara reiterates what he calls a "commonplace of Augustinian scholarship" when he writes that Augustine was unable to plan a book:

1. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated with an introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961; rpt., 1974), Bk. X, ch. 3, pp. 208-209. All subsequent references to the *Confessions* in English will be to this translation. These will be indicated parenthetically in the text, with reference to book, chapter, and page number, in that order.

A cursory examination of the *Confessions* will reveal that of its thirteen books, the first nine deal mainly with Augustine's conversion and what preceded it, and the last four with Augustine's life at the time of writing. There is no account given of the twelve important years which intervened between the death of his mother soon after his baptism and his present life as Bishop of Hippo. But even in the last four books Augustine was trying to do two things: on the one hand, tell those who had requested the information from him how he was now faring in the conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil; and on the other, expound the beginning of Genesis. He combines all these various parts rather awkwardly, merely placing them in succession one after the other. The result is a badly composed book.²

Are the *Confessions* "a badly composed book?" That depends on what one means by "composition." The *Confessions* may not be a well composed work if the word composition suggests self-containment, classicism or symmetry; and the fact that Book X may have been the last to be written and was then inserted into the work does add to the sense of inchoateness, of interruptedness that the reader has in opening it.³ Even in their present form the *Confessions* do convey a sure sense of progression; it is a progression without a close. The *Confessions* seem to open out on infinity itself.

It is not the explicit concern of this paper, however, to raise the issue of the unity of the *Confessions*, but to determine how Augustine's discussion of memory in Book X fits into the logical progression of the work and has contributed to the development of autobiography while seeming to interrupt the autobiographical flow of the book.⁴

"The *Confessions*," O'Meara has written, "is no autobiography, and not even a partial autobiography. It is the use of Augustine's life and confession of faith in God as an illustration of his theory of man" (p. 18). Let us leave aside for the moment the highly controversial matter of whether the *Confessions* are an autobiography. What is worthy of retention is the highly theoretical content of so much of the work. If one pictures the *Confessions* as the history, not of Augustine's life, but of his

2. John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine: The Growth of St. Augustine's Mind up to his Conversion* (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1954), p. 13.

3. For discussion of the composition of Book X and its relation to the rest of the *Confessions*, see (S. Augustine,) *Les Confessions*, ed. M. Skutella, in the collection, *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1962), 13: 21-23. While quoting other arguments in favor of the composition of Book X after all the other books, Solignac responds that "quant au livre X en particulier, aucune raison sérieuse n'oblige à le considérer comme un appendice ajouté après coup" (13:23).

4. In his introduction to the *Confessions* (see n. 3, above), A. Solignac discusses the problem of the unity of the work, and argues that it is more an "interior" than a logical one: "les anciens [he continues] n'avaient point nos idées sur la nécessité d'un plan; leur rhétorique enseignait davantage l'imitation de la 'manière' des auteurs classiques qu'un art d'ordonner les idées selon une progression rigoureuse. Aujourd'hui, un écrivain commence à rédiger un plan qu'il garde ensuite sous les yeux et qui lui sert comme un devis d'architecte, quitte à le modifier en cours de rédaction; les anciens partaient plus volontiers d'une 'idée directrice', intérieurement pensée, élaborée mais non encore écrite: les dimensions limitées du *liber* suffisaient à maintenir la fidélité à ce schéma vivant" (13:25).

attitude towards language, then Book X falls naturally into place as an integral and dynamic part of Augustine's inquiry. He received a highly literary, oratorically-oriented education, grounded in rhetoric.⁵ Indeed one wonders to what extent his picture of a sinful youth might be distorted, colored or darkened by his own disgust over the punitive, repressive and exclusively oratorical Roman curriculum on which he was reared.⁶ Of his study of grammar, which enabled him to develop the power of speech and thus emerge from *infantia*, he writes:

When I tried to express my meaning by crying out and making various sounds and movements, so that my wishes should be obeyed, I found that I could not convey all that I meant or make myself understood by everyone whom I wished to understand me. So my memory prompted me. I noticed that people would name some object and then turn towards whatever it was that they named. I watched them and understood that the sound they made when they wanted to indicate that particular thing was the name which they gave to it, and their actions clearly showed what they meant, for there is a kind of universal language, consisting of expressions of the face and eyes, gestures and tones of voice, which can show whether a person means to ask for something and get it, or refuse it and have nothing to do with it. So, by hearing words arranged in various phrases and constantly repeated, I gradually pieced together what they stood for, and when my tongue had mastered the pronunciation, I began to express my wishes by means of them. In this way I made my wants known to my family and they made theirs known to me, and I took a further step into the stormy life of human activity . . . (I, 8, p. 29)

What is Augustine telling us? Readers usually assume that the reasons for his violent rejection of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic were moral, and that the text of the *Confessions* bears them out. The verbal arts were "sinful," because they promote vainglory, concern with worldly reputation, concern with lust-inspiring images. How could Augustine not reject such a vain education once he had discovered the Word of God in Scripture and in Christ?

Without going so far as to argue that these reasons are wrong, one might argue that they are not the only reasons, nor are they the deepest

5. Augustine did study the mathematical disciplines in the *artes liberales*, but he was by temperament inclined to a love of literature and a hatred of mathematics: "In fact it would be truer to say that I loved the one and hated the other. But in those days 'one and one are two, two and two are four' was a loathsome jungle, while the wooden horse and its crew of soldiers, the burning of Troy and even the ghost of Creusa made a most enchanting dream, futile though it was" (I, 13, 34-35). On the careers open to "successful rhetors" such as Augustine, see J. J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, pp. 92-105.

6. Augustine refers several times to being "punished" and even "beaten," *Conf.*, I, pp. 30, 31, 35. His trouble with learning Greek was perhaps due to total inhibition, "for I understood not a single word and I was constantly subjected to violent threats and cruel punishments to make me learn" (p. 35). On the other hand, he learned Latin well "without being forced by threats of punishment," which "clearly shows that we learn better in a free spirit of curiosity than under fear and compulsion"; but "from the schoolmaster's cane to the ordeals of martyrdom," God's law prescribes "bitter medicine to retrieve us from the noxious pleasures which cause us to desert you" (p. 35). On the punitive nature of the Roman curriculum before and during Augustine's time, see Henri I. Marrou, *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité* (Paris: Seuil, 1960), pp. 366-68.

reasons for Augustine's repudiation of an oratorical education. It had always been one of Augustine's most persistent interests to discover what lies at the root of language, that is to determine whether words are the ultimate reality of intellect or whether they are signs pointing to deeper realities of the mind, such as images and concepts. His rhetorically-founded education had taught him falsehood, he discovered, in suggesting that language is the product of an art, quite as much as any other artifact; that it is acquired by the promptings of a mechanism called memory, wherein words are stored; that it is a mimetic act, closely connected with a "universal language, consisting of expressions of the face and eyes, gestures and tones of voice"; and that the purpose of language is not the attainment of truth but the pursuit of success in the world.

Augustine's rejection of a mimetic and generative conception of language based upon an archaic and mechanistic idea of memory is perhaps what made it necessary for him to investigate the deeper layers of memory. That is where Book X comes in. The process of Augustine's inquiry seems to have taken him from a conception of language as originating in the human brain to a conception of language produced in the world outside the mind, inscribing itself in the human brain, and "passing through" man as its instrument of production: from thinking of man as creator of language he graduated to a conviction that man is merely its instrument.

Therein, perhaps, lies the secret and the necessity of Book X. It was in deepening his inquiry into the phenomenon of memory that Augustine could articulate the difference between language as originating in the speaker and language as originating in the world and passing through the speaker. He learned that, so far as memory in its deeper layers (not in its mechanistic sense) is concerned, in the beginning was not the word, but the image imprinted in the memory by the senses. Before the first words are ever stored in the memory, there are images so many of which go back to prephasic, infantile times. More than a mechanism, more than a storebox of words, memory is "like a great field or a spacious palace, a storehouse for countless *images* of all kinds which are conveyed to it by the senses." In it are stored away all the thoughts by which we enlarge upon or diminish or modify in any way the perceptions at which we arrive through the senses (X, 8, 214). All sensations, Augustine continues, are "retained in the great storehouse of the memory." The reader now begins to sense the crucial importance of this Augustinian investigation into the "vast cloisters" of the memory. The words we use suddenly appear to float on the surface of a fathomless sea of events, perceptions, sensations, concepts:

All this goes on inside me, in the vast cloisters of my memory. In it are the sky, the earth, and the sea, ready at my summons together with everything that I have

ever perceived in them by my senses, except the things which I have forgotten. In it I meet myself as well. I remember myself and what I have done, where and when I did it, and the state of my mind at the time. (X, 8, p. 215)

There follows a key passage asserting Augustine's faith in the ontological superiority and priority of "interior" to "exterior" life. The discovery of God, he says, is to be made not on the peaks of mountain tops, but at the summit of one's ascent into the layers of memory:

Men go out and gaze in astonishment at high mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the broad reaches of rivers, the ocean that encircles the world, or the stars in their courses. But they pay no attention to themselves. They do not marvel at the thought that while I have been mentioning all these things, I have not been looking at them with my eyes, and that I could not even speak of mountains or waves, rivers or stars, which are things that I have seen, or of the ocean, which I know only on the evidence of others, unless I could see them in my mind's eye, in my memory, and with the same vast spaces between them that would be there if I were looking at them in the world outside myself. When I saw them with the sight of my eyes, I did not draw them bodily into myself. They are not inside me themselves, but only their images. And I know which of my senses imprinted each image on my mind. (X, 8, 216)

Augustine's itinerary has led him from an instrumental attitude toward language, placing emphasis on the mind as signifier and the production of language for social ends, to a conceptualist attitude, with its stress on the *a priori* impression in the memory of the thing signified. Indeed, he says, it is possible for the signifier to be forgotten or blocked out while the thing signified remains:

I can mention forgetfulness and recognize what the word means, but how can I recognize the thing itself unless I remember it? I am not speaking of the sound of the word, but of the thing which it signifies. If I had forgotten the thing itself, I should be utterly unable to recognize what the sound implied. (X, 15, 222)

Now one might ask: what is the rapport between Book X and the nine books that preceded it, usually considered the autobiographical books. One might question the assumption that the first nine books are autobiographical.⁷ Well before the start of Book X, many sections of each of the previous books are concerned with philosophical questions rather than with autobiographical detail (Book VII, for example, is almost entirely

7. According to Pierre Courcelle, for example, the *Confessions* make use of a technique in catechetical instruction, which is fully developed in Augustine's *On Catechizing the Uninstructed* (5:9). According to this technique the catechist's work is easiest if he first admonishes the catechumen with examples of God's influence drawn from his own life, then goes on to explain Scripture by commentary. Courcelle states that the first nine books of the *Confessions* are a history of the exhortations, terrors, consolations, directions, dreams, oracles, miracles, and admonitions that had led Augustine to Christianity." But the most important part of the *Confessions* is, according to Courcelle, the explanation of *Genesis*, which is supposed to constitute the material of Books 10-13. (See J. J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, p. 14, and P. Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* [Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1950], pp. 21 ff.).

taken up with an inquiry into the nature of evil). Book X, as well as the three books that follow, need not be considered as an anomaly or as an accretion to a work that was intended as "straight" autobiography. There is no such thing as straight autobiography in the *Confessions*; they are a record not of the events of Augustine's life but of the questions he addresses his attitude toward certain problems, one of the most crucial of which is the nature of words.

Yet the last four books are unquestionably more impersonal in both content and tone than the previous nine; but the progression from a personal to an impersonal approach to truth, from a subject-oriented to a problem-oriented approach is as characteristically Augustinian as is the epistemological progression from sense perception to image, from image to concept, from concept to word sign, or the theological progression from sin to grace. The Augustinian itinerary of the soul to God continues beyond Book IX; but at the start of Book X, Augustine is no longer an anxious inquirer asking questions which life confronts him with, but a Christian philosopher pursuing his inquiry in a newly discovered serenity. The detached tone of the questions raised in Books X-XIII is perhaps a symptom of Augustine's complete conversion to the philosophical life; for it is noteworthy that Augustine's conversion to Christianity also symbolized his second and final conversion to philosophy. Augustine never intended to give up the search for truth after his conversion to the Word. On the contrary. The search, however less anxious, was meant to continue as intensely as ever.

George Gusdorf has argued that Augustine's *Confessions* are characteristically Christian in their striving toward impersonality and in their gradual relinquishing of exclusive self-concern. While the *Confessions* are perhaps the most profound work of self-examination that has yet appeared in Western literature, Gusdorf argues, and while they served as a fountainhead for much autobiographical literature in the centuries that followed, Augustine himself never favored indulgent self-scrutiny, never encouraged self-examination for its own sake but always in the light of God's grace. Gusdorf suggests that if the *Confessions* seem to progress from the relative intimacy of the first three books toward a more and more "intellectual" approach to life it is because Augustine deliberately wanted it that way. He is telling us that we, too, must "progress" from self looking at self, to a self allowing itself to be looked at by God; from erroneous self-evaluation and sinful concern with self we must progress toward accurate self-evaluation and confession of sin in the presence of God:

The *Confessions* of Augustine, which inaugurated a new literary genre, therefore remain faithful to their title, the value of which we have perhaps forgotten. The tribunal of penance prevails over examination of conscience. There is no subjectivism in this work. Quite the opposite. . . . An objective structure prevails over

the analysis, that of Revelation. As a sinner who has been saved by grace, Augustine looks at himself in the mirror of Scripture, which reflects an identical image of every man. The objective assumptions of the book are made even clearer by the fact that the last [four] books of the autobiography are concerned with meditations on man, memory, time and the world. These books form the basis for a Christian anthropology and a Christian cosmology; by appearing in a book of memoirs they show that Augustine's project is directed less to his own person than to the truth to which he is henceforth fully dedicated.⁸

To call the spiritual itinerary of the *Confessions*, then, a progression from subjectivity to objectivity, would, in Augustinian terms, be an anachronism. The long analysis on memory in Book X, and the question raised in the books that follow might better be described as the typical Augustinian *reditus in intima mea*, a progressive descent, or ascent into the soul, to a "peak" where Augustine sees above the eye of his soul, above his own intelligence, the unmovable light that is different from all other lights, the light that shines in all men if only they are willing to look for it there.⁹

There is a peak in the ascent of the soul beyond which, with God acting as guide, Augustine ceases to talk of his own empirically experienced self, for it is a peak beyond which the light resides; and beyond that level of self is experienced as other. This may be another reason why Book X and the books that follow seem to be expressed in a different key: it is self-inquiry written in the key of "I as other."

The light of truth, then resides in the soul. "It is 'above' my intelligence not as oil is above water, nor as heaven is above the earth. It is above because it is the light that made me, and I am below it because I was made by it. All who know the truth know this light and all who know this light know eternity. It is the Light that Charity knows."¹⁰

The fact that the Augustinian itinerary gradually transforms the self experienced as "I" into the self experienced as "other" makes the *Confessions* a highly "controlled" work of autobiography. Until the time of Renaissance autobiographies, like Cellini's for example, when the Self once again began to be experienced and described in literature as unbounded self-assertion and unleashed energy, Augustine's *Confessions* continued to serve as a model of Christian self-confession controlled by and projected under the piercing Light of God. Augustine's acquiescence to external principles of control may help explain the progressively imper-

8. Georges Gusdorf, *La Découverte de soi* (Paris: p. 21).

9. *Conf.*, VII, 9, 16: "Et inde admonitus redire ad memet ipsum intraui in intima mea duce te et potui, quoniam factus es adiutor meus, intraui et uidi qualiscumque oculo animae meae supra eundem oculum animae supra eundem oculum animae meae, supra mentem meam lucem incommutabilem" (S. Augustin, *Les Confessions*, ed. Sketella, 13:615).

10. *Ibid.*

sonal tone and content of his *Confessions*, and may help resolve the problem of the unity of composition.

One of the paradoxes of Augustine's *Confessions* is that, while in substance they have seemed to discourage as unChristian and unhealthy any unmitigated concentration on self, they have given an unprecedented impulse to the development of Western autobiography; and it is perhaps one of the ironies of the *Confessions* that the books that provide the firmest theoretical base for the furthering of autobiographical inquiry are the least autobiographical ones, such as the chapters on memory in Book X. For, according to Augustine, it is memory that makes the subject's self-apprehension possible. It permits the totalization of interior and exterior experience, insofar as both proceed from the experiencing subject.

As Augustine puts it, in an apt image from Book I, it is memory that weaves the thread of our diverse experiences into a single cloth, ever bringing together the present and the past, and anticipating the future, in a constant effort at rendering things present: "et haec omnia quasi praesentia meditor" (X, 8, 14).

Augustine's close, empirical research into the phenomenon of memory (Book X) gave an unprecedented impulse to his writing his own *Confessions*. Historically, it unquestionably furthered the development of confessional literature in the Middle Ages. His investigations into memory resolved for him key-problems which no other philosophical school he had attempted before had been able to resolve to his satisfaction: whether the soul is "material" or "spiritual"; where is the *locus* of God's residing in man, if it is true that God is within us. By positing that God resides in the human memory, Augustine did more than provide himself with a satisfactory solution as to the *locus* where man and God, as well as spirit and body, meet; he also provided theoretical underpinnings to his remarkable intuition that the soul is "distended" by time (Book XI, Ch. 26), i.e., that every person has a history. This resolution led him to further convictions about human life: that the past, through memory, is ever present, and that man is free to liberate himself from the shackles of the past at any moment, with the everpresent aid of God's grace. Augustine's research into memory therefore, freed him once and for all from deterministic assumptions about the human past. It also freed his conceptual apparatus from the rigidity that the Greek (Platonic) notion of the soul as *eidos* had imprisoned it in. Finally, it enabled him to develop the idea of time as both mathematical measure and personal duration.

Paul J. Archambault
Syracuse University



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