Augustine Confessions

General background, issues, themes, history and guide to further study.

St. Augustine: his life: born in the town of Thagaste in 354, now in Algeria; 200 miles from the Mediterranean Sea. Roman colonial outpost. his father, Patricius, a small landowner with a wealthy patron, however, and with ambitions for his son. his mother, Monica, may have been of Berber heritage. Key point: Aug receives a classical Roman education as a ticket to social and economic advancement; his mother is a Christian, his father not.

Late Antiquity: the period from roughly the Christianization of Rome under Constantine (who converted to Christianity in 312) and the advent of Islam into Europe and North Africa (the late 7th century). The period is characterized by several key features: a rich philosophical debate about the relationships between Christianity and the Platonic inheritance; the consolidation of classical Latin literary and intellectual culture, together with the rise of a rich commentary tradition and teaching techniques; the decline of Greek language and literacy in the West; the increasing involvement of peripheral colonial leaders in Roman cultural life; the political conflicts with the Germanic tribes and the eventual loss of Roman imperial control to the Germanic leaders; the rise of certain literary genres, in particular narrative prose and hagiography.

The history of the book: during Late Antiquity, Western Christianity adopts the codex as its primary means of textual transmission. The codex is a bound book of leaves. The scroll (volumen) was the primary means of textual transmission for Greek and Roman classical writing and for Jewish scripture (i.e., the Torah). The codex enables new forms of reading: skimming, selective textual engagement, page-to-page comparison, figural comparison with Old and New Testament, and a private, personal engagement with the book as object.

Augustine’s Confessions:

Autobiography

Prayer

Philosophical treatise

Literary work and literary criticism

The important point about the Confessions and its cultural moment: With the official institution of Christianity, the narrative of tension and challenge changes: “The Christian’s worst enemies could no longer be placed outside him; they were inside, his sins and his doubts; and the climax of a man’s life would not be martyrdom, but conversion from the perils of his own past” (Quoted from Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo, p.159).

The Confessions are also a profound engagement with two major literary works: The Psalms and The Aeneid.

The Psalms: the collection of prayers to God, the voice of the prophet, king, and poet David; the nature of poetry, of song, and of devotion.

Aeneid: the template for education and the paradigm for the wandering hero; errors of Aeneas; loves with Dido; the geographical passage: Rome, North Africa. The founding of a city – now, a city of God, not of men. Monica/Creusa/Dido.

The Confessions are a profound engagement with a major philosophical tradition:

NeoPlatonism: key tenets:

The preexistence of the soul

The nature of human life as a soul trapped in the body

The Fall of the soul

The unreliability of sense impressions as a form of understanding the world

The Confessions are a profound engagement with human feelings. Augustine stresses the way in which he feels things by reading, thinking, and living; e.g., when he comes to the Hortensius of Cicero in III.iv. he says, “it changed my way of feeling” mutavit affectum meum (Brown, 169).

The Confessions are a profound engagement with the theater:

Theater as a habit of Roman life and culture

Theater as a literary genre

As a problem for philosophy: what is the nature of acting; what is the nature of character; how do we understand the idea of representation itself

As a problem of desire and feeling: why are we moved by the fictional representations of activities on the stage.

As a problem of control: who is the director, the author, the actor?

As a source of temptation: Book III: rapiebant me spectacula theatrica.

The theater brings together the literary, philosophical, sexual, and cultural issues all at work in Augustine’s time and in his personal life.

Centerpiece episodes:

Book I: learning to speak and read; the child as infans (not speaking); education as memorization and recitation; the performance of emasculating literature in the theater of the classroom (Terence, Eunuchus; Juno from Aeneid); weeping over Dido; the wanderings (errores) of Aeneas.

Book II: the stealing of the pears; the figural reenactment of the Fall; the tree and forbidden fruit; the nature of sin and adolescence; the reader falls with Augustine.

Book III: Carthage and the theater; the “hot parts” of the Confessions; the nature of representation and the temptations of the senses; Augustine discovers Cicero’s Hortensius; his father dies; he discovers the scriptures (“its gait was humble, but the heights it reached were sublime”); Monica, her dreams, her desires.

Book IV: age 19-28, teacher of rhetoric, competitive and appetitive life, divination and astrology, his liberal arts education.

Book V: the engagement with Manicheism, the friendship with Faustus; Augustine leaves Carthage for Rom; he leaves Monica, rewriting Aeneas’s abandonment of Dido in the Aeneid.

Book VI: Ambrose – teacher, mentor, model; the scene of Ambrose reading silently; Alypius and Nebridius and the nature of friendship.

Book VII: the prelude to true conversion, reading in philosophy and scripture, the encounter with the Platonist texts and potential reconciliation with New Testament scripture; the discovery of Paul’s Epistles.

Book VIII: the conversion; first, through the story of Victorinus; then through the act of reading; recasting of the imagery of the Aeneid as a spiritual, rather than a physical journey; more reading, more imagery of games, more emphasis on self-conscious narration; the scene in the garden, take and read, the encounter with Paul; the use of the codex as the medium of reading and conversion.

Book IX: Monica’s illness and death

Lectures: my hope is to cover material as follows:

Thursday, 5/4: Lecture 10: Introduction and Books I and II

Tuesday, 5/ 9 Lecture 11: Books III, IV, V

Thursday, 5/11: Lecture 12: Books VI ,VII, VIII (and a bit of IX)

Note on further reading: The great biographer and scholar of Augustine is Peter Brown. He has written many important books, including St. Augustine of Hippo, The World of Late Antiquity, and The Body and Society. Portions of these books may be available on-line, through resources such as Google Books. Brown’s central thesis is that Augustine synthesizes the Late Antique persona of the “holy man” with the colonial Roman persona of the educated bureaucrat. His view of early Christianity is that its fundamental challenge was to understand the relationship between the value of the past, the pressures of the present, and the immanence of the future. I had read from a passage of Brown’s recent essay in The New York Review of Books (April 7, 2011), and it’s worth repeating it here:

“For Christians from the time of Saint Paul onward the issue had always been how much of the past should be allowed to linger in the present and how much could be declared to have been irrevocably transcended by the coming of Christ.”

We can find this issue in Augustine himself: how much of classical learning is important for Christian doctrine; how much of the Old Testament is in the New; how does a human being learn from his or her own past experience and how much of that experience should stay with him or her after conversion?