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A Contemporary Reading of Augustine's Confessions

Keywords

Michel Foucault, Confessions, Augustine of Hippo, St. Augustine

A Contemporary Reading of Augustine's *Confessions*

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Using the technical language and conceptual framework of contemporary literary theory, Michel Foucault's *Discipline & Punish* defines medieval torture as a mechanism of domination that is reconstituted in modern penal practices. He writes that torture "traces around, or, rather, on the very body of the condemned man signs that must not be effaced," adding that the "tortured body is first inscribed in the legal ceremonial that must produce, open for all to see, the truth of the crime" (Foucault 34-35). Through terms such as "traces," "signs," and "inscribed," Foucault characterizes the body as a textual space upon which physical marks become linguistic "signs" that signal discursive "truth." Through the repetition of "must" and the phrases "legal ceremonial" and "open for all to see," Foucault attests that these signs whose locus is the prisoner's body

are part of both a visual display and a communicative act. Commanding intent must inform the message and an audience must observe it in order for meaning to occur. In other words, Foucault conceives of medieval torture as a ritual that establishes and records public meaning.

Foucault's assumption that meaning is contextual challenges a foundational belief in medieval Christendom, namely that truth is located in God. Faith in God as the ultimate arbiter of truth informs public rituals such as the torture Foucault describes. Foucault's discordant viewpoint suggests the question of whether theory's terminology may accurately address all performances and texts, particularly those that themselves employ specialized terms for signification and representation. One such example of a problematic pre-modern text is Augustine's *Confessions*, which contemplates the nature and function of representations gesturing toward divine Truth. Though Augustine proceeds from an antithetical assumption, his terminology in translation and organization of ideas are remarkably and perhaps deceptively similar to those of contemporary literary theorists such as the Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida. Parsing Augustine's intended meaning and the connotations of terms such as "sign," "image," and "the Word" may offer insight into the extent to which contemporary theory may improve or detract from understanding of the *Confessions*.

Signification in Augustine's view begins with a God who is coincident with the Holy Spirit, Truth, "the Word," and Christ "the

Word made flesh” (226-27). “The Word” specifically connotes the infinite performative by which, on a mortal level, creation originates and passes through time. Human language imitates God’s Word yet produces only imprecise, sequential auditory “images,” or representations, of the objects God continuously pronounces into being (Augustine 225-26). Christ too has special connotative status because he takes human form. Augustine believes that Christ’s sacrifice lies partly in the self-debasement or “humility” to express the Word in human terms (219). Scriptural language gestures toward the Word by virtue of Christ’s unique status, as well as by the multiplicity of meanings for a given utterance, layering many simultaneous truths upon a single word (266-71).

Discussing meaning in the living absence of Christ, Augustine makes a distinction between foreknowledge of God – an innate yet inchoate awareness of divine grace – and the objects of thought and memory, which are “images” of God’s Word. Expressing the Platonic axiom that the impulse to self-preservation constitutes “a mark of [God’s] profound latent unity from whence [Augustine] derived [his] being,” or an early awareness of God’s grace, Augustine writes that “an inward instinct” bids him to value truth and “take care of the integrity of [his] senses” (22) even in childhood. The phrases “profound latent unity,” “inward instinct,” and “take care of the integrity” suggest an intelligence of the origin of being, and its wholeness in the eternal, concealed within the human mind. Affinity for truth and unimpaired judgment is instinctual in that it asserts itself

as an “inward” or subjective drive without being willed or understood. Augustine suggests that a person’s most private self is something motivated by God and partially understandable as such.

In Book X of the *Confessions*, Augustine situates foreknowledge of the Word in human memory – a Platonic conception whereby thinking “gather[s] together ideas which... [previously] lay hidden, scattered, and neglected” (189), drawing insight through the process of recollection. Depicting memory as the domain of the “hidden,” as well as a “huge cavern, with its mysterious, secret, and indescribable nooks and crannies” – or inscrutable contents and workings – defines truth’s inaccessibility as a problem of language. In particular, the pairing of “mysterious” and “secret” with “indescribable” relates memory’s unintelligibility to the impossibility of articulation. Despite language’s extreme diminution and remoteness from the Word, unmediated at present by “the Word made flesh,” Augustine maintains that a person’s spiritual state and the understanding permitted by God may nonetheless guide him toward Truth through the Bible and human intermediaries.

Much like Augustine, Jacques Lacan envisions an origin of selfhood that is coincident with unconscious assimilation of a compelling ideal. However, his theory diverges from Augustine’s in ways that make it difficult to discuss the *Confessions* using Lacanian terminology. Lacan locates selfhood’s origin in the “mirror stage” or the developmental period during which a child first understands his reflection as his own. The moment when a child

“assum[es],” or identifies as part of himself, his mirror image generates both the “*I* function,” or subjectivity, and an “ideal-*I*” image or object. In other words, selfhood is “irreducibly” relational, the composite of an observer and his reflection. As the nearly helpless infant perceives a virtual space that obeys him, he foretastes maturation in the form of a “mirage”: the “ideal-*I*” who commands his space entirely. According to Lacan, this phantom self-image resides in the unconscious and manifests symbolically in self-projections, converses, and doubles (3-7).

For both Augustine and Lacan, the mind from its birth harbors an inconceivable ideal. In addition, for both thinkers, this ideal compels the subject to strive toward its origin. However, Lacan’s “ideal-*I*” is wholly imaginary and confined to the unconscious, constituting a reflection of a real object and prohibiting any transcendence of the human mind, both of which qualities mark it as beneath the “*I* function” in Augustine’s ontology. Lacan’s apparent alienation of consciousness from the unconscious echoes Augustine’s insistence that thought is far distant from foreknowledge of the Word. However, for both thinkers, these seemingly rigid distinctions fail on the subject of language. Lacan seats the language function in the unconscious, noting the complex relations among “signifiers,” or material components of language, that produce signification through shifting discursive context and associative links, such as metaphor and metonymy. A metaphor invokes two “equally actualized” or fully manifested signifiers, one of which is a “trace,”

or literally unexpressed marker, that exists metonymically in a text. The presence of this second term may be appreciated unconsciously, generating the infinite associative links that make up language (Lacan 145-48).

Treating the unconscious as comparable to Augustine's "secret" memories is itself problematic. Augustine relates language to the Word only partly in analogue to the Lacanian view that unconscious associations drive communication; an imperfect comparison has Augustine's divine foreknowledge direct the behavior of unwitting human subjects. Lacan's unconscious holds no attachment to stable, external Truth. If anything, it attaches merely to symbolic pre-language, a cognitive state more primitive than and internal to itself. Conversely, Augustine's consciousness seeks a potential reconciliation in Truth through external powers such as Christ "the Word made flesh," both redeemer and mediator for mankind, and the Holy Scripture. Both Augustine and Lacan assume a multi-sectioned mind, but only Augustine's components of memory are compatible and secured within a greater external entity. Lacan's emphasis on the dominion of the unconscious renders any Lacanian interpretation of Augustine difficult at best, since the *Confessions* expounds upon ways in which the mind's limitations may be transcended.

One such vehicle of transcendence is the Scriptures. Augustine sees genius in the Bible's apparent simplicity and insinuated complexity, "open to everyone to read, while keeping the

dignity of its secret meaning for a profounder interpretation” (96). The word “dignity” implies an elevated, perhaps untouchable status, while “profounder” connotes both the unfathomable depths of untapped memory and a conscious striving toward divine understanding. Augustine treats the “symbol” as a worldly matter on an even lower plane than the Bible’s surface meaning. He writes:

May [God’s] ministers now do their work on ‘earth,’ not as they did on the waters of unbelief when their preaching and proclamation used miracles and sacred rites and mystical prayers to attract the attention of ignorance, the mother of wonder, inducing the awe aroused by secret symbols. (Augustine 290)

Early converts suffer such “ignorance,” or privation of God, that they must be lured away from sin by spectacle. Augustine writes derisively of these performances, calling ignorance “the mother of wonder,” distinguishing, in other words, euphoria in God from mere excitement and curiosity. His ironic use of “sacred” and “mystical” reaffirms that language may have degrees of truthfulness, unlike the unchanging Word. Finally, Augustine contrasts the Bible’s “secret meaning” to the awe-inducing “secret symbols,” demonstrating his belief that external signs of faith are mere formalities, and “symbols” – suggesting vested secular meaning – signify little.

Augustine reiterates his low valuation of religious “symbols” when he condemns Christians who request “signs and wonders [...]”

desired not for any salvific end but only for the thrill” (212), apparently using “sign” and “symbol” interchangeably. The images placed contextually near “signs” and “symbols” in the above passages, such as “attract,” “inducing,” “aroused,” “desired,” and “thrill,” connote the onset of sexual excitement. These intimations convey Augustine’s reproof, tying signs and symbols not only to the secular but also to the puerile. The libidinal associations also imply a latent threat in spectacular practices, since sexuality is Augustine’s primary obstacle to conversion (152-53). Augustine further links public religious displays to privation from God by repeating “wonders” in the second passage and by lamenting, “Lord, my God... how many machinations are used by the Enemy to suggest to me that I should seek from you some sign!” As Augustine believes evil is a relative absence from God (43), the “Enemy” implies ignorance of the Word. Augustine contends that signs and symbols are not clear images of the Word and may indeed be obstacles to apprehending Truth.

Foucauldian thinkers may recognize in Augustine’s secularly charged, subtly menacing signs and symbols their own conception of public demonstrations of power. However, Foucault crucially omits religious motivation in his discussion of medieval legal ritual, while for Augustine no activity is fully secular because God alone provides form or being (67). Secular power for Augustine constitutes a detraction from the Word, or relative lack of spiritual substance, as opposed to meaningful active mechanisms. Augustine and

Foucault's theories nonetheless converge in ways that may attract a Foucauldian reading of the *Confessions*. For example, much like Foucault, Augustine involves the sign in public performances. Both thinkers also attribute to such spectacles a secular power and an implied threat; and both Augustine and Foucault believe the truth-value of signs is contextual, contingent in part upon the spirit of the audience.

Presenting a general challenge for contemporary theorists, the "sign" has evolved in conventional usage to mean something unlike Augustine's definition. Ferdinand de Saussure defines a linguistic "sign" as the arbitrary union of a "signifier" and a "signified," or a particular conceptual meaning (66-67). Contemporary theorists have subtly altered this definition to reflect their own theories, but Foucault appeals partly to the conventional sense when he analogizes torture to inscription using linguistic signs. He uses the term metonymically for all communicative acts, rendering his "sign" comparable to Augustine's public rituals. However, the relationship between Augustine and Foucault's "sign" becomes more complex in light of Foucault's peculiar definition of the term. In *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*, Louis Montrose synthesizes post-structuralism and New Historicism – the schools of thought with which Foucault self-identifies – when he expresses that "every human act is embedded in an arbitrary system of signification that social agents use to make sense of their world." A discursive

matrix “embed[s],” or subsumes, its constituents and co-creators, the “social agents” who are but one subject and many objects.

Foucault thus treats the sign as born of and contingent upon a network of authoritative mechanisms. Similarly, Augustine perceives a secular energy that informs and empowers signs with an implicitly puerile affect. Foucault’s assertion that signs fall within a matrix of domination appears to cohere with Augustine’s view that all meaning arises from on high. However, to the extent that signs present an active threat to faith, they appeal only to the basest temptations, which are potentially transgressive for Augustine rather than binding as in Foucault’s system. In addition, signification for Foucault is “arbitrary,” whereas for Augustine the closest parallel is observers’ relative distance from the Truth. Augustine believes that language’s relation to the Word is unchanging; only interpretation moves closer to or further from the Word.

Augustine narrates his conversion experience largely in terms of an evolving understanding of Truth in religious language. For example, he writes that in his late Manichean stage he cannot conceptualize “spiritual substance” as something outside space and time (Augustine 89-94). Describing a moment of great spiritual trial, he writes:

My heart vehemently protested against all the physical images in my mind and by this single blow I attempted to expel from my mind’s eye the swarm of unpurified notions flying about there [. . . He fails

to exorcise the images]. My eyes are accustomed to such images. My heart accepted the same structure. (Augustine 111-12)

Augustine depicts his overly physical imagination of spiritual “substance” as a “swarm of unpurified notions” emanating from his “mind’s eye.” Augustine’s observation that images of material substances constitute a “swarm” implies proliferating, irritating thoughts uncurtailed by Truth-directed reason. In addition, “mind’s eye” connotes a special compartment of memory for storing sensory images apart from interpretation. The word “eye,” in particular, juxtaposes a bodily image with Augustine’s false conception of a “spiritual” object, relating Augustine’s preoccupation with corporeal matters to his distance from the Truth. Finally, Augustine underscores the synonymy of God and Truth by characterizing the false images as “unpurified,” stressing that all human knowledge is sanctified by God.

The description “physical images” anticipates Augustine’s extended discussion of Platonic categories of representation in relation to memory. The basest images are “all kinds of objects brought in by sense-perception,” or images of physical sensations that are catalogued unreflectively by memory, while more elevated memories involve intelligent altering of “the deliverance of the senses,” or rational interpretation of sense-perceptions to create meaning. The highest memories approach “the invisible things of God... [in] the things which are made,” acknowledging sense-

perceptions merely as expressive images of the Word (Augustine 184-85). These memories are the most “inward,” and Augustine writes that in his most transcendent memories “[t]here also I meet myself” (186), reasserting the connection between self-knowledge and knowledge of God.

Augustine’s manipulations of sense-perception evoke both Lacanian and Derridian theories, but his conceptualization of memory defies contemporary theoretical terms. Augustine clearly distinguishes between imagination of “the invisible things of God,” or spiritual substance, and rational interpretation of sensory phenomena, as does Lacan. Both theorists also believe that imagining ideal entities relates more closely to the origin of selfhood than does apprehending spatial reality. Lacan’s “mirror stage” invokes alongside the “ideal-*I*” a virtual reflective space that conditions future relations between the “*I* function” and physical space. The infant assumes and anticipates an ideal space over which he will possess absolute subjectivity, so the reality of social and natural space constitutes a disappointment and discordance (Lacan 6). Crucially, Lacan treats the ideal-*I* and its virtual space as figments that adhere to a fractured self and exacerbate inner discord, whereas Augustine believes that unity with God is precognizant and something to be reacquired through “the invisible things of God.” According to Augustine, the faculties that transform sense-perceptions into intimations of the Word resolve “inward” conflict and enable progress toward divine comprehension.

Likewise, Jacques Derrida echoes Augustine's preoccupation with hidden meaning. Both Augustine and Derrida believe that images simultaneously express a direct meaning and a suppressed, dissimilar meaning. For Augustine, sense-perceptions are rationally apprehensible, but they also stand for "the invisible things of God" that are far removed from physical matter and rational thought. Similarly, Derrida's linguistic sign comprises both a direct meaning and intimations of the converse. According to Derrida, a "privileged signifier" constitutes the external marker for a sign's direct signification, comparable to Augustine's rational interpretation of an image. The privileged signifier provides an automatic interpretation, as opposed to the converse, whose signification is implied rather than represented – just as, for Augustine, God's Word imperceptibly infuses all things. Despite these complementary views on the presence of hidden meaning, Augustine and Derrida hold antithetical beliefs about the nature of representation. While Augustine trusts in a stable Word, Derrida contends that language has no fundamental structure or orientation.

In what ultimately becomes "Deconstructionism," Derrida identifies the converse of a privileged signifier and restates both terms in a relationship of difference (967), proposing an alternative conceptual arrangement that avoids the delimiting power of "truth." In Derrida's methodology, hidden meaning assumes equal importance to that of the privileged signifier, whereas Augustine affirms Truth's unchanging preeminence and treats its secret emanations as

greater than the objects of rational observation. Crucially, Derrida's "truth" is not Augustine's "Truth," and Derrida envisions an ideal rather more like the latter in that Deconstructionism makes manifest all concepts and undermines linguistic boundaries. Derrida's "truth" refers to a consensus viewpoint reached within discourse and reflects to some extent the truth-value Augustine assigns to "signs" and "symbols." However, even in their shared hope for a whole consciousness, Augustine's theory remains quite unlike Derrida's because he locates Truth in an ordered space while Deconstructionism proposes something immediately disordering.

Augustine moves toward Truth both by learning from the Bible and by interacting with other Christians. Just as the Bible intimates its meaning to beginners through simple language, Augustine writes that at first he listens only to Ambrose's "rhetorical technique":

Nevertheless together with the words which I was enjoying, the subject matter, in which I was unconcerned, came to make an entry into my mind. I could not separate them [...]. [T]here entered no less the truth which he affirmed, though only gradually. (Augustine 88)

In other words, memorable, true language supplants disorganized, "unpurified" notions despite the listener's resistant will. The phrase "make an entry into my mind" connotes stealth as well as sensible structure, in contrast to Augustine's false "swarm." Augustine

reasserts that thought and language are inextricable through the phrases “could not separate them” and “no less.” However, he grasps only a fraction of the words’ meaning since he cannot yet apprehend Ambrose’s life in the Word. The phrase “though only gradually” depicts the subjective truth-value of words, whose meaning varies with the individual’s spiritual state. Through Ambrose’s guidance, Augustine comes to reinterpret the Holy Scriptures, which are “no longer read with an eye to which they had previously looked absurd” (94). Augustine’s passive role in relation to the Bible, as in “came before me” and “were no longer read,” suggests that the text’s infusion with the Word itself compels greater understanding.

However, Augustine also believes that active linguistic exchanges can provoke spiritual progress though they must be guided by God’s grace in order to be productive. His own conversion draws upon an oral recounting of the life of Antony, the Egyptian monk, as well as a complementary tale of two men so moved by Athanasius’s “Life of St. Antony” that they convert at once (Augustine 142). The “Life of Antony” critically reappears at Augustine’s moment of conversion, when he recalls the transformative potential of language and “pick[s] up and read[s]” a randomly selected page of the Bible, which empowers him to avow chastity (153). Augustine seeks in his *Confessions* to write an analogue to the “Life of Antony,” a conversion narrative sanctioned by God such that it “stir[s] up the heart” (180) to intimations of a

greater, universal truthfulness. “I pray,” he writes, “that . . . [despite human misunderstanding] I may say what, occasioned by [Christ’s] words, [God’s] truth wished me to say” (272), acknowledging that ultimately the truth-value of any words uttered by humans must be accepted on faith.

In Augustine’s view, whenever Christians organize their raw impressions to make confession, they participate in an ascendant movement that intrinsically praises God (Augustine 3). Augustine’s most passionate remarks on the potential accessibility of God simultaneously underscore that knowledge and representation are subjective in relation to an objective Truth. In his above prayer, Augustine reconciles the social need to share “truth” with the seeming incommensurability of general human and divine understanding by accepting fragmentary truth and praying for further guidance. Contemporary theorists grapple with a similar problem in the absence of an ideal fixed Truth; discourse comprises a multitude of subjective voices, and the more personal an individual’s relationship to truth, the more difficult it becomes to meaningfully accommodate incongruous viewpoints. Augustine’s text may appear sympathetic to this challenge, but Augustine emphasizes that Christ enables all humans to someday fully comprehend God’s Word.

Augustine’s *Confessions* presents concepts and terms in translation that seem coherent with those of such contemporary theorists as Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida, but the crucial points of divergence make theoretical readings problematic. This paper has

dealt mainly with linguistic representations in relation to Truth, but there are many other intriguing avenues of study. For example, the *Confessions* employs corporeal imagery in relation to the Word, which Foucauldians especially might find compelling. Applied with meticulous discernment, contemporary literary theory might augment our present understanding of the text, but the potential is great for slight misapplications of terms that would then confound two antithetical worldviews. The difficulties associated with the *Confessions* suggest that other pre-modern texts should be evaluated similarly before contemporary theoretical interpretations are attempted.

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