

Humanities 110 Reed College
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Augustine and the Art of Transformation

Outline of Lecture

- I. Introduction: The Purpose of Art--Theories of Reading
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- II. Augustine's Theory of Reading
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 - B. Reading as Spiritual Growth
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- III. Why We Must Change Our Live (and Why We Don't Want to Do So)
 - A. Autobiography and the Narcissistic Self
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Quotes

I. The Purpose of Art: Theories of Reading

1. Jas Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer* (36)

Philostratus is teaching, through his ekphrastic performance, an hermeneutic of relating to images....The beholder constructs the object into his subjectivity, makes the other--which previously had no place in his experience--a constituent of that unique and intimate set of objects by which he defines his identity....The premise beneath this strategy is that the viewer is always apart from the object he views, is always excluded from the reality of the object....Hence the hermeneutic enterprise of ekphrasis--the excluded viewer must narrate, or describe or associate the image into terms that he knows, the discourse that he uses. But there is a price to pay. The image is no longer itself--it is a subjective construct with a personal meaning for the beholder...a meaning that need have no relation with the object itself.

Roman Monuments and Museums Web Site: <http://www.roma2000.it/z1.html>

2. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems*, tr. Stephen Mitchell (61)

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

Alternate ending: "nothing can stop the radiance of all poems from nearly
burning us to death" (Mitchell 304).

Web Site of the Louvre Museum (home of *Torso of a Youth from Miletus [Apollo]*):
<http://www.paris.org/Musees/Louvre/Treasure/GreekRoman>

3. James O'Donnell, *Augustine's Confessions*

All of us who read Augustine fail him in many ways....Denying him our full cooperation, (1) we choose to ignore some of what he says that we deny but find non-threatening; (2) we grow heatedly indignant at some of what he says that we deny and find threatening; (3) we ignore rafts of things he says that we find naive, or uninteresting, or conventional (thereby displaying that in our taste which is itself naive, uninteresting, and conventional); (4) we patronize what we find interesting but flawed and primitive (e.g., on time and memory); (5) we admire superficially the odd purple patch; (6) we assimilate whatever pleases us to the minimalist religion of our own time, finding in him ironies he never intended; (7) we extract and highlight whatever he says that we find useful for a predetermined thesis (which may be historical, psychological, philosophical, or doctrinal, e.g., just war, immaculate conception, abortion) while not noticing that we ignore many other ideas that differ only in failing to command our enthusiasm. (Web Site: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine.html>)

II. Augustine's Theory of Reading

1. Augustine, *The Confessions* (15): on Virgil's *Aeneid*

I was later forced to learn about the wanderings of some legendary fellow named Aeneas (forgetful of my own wanderings) and to weep over the death of a Dido who took her own life from love. In reading this, O God my life, I myself was meanwhile dying by my alienation from you, and my miserable condition in that respect brought no tear to my eyes.

What is more pitiable than a wretch without pity for himself who weeps over the death of Dido dying for love of Aeneas (I.xiii.20-21).

2. Augustine, *The Confessions* (39): on Cicero's *Hortensius*

The book changed my feelings. It altered my prayers, Lord, to be towards yourself, It gave me different values and priorities. Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart. I began to rise up to return to you. For I did not read the book for a sharpening of my style, which was what I was buying with my mother's financial support now that I was 18 years old and my father had been dead for two years. I was impressed not by the book's refining effect on my style and literary expression but by the content (III.iv.7).

the one thing that delighted me in Cicero's exhortation was the advice "not to study one particular sect but to love and seek and pursue and hold fast and strongly embrace wisdom itself, wherever found" (III. iv.8).

3. Augustine, *Confessions* (143-44); on *The Life of St. Anthony*

In their wanderings they happened on a certain house where there lived some of your servants, poor in spirit: "of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). They found there a book in which was written the Life of Anthony. One of them began to read it. He was amazed and set on fire, and during his reading began to think of taking up this way of life and of leaving his secular post in the civil service to be your servant. For they were agents in the special branch. Suddenly he was filled with holy love and sobering shame. Angry with himself, he turned his eyes on his friend and said to him, "Tell me, I beg of you, what do we hope to achieve with our labours? What is the aim of our life?..." So he spoke, and in the pain at coming to birth of new life, he returned his eyes to the book's pages. He read on and experienced a conversion inwardly where you alone could see and, as was soon evident, his mind rid itself of the world (VIII.vi .15).

4. Augustine, *Confessions* (153); on St. Paul

I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting. There I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: "Not in riots or drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts" (Rom. 13: 13-14).

I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were expelled (VIII.xii [29]).

5. Augustine, *Confessions* (26); on OUR conversion

To whom do I tell these things? Not only to you, my God. But before you I declare this to my race, to the human race, though only a tiny part can light upon this composition of mine. And why do I include this episode? It is that I and any of my readers may reflect on the great depth from which we have to cry to you (II.iii[5]).

III. Why We Must Change Our Lives (and Why We Don't Want to Do So)

A. *Autobiography and the Narcissistic Self*

1. Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (33)

Augustine's *Confessions* answer to this new spiritual orientation [of self examination] by contrast to the great philosophical systems of classical antiquity--Epicurean, for example, or Stoic--that contended themselves with a disciplinary notion of individual being and argued that one should seek salvation in adhering to a universal and transcendent law without any regard for the mysteries (which anyway were unsuspected) of interior life. Christianity brings a new anthropology to the fore: every destiny, however humble it be, assumes a kind of supernatural stake. Christian destiny unfolds in dialogue with God in which, right up to the end, every action, every initiative of thought or conduct, can call everything back into existence. Each man is accountable for his own existence, and intentions weigh as heavily as acts--whence a new fascination with the secret springs of personal life.

B. *To Confess: The Confessions as a Psalm/Prayer*

2. William Mallard, *Language and Love* (12)

[A] confession in the early church meant confessing the glory and wonder of God, and only secondarily confessing one's sin.

3. Augustine, *Confessions* (3): Confession as Prayer

"You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised (Ps. 47:2): great is your power and your wisdom is immeasurable"(Ps 146:5). Man, a little piece of your creation, desires to praise you, a human being "bearing his mortality with him"(2 Cor 4:10), carrying with him the witness of his sin and the witness that you "resist the proud" (1 Pet 5:5). Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of

your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you (I.i.1)

Genres of Psalms ("Praises"):

Hallelujah ("call out to Yah [God's poetic name]") Psalms: 147, 1508

Supplicant Psalms (individual or communal applications for aid, cries of distress, or pleas for God to relent his fury): 90, 22

Wisdom Psalms: 90

Professions of Faith or Innocence: 23

C. The Self Redirected

4. Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* (136)

According to Augustine man is created by God from nothing. His fulfillment lies in God. Life in the post-lapsarian world is an arduous journey back to God.

5. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance* (150)

[W]hat is right is after my own constitution; the only wrong is against it.

6. Augustine, *Confessions* (14, 25)

She [Monica] anxiously laboured to convince me that you, my God, were my father rather than he, and in this endeavor you helped her to gain victory over her husband (I.xi.17).

I ought to have paid more vigilant heed to the voice in your clouds:... "He who has no wife thinks on the things of God, how he can please God. But he who is joined in marriage thinks on the affairs of the world, how he can please his wife" (1 Cor. 7:32-3). had I paid careful attention to these sayings and "become a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:12), I would have been happier finding my fulfillment in your embraces (II.ii.3).

D. The Intimacy of Evil

7. Augustine, *Confessions* (29, 32)

There was a pear tree near our vineyard laded with fruit, though attractive in neither colour nor taste. To shake the fruit off the tree and carry off the pears, I and a gang of naughty adolescents set off late at night after (in our usual pestilential way) we had continued our game in the streets. We carried off a huge load of pears. But they were not for our feasts but merely to throw to the pigs. Even if we ate a few, nevertheless our pleasure lay in doing what was not allowed (II.iv.9).

So the soul fornicates (Ps. 72:27) when it is turned away from you and seeks outside you the pure and clear intentions which are not found except by returning to you (II.vi.14).

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