

Augustine and the Art of Transformation
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I. Ways of Relating to Other Cultures and the Past

I would like to begin today by discussing the ways that we use the past and other cultures to build our sense of self. In doing so, I will return to questions raised by Wally Englert in his first lecture last semester: why do we turn to the literature, art, philosophy, and history of the Greeks and Romans--what do we hope that they--a people so temporally and culturally distant from us--can offer to us today? My response to this question consists of four parts: 1) Roman museums and ekphrasis provide us with one model for reading and viewing works of art that suggests that we can gain power from art through controlling, distancing, and objectifying art and literature; 2) this is very different from the model of reading/viewing that Augustine provide us with in the *Confessions*, since he suggests that art is intimate and offers us the ability to transform ourselves; 3) Augustine's new mode of reading is related to the shift in Late Antiquity toward interiority (a shift we have already seen in St. Anthony and Mani); and [finally] 4) because of the differences between a generic late antiquity Christian self and 20th Century American self, this new model can be uncomfortable and cause us to retreat from Augustine, and in doing so, to miss one of the major premises of his book.

First I would like to address the two models of readings across cultures that I just mentioned. The first model of reading--in which we can gain power from art through controlling, distancing, and objectifying it--is not completely foreign to us: it can be found in museums--a cultural icon that has its roots in

Romans art displays. Although we tend to think of museums as natural and apolitical, they are descendants of the Roman cycle of conquest. Livy tells us that after conquering an enemy, the Roman army would loot the city of its most prized possessions: this booty--"always objects of value, either as tokens of wealth or national icons, many works of art, [were]...brought home in triumph" (Newton 270).¹ Displaying these items became a fad among wealthy Romans, but not merely for their exotic appeal: As museum scholar Douglas Newton points out, "looting is an expression of power [and] ...a somewhat wistful desire to assimilate the esteemed culture of the looted" (Newton 270). Thus, in displaying the art of other cultures in these "protomuseums," Roman aristocrats reinforced an image of themselves and their empire that was quite comforting: these displays not only signified "the glory of the Roman empire for having been able to conquer such formidable enemies," (Lazar --) but also served as a metaphor for the empire itself: they showed how diverse cultures could be unified under one roof and under the control of Rome.

In this sense, Roman displays of spoils reflect a more general Roman understanding about art and how to view it that we have seen in other texts we've read this semester. For example, one might argue that these museums use other cultures much in the same way that the Arch of Constantine uses the past: in both instances, figures and cultural artifacts are removed from their original locations and repositioned within modern monuments at center of the city to "advertise the victories and virtues of the Roman empire" (Peirce 389). In dislocating these images, the viewer, in art historian Jas Elsner's words, "is encouraged in the illusion that he or she can control the 'other,' the [art object] by incorporating it through a narrative contextualization into the world of the

¹I would like to thank a thesis student, Allyson Lazar, for recommending this article to me.

viewer's psychological and cultural experience" (Elsner 22). This "control" gives the viewer a sense of power, since the world of the art object never threatens the world of the viewer--indeed the art object's world is completely eliminated. In a book entitled, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, Jas Elsner explains that (on handout)

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.

For Elsner, then, ekphrasis involves the same process as the arch of Constantine--objects are removed from their contexts and renarrated. You may want to think back to instances of ekphrasis in works such as the *Aeneid*, the *Metamorphoses*, and the *Golden Ass* and consider whether you think that the authors encourage you to view art by controlling, distancing, and objectifying it.

This model of reading is very different from one proposed by Augustine in the *Confessions*. [I encourage you as well to compare both of these to the way Professor Wasserstrom suggested on Monday that Mani and Manichaens used the past and other cultures.] Lest you think that I have a somewhat pathological distrust of museums, I would like to return to this cultural site to propose a more generous understanding of how museums can work and how we might read across cultures--an understanding that I will argue in a minute is the type of reading Augustine himself recommends. In a poem called, "Archaic Torso of Apollo" Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke relives his encounter with a broken 5th Century Greek statue in the Louvre--a museum in Paris [web site on handout]. This beautiful poem worth reciting in full as one way we might consider the texts

we've read this year: when Rilke sees the statue, it does not reinforce his sense of his own power and prestige--instead, it does something quite different:

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. [literally gone] 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.

You must change your life: for Rilke, art speaks to us, challenges our sense of self. We do not watch art, but art watches us. Not hard to read Rilke's ekphrastic poem as a cry for what Rilke hopes his own art may do: actual statue Rilke saw was of a youth, but here Rilke substitutes Apollo. This substitution is symbolically loaded: as you know, Apollo is the God of poetry; thus, there is an implicit connection here to the power of literature as well. Although ancient texts make come to us broken or in fragments, they call to us with a seductive power that is almost frightening. Indeed, an early draft of this poem read that "nothing can stop the radiance of all poems from nearly burning us to death" (Mitchell 304).

While I am not asking that you all spontaneously combust, I would argue that it is exactly this notion of the relationship between art and the self, the past and the present that is at the core of Augustine's *Confessions*. It is our very resistance to this transformative aspect of Augustine's *Confessions* that has plagued Augustine scholar James O'Donnell. O'Donnell has focused his extensive web site on Augustine on our very resistance [again, address on handout]. In asking us to reshape our readings, O'Donnell has created a list of the many ways that we "fail" Augustine, all of which are related in my mind, to our reluctance to read him transformatively. An abridged version of the list is as follows: (on handout)

All of us who read Augustine fail him in many ways....Denying him our full cooperation, we (1) 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;...(6) we assimilate whatever pleases us to the minimalist religion of our own time, finding in him ironies he never intended.

For those of us who are not Christians, perhaps the most threatening element of Augustine's *Confessions* is that it asks us to convert to Christianity as he himself has done. On a basic level when we refuse to open ourselves to this possibility we do fail him. But is there a way that this text can still call to us, ask us to change ourselves if we won't be converted? For many of us at Reed who are not Christians, including myself, and who do not desire to be transformed into Christians, how can we read Augustine so as to fail him as little as possible?

It seems to me that we fail Augustine when we are detached and imperial--when we seek to collect him as an object for our mental museums without allowing him to challenge us--to see how (threatening or not) he asks us directly, and specifically to change our lives. *The Confessions* is not about being

dispassionate, objective, or serene: this book repeatedly and insistently tell us of a passion that is so bright it threatens to burn us, and the book seduces us into hoping that we too might be ravished by God and made anew. At the moment when we are most threatened by Augustine we are closest to allowing his text to work.

I would like to turn in a moment to how Augustine hopes to transform us and the reasons we are tempted to resist his text. But first I would like first to turn to the *Confessions* in order to substantiate my hypothesis that Augustine's notion of reading is indeed a transformative one.

II. Augustine's Theory of Reading

In book one, Augustine introduces two main preoccupations: God and language (Mallard 12). The connection between these two subjects should not surprise us: we know from Genesis that God creates the world through language (a fact which Augustine remind us of in Book 11), or as it is written at the beginning of the gospel of John: "When all things began, the Word already was. The Word, dwelt with God, and what God was. The Word, then, was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be" (John 1:1-3). To have language, then, is to be with God: language is what connects Augustine to God in moments of prayer, and the *Confessions* record his search for a language to pray to God appropriately (Mallard 12). When Augustine speaks of his infancy, it is a time without language: he says, "I threw my limbs about and uttered sounds, signs resembling my wishes, the small number of signs of which I was capable but such signs as lay in my power to use: for there was no real resemblance" (I. vi .8). Like Moses in Exodus 6:28, the young Augustine is a "poor speaker"--or more literally from the Hebrew has "uncircumcised lips." This

more literal rendering of Exodus is important for understanding the weight of Augustine's ineffectual sign language: his linguistic deficiencies reflect his spiritual ones. Thus, Augustine's physical and spiritual growth is associated with a coming into language: when "boyhood came upon him" he remarks "I was no longer a baby incapable of speech but already a boy with the power to talk" [I. viii (13)]. As you read the *Confessions*, you might want to think about whether he ever achieves a pure language, and what a pure language would mean to you.

For Augustine, this verbal awakening is accompanied by a textual awakening as well. Just as *the Confessions* uncovers Augustine's progress toward obtaining a language with which to address God, so does the book reveal his trajectory from improper readings to his ultimate reading at moment of conversion. Augustine grows up in a fractured world--it is Pagan and Christian [and all the various sects in-between], African and Roman, the City of Man and the City of God; and he must learn to sort through the many improper uses of language and the false understanding of how to read texts which he receives in school. In this sense, Augustine reworks a theme we have seen in other texts this year: the misuse of language and rhetoric.

One example of an early improper reading is interspersed within his discussion of his boyhood miseries towards the end of Book 1. Augustine recounts his trials learning the pagan texts of Greek and Roman literature. Here it is not only the content of the texts that leads him astray, but also Augustine's own reading strategies: He recalls that (on handout)

I was forced to learn about the wanderings of some legendary fellow named Aeneas (forgetful of my own wanderings) and to weep over the death of 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, but not weeping over himself dying for his lack of love for you, my God, light of my heart, bread of the inner mouth of my soul (15)

(It would be useful to ask yourself whether your response to the *Aeneid* was a similar one--whether your heart bled for Dido, but didn't move you to reflect upon your own condition--that is, is Augustine right? What would it mean, what would happen if the text were to speak to us, to challenge our sense of self?) I would have you notice that Augustine does not suggest that we burn the *Aeneid* (or remove it from Hum 110 syllabus) because it does not mention God; rather, he asks that we change the way we read from an external enterprise to an internal one. In doing so, Augustine formulates a very different notion of relationship between pagan Rome and the world of God than we have seen before. Whereas St. Anthony turns his back on the city and classical culture, Augustine attempts to transform it.

[It's worth noting that this was true in some types of early Christian art as well. Although Pagan images were not allowed in churches, they were used in art in Christian homes--for example on silver serving dishes. One way of the ways that Christians made sense of pagan art and pagan images is that they read them allegorically or typologically--that is they have looked for a Christian subtext in much the same way that Christians reread the Hebrew Bible.]

Augustine's desire to find truth in all texts--in other words to reread classical culture--helps make sense of why Augustine draws parallels between his own life and that of Aeneas, and why he alludes to the *Aeneid* --and many other classical texts throughout the *Confessions*. Like Aeneas, he is a "wanderer" in

search of a new homeland (II. ii[2] I.xiii[21-22], III.i [1], III vii [13], who has been led astray from his true mission--a movement toward God (rather than Rome). In conference you might discuss what type of audience this strategy of rereading might appeal.

There is a certain narrative beauty, at the opening of Book three when Augustine, wandering in search of education, and seeking "an object for his love" lands in Carthage, like a misguided Aeneas (III.i[1]). Here, like Aeneas, Augustine finds an improper thing upon which to focus his desire and be "captivated by": instead of Dido, it is theatrical shows. However, like Dido, ultimately tragedy must be discarded as a false love that impedes his movement toward his telos.

Just as Carthage is the site where Aeneas is awakened to his mission, so is it where the Augustine the university student take a substantial step forward toward God and his pursuit of language. This epiphany occurs not while reading a Christian text, but while digesting Cicero's *Hortensius*. Cicero's work unexpectedly yet radically alters the way Augustine reads: he remembers that (on handout)

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....I was impressed not by the book's refining effect on my style and literary expression but by the content (III.iv(7)).

Here Augustine realizes that even "academic language [that] boasts fine form, ...can be turned to private, corrupt ends" (Mallard 41). Cicero changes Augustine's life because he teaches him that language can be both "learned and devout, both sophisticated and truthful" (Mallard 41). Although Augustine

ultimately decides that he can not be entirely "gripped" by any book that lacks Christ's name (40), Cicero challenges Augustine to find enlightenment in all texts--that is, to open his mind: Augustine remarks (on handout) that "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)). We would not be wrong to sense the parallels between this theory and the saying in the *Tractate Avot* that "a controversy for the sake of God will lead to abiding results" (PA 20, p. 235). A key part of Augustine's theory of reading is that this shift inward will naturally redirect one's self and one's readings toward God: Cicero doesn't make the scriptures unnecessary--instead, he re-channels Augustine's textual desire toward "holy scriptures...to find out what they were like" (III.v [9]). In this sense it is natural that Augustine should end his own work by turning to Genesis--since through reading *The Confessions* we too will presumably have our desires re-channeled.

Although some of you may not have finished the Confessions yet, I think that it is important to point out that Augustine's own conversion occurs as a result of a proper reading experience. In book 8, St. Augustine lays the groundwork for this conversion by recounting a story told to him by Ponticianus of how two men were brought to God through reading the *Life of St. Anthony* (on handout--won't read here). After hearing this story, Augustine does not respond to it as he did to story of Dido and Aeneas, or to the tragedies: instead, while Ponticianus was speaking, God "turned [Augustine's] attention back to [him]self" (144). Here, Augustine shows that to hear or read of another's conversion is to desire your own: hearing the story forces Augustine to "observe [himself]...that [he] might see how vile [he] was, how twisted and filthy, covered in sores and ulcers" (VIII.vi [15]).

As with reading Cicero, hearing the story of Ponticianus' friends directs Augustine back to the scriptures, and hence to his own moment of conversion: (on handout) he recounts

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 (153; VIII.xii [29]). If this moment seems odd to us, either it is because it is out of context, or because Augustine's work has failed to change us. Clearly, the ultimate goal of this text must be to propel *us* towards conversion, just as Augustine's readings have propelled him. In book I chapter six, Augustine praises god because he has "given mankind the capacity to understand oneself by analogy to others" (8). Just as Augustine must take the works of the Apostles, Saints, Scriptures, Greeks, and Romans personally, so must we take his. Although this book is addressed to God--Augustine's "you"--God is clearly not his only audience: In book two he asks (on handout)

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 (26; II.iii[5]).

I suspect that this is the precisely the moment at which most of us "fail" Augustine (in James O'Donnell's words): it is the point at which those of us who are not Christians or practicing Christians and have no desire to be so recoil in terror. What is so threatening about the type of conversion and reading that Augustine suggests and why do we resist it? In the next section of my lecture I will position Augustine's concept of self within shift toward interiority and argue that because of the differences between a generic late antiquity Christian self and a generic 20th Century American self, this new model can be uncomfortable and cause us to retreat from Augustine, and in doing so, to miss one of the major premises of his book.

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

One of the things that is perhaps most disconcerting about Augustine's *Confessions*, is the exactly the weight that it places upon us as readers to investigate and challenge ourselves. Augustine reminds us that it is not enough for the "human race [to be]...inquisitive about other people's lives but negligent to correct their own" (X.iii[3]; 180). It is this very interest in the self that has caused literary critics to position Augustine's *Confessions* at the beginning of the Western autobiographical tradition--or as Peter Brown puts it in *The World of Late Antiquity*--see the *Confessions* as "the first, and one of the greatest 'self-portraits'" (75). At its simplest, an autobiography is the "story of someone's life written by him or herself" (Spender 114); however, at a deeper level autobiography--as we know it today--presumes a curiosity with the self that is historically and culturally determined. Theorist George Gusdorf suggests that this self-curiosity emerges out of Christianity's "new spiritual orientation" toward self-examination during this era (Brown 67), and that this curiosity makes Augustine's text substantially different from the Pagan texts we have read this year.

In the "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," Gusdorf argues that (quote on handout),

The great philosophical systems of classical antiquity--Epicurean, for example, or Stoic--...contented 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. [In contrast] 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" (33)

[Gusdorf's argument is similar to the argument made by Nigel Nicholson in his lecture on Greek lyric in which he argued that "mystery" of I that we look for in poems is missing in Greek lyrics--there is a different notion of self at play.] For Gusdorf, this new "fascination with the secret springs of personal life" lays the groundwork for later European and Euro-American cultures narcissistic fascination with the self. While I think that Gusdorf is right on both of these accounts--Augustine's self is different from Sappho's and our sense of self develops out of Augustine's, he does not address the fact that our sense of self is really quite different from Augustine's. Sociologists and historians alike have well documented the "cult of individualism" in American culture--a tendency toward self-reliance and self-direction that is so strong that at least one group of sociologists in a book called *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* have raised the concern that "individualism may have grown

cancerous...[and as a consequence] may be threatening the survival of freedom itself" (Bellah viii). While you may not agree that individualism is about to destroy our country, it is clear that the inward turning in Augustine's *Confessions* is a different type of self-fascination we are used to seeing.

In the *Confessions* we turn inward not for our own sake--egocentric individualism--but for the sake of God--that is to erase individualism. If modern autobiography is an alluring mirror which draws us in Narcissus-like to revel in the "mystery of our own personality," Augustine's *Confession* seduces us with the intention of obliterating us. This I would assert is one of the many (threatening) paradoxes at the heart of Augustine's theology. We must be both self-concerned and not so.

One way that Augustine frames his paradoxical vision of self is through the prayer format of his self-life writing--an autobiography which is entitled a "confession." As theologian William Mallard usefully reminds us, "a confession in the early church meant confessing the glory and wonder of God, and only secondarily confessing one's sin." Thus, the *Confessions* open not with Augustine's life (I was born in a small town in North Africa), or with his sin, but with the greatness of God: The *Confessions* open with the following prayer (on handout)

"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])

While this quote reminds of the importance of language in *The Confessions*-- Augustine must learn right words because he is speaking to God--it also reminds us of the balancing act that Augustine performs throughout his work. It is crucial that we don't lose sight of God or Augustine or ourselves, of this world, or the next (Burke 52). Augustine must speak of his sins in this world--and our own--but only as they move us toward God and salvation. Augustine reminds us in Book 10 chapter 3 that he tells us about his sins not so we might be entertained by them [as we are by tragedy and "theatrical shows"], but so that we might be moved and changed. Augustine speaks of his sins for our sake, and for God's: the opening of Book four reminds us that it is right to confess to God our shame, since "it is for ...[his] praise" (Psalm 105; IV.i [1]).

Augustine's emphasis on "praising God" points to one of the many ways that *The Confessions* is indebted to the Psalms. [About one-third of the book's thousand plus Biblical quotations" are [from this book of the bible [Burke 55]]. In fourth century Christianity, Psalms (or "Praises") were part of the daily prayers. Augustine borrows from the Psalms in three key ways: he uses their themes, language, and focus on the inner life. Although I do not have time here to examine Augustine's use of the Psalms extensively, one way that you might compare the Psalms and *The Confessions* either in conference or on your own, is to think about the various types of psalms that we read (put these on the handout): for example, we read Psalms that "call out to God" (literally Hallelujah), Psalms that speak of God's wisdom, Psalms that profess faith, and Psalms of supplicants who apply for aid, cry out in distress, or plea for God to relent from his anger. As you read through *The Confessions* it would be worth noting the way Augustine invokes these very different types of prayer at different points in his narrative. Similarly, Augustine is indebted to the heightened emotional language of psalms. In his lecture on prophecy, Steve

Wasserstrom explained how the psalms and the books of the prophets used formulaic language and ideas in order to come across as spontaneous, inspired, and close to God: one might do a close reading of Augustine's text and examine the ways he uses the language of the psalms as a model for how to keep his work vibrant.

Most important to my argument though, is the way that Augustine borrows the Psalms' insistence upon the prayer's close relationship to God. God's relationship to Augustine throughout the *Confessions* picks up on the interiority of Psalms and the personal relationship to God it suggests. Genesis and Exodus (like Gospels) tell of historical personages and times: Psalms uses that language to make an immediate and personal connection: as the supplicant repeats the words of the Psalms in temple, in church, or in private he or she makes a makes individual connection to the divine. Reading *The Confessions* can feel a little like eavesdropping if we do not realize that Augustine intends his prayer to serve as a model for our own. *The Confessions* asks that we, like Augustine himself, feel the divine within us. As Professor Wasserstrom pointed out, though, connecting with God is not always a pleasant experience--the prophet Jeremiah was "raped and overcome" and left with "pain unending, ...[his] wound desperate and incurable" (Jeremiah 20:7, 15:18). Augustine himself speaks of being set on fire and having his heart pierced (156, 183). Perhaps we are right to be wary when Augustine asks us to make this connection.

Yet, the reintegration of God, the prayer, and us is at the heart of the *Confessions*. This is what I mean by the paradox of self-interest that Augustine presents. *The Confessions*--like the *Aeneid*--is a teleology, but here the telos is God and his kingdom--not the earthly telos of Rome or ourselves. Genesis--the text with which Augustine concludes *The Confessions* --marks both the beginning and the end of this journey since the fall in Eden is a wandering from, or a loss of self

(Dollimore 132). To return to Genesis is to undo this divide. Queer theorist Jonathan Dollimore's book *Sexual Dissidence*--is particularly useful for understanding Augustine's sense of self, and I quote him on the handout:

According to Augustine man is created by God from nothing. His fulfillment lies in God. Life in the post-lapsarian world [that is, after the fall] is an arduous journey back to God (Dollimore 136).

Augustine asks God to come into the "house of his soul" for without God, he is incomplete to the point of nonexistence. In Book one chapter two, Augustine must cry out to god (hallelujah) because "I would have no being, I would not have any existence, unless you were in me" (I.ii[2]). This exceedingly dependent self is very different from the self-reliant individual Ralph Waldo Emerson, and others, have proposed as the ideal American. For Emerson, Americans must listen to the call of their inner telos and be guided by it, rather than fall prey to conformity: he argues, "what is right is after my own constitution; the only wrong is against it" (Emerson 150). While Emerson certainly believes that we can follow ourselves because we are connected to the divine, his glorification of the path of the self has had important ramifications for American culture. Sociologist Robert Bellah has argued that self-reliance has become tied in the American consciousness to the notion of freedom and the inalienable right to become "an autonomous person, responsible for [our] own live[s], ...free to have [our] own values and to lead [our] lives the way [we] choose" (Bellah 23). Ironically, for many Americans the desire to be autonomous has led to feelings of cultural and social alienation--last year my conference proposed the unibomber as an of this type of alienation.

Although antithetical to the generic 20th Century American desire for autonomy and self-reliance, Augustine's desire for "completion" by God might be seen as responding to a similar feeling of alienation. In *The World of Late*

Antiquity, Peter Brown argues that Christianity's turn inward and its desire for more personal God, reflected a growing feeling of being "uprooted," and "cast adrift" in a lonely and impersonal place (Brown 62). If, as Brown argues, the "Christian community came to appeal to men who felt deserted," Augustine's personal metaphors for his relationship to God would assuage the lonely convert or convert to be. I would like to explore two of these metaphors briefly here: namely, god as parent and god as lover.

One of the ways that Augustine figures his dependency upon God is by formulating God as his parent. Although we, as modern readers, are most likely used to the idea that we are reliant upon our parents, Augustine's emphasis of this point may be more annoying than reassuring. Perhaps more disconcerting, though, is the fact that Augustine subordinates his worldly-defined self to his divinely-defined self. The opening of Augustine's text emphasizes this focus. We are more familiar with opening of life-stories such as this one from Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*:

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot country, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it.... A want of information concerning my own [age] was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood...My mother's name was Harriet Bailey. She was the daughter of Isaac and Betsy Biley, both colored, and quite dark. My mother was of a darker complexion than either my grandmother or grandfather.

My father was a whiteman (Chapter 1)

This passages is revealing in that Douglass' sadness and anxiety about the information he lacks point to the conventions of American autobiography. Douglass seeks to position himself geographically, temporally, socially, and

perhaps--most crucially--biologically. The implication is that these aspects of Douglass' upbringing are essential to his--and our--understanding of his self. For Augustine, these aspects of his identity are subordinate to his identity through God. In Book 1 chapter seven, Augustine reminds us that God, not his biological parents, is "the giver of life and a body to a baby" (I.vii[12]): it is god's "gift" that Augustine exists not his mother Monica's (23). In Book 1 chapter eleven, Augustine is careful to label the Church the "mother of us all" and Monica his "physical mother" (13). But even his physical mother seeks to position God in the role of Augustine's father: in book 1 chapter eleven, Augustine remembers that Monica anxiously labored to convince him that God was his father rather than Patricius (14). To become intimate with God, Augustine must wean himself away from his earthly family--particularly his Pagan father who taunts him with worldly desires. Augustine remembers with shame that as a child he himself "greedily opened [his] mouth to suck at his mother's breasts (I.vii.11; 9); but at the beginning of Book four Augustine uses the same language to glorify his relationship with God: he asks, "Without you, what am I but a guide to my own self-destruction? When all is well with me, what am I but an infant sucking your milk, and feeding on you, 'the food that is incorruptible' (John 6: 27)" (IV.i.1; 52). Like an infant upon his mother, Augustine's dependency upon God is complete. In return, God promises to love, guide, and feed Augustine better than any earthly mother. While his earthly mother ultimately dies and deserts Augustine, God and his loving protection is eternal.

Just as God eventually--and rightfully--obtains the love Augustine feels for his biological family, so will he receive the love Augustine misguidedly gives to his earthly lovers. Here Augustine follows both biblical and pagan precedents. Augustine calls upon bridal imagery of Old and New Testaments (for example the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25; also (although we did

not read it this semester) the Song of Solomon presents the love relationship with God in highly eroticized terms.) Moreover, like Lucius in the *Golden Ass*, Augustine progresses through a series of misguided and debased love affairs before finally uniting with a God. In many ways Augustine's narrative parallels a romance plot: at the beginning of book two he argues that "the single desire that dominated [his] search for delight [in his early life] was simply to love and be loved" (Book II.ii.2; 24). Similarly, when he arrived in Carthage he "sought an object for [his] love": he says plaintively, "I was in love with love....I rushed headlong into love, by which I was longing to be captured" (III.i.1; 35). As an adolescent he attempts to fulfill these desires with earthly salves, but ultimately they are unsatisfying because they cannot match the love God offers. Indeed, they only serve to lead him astray: he laments (on handout)

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]; 25).

The language of unification with God is ultimately that of a consummated sexual act--God "fills" him and "enters" him and makes him complete. Augustine is implicitly (sometimes explicitly) the female partner in this relationship; although I will not do so here, I think it is worth considering what role this suggests for women both as temptresses and as doubly "incomplete" members of society. (Women require completion by men as well as God.) Do women fulfill other narrative purposes besides leading Augustine away from God?

Just as the relationship with God has become explicitly intimate in the *Confessions*, so has our relationship to evil. If virtue is as, Jonathan Dollimore puts it, "largely measured by our refusal to divert or deviate from that path" then "evil involves a deviation from God, a regression back towards" the original state of non-being "a perverse falling...or turning away from God, from the higher to the lower, the superior to the inferior" (Dollimore 136). To sin is to be lost, a wandering or as Augustine puts it in Book II Chapter iii.7 "i was traveling father from you" (II.iii.7; p. 27). Throughout *Confessions* Augustine relies on notion of life as a journey. **[Notice that travel is at the base of Autobiography--that geographical movement is tied to movement of the soul--it's worth writing your own autobiography and see if you're tempted to 1) begin at birth as Frederick Douglass does 2) frame as a progression.]** Evil, like women, is seductive though--it is as intoxicating like alcohol: on p. 27 when Augustine's earthly father Patricius delights in the "signs of [Augustine's] virility and the stirrings of adolescence" Augustine retrospectively shudders in horror at his father's delight which "was that of intoxication, which makes the world oblivious to you, its creator, and to love your creation instead of you. Augustine's father was drunk--"with the invisible wine of his perverse will directed downwards to inferior things" (27).

This horror at his father's perversion lays the groundwork for Augustine's own pinnacle of perversion at the middle to end of book Two when Augustine steals pears from neighborhood tree. The incident itself it briefly recounted: (on handout)

There was a pear tree near our vineyard laden 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; 29) .

For six sections at the end of Book II Augustine worries and obsesses over this incident: out of context, one might be tempted to ask what the big deal is--surely there are worse things that to steal a pear and throw it to a pig--we aren't talking murder here! For Augustine, though, stealing the pears from the tree--like Eve's (or Adam's) taking of the fruit from the tree of knowledge--represents his ultimate fall away from God. He has been seduced not merely by worldly things--this would be bad enough!--but with evil itself. As religious scholar Kenneth Burke points out, the pear incident is the perfect parody of his religious motives--and hence, is the complete perversion (Burke 94). First, Augustine should be dedicated to God for God's sake--without worldly motives, but instead he is dedicated to crime for its own sake--the pears don't taste good, and he doesn't want to eat them anyway, "the pleasure lay in doing what was not allowed." The second way that Augustine's incident with the pears inverts the proper way he should act is the company that he keeps: Augustine should consort with the like-minded associates of the Brotherhood of the Church, but instead he hangs out with a gang of like-minded "naughty adolescents." Third, he should the love he feels for sin is the love he should feel for God. For Augustine, such love of perversion is a type of adultery: in II.vi.14 he laments, "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" (32).

In locating evil as a movement away from God, Augustine addresses a theological quandary in monotheism which we might consider in our own lives. If God creates all, is he not the author of evil as well? And if God is not the

author of sin, is there not necessarily some other entity besides him with great power (i.e. he doesn't believe in monotheism)? Augustine's argument that sin is a "turning from God to the self, from perservice in duty to the perverse affirmation of desire, the following of the wills' own line, and not God's" seems to me antithetical to the notion of self we are raised with in contemporary American society. The self is not a snare to be avoided, but is to be cherished and developed. For Americans raised on the cult of individualism--it is hard imagine that to "follow one's own line" is to "long for a...kind of exhalation" or that to fix one's mind is itself perverse.

I have argued that to read Augustine as he asks us to read him, we must weigh these discrepancies between his message and our own cultural upbringing seriously, rather than dismissing him out of hand. (I encourage you to come up with other discrepancies in conference.) To do so, is to reformulate the curiosity which with we approach the text. Augustine asks that we do not look on his text like a licentious Lucius--eager to gobble up the exotic experiences and misfortunes of others and remain unaffected, but to walk away transformed--not into an ass but into better human beings.

Thank you.

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