

Confessing with St Augustine

Biography, Memory, and the Self in Augustine's *Confessions*

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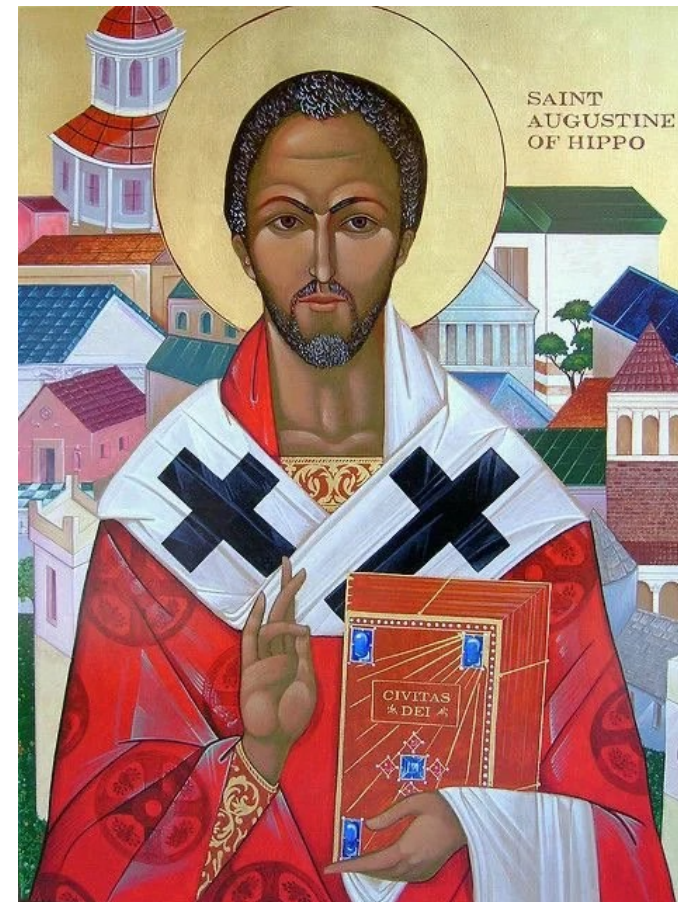


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St Augustine & His *Confessions*

- Professor of Rhetoric for Valentinian II, who eventually became Bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa.
- Outside of the apostles, probably the most influential Christian thinker in history.
- The *City of God* is probably his most theologically significant work, but his *Confessions* was his most widely read.
- Some have described it as the very first autobiography.



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Producing the *Confessions*

- Written in 397 AD, 6 years after Augustine was ordained, just a few months after his co-bishop, Valerius, died.
- The work was probably composed in a short span of time — a couple months perhaps.
- Fox suggests it was originally a series of lenten prayers produced over the 6 weeks leading up to Easter, at a time when Augustine had been afflicted with haemorrhoids (pp. 519, 537).
- It was likely dictated to a scribe who took it down in short-hand. Its language was then carefully revised and polished.



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What are the *Confessions*?

- *Confessio* — an acknowledgement or public avowal.
- *The Confessions* tell the story of Augustine's moral and spiritual conversion.
- *Conversio* — a change, turning, or revolving.
- But conversion to what?
 - To saving faith in God?
 - To the continence and self-denial necessary for Baptism?
 - To the vocation of a Bishop?
- Augustine, his friends, and especially God are central characters in the narrative.

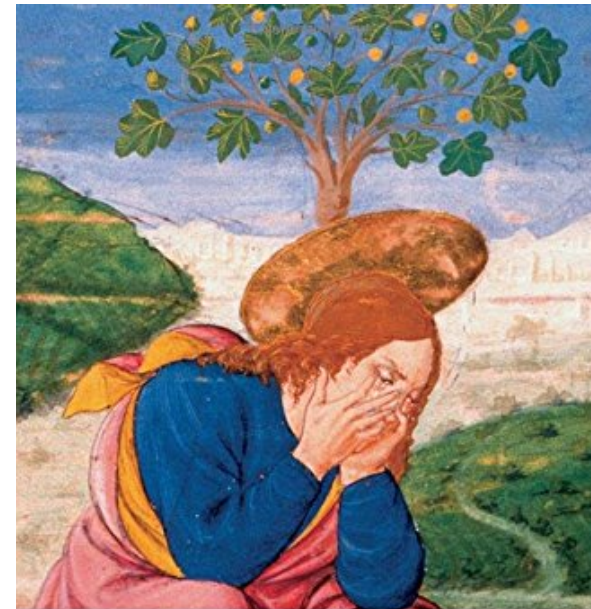


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The Structure of the *Confessions*

- Book, section, paragraph: *Conf.* I.ii.3/1.2.3
- Books I-IX — Narrative of Augustine's spiritual biography and eventual conversion to baptism.
- Books X-XIII — Reflections on the presence of God to the memory and in creation, using the text of Genesis 1.
- Relation between these parts is disputed and bound up with larger issues about the wider purpose of the work.
 - Williger: A later addition.
 - Courcelle: Failed attempt to exposit the whole Bible.
 - O'Donnell: Illustration of contemplative ascent to God.



Saint Augustine *Confessions*

A new translation by Henry Chadwick

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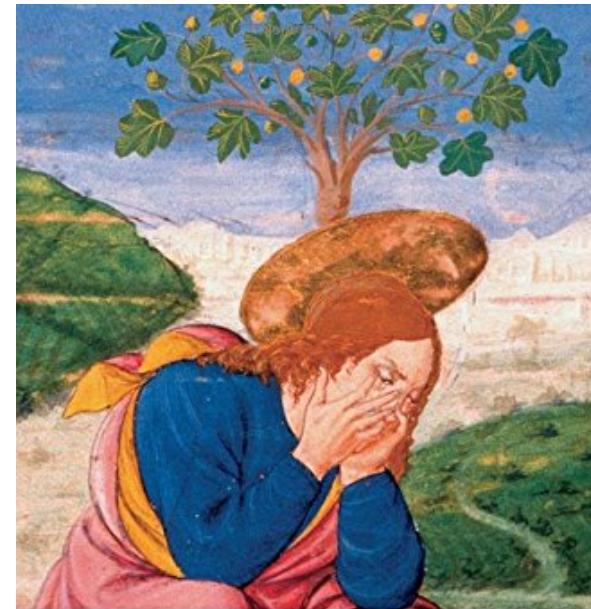


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The Ambiguous Genre of the *Confessions*

- Several scholars have understood the *Confessions* as a new kind of autobiography (Brown, p. 152).
 - Ancient biographies focus on the achievements of great men, providing justifications for their actions, or evidence of their greatness. But the *Confessions* were a scandal in polite corners precisely because they were deemed undignified.
 - Ancient “autobiographies” are not heavily psychological, as the *Confessions* are.
 - Important aspects of Augustine’s life are entirely missing, e.g., his family, siblings, the name of his common-law wife.
 - The final 3 books have little to do with Augustine’s biography.



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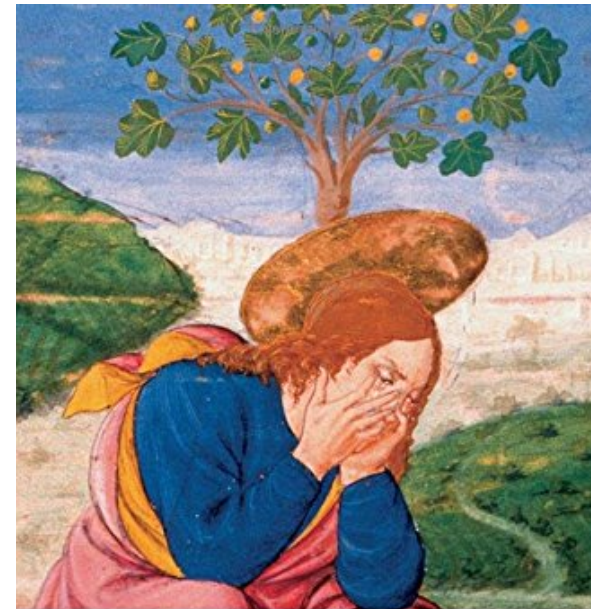


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The Ambiguous Genre of the *Confessions*

- How historically accurate is it?
 - This is a consistent issue for any reader of the *Confessions*, e.g., how depraved was Augustine as a youth?
 - Fox and Brown both treat it as largely accurate.
 - O'Donnell sees it as having more creative license, exaggerating the facts to serve its pastoral aims.
- The issue here is not just about accuracy, or even interpretation, but the *selectivity* of the *Confessions*. Why does A choose to tell us things like the episode with the pears? Is it for biographical or protreptic purpose?



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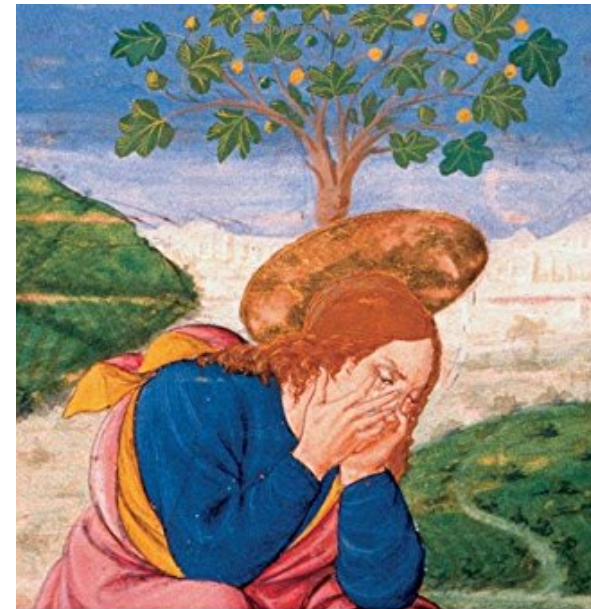


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The Ambiguous Genre of the *Confessions*

- Augustine never addresses his readers directly. Where he speaks of them, he does so indirectly. Instead, he addresses himself directly to God in the form of a *prayer*.
- But the intent clearly goes beyond simply prayer to instruction:
 - “To whom do I tell these things? Not to you, my God. But before you I declare this to my race, to the human race . . . It is that I and any of my readers may reflect on the great depth from which we have to cry to you” (2.3.5).
- Perhaps better to think of the biographical elements as “testimony”.
- As this applies to both biographical and contemplative parts of the *Confessions*.



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Augustine's Later Reflection on the *Confessions*

- “The thirteen books of my *Confessions* praise the just and good God for my evil and good acts, and *lift up the understanding and affection of men to Him*. At least, as far as I am concerned, they had this effect on me while I was writing them and they continue to have it when I am reading them. What others think about them is a matter for them to decide. Yet, I know that they have given and continue to give pleasure to many of my brethren. The first ten books were written about myself; the last three about Holy Scripture, from the words: ‘In the beginning God created heaven and earth’ as far as the Sabbath rest” (Retractions, 2.32, p. 130).



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The Spiritual Ambition of the *Confessions*

- It is part testimony, prayer, and sermon. A's life is a spiritual paradigm intended to lead us to contemplate God & ourselves. A's knowledge of himself is never definitive or complete.
- Mathewes describes it as “anti-biographical” — in order to know ourselves, we must “escape the will-to-autobiography”, which involves “unlearn[ing] the false explanations we give” of ourselves (p. 8).
- The first rule of PR is “control the narrative” — but in the *Confessions*, A appeals to God as a way of de-centering his self-understanding, which emerges only in a fragmented way through prayer: “theology precedes autobiography” (Mathewes, p. 11).



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The Spiritual Ambition of the *Confessions*

- “If the present conscious self can construct or reconstruct the past imaginatively in a way that is unanswerable, there can be no sense that the past is a matter for shared discourse, no sense that what I have done or been has a life in the reality and perception of others” (Williams, p. 18).
- “This self-interrogation without hope of closure is how I know God, and so how I know myself as well” (Williams, p. 20).
- Though this is the cause of some anxiety for Augustine, it is ultimately not a hopeless endeavour, because it is a truth held by a God of love.



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The Purpose and Readers of the *Confessions*

- Knowledge of God and self emerge together, which draws together the biographical and contemplative parts of the *Confessions*.
- What are its subsidiary purposes?
 - O'Donnell: Provide instruction in the Christian faith.
 - Kotzé: Refute Manichaean teachings.
 - Willis: Confirm the sincerity of Augustine's conversion to his new bishopric (p. 18).



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Reception of the *Confessions*

- The *Confessions* received an enthusiastic reception during Augustine's own life.
- Augustine's writings appear to have been taken to Rome to protect them during the Vandal invasion.
- They were widely circulated in the Middle Ages, by figures like Boethius. Extant copies date from as early as 5th Century.
- The *Confessions* served as a paradigm for repentance and conversion in Puritan England, the *autobiography* of Rousseau, and informed huge portions of the philosophies of Descartes, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Arendt, and Derrida.



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