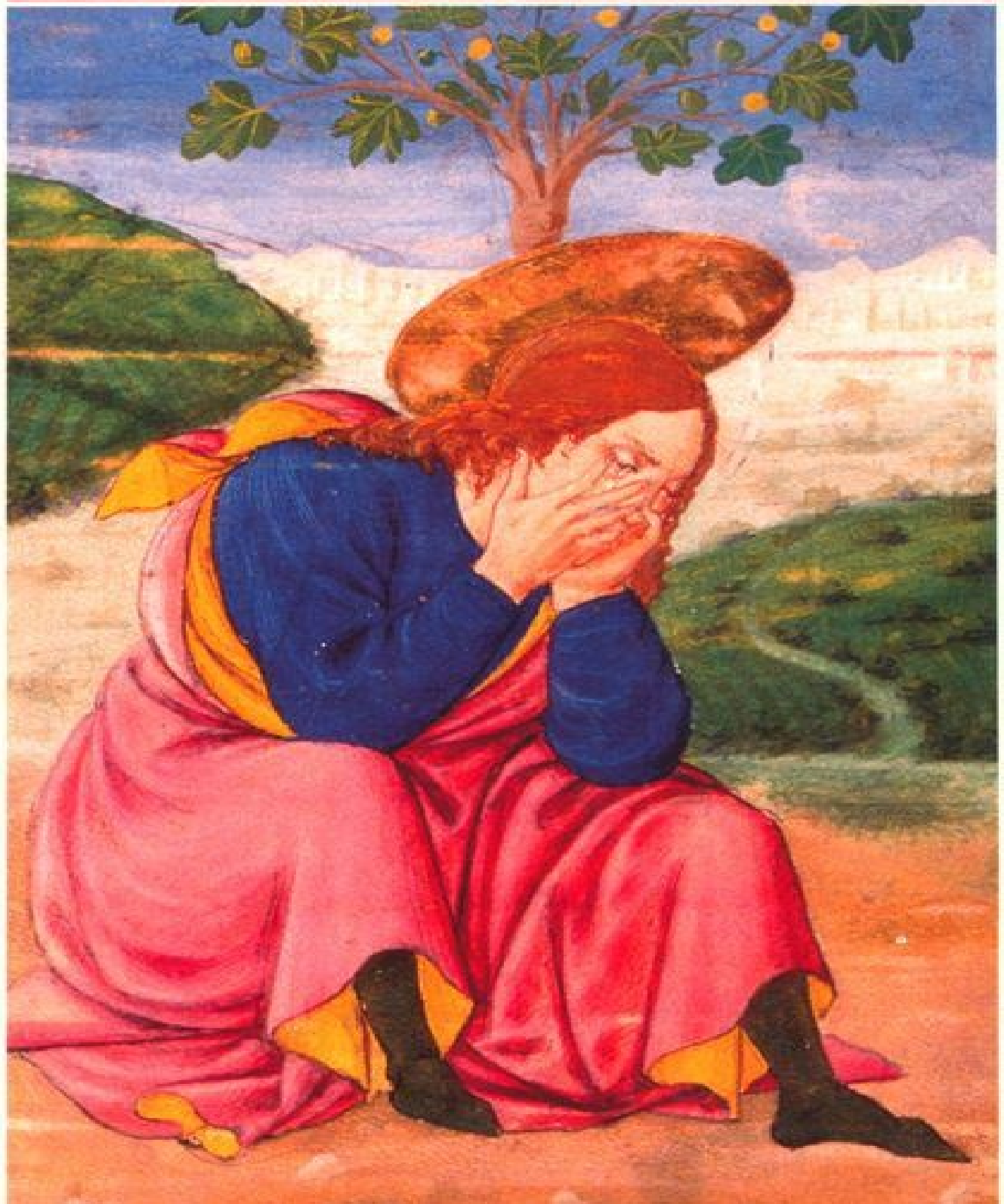


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SAINT AUGUSTINE CONFESSIONS

A new translation by Henry Chadwick



CONFESSIONS

AUGUSTINE was born in 354, the son of a Christian mother and a pagan father who farmed a few acres at Thagaste (now Souk-Ahras in eastern Algeria). Education at the hands of poor teachers could not hinder his acute mind from acquiring a mastery of classical Latin literature, especially Cicero and Virgil whose writings he knew almost by heart. He became a gifted teacher of literature and public speaking successively at Carthage, Rome, and Milan. At Carthage he met a woman by whom he had a son, and with whom he lived faithfully for fifteen years until at Milan she became a fatal block in the path of his secular career. A personal crisis followed. Already in Africa his religious quest took him to Manichee theosophy, then in Italy to scepticism and thence to the Neoplatonic mysticism of Plotinus. In July 386 in a Milan garden he resolved to abandon a secular career and the respectable marriage that would make this possible. Baptized by St Ambrose (387), he buried his widowed mother at Ostia and returned to North Africa (388). Against his will he was forced into ordination in 391 and five years later became bishop at Hippo (modern Annaba) for the remaining thirty-four years of his life. A fluent and voluminous writer on theology, philosophy, and sex, his writings made him influential and controversial both in his lifetime and in the subsequent history of Christendom. He died during the Vandal siege of his city (28 August 430).

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SAINT AUGUSTINE

Confessions



Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
HENRY CHADWICK

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Introduction

AUGUSTINE'S *Confessions* will always rank among the greater masterpieces of western literature. Like Rousseau's book with the same title (but otherwise having little in common), the work has perennial power to speak, even though written virtually sixteen centuries ago and certainly a book rooted in antiquity. The contemporary reader today may find much of it so 'modern' that at times it is a shock to discover how very ancient are the presuppositions and the particular context in which the author wrote. Because of this context and these presuppositions, a translation needs to be provided with some minimum of concise explanation if the reader is to grasp the point of Augustine's argument or the social context of his time (the work is a major source for social history as well as for religion). For this work is far from being a simple autobiography of a sensitive man, in youth captivated by aesthetic beauty and enthralled by the quest for a sexual fulfilment, but then dramatically converted to Christian faith through a grim period of distress and frustration, finally becoming a bishop known for holding pessimistic opinions about human nature and society. The *Confessions* is more than a narrative of conversion. It is a work of rare sophistication and intricacy, in which even the apparently simple autobiographical narrative often carries harmonics of deeper meaning. To understand the work one needs to comprehend a little about the author's mind, his loves and hates, his intellectual debts and principal targets for criticism. The *Confessions* is a polemical work, at least as much a self-vindication as an admission of mistakes. The very title carries a conscious double meaning, confession as praise as well as of confession as acknowledgement of faults. And its form is extraordinary—a prose-poem addressed to God, intended to be overheard by anxious and critical fellow-Christians.

The emotional power and in places the rare beauty of the writing have not invariably captured readers. In ancient as in more recent times some have been unattracted by the sophistication of the style or by the conception and estimate of human capacity presupposed by the work. The earliest surviving British writer, Pelagius (whose British origin is attested by Augustine himself), was seriously alarmed by the strong language about the nothingness of humanity and the totality of human dependence on God for the achievement of the good life. Pelagius feared the morally enervating effects of telling people to do nothing and to rely entirely on divine grace to impart the will to love the right and the good. Another contemporary critic wrote to Augustine to complain of the clever rhetoric; he felt that so brilliantly acute a mind could equally skilfully defend the opposite opinion with an equal éclat; like a high-powered lawyer, he would have been equally content whether prosecuting or defending. The elaborate manner of late Latin oratory, with its love of antitheses even if they were artificial (as some of Augustine's were), was a style that contemporaries admired but were accustomed to associate with insincerity. Augustine himself records that when he had to deliver a panegyric for the tenth anniversary of the accession of the emperor Valentinian II, he was not only filled with absurd nervousness about his public performance (some of which may have been due to Italian mockery of his African accent), but ashamed of the lies and bogus flattery that, as everyone knew, filled his discourse. He wrote for an age stamped with an elegant scepticism, for which a well-turned phrase gave more pleasure than a cogent argument for the truth. In several places in the *Confessions* and elsewhere Augustine's term for contemporary pagan culture was 'loquacity': it used fine words, even rococo elaboration, but had little or nothing to say. Nevertheless, Augustine's wish to distance himself from the secularity of contemporary oratory and the teaching of pagan literature never meant for him that, in setting forth the truth he had come to find in Christian faith, he felt bound to avoid the skills he had learnt in the rhetorical schools. He loved to use rhymes in his prose, and delighted in polished epigrammatic antitheses as much as any pagan writer. Only in his case the

epigram almost always carries a sharp point directed to a religious target of extreme seriousness for him. His prose is more effective with short epigrams than with long periods. The presence of so much rhyming in the Latin diction presents an insoluble problem to the translator. It is impossible to reproduce in another language without resulting in absurdity.

Augustine shows an awareness that he will have Christian readers suspicious of his elaborate rhetorical style; at v. vi (10) their fears are expressly mentioned. These suspicious persons are no doubt identical with the puritan critics who felt that immediately upon his conversion he ought to have resigned his professorship of grammar and literature instead of waiting until the vacation to hand in his letter of formal resignation (IX. ii (4)). He felt bound to concede that his profession of 'selling words' in the 'bazaar of loquacity' was vulnerable to moral criticism. At the same time he expressed remarkable doubts and hesitations whether skill in public speaking can be acquired from a teacher (VIII. vi (13)). He was conscious that his own high ability in this respect was a natural endowment, a gift of God, not something he had learnt from any of the second-rate teachers whose instruction he had endured in youth.

The work was written at a considerable distance in time from the conversion at Milan, which lay in the past by thirteen or more years. The immediate stimulus to the writing seems to have come from the convergence of two factors. The first was an unfortunate and embarrassing row which had broken out at the time when Augustine was made a bishop in 396. For a time after his return to North Africa from Italy in the late summer of 388 he had organized a lay community of his friends at Thagaste, quasi-monastic in character. But in 391 he had gone to Hippo Regius on the coast, and on attending the Church service on the Sunday morning he had been spotted by the old bishop, Valerius, a Greek speaker from southern Italy. In his sermon the bishop pointed out his need for a presbyter, and suggested that Augustine would do well. It was far from uncommon at this period for ordination to be forced upon the candidate by the coercion of the congregation. Augustine was allowed no escape, and had to submit.

Four or five years later bishop Valerius was anxious to ensure that no other Church took Augustine away to be their bishop elsewhere, and persuaded the presiding bishop of Numidia (in North Africa) whose presidency went not with the see, except in the case of Carthage, but with seniority by date of consecration) that Augustine be ordained as assistant or coadjutor bishop with the right to succeed. Such an ordination was not in line with canon law, but that does not appear to have caused the difficulty. Augustine was clever, and therefore distrusted. Many recalled how combative he had once been against the Catholic Church before his conversion. Were the monasteries that he was attempting to found heretical nests of Manichee dualism? His lurid youth had not been forgotten. And then he had been baptized far away at Milan: were there reliable witnesses to attest to that? It was normal custom for a foreigner to be received to baptism only after good testimony to him had been received from his home land. It did not appear that Ambrose at Milan had asked for letters from Africa in support of the candidate.

The elderly presiding bishop wrote an irate letter to Valerius enumerating the complaints against Augustine. The letter was not kept confidential, and was exploited by unfriendly critics. The criticism was the more painful because of an inveterate schism, the Donatist schism in the African Church, since two rival bishops were ordained at Carthage in 311 in the aftermath of the Great Persecution. In Numidia the Donatists were in a majority in both town and countryside, and notably in Hippo itself. The Donatists got hold of the presiding bishop's letter and used it as a rod to beat Augustine.

Accordingly, the *Confessions* took some of its impetus from a wish to answer critics both inside and outside the Catholic community. The exploitation of the case against Augustine by the Donatists helped to explain the fact, at first sight surprising, that the work makes not even the most oblique reference to the existence of Donatists, though every day of Augustine's life as a bishop was certainly beset by

problems arising out of the schism with all its rancour and periodic violence. No reader of the work would ever guess that Augustine was now presiding over a minority community in Hippo, under the necessity of fighting for its life against a militant majority.

The second stimulus to the composition of the work came from outside Africa. In the summer of 395 Augustine's friend Alypius, by then bishop of Thagaste, had written out of the blue to a notable convert to the ascetic life in Italy, Paulinus, a multi-millionaire aristocrat from Bordeaux (where he was a pupil of Ausonius); he owned land in Campania and became governor of that province. He suffered various family tragedies, was ordained priest in Barcelona, and finally settled at Nola in Campania as priest, later becoming bishop. He sold large parts of the estates belonging to himself and his wife, and his renunciation of the world and its gold caused a sensation. Alypius may have hoped to interest him in supporting ascetic foundations in his diocese. He sent him anti-Manichee works by Augustine. Paulinus' reply asked Alypius to send him an autobiography revealing how he had come to adopt the ascetic life, and by what way he had come to baptism and ordination. Alypius' answer does not survive. He shared the request with Augustine. The *Confessions* is not dedicated to Paulinus of Nola, but it can hardly be accidental that a substantial part of book VI consists of the biography of Alypius.

At the end of his life Augustine wrote a review and reappraisal of his output, the *Retractationes* (almost half of which consists in telling critics that he has nothing to withdraw so that one cannot translate the title 'Retractions'). When he came to the *Confessions* he observes that they serve to excite the human mind and affection towards God; the act of writing the book had done that for himself at the time, and 'that is the effect when it is read now'. Aware that not everyone has admired the work, he nevertheless adds 'However, they have given great pleasure to many brethren and still do so'.

The work was written during the last three years of the fourth century AD by a man in his middle forties, recently made a bishop, needing to come to terms with a past in which numerous enemies and critics showed an unhealthy interest. Aurelius Augustinus had been born on 13 November 354 to parents of modest means, who owned a few acres of farmland at the small town of Thagaste, then in the Roman province of Numidia, now Souk-Ahras in the hills of eastern Algeria about 45 miles inland from the coast. His father Patrick was not a Christian until baptized on his deathbed in 372, but his mother Monica¹ was a devout believer coming from a Christian family. Her ambitions for her gifted son were divided between high and well-grounded hopes for his secular success and a yearning that despite his wanderings from her own faith and moral standards, one day she would see him as an orthodox Christian. He pained her at the age of 17 by taking to his bed a Carthage girl of low social standing, with whom he lived faithfully for fifteen years until his ambition for high office under the imperial government made her a disastrously unsuitable partner.

Aged 18 he was moved by his reading of a philosophical dialogue by Cicero, *Hortensius*, teaching that happiness is not found in physical pleasures of luxurious food, drink, and sex, but in a dedication of the mind to the discovery of truth. Cicero's remarks on the way in which the majority of mankind look for happiness in the wrong place initially led him to pick up his Latin Bible. Its style, especially in the Old Testament, was often close to translationese, painful to an admirer of Cicero and Virgil. Before Jerome's revision of the Latin Bible, produced during the years from 383 to 405, the Old Latin Bible composed by second-century missionaries in Italy and Africa was colloquial and at times obscure to the point of being barbaric. Augustine found that once he had put it down, it was hard to pick it up again. Moreover, he was offended by the polygamy of Old Testament patriarchs and the different genealogies of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

He was drawn to the theosophy of Mani, a Mesopotamian gnostic of the third century who

religion was zealously propagated by underground missionary work, despite fierce prohibitions from the imperial government. The religion of Mani's followers, called in Latin *Manichaei*, Manichees expressed disgust at the physical world and especially at the human reproductive system. Procreation imprisoned divine souls in matter, which is inherently hostile to goodness and light. Manichees had a vegetarian diet, and forbade wine. There were two classes, Elect who were strictly obliged to be celibate, and Hearers allowed wives or concubines as long as they avoided procreating children, whether by contraceptives or by confining intercourse to the 'safe' period of the monthly cycle. Hearers prepared the correct food for the Elect. Manichee propaganda was combative against the orthodox Catholic Church, which granted married Christians to be in good standing, and admitted in the lectionary the Old Testament stories of Moses the murderer, David the adulterer, Joseph the star monopolist. Baptism and eucharist were held in contempt by Mani on the ground that Catholics ascribed to these sacraments a holiness which Manichees discerned in everything. Mani strongly denied the historical reality of the crucifixion of Jesus; for him the Cross was a symbol of the suffering of humanity. However, Manichees accepted the epistles of St Paul, appealing especially to Romans 7 to underpin their dualism of spirit and matter, light and darkness. Admittedly, they thought the New Testament writings had been interpolated.

Central to Manichee belief was their answer to the problem of evil, namely that God is good but not omnipotent, and though resistant to evil not strong enough to defeat it. What was abhorrent to Mani was to make the Creator supremely good and powerful, since that must end by making him responsible for the evil in his creation.

The evidence shows that Manichees were not recruited from the ignorant poor, and were in some cases reasonably educated people. Augustine specifically says that their books were not only finely bound but also written in 'a good Latin'. However, Mani's religion could be attractive only to those on the fringe of the Church. Those who joined them learnt a fantastic mythology designed to explain the eternal polarity of good and evil. Eclipses were explained by saying that the sun and moon were veiling their sight from the dreadful cosmic battles. The more Augustine learnt about astronomy, the greater the tension in his adherence to the Manichee faith. The *Confessions* shows that he continued his association with the Manichee community for a decade, even though towards the end of that time he was rapidly losing confidence in the system. In youth he had accepted Manicheism because he believed to be valid both its claim to be true Christianity and its grounds for rejecting Catholic orthodoxy. By the time he reached Milan he still regarded its negative criticisms of orthodoxy as valid, but had ceased to accept the Manichee mythology without which the system seemed to disintegrate.

Augustine was a born teacher. He began by opening his own school at Thagaste, but then moved to Carthage, second city of the western empire. There turbulent students impelled him to Rome, where fees were higher and pupils quieter. But the dishonesty of Roman students in swindling teachers (strikingly paralleled in Alexandria at this period) made him interested in a vacant post at Milan, which had the further attraction of being the seat of the court of Valentinian II, the western emperor. Manichee friends in Rome put his name to the strongly pagan prefect of Rome, Symmachus, who listened to a probationary discourse and no doubt ascertained that Augustine was no Catholic Christian and safe to send. Skilled orators and writers not infrequently found their way to high office. A striking parallel to Augustine's secular career is found in his elder contemporary Aurelius Victor, author of the surviving history of the empire, who was born in Africa of modest rural parents, but by his studies elevated himself; he became governor of Pannonia and later (389) prefect of Rome. At Milan Augustine gained entrance to the houses of powerful and rich senators, on whom ambitious young men would call during the afternoon. Augustine's secular ambitions, however, met with frustrating checks because he lacked money. If only he could acquire a rich wife, the dowry would provide the necessary

premium for obtaining office. Almost all important appointments were for sale, a system that saved the fisc cash and simultaneously made room for some gifted candidates, like Augustine, without much class.

At Milan Augustine still had with him the Carthaginian mate, of low social status, whom he had picked up at the age of 17. She was no intellectual companion for him. Early in their liaison she produced a son, unwanted but then deeply loved. Named Adeodatus, he was clever and a source of pride to his father. (He died when only 17). If at Milan Augustine's ambitions were to be realized, his concubine was a liability. She would hardly do at government house, but in any event only a wife with a fat dowry could bring success. His mate's inferior social status made marriage out of the question by law and in social convention. So she returned to Carthage, and the parting was exquisitely painful on both sides. Meanwhile the strenuous efforts of Monica produced a fiancée; the marriage was deferred because the girl was still only 10 or 11 years old. In Roman law the minimum age was 12.

To modern readers nothing in Augustine's career seems more deplorable than his dismissal of his son's mother, the concubine of fifteen years. In the mentality of the fourth century no one would have been outraged unless the person concerned were a professing and baptized Christian, which at the time Augustine was not. Texts other than Augustine's disclose that for a young man it was regular custom to take a concubine until such time as he found a suitable fiancée, marriage being understood as a property deal between the two families. The bride's dowry was crucial. The modern criticism is not of Augustine so much as of the total society in which he was a member. His world was not very different from ours in this.

Augustine himself in episcopal retrospect came to judge his liaison with his partner as 'my sin'. Although the couple were entirely faithful to one another and as, for the Church (as is shown by a canon of the Council at Toledo in 400), cohabitation by persons not legally married was no bar to communion provided they kept wholly to one another, this negative judgement may seem strong. The judgement hangs together with Augustine's mature doctrine of the proper nature of marriage. He describes his relationship to his concubine as a mere indulgence in physical satisfaction and 'habit'. (In Latin 'habit', *consuetudo*, is an attested euphemism for marital intercourse.) What was absent was the intention to raise a family, the lifelong vow of fidelity, the sacramental bond. For the mature Augustine the indispensable and structural elements that constitute marriage are strikingly non-physical. Repeatedly in the *Confessions* he contrasts a marriage centred on companionship and responsible raising of a family with a merely physical relationship centred upon the satisfaction of appetite.

Augustine specifically mentions that he was talked out of marrying by his intimate friend and former pupil Alypius. A furtive sexual experience in early adolescence had left Alypius with a lasting sense of revulsion. He found Augustine's delight in his partner astonishing and unintelligible. It was perhaps necessary to be on one's guard against supposing that the young unconverted Augustine was an uninhibited Romantic. Although like Plotinus he can use erotic imagery for the beatific vision, he resembled most other ancient people in not finding sexual experience a source of profound psychological liberation. In the ancient world few people (not at least the writers of the erotica in the fifth book of the *Greek Anthology*) thought in anything like that kind of way. Everyone acknowledged that the mating impulse ensures the survival of the human race. But all philosophers with a serious claim to be respected as wise moralists—Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans—were of one mind in being impressed by its risks and dangers and by the capacity of sexual desire to disrupt and even destroy the most rational of plans and intentions. None was more negative than the arch-hedonist Epicurus; and his follower, the Latin poet Lucretius, sharply formulated that general distaste for Venus and her works in the most impassioned section of his long poem 'On the nature of things'. Happiness is understood in terms of the reduction of emotional disturbance to the minimum, then the

ancient attitude to sexuality is natural enough.

Augustine in his maturity accepted the consequence of his conversion. The negative Manichean attitude to sexuality was rejected, and replaced by many more positive statements than some writers have given Augustine the credit for. Against the Manichees he upheld the essential goodness of the procreative impulse. The Pelagian controversy, however, led him to see the process of reproduction as the transmitter of the irrationality and egotism that infects the sexual urge. By his stress on 'concupiscence' (uncontrolled desire) he set the West on the path to identifying sin with sex; that was not his intention.

Augustine came to think it an ingredient in the misery of the human condition that the sexual impulse is so frequently disobedient to the mind's higher intentions and instructions. Because it can tend to animality, it all too easily becomes destructive of both friendship and self-respect. After he had become a bishop, the counselling of married couples in trouble occupied much of his time and care, and he was well aware of the inconstancy of the human heart, of the tendency to have minor and trivial affairs which he once stigmatized as 'a male disease', and of the existence of husbands who knew their wives to be unfaithful to them but nevertheless found their embraces too enthralling to part with. Some men treated their wives as harlots.

His non-physical description of the essentials constituting marriage was in part influenced by his determination to affirm the bond between Joseph and Mary to be a genuine marriage. But the foundation for that affirmation was made possible by his belief that an ideal marriage is one of perfect mutual companionship. This portrait of an ideal marriage is painted in the fourteenth book of the *City of God*, where he sets out to describe the sexual bond between Adam and Eve before the Fall, a relationship controlled throughout by reason and will, never experiencing the frustration common to fallen mortals where the urge felt by one partner is not necessarily felt by the other at the same time. To both partners it was a source of the highest pleasure. The ideal language is rich in the sense of marriage as the supreme example of intimate friendship in mutual respect.

Adeodatus' mother was uneducated. Augustine came to find his own mother Monica possessed of great wisdom, but she spoke in a demotic syntax. In short, although he knew that well-educated and cultured women existed, yet they were the far side of the horizon. He himself never had one among his own circle of friends. So he felt sure that 'if God had wanted Adam to have a partner in scintillating conversation he would have created another man; the fact that God created a woman showed that he had in mind the survival of the human race'. The observation (from his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, written not long after the *Confessions*) reflects Augustine's sense of antithesis and tension between a social estimate of marriage as a companionship with the meeting of minds and the business of reproduction. The society in which Augustine was raised took for granted the supportive and unpublic role of women. Yet near the end of the *Confessions* he would insist that men and women are entirely equal in mind and soul.

The personal crisis of his possible marriage, and the demeaning process of calling on powerful men of influence vainly hoping to enlist their support for his secular ambitions, coincided with an intellectual crisis. At Milan his lost belief in Mani was replaced by a scepticism about the possibility of any certainty. He devoured the writings of sceptical philosophers of the Academic school telling him that certainty is not available except in questions of pure mathematics. The psychological transition from radical scepticism to faith is sufficiently common to make it likely that his sceptical period on arrival at Milan prepared the ground for the coming conversion.

At Milan, however, there was a group of Platonists, some being Christians and others fellow travellers, who used to read the treatises of Plotinus, who taught in Rome a century earlier, and of his biographer and editor Porphyry.² Some of their work had been translated from Greek into Latin by an eminent orator and teacher in Rome about 350, Marius Victorinus, who was himself impressed by the

affinity between the Neoplatonists and the best Christian theology. In *Confessions* VIII Augustine recounts the narrative of Victorinus' final decision to offer himself for baptism, probably about 350 to the amazement of the pagan aristocracy of Rome. Plotinus, as his attack on the Gnostics shows (9), cordially disliked theosophy, and Manicheism was uncongenial to the Neo-platonists generally. Sustained attacks survive from Alexander of Lycopolis in Egypt (about 300), and from Simplicius (about 530).

In particular the Platonic school offered a wholly different treatment of the problem of evil.

Three explanations were offered to mitigate the difficulty for affirming providence. First, the cosmos is a grand continuum, a great chain or hierarchy of being, descending by emanation from the highest to the lowest, from mind to matter, and in this graded series where existence is itself a good, the higher the level of being the higher the goodness. Therefore 'evil' is not Being but a lack of it, a deficiency inherent in having been placed on a lower step than higher entities. Since to exist is for a Platonist to be a 'substance', evil has no 'substance'. Secondly, matter is recalcitrant to beauty and form, and pulls the soul down to external things. Matter exploits a weakness in the will distorting it towards moral evil. Thirdly, evil results from the misuse of free choice by rational beings.

In Augustine's time there were a few educated people for whom all religion was superstition; but the dominant consensus held to belief in divine providence, visible in the mathematical order and coherence of the world, and given special manifestations to individuals by dreams and oracles. Design was evident to the eye. On the other hand the imperfection and contingency or indeterminacy of the world pointed to the existence of perfect and necessary Being, the ground of all existence. Nevertheless, twice in the *Confessions* (vi. v (7); VII. vii (11)) Augustine felt it necessary to affirm that, in all his wanderings, he never lost his belief in the being and the providence of God.

With a measured deliberation the *Confessions* records the absence of high motivations in the successive decisions which took him from a farm in the Numidian hills to the emperor's court in Milan. He left Thagaste for Carthage because his home town was painfully filled with associations with a dead friend; on to Rome because of student turbulence, and thence to Milan because of student dishonesty and because Manichees and a pagan city prefect used influence on his behalf. So it was that he 'came to Ambrose the bishop', and discovered how different Christian faith was from what he had supposed. Ambrose's sermons were certainly very different from the kind of thing he might have heard in some of the North African churches, where discourses lacked much rational structure. Through all his wanderings he discerned in retrospect the watchful hand of an unseen guardian, whose protection had been invoked upon him by Monica when as a baby he was made a catechumen. Decisions made with no element of Christian motive, without any questing for God or truth, brought him to where his Maker wanted him to be.

Ambrose's influence was not through any intimacy of personal contact, but through his discourses in the pulpit, which taught Augustine a very different way of interpreting the Bible. The sermons also presented a Christian theology that combined aversion from pagan religion with a large ingredient of Neoplatonism. Aversion from pagan religion is evident in Augustine's *Confessions*, which were written at a period when social tension between pagans and Christians in the empire was very high, the consequence of Theodosius' laws suppressing cult in the old temples.

Plotinus provided Augustine with a model and a vocabulary for a mystical quest directed to the union of the soul with God in a beatific vision. In book VII Augustine set out to describe his attempt to attain this union with the One, the supreme Good, by the methods he had learnt from the Neoplatonists. He was dis-appointed by the transience of the experience and by the fact that, when he had passed away, he found himself as fiercely consumed by pride and lust as ever. Yet he knew that in that 'flash of a trembling glance' he had had a dazzling glimpse of eternal Being, transcending his

own all-too-changeable flux even when at his best.

Plotinus' mysticism was grounded in his belief that the purified soul, purged of all physical contact and all images of material things, is capable of achieving a union with God which is an experience of identity (Plotinus 4. 8. 1). Moreover, it is an experience in which the soul is lifted up beyond the successiveness of time to the simultaneity of eternity, and requires quiet and silence. For Plotinus the experience came rarely and was frustratingly short-lived and transient (6. 9. 10. 1 ff.); and, like Augustine, Plotinus was fond of using erotic symbolism for the soul's union with the Good (e.g. 6. 31; 6. 7. 33; 6. 9. 4. 18). Plotinus once affirms that a man should abandon high secular office if this enabled him to win the blessed vision of the One (1. 6. 7. 35). The method is that of introspection: 'Go into yourself' (1. 8. 9. 7-8). For the problem to be overcome is the drastic deterioration that has befallen the soul since it became implicated in and joined to matter (1. 8. 13. 20; 2. 3. 16. 26). In the world the soul is split into multiplicity and needs to return to unity; it experiences successiveness as the temporal process which distracts it from its ascent to eternity. Our use of words in which meaning is conveyed by one sound after another, never in a simultaneous present, is for Plotinus, as for Augustine, a symptom of the fallen condition of humanity (5. 3. 17. 24).

Nevertheless, 'all things are full of signs' (Plotinus 2. 3. 7. 12). Augustine's fascination with words and his awareness of the difficulty human beings have in communicating their meaning to one another, even when there is no linguistic barrier to cross, made him acutely conscious of the semantic problem. He affirmed the fact that we have to use words as signs to be a consequence of our fallen estate. All words are inadequate for the expression of divine mysteries.

The acute sense of the inadequacy of words explains why Augustine at the beginning of the *Confessions* experiences difficulty in finding any way of addressing God intelligibly, or speaking about God correctly. The answer to the question he finds in the reception of scripture in the Christian community. The Bible consists of words, human indeed but for the believing community a gift of God so that within the sign there is also a divine reality. The same principle holds good of the visible sacraments of baptism and eucharist, which in book XIII he will describe as necessary and indispensable and yet insufficient if they are not spiritually used and understood. The fact that scripture God uses words to convey his gospel of love to humanity and his requirement of love to the neighbour carries the consequence that words are not excluded. So Augustine can address God in the way the psalmist did. He can use almost a cento of quotations from the Psalter, which was evidently in daily use in the quasi-monastic communities in which he lived from 388 onwards. Citations from the Psalms are even made integral to the literary structure of the work, so that in several cases a citation links the books together like a coupling. Particularly important for him are Psalms 4, 41 (42), and 139 (139). Because of this constant use of the Psalms, it is often the case that less than clear passages in the *Confessions* are explicable without difficulty when compared with the parallel expositions in his homilies on the psalter, which are also a primary source for the Latin Bible text used by him.

From the first paragraph of the *Confessions* onwards, Augustine can express Neoplatonic themes in a language which sounds like a pastiche of the psalter. It is among the paradoxes of the work that the author wholly rejected pagan religious cult, but accepted a substantial proportion of Neoplatonic theology, so that the reader is surprised to discover how constantly echoes of Plotinus occur. A famous passage in book VII finds the essentials of Platonism in the prologue to St John's gospel, yet with the crucial exception of the incarnation. 'That the Word was made flesh I did not read there' (in the book of the Platonists). At the end of the same book he observes that those books had nothing to say about penitential confession or the eucharistic thanksgiving for our redemption. The Platonists saw far off the land of peace, but could not find the path to reach it. Yet when he describes the vision at Ostia shared by Monica and himself (perhaps a unique instance of a mystical experience for two simultaneously) the vocabulary is deeply indebted to Plotinus.

Plotinus and other literary echoes also enter the description in book VIII of his conversion at Mileu in the summer of 386, so that it is a disputed question how much of the narrative is intended to be sober history and how much is a more poetic truth. There is an ambivalence to the writing. Did his friend Alypius, who was with him, also hear the voice as it were of a child, whether a boy or a girl, repeatedly saying *Toile lege, tolle lege*— ‘Pick up and read’? The literary effect depends on the evident intention to describe a divine oracle uttered by a child (?) in whose mind nothing could have been more remote than the salvation of Augustine’s soul. Utter randomness was of its essence. But like Plotinus (3. 1. 1), Augustine did not believe in ‘chance’, which he thought merely a word for describing an event when we cannot discern the cause.

To the autobiography of the first nine books Augustine appended four further books. The tenth, of memory and the subconscious, is quite twice the length of most of the other books and has sometimes been thought to be an addition or afterthought. The subject-matter, however, is integrally linked with the rest of the work. The eleventh book discusses time and eternity, the twelfth the reconciliation of Platonic and Christian notions of Creation, while the thirteenth and last book astonishingly allegorizes the first chapter of Genesis to discover in it a most subtle piece of symbolic writing about the Church and sacraments. The last two books are commonly found to be exceptionally difficult for modern readers, because the context to which they are addressed is very distant.³

Much ink has been spilt on the endeavour to discover the overall plan, if any, which holds the different parts of the work together and imparts unity to it. At first sight the autobiographical books look scarcely connected with the last four books. There are, however, numerous subtle cross-references. The last four books make explicit what is only hinted at in the autobiographical part, namely that the story of the soul wandering away from God and then in torment and tears finding its way home through conversion is also the story of the entire created order. It is a favourite Neoplatonic theme, but also, as Romans 8 shows, not absent from the New Testament.

The creation, made out of nothing, is involved in the perpetual change and flux of time. It falls into the abyss of formless chaos, but is brought to recognize in God the one source of order and rationality. Because it comes from God, it knows itself to be in need of returning to the source whence it came. So Augustine’s personal quest and pilgrimage are the individual’s experience in microcosm of what is true, on the grand scale, of the whole creation. Augustine found his story especially symbolized in Luke’s account of the parable of the prodigal son. But that parable also mirrors the evolutionary process of the world as understood by the Neoplatonic philosophers of the age. So the autobiographical books I–IX are more than a memoir: they illustrate a universal truth about human nature. They tell of a soul’s wandering away into ‘the region of destitution’ (II. x (18))—a theme picked up at the start of book III in the description of his coming to Carthage where the place seethed with sexual provocations. But even in ‘the region of death’ (Ps. 138: 7–8) he found he could not escape God (iv. xii (18)). With book V begins the gradual ascent towards conversion, the disillusion born of the encounter with the Manichee leader Faustus of Mileu, so much dimmer than he had been led to expect, and he was on his way to meet Ambrose, unaware of the guiding divine hand but at last meeting a man of high culture as well as high class, who met him with affection and was everything a bishop ought to be (v. xiii (23)). So in book VI Augustine and his friends begin their quest. Book VII sees the exploration of the Platonist method and the profound impression made by reading Plotinus with his exhortation to look within the soul and not at external things.

The first chapter of Genesis speaks of man being made in the image and likeness of God. The Platonic tradition (*Theaetetus* 176b) also spoke of the moral and religious ideal in terms of being like God as possible, and of the inferior realm as ‘the region of dissimilarity’ (*Politicus* 273c). Augustine, was seeking for certainty and stability. Book VIII speaks of the impact of three stories of conversion, of Marius Victorinus, of Antony, of the senior civil servants at Trier in the narrative of

Ponticianus, until finally he comes to his own personal crisis in the Milan garden.

The vision of Ostia and the last hours of Monica form a climax in emotional intensity, and book I is a turning point in the *Confessions*. With book X Augustine is no longer speaking about the past but explicitly about his state of mind in the present as a bishop ministering the word and sacraments to his people. But we are now paradoxically in an even more Neoplatonic world of thought than at any previous moment in the work, and remain so until the end of book XIII. Only from time to time the debate is interrupted by sudden passages of anti-Manichee polemic. It is a prime task for Augustine to show that the Manichee dismissal of the authority of the book of Genesis is utterly mistaken, since this book is richer in Christian mystery when properly interpreted. The narrative of the creation interpreted in books XII and XIII sets the context for the total account of the nature and destiny of the soul.

In regard to the principles for the right interpretation of scripture, Augustine is acutely aware that his exegesis has orthodox Catholic critics. He asks them to tolerate him, as he tolerates them, since both he and his critics accept the authority of the divinely given 'dominical books'. In scripture much may be obscure, so that many interpretations are possible; all may be valid provided that they do not depart from the apostolic rule of faith. Even through scripture, revelation is accommodated to human capacity. If there are absurdities or verbal superfluities, they are put there by providence to be signposts to a deeper meaning.

The Bible of Augustine

The Bible text used by Augustine was the Old Latin version made from the Greek of both Old and New Testaments during the second century. This version has the authority of being based on very ancient Greek manuscripts, but its text occasionally produces forms differing in some respects from those familiar to users of the English translations. In the Psalter his numbering of the Psalms is that of the Greek or Septuagint version, which is also the numbering of Jerome's 'Vulgate'. That is to say that from Psalm 10 to Psalm 148 the Latin numbering is one less than that in the Hebrew text translated in the majority of English versions. For Augustine, therefore, Psalms 9 and 10, and Psalms 114 and 115 are both run into a single psalm, whereas 116 and 147 are divided into two. The references given within the present translation are to Augustine's Latin Bible, so that *from Psalm 10 to 148 the reader must add one to find the corresponding passage in an English Bible*, whether King James or the Revised English Bible or the New Jerusalem Bible.

Chapter and paragraph divisions

The medieval manuscripts have only the divisions into thirteen books. The chapter numbers, given in small Roman numerals, go back to the early printed editions of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The paragraph numbers were first provided in the great edition of all the works of Augustine (as far as then known) by the French Benedictines of Saint-Maur, published at Paris in 1679.

Latin Text

M. Skutella produced for Teubner of Leipzig in 1934 a critical edition on which all subsequent work has depended. A revision by H. Juergens and W. Schaub was published at Stuttgart by Teubner in 1981. In the same year the late Luc Verheijen also produced a revision of Skutella for *Corpus Christianorum* 27. Skutella's text of 1934 is printed with French translation and distinguished notes by A. Solignac in *Bibliothèque Augustinienne*, 13-14 (Paris, 1962). Apart from excerpts made early in the sixth century by Eugippius, and one manuscript of the sixth century in Rome, Skutella's edition

based on ninth-century manuscripts, an age with a powerful interest in Augustine's theology.

¹ Her name, spelt by Augustine Monnica, is probably Berber, and perhaps both parents were ethnically Berber. Their culture was Latin. Monnica had near relatives who were Donatists.

² In the *Confessions* Augustine does not specify the authors of 'the books of the Platonists' which influenced him. Scholars have disputed whether they were all tracts by Plotinus or all works by his pupil Porphyry. The probability is that Augustine read some of each of them. Since he also knew about the Neoplatonist Iamblichus (c. 250-325) mentioned in *City of God* 8. 11, he is likely to have read other books from the Platonic school as well.

³ Because of the Manichee controversy, Augustine in effect wrote five distinct expositions of Genesis 1: (a) *De Genesis contra Manichaeos*, of 388-9; (b) *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, of 393, avoiding allegory; (c) *Confessions* XI—XII, to which X is a kind of revision, of 397-400; (d) *De Genesi ad litteram*, the literal commentary—more engaged in controversy with Porphyry and Neoplatonism than with Manichees; (e) *City of God* 11-12—again controversy with Neoplatonism.

Bibliographical Note

A full list of significant books about the *Confessions* would be very long. In modern times watershed was the revolutionary book by the French scholar Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de S. Augustin* (Paris, 1950; second edition, enlarged 1968). Post-Courcelle accounts may be found in the biography by Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London, 1967 and later reprints), and in John O'Meara, *The Young Augustine* (London 1954, paperback 1980). On the Ostia vision, see Paul Henry, *The Path to Transcendence* (Pittsburgh, 1981); on Neoplatonism and the discussions of memory, time, and creation see R. Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum* (London, 1983). The greatest of intellectual biographies remains John Burnaby, *Amor Dei* (London, 1938 and later reprints). An outline in H. Chzàviick, *Augustine*, Past Masters (Oxford, 1986 and later reprints).

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Original Manichee texts survive mainly in Coptic and medieval Chinese. For a reliable guide, with bibliography, see S. N. C. Lieu, *Manicheism in the Later Roman Empire and in Medieval China* (Manchester, 1985).

Dates

- 354 born 13 November at Thagaste (Numidia Proconsularis)
- 366-9 School at Madauros; 370 to Carthage
- 372 Patrick's death, Adeodatus' birth
- 373-5 Teaching at Thagaste: Manichee Hearer
- 376 Teaching at Carthage; 383 to Rome
- 384 Professor at Milan: reads 'Platonic books'
- 386 (July) conversion; retreat to Cassiciacum
- 387 (Easter) baptized at Milan; to Rome and Ostia
- 387/88 Monica's death; return to Thagaste
- 389 Adeodatus' death
- 391 Forced ordination at Hippo Regius; anti-Manichee writings
- 395/6 Bishop
- 397-400 Writes *Confessions*
- 400-19 Anti-Donatist writings; *On the Trinity*
- 412-30 anti-Pelagian writings
- 413-26 *The City of God*
- 430 28 August, death at Hippo

Confessions

Early Years

i (1) '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 every 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.¹

'Grant me Lord to know and understand' (Ps. 118: 34, 73, 144) which comes first—to call upon you or to praise you, and whether knowing you precedes calling upon you. But who calls upon you when he does not know you? For an ignorant person might call upon someone else instead of the right one. But surely you may be called upon in prayer that you may be known. Yet 'how shall they call upon him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe without a preacher?' (Rom. 10: 14). 'They will praise the Lord who seek for him' (Ps. 21: 27).

In seeking him they find him, and in finding they will praise him. Lord, I would seek you, calling upon you—and calling upon you is an act of believing in you. You have been preached to us. My faith in you, Lord, calls upon you. It is your gift to me. You breathed it into me by the humanity of your Son, by the ministry of your preacher.²

ii (2) How shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord? Surely when I call on him, I am calling on him to come into me. But what place is there in me where my God can enter into me? 'God made heaven and earth' (Gen. 1: 1). Where may he come to me? Lord my God, is there any room in me which can contain you? Can heaven and earth, which you have made and in which you have made man, contain you? Without you, whatever exists would not exist. Then can what exists contain you? I also have being. So why do I request you to come to me when, unless you were within me, I would have no being at all? I am not now possessed by Hades; yet even there are you (Ps. 138: 8): for 'even if I were to go down to Hades, you would be present'. Accordingly, my God, I would have no being, I would not have any existence, unless you were in me. Or rather, I would have no being if I were not in you 'in whom are all things, through whom are all things, in whom are all things' (Rom. 11: 36). Even so, Lord, even so. How can I call on you to come if I am already in you? Or where can you come from so as to be in me? Can I move outside heaven and earth so that my God may come to me from there? For God has said 'I fill heaven and earth' (Jer. 23: 24).

iii (3) Do heaven and earth contain you because you have filled them? or do you fill them and overflow them because they do not contain you? Where do you put the overflow of yourself after heaven and earth are filled? Or have you, who contain all things, no need to be contained by anything because what you will you fill by containing it? We cannot think you are given coherence by vessels full of you, because even if they were to be broken, you would not be spilt. When you are 'poured out' (Joel 2: 28) upon us, you are not wasted on the ground. You raise us upright. You are not scattered but reassemble us. In filling all things, you fill them all with the whole of yourself.

Is it that because all things cannot contain the whole of you, they contain part of you, and that all things contain the same part of you simultaneously? Or does each part contain a different part of you, the larger containing the greater parts, the lesser parts the smaller? Does that imply that there is some part of you which is greater, another part smaller? Or is the whole of you everywhere, yet without anything that contains you entire?³

iv (4) Who then are you, my God? What, I ask, but God who is Lord? For 'who is the Lord but the Lord', or 'who is God but our God?' (Ps. 17: 32). Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden yet most intimately present, perfection in both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old, making everything new and 'leading' the proud 'to be old without their knowledge' (Job 9: 5, Old Latin version); always active, always in repose, gathering to yourself but not in need of supporting and filling and protecting, creating and nurturing and bringing to maturity, searching even though to you nothing is lacking: you love without burning, you are jealous in a way that is free of anxiety, you 'repent' (Gen. 6: 6) without the pain of regret, you are wrathful and remain tranquil. You will a change without any change in your design. You recover what you find, yet have never lost. Never in any need, you rejoice in your gains (Luke 15: 7); you are never avaricious, yet you require interest (Matt. 25: 27). We pay you more than you require so as to make you our debtor, yet who has anything which does not belong to you? (1 Cor. 4: 7). You pay off debts, though owing nothing to anyone; you cancel debts and incur no loss. But in these words what have I said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What has anyone achieved in words when he speaks about you? Yet woe to those who are silent about you because, though loquacious with verbosity,⁴ they have nothing to say.

v (5) Who will enable me to find rest in you? Who will grant me that you come to my heart and intoxicate it, so that I forget my evils and embrace my one and only good, yourself? What are you to me? Have mercy so that I may find words. What am I to you that you command me to love you, and that, if I fail to love you, you are angry with me and threaten me with vast miseries? If I do not love you, is that but a little misery? What a wretch I am! In your mercies, Lord God, tell me what you are to me. 'Say to my soul, I am your salvation' (Ps. 34: 3). Speak to me so that I may hear. See the ears of my heart are before you, Lord. Open them and 'say to my soul, I am your salvation.' After that utterance I will run and lay hold on you. Do not hide your face from me (cf. Ps. 26: 9). Lest I die, lest I die so that I may see it.⁵

(6) The house of my soul is too small for you to come to it. May it be enlarged by you. It is in ruins: restore it. In your eyes it has offensive features. I admit it, I know it; but who will clean it up? Or to whom shall I cry other than you? 'Cleanse me from my secret faults, Lord, and spare your servant from sins to which I am tempted by others' (Ps. 31: 5). 'I believe and therefore I speak' (Ps. 115: 10). 'Lord, you know' (Ps. 68: 6). Have I not openly accused myself of 'my faults', my God, and 'you forgave me the iniquity of my heart' (Ps. 31: 5). I do not 'contend with you in a court of law' (Job 9: 3), for you are the truth. I do not deceive myself 'lest my iniquity lie to itself' (Ps. 26: 12). Therefore I do not contend with you like a litigant because, 'if you take note of iniquities, Lord, who shall stand?' (Ps. 129: 3).

vi (7) Nevertheless allow me to speak before your mercy, though I am but dust and ashes (Gen. 18: 27). Allow me to speak: for I am addressing your mercy, not a man who would laugh at me. Perhaps even you deride me (cf. Ps. 2: 4), but you will turn and have mercy on me (Jer. 12: 15). What, Lord, can I wish to say except that I do not know whence I came to be in this mortal life or, as I may call it, this living death?⁶ I do not know where I came from.⁷ But the consolations of your mercies (cf. Ps. 50: 93: 19) upheld me, as I have heard from the parents of my flesh, him from whom and her in whom you formed me in time. For I do not remember. So I was welcomed by the consolations of human milk, but it was not my mother or my nurses who made any decision to fill their breasts, but you who through them gave me infant food, in accordance with your ordinance and the riches which are distributed deep in the natural order. You also granted me not to wish for more than you were giving, and to my nurses the desire to give me what you gave them. For by an impulse which you control the instinctive wish was to give me the milk which they had in abundance from you. For the good which

came to me from them was a good for them; yet it was not from them but through them. Indeed ~~a good things come from you, O God, and 'from my God is all my salvation' (2 Sam. 23: 5).~~ I became aware of this only later when you cried aloud to me through the gifts which you bestow both inward in mind and outwardly in body. For at that time I knew nothing more than how to suck and to be quietened by bodily delights, and to weep when I was physically uncomfortable.

(8) Afterwards I began to smile, first in my sleep, then when awake. That at least is what I was told, and I believed it since that is what we see other infants doing. I do not actually remember what I then did.

Little by little I began to be aware where I was and wanted to manifest my wishes to those who could fulfil them as I could not. For my desires were internal; adults were external to me and had no means of entering into my soul. So 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. When I did not get my way, either because I was not understood or lest it be harmful to me, I used to be indignant with my seniors for their disobedience, and with friends and people who were not slaves to my interests; and I would revenge myself upon them by weeping. That is the way of infants I have learnt from those I have been able to watch. That is what I was like myself and, although they have not been aware of it, they have taught me more than my nurses with their knowledge of how I behaved.

(9) My infancy is long dead and I am alive. But you, Lord, live and in you nothing dies. You are before the beginning of the ages, and prior to everything that can be said to be 'before'. You are God and Lord of all you have created. In you are the constant causes of inconstant things. All mutable things have in you their immutable origins. In you all irrational and temporal things have their everlasting causes of their life. Tell me, God, tell your suppliant, in mercy to your poor wretch, tell me whether there was some period of my life, now dead and gone, which preceded my infancy? Or is that the period that which I spent in my mother's womb? On that matter also I have learnt something, and myself have seen pregnant women. What was going on before that, my sweetness, my God? Was anyone anywhere, or any sort of person? I have no one able to tell me that—neither my father nor my mother nor the experience of others nor my own memory. But you may smile at me for putting these questions. Your command that I praise you and confess you may be limited to that which I know.

(10) So 'I acknowledge you, Lord of heaven and earth' (Matt. 11: 25), articulating my praise to you for my beginnings and my infancy which I do not recall. You have also given mankind the capacity to understand oneself by analogy with others, and to believe much about oneself on the authority of weak women. Even at that time I had existence and life, and already at the last stage of my infant speechlessness I was searching out signs by which I made my thoughts known to others. Where can a living being such as an infant come from if not from you, God? Or can anyone become the cause of his own making? Or is there any channel through which being and life can be drawn in to us other than what you make us, Lord? In you it is not one thing to be and another to live: the supreme degree of being and the supreme degree of life are one and the same thing.⁸ You are being in the supreme degree and are immutable. In you the present day has no ending, and yet in you it has its end. 'all these things have their being in you' (Rom. 11: 36). They would have no way of passing away unless you set a limit to them. Because 'your years do not fail' (Ps. 101: 28), your years are our Today. How many of our days and days of our fathers have passed during your Today, and have derived from it the measure and condition of their existence? And others too will pass away and from the same source derive the condition of their existence. 'But you are the same'; and all tomorrow and hereafter, and indeed all yesterday and further back, you will make a Today, you have made a Today.

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