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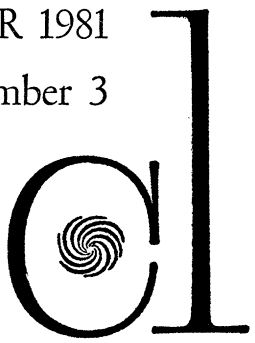

LAWRENCE ROTHFIELD

Autobiography and Perspective in The *Confessions* of St. Augustine

AFTER sixteen hundred years, the literary power of St. Augustine's *Confessions* remains undisputed, despite the fact that few readers today can assent to the Christian doctrine which Augustine himself considered to be at the heart of his autobiography. As in the case of that other great practitioner of Christian autobiography, Dante, modern critics who deal with St. Augustine have been confronted with an author for whom literary and theological structures seem inextricably intertwined. Until relatively recently, theology tended to dominate interpretation of Augustine's text. The development of literary criticism as a profession (perhaps theological in its own way) has been accompanied by a shift in emphasis. As with Dante, the predominant impulse among modern critics has been to divide and conquer, to set aside the problem of Christian content in favor of a formal analysis on historical or philological grounds.

In Georg Misch's expansive *History of Autobiography*, for example, Augustine is placed within a literary tradition which, as Misch's title indicates, is exclusively autobiographical. By choosing his sources on the basis of their membership within a literary genre rather than on their qualifications as specifically Christian texts, Misch appears to have freed himself from theological constraints. But Misch's putatively nondogmatic work remains very much bound to a philosophical, though not overtly religious, set of assumptions. The words "history" and "autobiography" are freighted with meaning, and Misch's assessment of

Augustine's achievement is determined to a large extent by the parameters assigned to these two words. By "history" Misch seems to have in mind a continuity of evolutionary progress. With regard to autobiography, "historical" analysis reveals the steps taken toward the present achievement of a fully expressive literature of the self. Within such a perspective, the *Confessions* can only be seen as an immature version of the genre, and Misch describes them as such: "The inner life had freed itself from dependence on Nature and the external world; but it was not yet ready to rely on itself and try, in the face of the dangerously rich flow of the psychic happenings, to attain the divine in the fullness of the soul so that it might form itself freely out of its infinite potentialities."[1] Pierre Courcelle, writing contemporarily with Misch, carefully distinguishes his own "philological" approach from Misch's "philosophical" one.[2] Rather than emphasizing general thematics as Misch does, Courcelle invests his powerful scholarly energies in an examination of literary motifs, intertextual *topoi*, and influences. The autobiographical realism of the *Confessions*, already made suspect by discrepancies in Augustine's own accounts of his conversion, is put radically into question by Courcelle's research. At every point in a narrative which we would like to believe is as unique as the individual who produces it, we discover other narratives lurking, like children in a nearby house. Augustine's individuality turns out to be no more than a variation of a collection of textual patterns, patterns which are neither necessarily Christian nor autobiographical in and of themselves.

The formal analyses by Misch and Courcelle, by showing that the *Confessions* did not arise in a vacuum, perform a useful function in ridding us of any notions we may have entertained as to the uniqueness of individual autobiography. Neither writer, however, attempts to come to grips with the fundamental problem to which I alluded at the start—the relation between the theology and the form of Augustine's narrative. Without subscribing to what might be called hermeneutic formalism, we need somehow to reintegrate Augustinian theology (a theory of the comprehension of experience) with Augustinian formalism (a theory

[1] *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, trans. E. W. Dickes (London, 1950), p. 637. Misch's evolutionary sense of autobiography is shared by many humanists, one recent example being Karl J. Weintraub in *The Value of the Individual* (Chicago, 1978): "The transcendental relatedness of the Augustinian conception of the personality constitutes another barrier for freely admitting the notion of individuality . . . He placed little importance on a conception of the interplay of a self and the historical world of which it is a part, that interplay in which a self, having formed itself in a specific world, works back upon the world by partially making it its own, changing it in terms of what it has become by having interacted with it" (p. 46).

[2] *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire* (Paris, 1963), pp. 11 ff.

of the literary structure of a textual genre, here that of confessional autobiography).

When we examine the purely structural problem inherent in autobiographical narrative and compare it with the epistemological problem inherent in spiritual death and rebirth, we find that the two problems are superimposable. Augustine's insight is precisely this, to see the two problems as one. The literary solution then becomes the same as the epistemological one: the Incarnation, which both articulates a verbalized epistemology (making knowledge of the flesh equivalent to knowledge of the word) and validates an autobiographical writing of the self (making word stand for flesh).

In order to understand this synthesis, it is first necessary to carry out a rather detailed and abstract analysis of the problem inherent in writing about oneself. There appears, in fact, to be a fundamental contradiction built into the very conception of the genre of narrative autobiography. Put most simply, to write about oneself requires both a separation from oneself (as subject of a narrative) and a continuity between author and subject which will justify the identification of the narrative as autobiographical. As John Freccero, one of the first critics to examine this problem, puts it: "Somehow the author must both be himself and stand outside himself in order to judge his life not as something which *is* but as something which *has been*."[3]

Within a Western metaphysical system that gives priority to presence, continuity, and unity,[4] the schizophrenic tension between narrator and subject, between a writing "I" and a written "I,"[5] must be seen as

[3] "Dante's Novel of the Self," *The Christian Century*, Oct. 6, 1965, p. 1217. Freccero's formulation of this problem is an outgrowth of Charles Singleton's seminal research on the autobiographical aspects of Dante's writing. Cf. also M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York, 1971), pp. 84 ff., for a concise recapitulation of Freccero's basic insight.

[4] Much of the most important critical work in France during the last fifteen years, of course, has been devoted to a dismantling of this metaphysics, with a concurrent attempt to define in theoretical terms an autobiographical writing postulated on an absence of any transcendental center or origin. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore, Md., 1976), for the most sustained critique of what Derrida refers to as "logocentrism."

[5] This tension between "I" as subject and as object of the verb "to write," as Roland Barthes has shown, "is a diathetical one," subsumed in the modern text by a "middle voice" in which "to write" is an intransitive verb: "It is subjective writings, like romantic writing, which are active, because in them the agent is not interior but *anterior* to the process of writing. The one who writes here does not write for himself, but, as if by proxy, for a person who is exterior and antecedent (even if they both have the same name). In the modern verb of middle voice *to write*, however, the subject is immediately contemporary with the writing, being effected and affected by it. The case of the Proustian narrator is exemplary: he exists only in writing" ("To Write: Intransitive Verb?", in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, Md., 1970, p. 143).

a problem. This is because the self who is both subject and object cannot be simply present. Rather, the self in autobiography is both present and absent to itself: present in the retrospective gaze of the narrator, who can see his past life as forming a narrative whole; and absent in the eyes of the self in the narrative whose destiny is visible only in a completed reading, that is, a completed life.

The problem of autobiography, then, can be posed as one of a tension between two selves (two "I"s) which is somehow relieved by a movement of narrative which draws the two together in its ending. To understand Augustine's specific contribution to autobiography, we must analyze this dynamic of the self as it appears in narrative movement. In Augustine's case we can trace this conversion from one "I" to another within the narrative relatively easily, by examining the spatial and optical metaphors for the self which I have employed above. If all autobiography involves some sort of movement or transformation from one point of view to another, narrative can be thought of as the space within which this relocation occurs. We can make an analogy between the conceptual space of narrative and the physical space inhabited by the character Augustine within the narrative. That is, Freccero's insight can be recast so that the written "I," who is located within the linguistic space of narrative, becomes equivalent to the eye which is located in a space of perceived objects.

If the change from one "I" to another involves a change in perspective or point of view, that change ought to be revealed in Augustine's attitude toward various ways of seeing and situating oneself with respect to objects of vision. The aim of this essay will be to analyze how perspective is transformed and renovated in the course of the *Confessions*.

I would like now to discuss how the self can be thought of as being constituted in space, space which is at the same time physical and psychological. Having established the specifically Augustinian conception of the spatialized self, I will then try to show how the agency of sight is involved in the trapping of the self in space, a process which is initially felt as painful. But the painfulness inherent in the spatialization of the self is palliated by the egotistical pleasures of the symbolic. Augustine's antagonistic attitude toward the major symbolic activity of game is in large part due to the competition which such palliating activity thus affords to a Christian solution of the problem of the self.

Augustine's conception of self is radically different from the Cartesian one with which we are more comfortable today. The difference is revealed most clearly by comparing Augustine's famous assertion that "I have become a problem to myself" with the equally well-known Cartesian self-assurance that "I think, therefore I am." For the purposes of this essay, however, we must try to sharpen the distinction in

terms of organizations of space. The Cartesian "Je" is equivalent to the origin, the central point of a regularized geometrical (Cartesian) space. The Augustinian self, on the other hand, is dispersed through a space from which it takes its shape, fragmented in its very existence. For example, at various points in the *Confessions* Augustine describes himself as "falling apart" (X.xxix), "divided" (XI.xxiv), and "torn to pieces" (II.i).[6] If it is only in turning to God that Augustine believes it possible to "find a safe haven for my mind, a gathering-place for my scattered parts" (X.xl), then the self we see in Books I-VIII can only be displayed as a victim of spatialization.

Because the Augustinian self always exists as a victim of a space which constitutes it, there can be no such thing as childhood innocence. The oft-remarked harshness of Augustine's attitude toward children is a corollary of his theory of the self as always already alienated in space. In distinction from his Romantic autobiographical successor Wordsworth, Augustine equates the loss of what Wordsworth would call "immortality" with a specific and self-creating rupture. For Augustine, the infant's consciousness is not that different from our own. Consciousness, regardless of the age of its possessor, is a consciousness not of Cartesian presence but of lack, of separation, of absence.

What wholeness precedes this self-consciousness of lack of wholeness? For the infant, as we know from Freud, fulfillment is at the locus of the mother. The primary separation of and through which the infant therefore becomes aware is a separation from his mother's breast. Augustine is careful from the start to differentiate the sense of wholeness experienced by a breast-fed child from that gathering-together of the soul which can only be experienced through the grace of God: "But neither my mother nor my nurses filled their breasts of their own accord, for it was you who used them . . . [What was good] did not come to me from them but, through them, from you" (I.vi). Here we see the first of a series of characteristically Christian subsumptions of representations by an originary and transcendent source. As an image of wholeness, however, a child at the breast is too powerful to be neglected by a proselytizer; thus, when Augustine later describes union with God he falls back on the Biblical but still maternal image of the soul in the bosom of Abraham. The image is invested with Christian significance in another way: if the link between the immediacy of the flesh and spiritual immediacy is Christ, what could be more appropriate than to link the satisfaction of mother's milk to the satisfaction of Christ's name? "From the time when my mother fed me at the breast

[6] All quotations from the *Confessions*, cited in the text by book and chapter numbers, are from the translation by R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York, 1978).

my infant heart had been suckled dutifully on his name, the name of your Son, my Saviour" (III.iv).

Both the suckling infant and the soul clasped to God's breast represent the ultimate goal of the self: to do away with the space which creates it as separate from the object it desires. Thus it can be said that both the baby and the soul are distinct from the self, the baby because it has not yet undergone the self-constitutive separation, and the soul because it has transcended that separation in some way.

If the self is constituted as problematically divided in space, how does it become conscious of its predicament? As Augustine describes it, the initial perception of distance from the desired object is above all visual: "I myself have seen jealousy in a baby and know what it means. He was not old enough to talk, but whenever he saw his foster-brother at the breast, he would grow pale with envy" (I.vii). In this concise observation the parameters of consciousness in space are revealed in their most basic form. These parameters are the incomplete self (the infant), the object of desire (the mother's breast), and a third term (the foster-brother) which has displaced the self with respect to the object of desire. In visual, physical space these terms will define the psychotopology of a soul fallen into sin. This primal sin, envy (*invidia*), is a consequence of sight, as the Latin root implies. No spectator is innocent in this world, for to see is to produce a space in which both the spectator and the objects he views are placed and separated. The problem of the self is how to deal with what is perceived as a tragic spatialization.

At this point the infant is completely unwilling to accept its position stoically, unwilling to live with the idea of any surrogate taking his place with respect to the object of desire. He can only smoulder with silent rage at his rival. Aggression of this sort, which René Girard has called mimetic rivalry, arises as the first reaction to what I have portrayed as an essentially topographical problem. Of course, the baby's anger is an inadequate solution, since he remains unsatisfied: vision is not yet content with the gaze.

Satisfaction can come only when the self learns to accept physical separation, and to subvert it through the introduction of what Jacques Lacan terms the "symbolic." The symbolic solves (or appears to solve) the problem of the self as I have depicted it in the *Confessions*. It allows the self to accept the physical relationship in which it is trapped, while at the same time overcoming the frustration inherent in that relationship by transferring its parameters to a plane of symbols. Symbols, or representations, allow the subject to satisfy itself with observation, for observation is now identificatory rather than antagonistic. If the infant envious of his foster-brother had been able to accept him as a surrogate

(an acceptance Augustine was perhaps trying to make more difficult by denying a direct kinship link between the two), then he would have been reintegrated into the image of wholeness before which he sensed himself as excluded.

There are two possible ways in which the symbolic can be manifested, corresponding to external and internal modes of representation. What we call game is external representation accompanied by an identificatory mimesis. Internal representation, language, usually involves the required identification between self and representation, ego and speech, which defines the symbolic.

Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* points out the link between game and language, using as an example a child who plays a game involving both words and objects, a game by means of which "he compensated himself [for his mother's disappearance] by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach."[7] Augustine also sees both language and game as functioning in essentially the same way. He often compares the use of rhetoric to a type of game—not a particularly acute observation, since he is himself an excellent player both before and after his conversion. Moreover, Augustine, like Freud,[8] is willing to extend the function of play to all activities of society: "We enjoyed playing games and were punished for them by men who played games themselves. However, grown-up games are known as 'business,' and even though boys' games are much the same, they are punished for them by their elders" (I.ix). Entry into the symbolic is entry into the game that is society. If we recall the infant glowering with rage, it becomes clear that society requires the renunciation of mimetic rivalry and its attendant violence. The symbolic activity of game-playing involves a replacement of competitive mimesis by an identificatory mimesis, one which can even be shared by a large number of people, a society.

It is no surprise, then, to note that societies have always been concerned with controlling their members through some form of representational play. In Roman civilization, of course, what Huizinga calls "the play-element in culture" was vitally linked to the apparatus of imperial domination.[9] The clearest physical sign of a Roman presence in any city, as is still evident today, was the amphitheater, which was

[7] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* trans. James Strachey (New York, 1967), p. 34; see also pp. 32-37.

[8] "It is obvious that (children's) play is influenced by a wish that dominates them the whole time—the wish to be grown-up and to be able to do what grown-up people do." Freud goes on to speak of "the artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults" (pp. 34-35).

[9] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture,* trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York, 1950).

almost always the largest architectural structure. It is indeed possible to think of the amphitheater as a paradigm for the organization of the self by society, in much the same way that Foucault proposes that we think of the panopticon in the nineteenth century. In the amphitheater the audience, the *polis*, occupies a position with respect to the object of representation (the sign) which is more or less equidistant from all. The sign draws everyone's gaze to it, affirming the group as group. In a sense, the games function as a societal sacrament, in which to observe is to participate symbolically. As Huizinga puts it:

> It is true that contests between free men played a comparatively small part here, but this is not to say that the agonistic element was altogether lacking in the structure of Roman civilization. Rather we are dealing with the singular phenomenon showing how the competitive impulse shifted, at an early period, from the protagonist to the spectator, who merely watches the struggles of others appointed for that purpose. Without a doubt this shift is closely connected with the profoundly ritualistic character of the Roman games themselves, for this vicarious attitude is quite in place in ritual, where the contestants are regarded as representing—i.e., fighting on behalf of—the spectators. (p. 132)

It is not enough, however, simply to celebrate games and representation, as Huizinga naïvely does. We must go on to ask: what society or institution within society does the ritual of play and game affirm? To what apparatus of power does the dialectic of the gaze lend itself? In Augustine's day games clearly affirm the power of the Roman imperial society, and are sanctioned and attended by the Emperor himself. Pagan religion also takes advantage of the power of theatrical representation, with many temples doubling as theaters.

Where does this leave Augustine as a member of Christian society? On the political level, in the fight for public support he is left no alternative but to attack the most effective weapon of his rivals. The capture of the gaze in the pleasure of spectatorship must be denounced as a demonic trap and a snare for the unwary. Augustine's evident need to link games and theater to evil sometimes leads to some rather humorously hyperbolic rhetoric. For example, at one point, by showing that man can have two desires which are both sinful, he attempts to refute the Manichean notion that our souls are the battleground of good and evil desires. When the subject of games and theater comes to mind, however, the alternatives become a multitude of evil possibilities, as if to leave no doubt about the horrible character of such seemingly innocuous and widely practiced pleasures: "Or whether he should go to the games at the circus or to the theatre, when there is a performance at both places on the same day. In this last case there may be a third possibility, that he should go and rob another person's house, if he has the chance. There may even be a fourth choice open to him, because he

may wonder whether to go and commit adultery, if the occasion arises at the same time" (VIII.x).

Although Augustine's opposition to games is in part political, the extremity of his reaction forces us to look for other, more basic reasons. Or rather, it forces us to expand our notion of political competition to the area of a competition, on the most profound level, for the self. Pagan religion, the state, and Christianity all seek to resolve a major problem of the self, that sense of being lost in space which, if left untreated, can lead to an eruption of violence. As a Christian Augustine is concerned above all with proving that, for the problematical self, there can be no other solution, no other way of gathering together, than by God's grace. But game, as I have suggested, offers an alternative solution to Christianity's. By an identificatory participation in spectatorship, the self can overcome the distance inherent in all vision. Watching a game can be a conversion experience too.

Augustine himself offers us an example of such an experience in what is perhaps the best-known scene of the *Confessions*, thanks to its brilliant analysis by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis*.[10] Auerbach describes Alypius' conversion at the gladiatorial games as "an about-face from one extreme to the very opposite [which] is also characteristically Christian" (p. 69). The difference between the "magical intoxication" of the games and the "magic" of Christianity is not Auerbach's concern, however, and he contents himself with the vague assurance that Christianity's magic "is stronger because it is a more ordered, a more human magic, filled with more hope" (p. 70). We, however, cannot be satisfied with this interpretation. The source of both types of cathectic "magic," like the source of mimesis itself, must be sought for at the level of a topographical dialectic which can issue in specific mimetic configurations.

The similarities between the conversion experiences of Alypius and Augustine, as we shall see, reaffirm the hypothesis that there is only one basic mechanism for the renovation of the self through vision. The differences between the two, on the other hand, tell us why Augustine's conversion could be repeated in autobiographical form.

Alypius is at first skeptical about the power of the games, insisting upon his own ability to withstand their lure. He believes it possible to absent oneself from the field of vision, to remain somehow an unimplicated spectator: " 'You may drag me there bodily,' he protested, 'but do you imagine that you can make me watch the show and give my mind to it? I shall be there, but it will be just as if I were not present, and I

[10] *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (1953; rpt. Princeton, N.J., 1974), pp. 66-76; hereafter cited in the text.

shall prove myself stronger than you or the games' " (VI.viii). For Augustine such an attitude was "presumption, not courage" (a phrase he will use later with reference to another "bogus" conversion scene, that of neo-Platonic contemplation [VII.xx]) because no one can escape from the trap of vision. To watch is, willy-nilly, to give one's mind to the lure of the gaze. Alypius allows himself to be conducted to the arena, but closes his eyes, "determined to have nothing to do with these atrocities." But if he is not completely present, neither can he be completely absent; although he has removed himself visually from the scene, he remains subject to his ears. (Later Augustine will explain that true freedom from the space of the self is possible only if "the tumult of a man's flesh were to cease" [IX.xi]. The deprivation of the senses, of course, is a typically Christian response to their lure.) The voice, the spoken word from an unseen crowd, prepares and moves the self to vision. Once vision is engaged, Alypius can no longer, as he had planned, "remain master of himself." The moment that he fixes his eye on the mimetic object, an identificatory dialectic is put into action, through which what New Criticism might have called "aesthetic distance" is dissolved. Alypius actually experiences, within the symbolic space of his soul, the action from which he is separated in physical space: "So he opened his eyes, and his soul was stabbed with a wound more deadly than any which the gladiator, whom he so desired to see, had received in his body. He fell, and fell more pitifully than the man whose fall had drawn that roar of excitement from the crowd."

Symbolic space is recognized as a battleground on which various forces contend for the soul. Alypius' fall, like Adam's, is a fall to an enemy of Christianity, and thus the image is one of death to the soul, to "the wound which struck him down."

But if the soul has died a symbolic death, the body remains very much alive, a prisoner of vision. The self, both soul and body, has been given over to the illusory satisfaction provided by participatory spectatorship. In fact, the death of his old self, Auerbach's rational "individual," is dialectically accompanied by the birth of a new self into a community of converts: "He was no longer the man who had come to the arena, but simply one of the crowd which he had joined, a fit companion for the friends who had brought him." As a member of this community Alypius becomes a proselytizer for the games, "no longer simply together with the friends who had first dragged him there, but at their head, leading new sheep to the slaughter."

To summarize, without invoking the frantic hyperbole of Augustine: an individual is called by unseen voices to direct his eyes toward an object; he looks, and finds in that object an inescapable representation of and for himself; he is immediately converted, joining a community

which awaits him; and he becomes an evangelist, trying to get others to view the object and to join his group. In Augustine's conversion scene the same sequence of events occurs. We need now to examine this scene in detail to see how Augustine, undoubtedly aware of the similarity between conversion by the book and conversion by the game, attempts to differentiate the two by selecting details and by making outright assertions.

Augustine's conversion scene begins not with his retreat into the garden but with a seemingly innocuous visit from his friend Ponticianus. The two, along with Alypius, sit down to talk. Then, in what seems to be a detail of what Morton Bloomfield would call "authenticating realism," Augustine mentions that Ponticianus "happened to notice a book lying on a table used for games." That book, of course, will eventually draw Augustine into its power, but its strange juxtaposition with a gaming table cannot be taken as mere chance, for in Augustine's narrative everything has extrarealistic significance. By removing the book from its physical location on the table into its eventual destination of the garden, Augustine is trying to remove it psychologically from the category of self-entrapping game-objects.

Ponticianus, pleased to find that Augustine studies Paul's *Epistles*, goes on to tell the story of an Egyptian monk named Antony. Then, in a brilliant rhetorical maneuver, he makes of Antony's exemplary story a text within a second story, a mimesis to the second power. The effect of turning a narrated life into a textual object which is then shown affecting other lives within another narrative is to force the power of mimesis upon the listener, thereby exposing the possibility of drawing his own life into a text.

This mimetic strategy, however, differs only in degree, not in kind, from that of the games, and so within Ponticianus' story the contrast between the two must again be stressed. "While the Emperor [is] watching the games in the circus," two of his officials opt for a stroll in the gardens (VIII.vi). This seemingly contingent choice is soon shown to be an important one, for the stroll ends with the discovery of a book containing the life of Antony. On reading this book, the two Imperial officials realize that they must make a decision between the power of the Emperor, represented at the games, and the power of God, as represented in the book. The political competition discussed above is here most clearly evident, as the two men hesitate between continuing "to be the Emperor's friends" or becoming "the friend of God."

While Ponticianus speaks, the mimetic power of his story captures Augustine's gaze. What is seen, however, is not an external object which can give an illusion of wholeness. Augustine's gaze is forced, no matter where it turns in physical space, to fall upon himself:

But while [Ponticianus] was speaking, O Lord, you were turning me around to look at myself. For I had placed myself behind my own back, refusing to see myself. You were setting me before my own eyes so that I could see how sordid I was, how deformed and squalid, how tainted with ulcers and sores. I saw it all and stood aghast, but there was no place where I could escape from myself. If I tried to turn my eyes away they fell on Ponticianus, still telling his tale, and in this way you brought me face to face with myself once more, forcing me upon my own sight so that I should see my wickedness and loathe it. (VIII.vii)

The game which the self had been wont to view is no longer symbolically satisfying, for that game is now seen as occurring within the self. To see it, then, is to see the self as engaged in a game which is a "fierce struggle, in which I was my own contestant," in which the mind "had to wrestle with itself" (VIII.viii). As a result of the complete internalization of the symbolic, the self is once again made aware of its essentially divided character: "My inner self was a house divided against itself."

At this point Augustine is still identifying with the two men rather than with the book by means of which they were converted. He is thus unable to reinstate a sense of wholeness, and in his agony of indecision rushes off into a garden behind the house.[11] As he sits weeping, the sequence of events which will lead to the ultimate triumph of symbolization, and its corollary of a unified self, is put into motion:

I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the singsong voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain "Take it and read, take it and read." At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. (VIII.xii)

This final reference to game comes at the very threshold of conversion, at the very moment when divine intervention occurs, and we are expected to take on faith, so to speak, Augustine's assertion that game has ceded to the command of God. Courcelle notes the prevalence of admonitions by children's games in the literature of pagan antiquity, and concludes that Augustine "oppose du même coup son admonition chrétienne a toute espèce de divination païenne."[12] But the opposition of the divine to game is the more important consideration here, for we have seen how political distinctions (Christian vs. pagan) are a part of

[11] This garden, like the garden which the Imperial officers choose to go walking in, is a *topos* in competition and contrast with the place of games, the arena or gaming-table.

[12] Courcelle, p. 141.

a competition for the self through the use of the symbolic. There is really no absolute difference between the voices heard by Alypius at the arena and the voices heard by Augustine in the garden, so that an opposition can only be asserted.

There is a major difference, however, in the type of object to which the gaze is directed. Alypius is moved to view a physical object, while Augustine's voices direct him to perform a reading of the Scriptures. Much has been made of the fact that Augustine reads silently at this important moment, but for us the more important consideration is the effect of an identificatory mimesis which is for the first time undergone in the vision of a *book*, in an activity of reading.

In mundane terms the effect is identical to that of the sight of the gladiators upon Alypius. Augustine identifies himself with the object perceived (believing that what is written applies specifically to him) and is converted. His first act as a member of the Christian community is, like Alypius, to try to get others to experience a similar symbolic appropriation by the object of vision. The book, of course, is a much more economical trap for the gaze than the arena, and Augustine need only turn to his friend and pass the Bible along.

At the level of self-symbolization, however, the difference between reading the book and looking at the game will eventually account for Augustine's ability to write an autobiography. The same mimetic transfer from the represented object to the soul of the viewer that we saw in Alypius also happens to Augustine: in the sentence that he reads, he finds himself interpreted. The scattered self finds itself resumed within the Christian text, which is taken as a symbolic whole. To see words in a sentence (or on a larger scale, in a narrative) is to see objects which, although scattered in space, are bound together by principles of meaning which operate in all symbolic systems, in all games. Thus far we can find nothing to account for Augustine's accomplishment: language and game seem equal. But (and this is the crucial point) language differs from all other systems of signs in that it can represent sign-systems other than itself. It is possible, therefore, to subsume all other sign-systems (all other games) under that of language.[13]

Once the authority of the book is accepted, once the eye acquiesces in its capture by the word, then it is possible to reinterpret all existence in verbal terms. The book subsumes the world, and the world, which had been a space of objects in which the self could be problematically

[13] This special characteristic of language has allowed the development of structural linguistics in this century as the paradigm for all semiotic systems. For a cogent discussion of this linguistic advantage see Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers, 2nd ed. (1964; rpt. New York, 1977), pp. 9-12. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, Ill., 1964), especially pp. 77-83.

dispersed, becomes a space of words. As a result, the self can read the world as a text, as a (hopefully coherent) set of signifiers, which follows the structure given by the book. Augustine's project in the last five books will be such a reading, which will involve, finally, a correlation of outer space (the world of nature) and inner space (memory) with the ultimately textual space of Genesis.

If the world can now be read as text, if to see is to read, if to know something is to know it as a word within a narrative, then to know oneself is to acknowledge the self's existence within the narrative of existence, which is more precisely the narrative of the book that organizes experience, here the Bible. Conversion by the book thus allows the possibility of a narrative of the self, written from the point of view of one who is already within the text. If, as Augustine says elsewhere, we are all monads in a sentence spoken by God, then the vocation of the convert is to show how he is drawn into that sentence which is the context of his being. In looking back, the narrator is no longer scattering himself, for autobiographical vision is now a reading of the self literally into the text which ends the narrative. The narrator can see the problematic space of the self as subsumed by the space of a narrative which is not problematic because God is its author.

We see that a movement from one point in space to another, what we have called a change in perspective, is not what allows Augustine to write. Perspective in the sense of "looking through," with its attendant concept of a point of view, is an invention of the Renaissance.[14] The word was first coined by Boethius, however, and its original meaning of "seeing clearly" indicates how we can think of Augustine's change of perspective. Sight is remade; a changed perspective is a changed way of seeing. That change of vision from the real to the written is the basis of autobiography.

Beyond the point at which the self denies its own vision in favor of a textual perspective, autobiography becomes problematic. As Scriptural language subsumes the self, autobiography gives way, in the last few books of the *Confessions*, to what might be called "logobiography." Few of us, of course, share Augustine's willingness to submit to a Christian *logos*; our era is, as Kenneth Burke has noted, technological rather than theological.[15] Yet if the texture of life has changed, the problems

[14] Cf. Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), pp. 3-5. For a more extended discussion of the change from a spherical to a geometric theory of the organization of space in vision see M. Schild Bunim, *Space in Medieval Painting and the Forerunners of Perspective* (New York, 1940).

[15] *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley, Calif., 1970), p. 170. In this brilliant and too little known book, Burke analyzes the rhetoric of the *Confessions* in terms of a "logological" calculus which is at work in both theological and technological discourses.

inherent in writing about oneself remain the same. The *Confessions*, insofar as they display in an exemplary way the contest between versions of vision which is central to autobiography, remain contemporary.

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