

## On Reading St. Augustine's *Confessions*<sup>1</sup>

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*This essay is intended as a guide for beginning readers of Augustine, for teachers charged with helping these readers understand Augustine, and for those interested in a problem that confronted Augustine first as a reader and eventually as an author: how does a book help us understand ourselves even as we understand its author? A famously dysfunctional reader, Don Quixote de la Mancha, opens the essay as an example of a soul imprisoned by books because it is subject to slavish imitation. With this caution firmly in view, I offer a series of tips on how readers of the Confessions can approach the work with appropriate freshness, developing strategies for reading not only Augustine but other great authors as well. I stress especially the dialogical character of Confessions and, with it, Augustine's qualified continuity with the Platonic-Socratic tradition of text-as-conversation. In so doing, I emphasize Augustine's emerging pedagogy based on his understanding of the function of signs and the affective character of the poetic imagination. In this way, Augustine translates the Socratic tradition into a distinctively Christian idiom while providing a prospective antidote to Quixote's misplaced flights of intellectual and moral fancy, inviting the reader to begin his or her own independent spiritual journey.*

### Introduction

Augustine was a North African of the fourth and early fifth centuries but our journey begins in sixteenth century Spain, with the escapades of Cervantes' fictional adventurer, Don Quixote. We pick up Cervantes' tale at the end of Part One of the book. Don Quixote has been apprehended by his friends, themselves in disguise, and is being carted back to La Mancha in, well, a cart—he is behind bars. As the errant Don's companions walk alongside the rolling cage, the Canon chastises him with these words:

The truth is, my dear sir, that I myself consider these so-called books of chivalry to be prejudicial to the public good.... In my opinion this kind of writing comes under the heading of Milesian tales, which are absurd stories, concerned only to amuse and not to instruct, unlike apologues, which amuse and instruct at the same time. And even though the main aim of such books is to amuse, I don't know how they can succeed when they're full of so many monstrous absurdities, because the soul can only take delight in the beauty and harmony that it sees or contemplates in what the eyes or the imagination places before it, and nothing that contains ugliness or disorder can give us any pleasure.... Fictional stories should suit their readers' understanding and be written in such a way that, by making impossibilities seem easy and marvels seem straightforward and by enthraling the mind, they amaze and astonish, gladden and entertain, so that wonder and pleasure go hand in hand; and none of this can be achieved by the writer who forsakes verisimilitude and imitation, because the perfection of all writing consists in these two qualities. (Cervantes 2000, 439–440)

Here Cervantes contrasts beauty and harmony with ugliness and disorder; the Canon is Platonic in his conception of the structure of reality and of the imagination's capacity to be deceived (and to deceive itself). A well written book should edify, carrying its truth in every line as an antidote to misunderstanding and as a challenge to think for oneself. Imitation must capture the imagination; verisimilitude must incite the reader to understand the truth of things.

While not necessarily Cervantes' authentic voice, the Canon does reflect Cervantes' understanding of the delicate tension between the allure of fiction and the challenge of truth. The novel is a profound meditation on the delights and perils of reading and helps us appreciate how our own self-narrations are informed by books—that is, how words, images and stories inform our imaginations, give structure to our memories, and create the patterns by which our souls strive to understand themselves and their highest longings. At stake for Cervantes is nothing less than the freedom of the soul from the temptations of slavish imitation (see especially Girard 1976). One leaves *Don Quixote* with an acute sense of independence—the reader has learned, but has not been prescribed a definite path on which he is to embark.

In *Confessions*,<sup>2</sup> Augustine confronts a similar problem: how can the

written word sustain a spirit and practice of conversation in which one learns to think for oneself? The soul, for Augustine, seeks wisdom; the longing for this wisdom is innate, but the object of our highest longing is obscured by the countless distractions of lesser goods pursued in disorderly fashion. The awakening of the soul to wisdom would seem to require a teacher—a midwife whose questioning exploration of an individual soul can clear away enough of the soul's clutter to allow the light of wisdom to draw the soul to itself under its own power. Yet, once stretched, the soul is prone to contract and to attach itself not to wisdom's questions, but to the human teacher's answers. The teacher is always at risk of being intellectually both the seducer and the seduced.<sup>3</sup>

The human teacher can resist and deflect the student's desire to possess him or her instead of wisdom, just as Socrates resists Alcibiades' misplaced advances and redirects them towards the good. A book, however, has fewer defenses against the student who would possess it and its answers instead of wisdom itself. A book may become an occasion for the soul's complacency under the guise of the pursuit of wisdom rather than a stimulating guide encouraging its readers on their upward journey. Augustine understood that books could become for us not conversational companions but masters under whom we place ourselves, like Don Quixote, in slavish imitation. *Confessions* resists its readers' voluntary servitude.

Like Cervantes, Augustine wrestles with what it means to read and be read. Like Cervantes' Canon, Augustine understands the power of words both to inform and to mislead the soul. Consider the importance of the book for Augustine: he is moved to philosophy by Cicero's *Hortensius* (Book 3), he is inspired by the conversions of Victorinus and Ponticianus (Book 8)—who are themselves, by the way, converted by a book, *The Life of St. Anthony*—and the arguably decisive conversion in the garden in Book 8 is prompted by the mysterious injunction to “take up and read”...a book.<sup>4</sup> And of course, the Book of books—the Bible, and especially the Psalms (which Augustine would have read daily and seems to have memorized in full)—serves as a *basso continuo*, the pulsing harmonic foundation of *Confessions*' interwoven melodies.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the significance of these books, none of them in fact tells Augustine what to do. Augustine understood from his own philosophical-spiritual journey—especially his slavish adherence to Manichaeism

for a decade or more—the disequilibrium that derives from the unreflective affirmation of a taught doctrine. Correspondingly, he portrays his readings of books in *Confessions* not as conclusions, but as starting points. Rather than foreclosing further learning, these books are gestures which suggest a direction to be striven towards in one's own way and in one's own time. Books read properly demand interpretation, and interpretation requires the cultivation of reflective judgment. One can learn from another's self-narration, but one cannot adopt it as one's own.

There are, however, yet two more books to be considered as informing a reader's independent self-narration: first, the book of nature and nature's God, which presents itself through reason and empirical observation; and second, the book of the self, which simultaneously discloses and conceals itself to reason, feeling, and meditation.

*Confessions* is, then, a book in which Augustine strives to read himself and so to know himself against the backdrop of his understanding of nature and the God it presents. The self-narration is already embedded in a context, if only because one has a body, a pre-reflective history, and a medium of reflection—language—which are always already inherited. Unlike Don Quixote, the Augustinian soul is rooted in a real world which presents itself, materially and immaterially, for interpretation.

As a bishop and international intellectual personality, Augustine is fully conscious that his book, *Confessions*, is going to be read by people who want answers.<sup>6</sup> He is aware that his own series of conversions may be instructive for others, but he knows that his readers bear responsibility for their own experiences and cannot simply adopt his. *Confessions* is therefore a book designed to assist us in reading ourselves and our relation to nature and the God it presents. It is, self consciously, a book understood to be an aid to reading other books, including the book which is ourselves. In this respect, *Confessions* is truly a classic in George Steiner's sense of the word:

I define a "classic" in literature, in music, in the arts, in philosophic argument, as a signifying form which "reads" us. It reads us more than we read (listen to, perceive) it....The classic will ask of us: "have you understood?"; "have you reimagined responsibly?"; "are you prepared to act upon the questions, upon the potentialities of transformed, enriched being which I have posed?" (1998, 19)

A classic articulates, opens up a space for fruitful, if difficult, deepening of the soul. It is a space which demands a response because it forces the reader to judge himself, to reorder the data of memory (as we shall see) in responsible self-narration more accurately approximating the truth. “To read Plato or Pascal or Tolstoy ‘classically,’” says Steiner, “is to attempt a new and different life” (27). In contrast to Augustine’s experience and the experience Augustine expects of his readers—that of coming to think for oneself—Quixote’s new and different life is absurd because he imitates without examining himself, without reading his books of chivalry “classically.” The subject matter of the books Quixote reads is only partly to blame for his folly, which is at least equally the result of *how* he reads the books of chivalry. For us to be read even as we read requires a certain mental preparedness and spirit sufficiently open to hear the questions asked by a text. Augustine understands the need for this preparedness; correspondingly, *Confessions* is full of practical and theoretical strategies for reading the text and for reading ourselves. In the remainder of this essay, therefore, I would like to accomplish three things:

1. identify and dispel some common impediments to reading *Confessions*;
2. suggest some strategies and note some rhetorical cues that will aid readers’ understanding of Augustine; and
3. show how Augustine’s manner of writing educates his deep understanding of signs in the formation of an affective imagination.

### **Part I: Learning How Not to Read**

One of the perils of literary fame is that everyone knows already what it is you are going to say before they read your book. As one of my professors once put it when I asked him whether he had read a particular book: “Read it? I haven’t even reviewed it yet.” Let me outline six great temptations which inhibit our ability to read Augustine well.

1. He’s one of the greatest thinkers to have lived; otherwise we wouldn’t be reading him.

True, and while I will speak later about the importance of deferring to Augustine’s intellect it is worth saying here that Augustine is not to be taken lying down. I mean this both literally—*Confessions* is not best

approached from the prone position—as well as figuratively: he challenges us to think for ourselves. His words aren't worth reading because he is great; he is great because the power of his intellect and expression draw us—if we let them—to the heights of human thought. He doesn't tell us what to think; he invites us into the depths of his own, internal conversation. It is not enough to know *that* Augustine thinks this or that, we must explore *why* he thinks what he does, following his own thought process to begin to grasp the deeper logic of his thought. If we are to agree with Augustine, it must be not because of his reputation, but because of the integrity of his thought; if we are to disagree with him, we must do so with genuine arguments equal to his own.

## 2. Augustine is a saint.

True again, but he was not made a saint until many centuries after his death, when canonization procedures were formalized. But even at that point and under those guidelines, he was made a saint because of what he wrote and did; he did not do and write what he did because he was a saint. Let me enumerate three minor temptations here.

- a. of course he would say that, he's a saint;
- b. of course he thinks that, because it's traditional Catholic doctrine;
- c. as a saint, he of course thinks that revelation (the Bible) solves all intellectual problems.

Each of these minor temptations commits a fallacy with respect to causality, inferring from his sainthood necessary conclusions about Augustine's thought and person. He's not a saint when he writes, he defines much of traditional Christian doctrine (and not the other way around), and he has a commanding sense of what rational reflection is capable of achieving. Read without prejudice, *Confessions* is the story of a highly rational philosopher who finds that reason itself points him to the Christian faith.<sup>7</sup> His positions, again, cannot be explained—or explained away—by *ex post facto* historical judgments. And, after all, *Confessions* reveals how unconventional and un-saintly he was, laying bare his sins, doubts, and struggles. At the very least he may be seen as the patron saint of the passionate procrastinator—“grant me chastity,” he prays, “but not yet” (*Conf.* 8.7).

3. The *Confessions* are confessions—it is so dreary listening to Augustine unload his hypersensitive feelings of guilt.

Our English word “confessions” has a much narrower valence than the Latin *confessio* and Augustine uses the term quite uniquely in defining a literary genre. He does confess his guilt, to be sure, but *confessio* has also the sense of testimony or witness, as well as of meditation. In *Confessions*, Augustine has in mind a threefold audience: God, to whom his confessional meditations are primarily an act of worship; himself, for whom his confessional meditations are acts of conversational self-understanding; and the reader, to whom his confessional meditations are addressed as silent but attentive partners in Socratic conversation.<sup>8</sup> Meditations (Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*, for example) do not imply or require an audience. *Confessions*, by contrast, presupposes an audience and, consequently, a multi-dimensional dialogue.<sup>9</sup> This threefold audience demands our attentiveness to three levels of confessional dialogue—an attentiveness which prompts a new set of dialogues: between us and Augustine, us and ourselves, and us and our God.

4. *Confessions* is an autobiography.

*Confessions* does indeed present an autobiographical narrative, but it is not autobiography strictly speaking and is certainly not *merely* autobiography. Arguably, because of *Confessions*, we know more about Augustine’s life than we do about the life of most any other figure in pre-modern Western history. Augustine paints a fascinating personal portrait, but to what end? Augustine is wrestling in part to re-collect, to reorder the data of his memory to render more intelligible the meaning of the events of his life. Simultaneously, he sees his own struggle for meaning as an index, or pointer, to a more specific exploration of reading on the part of the reader. *Confessions*, then, is not merely the recounting of a life, or even an intellectual life, but the halting, contingent record of a soul’s ascent to the divine—an account of the peeling away of intellectual and moral error toward an ever purer vision of the divine order and its temporal expression.<sup>10</sup> Augustine’s narrative, for example, is not, strictly speaking, chronological—the narrative structure is guided by myriad other progressions which will reveal themselves only if the reader ceases to think in terms of a linear autobiographical chronology.

5. *Confessions* is primarily a conversion narrative.

This temptation is related to the fourth, viewing the work as a linear path to Augustine's decisive change of heart and life. But the narrative does not conclude with the apparently decisive conversion in the garden in Milan, as described in Book 8. Indeed, there are multiple conversions—perhaps even one in each book of *Confessions*—but at least these: the conversion to philosophy, the conversion to Manichaeism, the conversion from Manichaeism, the conversion to spiritual reality, the conversion to Platonic ascent, the conversion to the authority of Christ and the Catholic Church. Which of these is necessary? Which sufficient? Which uniquely decisive? What is Augustine trying to tell us about the character or permanence of conversion more generally? We must be careful not to read our own, tent-meeting notion of conversion into Augustine's narrative.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, the rhythm of the narrative would seem not to culminate in the conversion of Book 8, but in the mystical vision at Ostia in Book 9, the first successful ascent of the soul (after a series of interrupted attempts to glimpse the divine). And of course there are 13 books to the *Confessions*—the narrative of the first nine books ushers the reader into a meditation on remembering (Book 10) and an exploration of time (Book 11), and with time (“in the beginning”) two further books exploring the first chapters of Genesis. Viewing *Confessions* as primarily an autobiographical conversion narrative will obscure for us the far richer and more complex trajectory of the work. Remembering outward, in time, Augustine turns within to the very nature of memory and time, and finds his search for meaning culminating in an ever-expanding attempt to understand his origins and ends. His conversion to Catholic Christianity does not conclude Augustine's intellectual and spiritual quest; rather, it sets the terms and provides a grammar for broader and deeper inquiry which has no unconditional resolution.<sup>12</sup>

6. Finally, there is a temptation to see Augustine as overly hostile to the material world—to the body, to sex, to entertainment.

It is true that he is no hedonist, but when compared with his Stoic and (especially) Manichaean contemporaries, Augustine is remarkably well adjusted. Augustine is not hostile to the body—the human being, for Augustine, is by definition the unity of body and soul, not



a soul trapped in a body as the Gnostics would have it. For Augustine, the body is a good and essential part of our human nature, not to be escaped but to be ordered properly with respect to the divine. Similarly, the world of nature cries out, Augustine says, “Do not worship us but Him who made us.” Much of the philosophical movement of the *Confessions* is Augustine’s progressive understanding that human fulfillment—the satisfaction of our highest longings—is not found in material, but rather in spiritual realities. Like one exemplary rock star, Augustine can’t get no satisfaction; like a thirsty man who drinks salt water, Augustine’s pursuit of material satisfaction leaves him spiritually parched and more intently restless. Only when Augustine begins to see the material world as ordered to the divine do material things take on their full delight and significance. Even then, the ever-self-critical Augustine says that he still cannot detach himself from the beauty of the human voice and the taste of a good wine (*Conf.* 10.33, 10.31). Like Socrates, Augustine knows acutely the charms of the material world and guards against their immoderate enjoyment precisely so that their proper significance might be preserved.<sup>13</sup>

Six temptations, then. If we can get beyond: (1) an undue historicist notion of Augustine’s intellectual significance; (2) preconceptions of conventional piety and Augustine’s saintliness; if we can get beyond the sense that the book is primarily (3) an abject confession of guilt, (4) a simple autobiography or (5) a conclusive conversion story; and if we can resist (6) the temptation to see Augustine as hostile to matter as such—if we can resist all of these temptations, then we might begin to open ourselves as readers, as hearers, to a more distinctive, authentic Augustinian voice in *Confessions*. If we are to discern a new and different pattern in *Confessions*, we must refrain from imposing our own. Like Don Quixote, we must learn to see things as they are, and not as we have learned to understand them through a perverse imagination.

## Part II: Learning How to Read

How do we know how to read something we haven’t read before? Before I turn to clues Augustine himself gives for becoming better readers, let me say a few words about the modern condition of reading.

We have ceased to understand, or ceased to understand fully, the

richness of the Christian mystical tradition because we have forgotten how to read spiritually. By this I mean that the mode of thought and reading which we customarily inherit today is dramatically dissociated from the spiritual mode practiced at least through 1500 AD and that, consequently, much of the classical “mystical” texts like *Confessions* have been obscured from our view. T.S. Eliot spoke famously of the “dissociation of sensibility” which characterized modernity’s break with the past (1996). This is not the place to examine the many theories of modernity’s emergence, its precise date, its villains or its heroes. The spiritual problem has been adequately diagnosed; it remains to re-cultivate the habits of thought and being which will allow us once again to draw nourishment in the present from the considerable resources of Christian spiritual texts.

Nor would I wish to argue that this pre-modern spiritual sensibility does not have clear extension into the modern period, for clearly the mode I seek to describe is consciously conserved. But the spiritual mode of reading is a subterranean inheritance, the light of fireflies at dusk amidst dry intellectual stalks, intermittent light obscured by chaff and unobserved by eyes too dazzled by modern light to be accustomed to discerning traces—and too distracted by an untrained will no longer attentive to the sparkling simplicity of the divine.

Intellectually—or perhaps better, academically—this modern dissociation may be expressed as the separation of theology and spirituality. Yet, to treat the separation of theology and spirituality as a matter solvable by an academic exercise of getting the history right or rearranging the intellectual data to achieve a new, coherent theological model is to address the issue while remaining within a modern mode. To correct one’s map and synchronize one’s instruments are necessary, but are not the same as readying one’s craft and setting sail.

One can be prepared by another to embark upon a journey, but ultimately setting sail is something one must do for oneself. But if the very handbooks for setting sail have been rendered obscure, how are we to proceed? For reading great works—itself a kind of setting sail—can only be partly taught and perhaps it can only be learned. The engagement of reading spiritually requires a disposition to allow ourselves to be read to.

If indeed we have forgotten how to read spiritually, a book which

tells its reader how to read the great mystical texts would itself scarcely cease to inhabit the modern analytic mode. Indeed, it would be merely to perpetuate it. Here the image of Socratic midwifery reminds us that the philosopher aids in the delivery but himself is neither part of the conception nor the creature born.

Augustine is conscious that the intellect perennially lights from spiritual reality to concept, that it habitually seeks to insulate itself from the penetration of the divine light to the soul, if only by neglecting the thing signified by remaining in the company of the sign.<sup>14</sup> Conscious, then, of the soul's weakness—even the willing soul is distracted—Augustine has provided insight into cultivating and sustaining a habit of spiritual reading which culminates less in knowing than in loving and being. If learning is a matter of forming the soul, attentiveness to the spiritual masters will contribute to the re-forming of our own selves, progressively ironing out, as it were, the wrinkles of our modern souls.

I might summarize this excursus as follows: *non lectio, sed meditatio*—not reading, but meditation; let your reading become meditation. And if what I have said has any truth to it, neither Augustine nor I can be of much help except to be occasions for your movement from reading to meditation, for that is a task only you can do for yourselves.

Let us turn to Augustine to see what practical conclusions we might draw from the opportunities for meditation he provides for us in *Confessions*. We begin with the opening of the work:

*Magnus es Domine et laudabilis valde.* Great art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is thy power, and thy wisdom is infinite. And man wants to praise you, man who is only a small portion of what you have created and who goes about carrying with him his own mortality, the evidence of his own sin and evidence that Thou resistest the proud. Yet still man, this small portion of creation, wants to praise you. You stimulate him to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find rest in you. Grant me, O Lord, to know and understand which should come first, prayer or praise; or, indeed, whether knowledge should precede prayer. For how can one pray to you unless one knows you? If one does not know you, one may pray not to you, but to something else. Or is it rather the case that we should pray to you in order that we may come to know you? (*Conf.* 1.1, translation modified)

Beginnings and endings are essential for Augustine, just as they are essential for any great writer. *Magnus es Domine*. These *Confessions* are not about Augustine but about God, the God who is great. As such, the work is not conceived as the record of philosophical musings; it is an act of prayer and worship, an act of speech in which Augustine can express himself to God only with God's own words, words from scripture. God himself gives us the words to speak if we have become open to the possibility of hearing them.<sup>15</sup>

The opening of *Confessions* gives us several indications of the disposition Augustine expects us to bring to our reading of the work: first, an openness or humility before God and the text, a suspension of our pride; second, an expectation of the pleasure of reading; third, an attitude which takes questions seriously; fourth, an inclination of the soul toward appropriate curiosity, what Augustine elsewhere articulates in the phrase "faith seeks, understanding finds" (*On the Trinity* 15.2.2). We must bring to the text a desire to know.

In addition to a disposition to let the text read us, we must bring to *Confessions* a set of skills which we might broadly characterize as "attention." Indeed, much of Augustine's reflection in *Confessions* is anchored by the soul's movement from distraction to attention—a training of the soul to be attentive. Correspondingly, the skills of attention include:

1. Careful consideration of beginnings and endings. Consider for example, how the expectations of the opening of *Confessions*, in which Augustine asks how it is he can hope to know God, are met by the end of Book 1, where Augustine writes "so you will preserve me and those things which you gave to me will be increased and brought to perfection, and I myself shall be with you; for my very being is your gift." Similarly, the beginning of Book 13—"I call upon you O Lord" echoes the opening refrain of Book 1. The end of Book 13 provides both a conclusion and an injunction to begin anew.

But you, the Good which is in need of no other good, are always at rest, because you are your own rest. How can one man teach another to understand this? ... This must be asked of you, *sought* in you, *knocked* for at you. So, so shall it be *received*, so shall it be *found*, so shall it be *opened*. (*Conf.* 13.38)

Themes from the beginning recur—our restlessness and the uniqueness

of God's restfulness, our inquiry after a teacher, our asking and seeking answered by God's gift. As we close the book we are left with the final word—"opened." Reading *Confessions* is an act which is only properly concluded by opening the book—and ourselves—to be read again.

2. Attention to beginning and endings suggests hidden structures and symmetries in the work which guide our interpretation. How do the parts contribute to the whole? How does the whole illuminate the parts? What are the echoes that resound? How does the music of one passage cause sympathetic vibrations in another? Books 1–9 form a kind of unity. Consider the following symmetry: the garden of the pear tree of Book 2 foreshadows and is answered by the garden conversion beneath the tree in Book 8. How does the garden of Book 8 help us re-read the incident of the pear tree garden of Book 2? The work's structure and symmetry suggest, at least, both foreshadowing and backshadowing.<sup>16</sup>

3. Related to structure and symmetry, pay attention to the repeated images. Let's continue with gardens. The theft of the pears in Book 2 obviously has resonances with the eating of the fruit in the Garden of Eden. So too the garden in Book 8, perhaps—but the suffering in this case recalls also the garden of Gethsemane. We could multiply the images almost indefinitely. Let me mention only a very few persistent ones: restlessness, water (tears, baptism), bitterness and sweetness of taste. Each of these is rich for meditation and explication if the reader is sufficiently attentive.

4. Pay attention to multiple treatments of the same subject. Why is it that Augustine criticizes his tears over his friend's death in Book 4, and yet excuses his tears over the death of his mother Monica in Book 9? Consider the contrast between his treatment of friendship (with his unnamed friend) in Book 4 and that of his friendship with Alypius in Book 6—and note again the structural symmetry for interpretive clues.<sup>17</sup>

5. Consider how often Augustine asks questions, and how he proceeds to answer them. Often his questions appear to be rhetorical (e.g., *Conf.* 1.1–4, 10.3–4), but what rhetorical strategy does he have in mind in asking them?

6. Think about the relationship between books and the transitions Augustine makes between them. For example, in Book 1 he identi-

fies and relinquishes his attachment to physical necessity and infantile selfishness. Book 2 is concerned in part with social approbation. Book 3 wrestles with intellectual loves, Book 4 with the love of friends. Each book builds on another in identifying a progressively higher love, only to show how each love considered—even friendship—becomes corrupt if not rightly ordered. Consider the central transition: Book 3 begins with the titillating evocation of his “sizzling” and “frying” of unholy physical loves at Carthage, while in fact Book 3 is really about illicit *intellectual* loves.

7. Take time to attend to the poetry of Augustine's work (about which more below).

In undertaking his narrative self-reflection, Augustine became a puzzle to himself (*Conf.* 10.16, 10.33). To develop the skills of puzzling through a text is to begin to understand the tensions within an author and within oneself. Don Quixote is morally bewildered because he is not equipped to read his texts or judge his own imagination. Augustine's careful reader, by contrast, has begun to acquire the mental discipline of thoughtful wonder. In cultivating an open disposition to the text, together with the skills of attention, you will find yourself ready to be surprised, and with surprise comes the possibility of being changed. This is so because reading, for Augustine, is not simply a means of acquiring knowledge. In *Confessions* Augustine—like Cervantes in *Don Quixote*—wishes to inform the mind, stir the spirit, and elevate the soul. Reading is not simply the accumulation of facts but the training of the mind and improving the spirit's powers of discernment. When we read, Augustine demands that we attend not only to what we think, but also to how we think—how our thoughts and memories may be transformed into a new and different pattern.

### **Part III: Participating in Augustine's Poetry**

The transformation of memory has a poetic rather than dialectical logic for Augustine. In the same way Cervantes' pedagogical gestures follow a literary logic of their own, Augustine's instruction is not an attempt to prove, but by suggestion to change the disposition of the souls of those who read him. Augustine's text must be felt in order to be fully understood. For us both to feel and to understand the poetic quality of August-

tine's text, it helps to have some sense of how he thinks words work.

A brief story from *Confessions* introduces us to Augustine's understanding of language. One day Augustine sneaks up on St. Ambrose only to discover a most marvelous thing: Ambrose reads *silently*. This is not, of course, startling to us, but it does draw a considerable line between our own and Augustine's age with respect to reading. Latin in the fourth and fifth centuries, as before, was written in all capitals, with no punctuation or spaces between words. To discern a written text's meaning, those less virtuosic than Ambrose had to read the syllables aloud to discern the shape of words and sentences. Far from the solitary silent reading of our own day, reading for Augustine was an audible, social affair—all the more necessary in an age with low levels of literacy. *Confessions* was intended to be read aloud and the work takes on a very different texture when we take the time to fulfill that intention. Reading aloud prompts a different kind of attention, produces a different kind of affect, than does silent reading. Reading aloud underscores the author of a text as a vicarious conversation partner; and, of course, to read aloud in a group is almost certain to produce conversation once the reading has finished.

But reading aloud has a deeper, philosophical significance for Augustine. In his unfinished *On Dialectic*, part of an aborted series on the liberal arts undertaken shortly after his conversion in Milan, Augustine articulates the place of the spoken word in his understanding of language. There are signs and there are things. The word is a sign which points to a thing; the written word points to the spoken word, which points to the mental concept, which points to the thing itself. Here the contrast between Augustine's oral culture and our own privileging of the written word becomes sharp. For Augustine, the spoken word is closer to the reality of the thing than the written word; it is less material and so more intelligible than the written word, and in its pronunciation and articulation is shot through with spirit, nuance, affect, and life in ways the written word can never be. The spoken word makes more accessible the disclosure of the thing signified (*On Dialectic* 5.7–8; *On the Teacher* 4.8ff.). Ambrose's silent reading, which bypasses the spoken word in favor of the mental concept, is even closer to the signified (though in so doing it precludes the communal, con-

versational character of the spoken word).

Thus, while Augustine the rhetorician understands the power of the spoken word, Augustine the philosopher acknowledges the fragility of language at all levels, the inability of a single word or group of words to exhaust the meaning and reality of the thing being signified. Words impose a pattern (however unintentionally) on the signified and falsify the ever freshness of experience of the thing itself. Here we see Augustine's affinities with Plato's Socrates, who was similarly concerned about the difficulties of using words to disclose the things themselves. Indeed, in the *Phaedrus* (274b–278b), Socrates criticizes the practice of writing altogether because it falsifies and fixes words (the Platonic dialogue may well be an attempt to write so as to mitigate this problem).

Augustine himself wrote dialogues in the years immediately following his conversion. One of these early works, *On the Teacher*, stresses the limitations of words in teaching us what we long to know. Consider the following passages:

When a sign is given to me, it can teach me nothing if it finds me ignorant of the thing of which it is a sign. (10.33)

When I learned the thing itself, I trusted my eyes, not the words of another—though perhaps I trusted the words to direct my attention, that is, to find out what I would see by looking. To give them as much credit as possible, words have force only to the extent that they remind us to look for things; they don't display them for us to know. (10.35)

[In questions which probe part-by-part and their relation to the whole] the words nevertheless do not teach him, but they raise questions in such a way that he who is questioned learns within.... (12.40)

Or consider this exaltation:

The *Good*—you hear this word and you take a deep breath; you hear it and utter a sigh.... We cannot say, and yet cannot be silent either....

We are what we do, employing neither speech nor silence? We ought to rejoice! Jubilate! Shout out your heart's delight in wordless jubilation!<sup>18</sup>

When it comes to the most important things, therefore, there is no teaching, only learning. The word can instruct only by reminding the reader of something he already knows or prompting the discovery that only the reader can make on his own. At the center, of course, is Christ the Word, the Teacher, so beautifully expressed by Augustine in one



of his sermons: “He cried in the manger in wordless infancy, He the Word, without whom all human eloquence is mute.”<sup>19</sup>

Recent scholarship has brought to the fore the literary and philosophical sophistication of Augustine’s early dialogues, long mistakenly criticized for their clumsy imitation of Cicero’s dialogues, themselves clumsy when compared to Plato’s (see Conybeare 2006). Regardless, Augustine himself seems to have found the dialogue form insufficient for his therapeutic and pedagogical purposes. Ever more deeply aware of the limitations of words, the maturing Augustine shies away from precise definition and instead uses multiple words and complex images in the hope that the reader will not be content with the word—the sign—but will discern that which is signified. Let us take the most obvious example, “God.” The word “God” is a sign that points to the reality, God. No single word will do. Augustine’s only hope is that, through a constellation of words, images, and narratives, the reader will discern that for which the word “God” stands. The same is true for Truth, the Good, Light, Life. For Augustine, these concepts are best intimated in a multitude of verbal gestures, only one of which need strike a chord or affect the imagination to provoke a moment of insight—a recognition of something already present but not yet discerned.

It is clear that by 396, when he begins *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine is sufficiently troubled by the relation of words and things to begin looking for a new, more adequate genre of thought and expression. Toward the end of his meditation on signs, Augustine puts the work aside to begin *Confessions*: he cannot *tell* the complex relation between signs and things, he must *show* it.<sup>20</sup>

It is for this reason, I would suggest, that Augustine creates the unique genre that is *Confessions*. He says at the end of Book 12: “I should prefer to write in such a way that my words could convey any truth that anyone could grasp on such matters, rather than to set down one true meaning so clearly as to exclude all other meanings, which, not being false, could not offend me.” Words are aids to thought, signposts on a journey that one can only undertake for oneself in conversation with the “inner teacher.” Augustine understands his responsibility to suggest the truth without using words that lead to misunderstanding. But he also acknowledges that his text will have a life of its own, a different

tenor and resonance for each reader, a set of words and images that could be suggestive beyond his own intention—suggestive because well-crafted words themselves reflect the divine Word spoken at creation, the silent sound that undergirds all that is. In *Confessions* Book 3, Augustine advances a critique of fiction akin to that of Cervantes' Canon in *Don Quixote*, and not unlike Tolstoy's later critique of art (in *What is Art?*). *Confessions* succeeds in avoiding the perils of fiction by demanding the participation of his readers into their own conversation with the Word made flesh in the affects of poetic imagination expressed in thought and sound.

Several passages from *Confessions* exemplify these consistent poetic affects, which are naturally most forcefully evident in Latin, but which are still discernible in good English translations. Take, for example, this passage, from Book 9:

*Si cui sileat tumultus carnis  
sileant phantasiae terrae et aquarum et aeris,  
sileant et poli  
et ipsa sibi anima sileat  
et transeat se non cogitando . . .  
et loquatur ipse solus non per eas  
sed perseipsum,  
et audiamus Verbum ejus . . . .*

If to anyone the tumult of the flesh were hushed,  
hushed the images of earth, and waters, and air,  
hushed as well the very heavens;  
did the soul, indeed, fall silent to itself,  
and mount, by not thinking on itself, beyond itself . . .  
and He alone spoke, not through these things  
but through His very Being  
that we might hear His word.... (*Conf.* 9.10)

Or this passage:

*Sero te amavi,  
pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova,  
sero te amavi.  
Vocasti et clamasti et rupisti surditatem meam,*

*coruscasti, splenduisti, et fugasti caecitatem meam,  
gustavi et esurio et sitio,  
tetigisti me, et exarsi in pacem tuam.*

Late have I loved Thee, Beauty,  
ever ancient, ever new,  
late have I loved Thee!

Thou didst call, cry out to me, and shatter my deafness;  
Didst flash forth and shine to me, and scattered my blindness;  
Didst send forth Thy fragrance, and I drew in breath and now pant for Thee.  
I have tasted, and now hunger and thirst for Thee;  
Thou hast touched me, and I burn for Thy Peace.

(*Conf.* 10.27; tr. O'Connell 1978, 119)

The reader—the hearer—whose imagination is affected by these words begins to understand a peace which passes understanding. This moment of insight is formative, not in a Quixotic way which romanticizes an invented reality from a fictional text, but in a spiritual discernment of what is most real—an elucidation of the shadows of one's perceptions of self, of others, and of God in recognition of an ineffable light which can be expressed only in the totality of one's being in love. *Confessions* challenges the reader's imagination to reorder the data of the soul's memory in a new and different pattern. And yet it does so not by enslaving the reader to imitation of the past or of a book, but by freeing the reader to a new and different life, a transformation so eloquently expressed by T.S. Eliot in our own age:

This is the use of memory:  
For liberation—not less of love but expanding  
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation  
From the future as well as the past.  
See how they vanish,  
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,  
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

(Eliot 1968, 55)

## Notes

1. This essay is a revision of two public talks and I have opted to retain the conversational immediacy of expression and address; in keeping with the subject matter, these talks were designed to be evocative rather than didactic and I am grateful to the editors for allowing me to keep as much of that evocative char-

acter as a printed publication can permit. The final version of this essay has benefited greatly from the keen suggestions of Peter Busch and Jonathan Yates. A version of Parts I and II of this article was originally given as an invited lecture to the Honors Program at the University of Tulsa (January 2005); I am particularly grateful to the members of the Department of Philosophy and Religion, and especially to Russell Hittinger, for the opportunity to develop these ideas and to have them refined and extended. Part III was added to a revision of Parts I and II in my capacity as an invited consultant for an NEH Workshop presentation, "Socrates and Augustine," for the Core Humanities Program at Villanova University (February 2006); I am particularly grateful to the workshop organizers and participants—especially Jack Doody, Peter Busch, and James Wetzel—who were, characteristically, lively and provocative interlocutors from whom I learned a great deal. In both instances, the explicit charge was not to lecture on Augustine—not to tell others what to think—but to provide tools for students and teachers alike to deepen and extend their own readings of Augustine (correspondingly, I have kept historical and scholarly references to a minimum so as to focus on guides to reading and discovery). These opportunities, and the ideas and conversations they spawned, are truly gifts of intellectual and spiritual friendship which Augustine himself richly celebrated.

2. References to *Confessions* and other works of Augustine will be to book, chapter, and (occasionally) paragraph number rather than page number. Except where otherwise noted, quotations from *Confessions* will use Warner's translation (Augustine 1963) and the Loeb edition (Augustine 1912) for Augustine's Latin. Other works by Augustine are listed in the References below.
3. O'Donnell (2005, 202–208) plays the role of a mischievous Cervantes, using the character Don Quixote (as distinct from the novel *Don Quixote*) to illustrate Augustine's own slavishness to books and, especially, the slavishness of scholars to Augustine himself. O'Donnell the artful provocateur and I differ only at first glance; both of us are at pains to recreate for the reader Augustine's freshness and the genuine puzzles of the ideas he confronted—and to demand of readers that they think for themselves.
4. I use the term "book" here loosely for its contemporary effect. Augustine, of course, read codices and possibly even scrolls and tablets. His collection of Pauline (or alleged Pauline) texts would not have resembled our complete printed Bible or even the Christian New Testament, which itself was only at the time in the process of being formally agreed upon. Augustine gives his own canonical list of scripture at *On Christian Doctrine* 2.8.13. On Augustine as a reader, see Stock 1996. For a classically informed contemporary examination of the material history of texts and its contemporary significance by one of our greatest Augustinian scholars, see O'Donnell 1998.
5. For Augustine's use of scripture in *Confessions*, both as a literary device and as

a polemical defense against charges of lingering Manichaeism, see for example Martin 2000.

6. See, e.g., *Conf.* 10.3. For discussions of Augustine's self-consciousness of his literary reputation, see Vessey 2005 and Brown 2000, 441–481.
7. Augustine understands his own impulse toward Catholic Christianity to be not an escape from reason but a working out of reason, a rational coming to terms with reason's Creator and the Ratio of that Creator's self-revelation in the second person of the Trinity. For Augustine as a philosopher, see O'Daly 1987.
8. For examples of this multiple audience, see, respectively, *Conf.* 1.1, *Conf.* 9.1, and *Conf.* 10.3.
9. And in many respects, as I shall remark later, the genre of *Confessions* should be seen as the successor to Plato's philosophical dialogues in the sense that the reader has more intellectual and moral resources at his disposal, but is left largely in a state of inconclusiveness (*aporia*) with respect to his next steps.
10. Consider Augustine's philosophical materialism, for example, or his embrace of Manichaeism.
11. Nock 1998 remains well worth reading on this subject. See further Starnes 1990 and Van Fleteren 1990.
12. Theologically, this grammar is framed by the divine rest that brackets the whole of creation—the restful order in which all things were created according to their measure, number and weight, and the Sabbath rest of the eschatological Seventh Day of God's creation in which all things are restored to their created natures. In between is the restlessness of the fallen condition never at peace with itself because never able either to fulfill or eradicate its nature created for the love and worship of God. This theological framework is suggested in *Confessions* (Book 1 and Book 13 especially) and is more fully developed in *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* (e.g., 2.1.2, 3.14.22, 6.16.27) begun shortly after *Confessions* but not finished until 415.
13. One sees Augustine's own moderation in the passage just cited and in his modest asceticism; not moderate by the standards of our own day, but certainly moderate with respect to the rigorous asceticism of fourth and fifth century paganism and Christianity alike (see further Brown 1988). As a matter of comparison, one sees Plato's own moderation in the philosophical movement of *Symposium*, *Charmides*, or *Lysis*, for example, or in the tripartite division of the soul (e.g., in *Republic*), where it is not the passions themselves that are improper but rather the immoderation of their refusal to be ruled by the mind.
14. See, e.g., *On the Teacher* 2.3ff, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.2.2; 3.9.13, and *On the Trinity* Books 9–11. See also Breyfogle 1999 with bibliography.
15. How this opening occurs is fundamentally mysterious to Augustine, and for this reason, as we shall see, Augustine tries to write in such a way as to maxi-

- mize the possibilities of prompting openness to insight. The deeper structure of this opening to the text—in effect opening to the speaking of the divine in and through the text—would entail examinations of his understanding of intellectual illumination and of grace and free will, which cannot occupy us here.
16. For these and many other insights, I am grateful for the conversation of Robert McMahon and his *Augustine's Prayerful Ascent* (1989), which is replete with examples of hidden structures and symmetry in *Confessions*.
  17. On tears, see Paffenroth 1997.
  18. The passage is quoted by Josef Pieper (1990, 43–44). I have been unable to locate the Augustinian source of the quotation.
  19. *Sermon 188.2*, translated by John E. Rotelle (Augustine 1986, 11).
  20. Augustine remained concerned to explore the function of signs. Having abandoned his treatment toward the end of Book 3 (3.25.35) of *On Christian Doctrine* in 396, he returned to the work late in life (426/7), completing the third and adding a concluding fourth book, and likely revising what he had written previously.

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