

WRITING A SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY : AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS*

IST, Nov-Dec 2017

Session 1

Sunday 5 November 2017

BOOK 1

The First Fifteen Years

1

BOOK 2

The Sixteenth Year (Adolescence)

2

BOOK 3

From Sixteen to Eighteen (Student in Carthage)

BOOK 4

From Eighteen to Twenty-Seven (Manichee and Astrologer)

3

BOOK 5

Aged Twenty-Eight (Carthage, Rome and Milan)

BOOK 6

Age Twenty-Nine (Secular ambitions and conflicts)

4

BOOK 7

Aged Thirty (A Neoplatonic quest)

BOOK 8

Aged Thirty-One (The birthpangs of conversion)

5

BOOK 9

Aged Thirty-Two (Cassiciacum : to Monica's death)

6

BOOK 10

Concludes Augustine's Confession (Memory)

7

BOOK 11

Commentary on the Genesis (Time and Eternity)

BOOK 12

Commentary on the Genesis (Platonic and Christian Creation)

8

BOOK 13

Commentary on the Genesis (Finding the Church in Genesis I)

PASSAGES & QUESTIONS

BOOK 1

THE FIRST 15 YEARS

Grant me, O Lord, to know which is the soul's first movement toward Thee – to implore Thy aid or to utter its praise of Thee ; and whether it must know Thee before it can implore.

Augustine, Confessions, 3

1

The Confessions starts with a prayer (I-V). A prayer asking for guidance to pray. Imploring God ? Praising God ? Knowing God ?

The conversation/prayer/reflection on prayer with God is rather elongated, quite technical already. What impact did it leave to you upon entering this text ? Is it orienting your receptivity in a particular way, as we move towards hearing the earliest memories of Augustine ?

—

By whose gift shalt Thou enter into my heart and fill it so compellingly that I shall turn no more to my sins but embrace Thee, my only good ?

Augustine, Confessions, 5

What is the role of guilt in undertaking an autobiographical quest ? Is an autobiography necessarily about guilt ? Can there be no guilt at all behind an autobiography ?

2

Can an autobiography liberate from guilt ? — Liberate the writer ? Liberate the reader ?

... and I have no will to deceive myself, *lest my iniquity lie unto itself*

[Psalms XXVI, 12].

Augustine, Confessions, 5

Can we lie to ourselves in an autobiography ? Is an autobiography necessarily a research of one's truth ?

... I know not where I came from, when I came into this life-in-death – or should I call it death-in-life ? I do not know.

3

Augustine, Confessions, 6

How are we led to feel life-in-death/death-in-life ? Is it just going through a rough patch... or is it something else ?

—

And gradually I began to notice where I was , and the will grew in me to make my wants known to those who might satisfy them ; but I could not, for my wants were within me and those others were outside ... So I would fling my arms and legs about and utter sounds ...

4

Augustine, Confessions, 6

Would you dig back that far if you wrote an autobiography ? (Why not ?) What does it say for Augustine's quest ?

—

And I do truly, Lord of heaven and earth, adore You and praise You for my first being and the infancy of which I have now no memory : for You have left man to learn these things about himself from others, to accept much that touches him so closely on the word of his womenfolk.

5

Augustine, Confessions, 7

Can an autobiography ever be just one's own text ? Are our family, our culture also necessarily speaking through it ? (Or is there a way to develop a text free of them ?)

6

What is it to me, if anyone does not understand this ? Let him rejoice as he asks : *What is this ?* [Exod. XVI, 15 Eccles. XXXIX, 17] Let him rejoice, and let him prefer to find You even if he does not find this, rather than find it and not You with it.

Augustine, Confessions, 7

Is Augustine placing the genuine self-seeking above the finding of God ?

—

7

But at any rate it is an odd kind of innocence when a baby cannot bear that another – in great need, since upon that one food his very life depends – should share the milk that flows in such abundance.

Augustine, Confessions, 8

Have you seen such instances of harsh meanness in very young infants ? Would you categorise them as evil-doings ? How do you understand their coming to be — years before the child internalises and understands his cultural milieu ?

—

8

And when You did not hear me ... my elders and even my parents, who certainly wished me no harm, treated my stripes as a huge joke, which they were very far from being to me.

Augustine, Confessions, 10

Do you interpret this event of being beaten at school as explaining some of the later personality development and life events of Augustine ?

It was not, Lord, that I lacked mind or memory, for You had given me as much of these as my age required ; but the one thing I revelled in was play ; and for this I was punished by men who after all were doing exactly the same things themselves. But the idling of men is called business ; the idling of boys, though exactly like, is punished by those same men : and no one pities either boys or men. Perhaps an unbiased observer would hold that I was rightly punished as a boy for playing with a ball : because this hindered my progress in studies – studies which would give me the opportunity as a man to play at things more degraded.

9

Augustine, Confessions, 10

Do you find Augustine to be right in comparing two kinds of plays for childhood vs. adulthood ? Or is he reducing the complexity of adult lives and values ?

And what difference was there between me and the master who flogged me ? For if on some trifling point he had the worst of the argument with some fellow-master, he was more torn with angry vanity than I when I was beaten in a game of ball.

Augustine, Confessions, 11

Vanity, egos, ambitions... would they be part of a *play* ? Are we not beyond the play when such self-emotions get involved ?

—

... but I made a sudden recovery. This caused my baptismal cleansing to be postponed : for it was argued that if I lived I should inevitably fall again into the filth of sin : and after baptism the guilt of sin's defilement would be in itself graver and put the soul in graver peril.

Augustine, Confessions, 11-12

10

It was apparently a common practice to wait for post-adolescence to get a person baptised. Augustine interpreted it as being perhaps her mother's premonition of Augustine's sinful acts to come. Would you also understand it thus ?

So my mother knew : and she thought it better to let them break upon the clay before it was moulded to Christ's image rather than let the clay be moulded and then assailed.

Augustine, Confessions, 12

Augustine favoured fiction and myths over language and grammar :

Or again, were I to ask which loss would be more damaging to human life – the loss from men's memory of reading and writing or the loss of these poetic imaginings – there can be no question what anyone would answer who had not lost his own memory. Therefore as a boy I did wrong in liking the empty studies more than the useful – or rather in loving the empty and hating the useful. For one and one make two, two and two make four, I found a loathsome refrain ; but such empty unrealities as the Wooden Horse with its armed men, and Troy on fire, and Creusa's Ghost, were sheer delight.

Augustine, Confessions, 14

Do you find Augustine's unfair and in self-denial, inasmuch this early passion for fiction also informed and generated his later rhetorical powers ?

Personally, where do you stand on this question : grammar and maths or fiction ?
