

# 2

## **Textual Pleasure: “Where Can I Find the Books?”<sup>11</sup>**

*The text of pleasure is  
not necessarily the text  
that recounts  
pleasures.<sup>12</sup>*

*What if knowledge  
itself were delicious?<sup>13</sup>*

*How can we imagine  
what our lives should  
be without the  
illumination of other  
lives?<sup>14</sup>*

**T**he narrative of another person's life experience, especially when it is told as dramatically as Augustine's, holds perennial and intrinsic interest and pleasure for readers or hearers. Narrative alone would make the *Confessions* a text of pleasure. In this chapter, however, I will consider a further dimension of the pleasure of the text, namely, Augustine's use of several strategies that enhance readers' vigorous engagement with the text. The *Confessions* represents one side of an energetic conversation in which the reader's response is solicited and provoked. The pleasure that results from this conversation is not merely the simple pleasure of hearing a good story, but the complex pleasure of strong feelings—sometimes violent disagreement, sometimes frustration, sometimes “the—inconsiderable—pleasure of resistance,”<sup>15</sup> and sometimes near-ecstatic recognition of the great beauty, “beauty so old and so new” (X.27), to which Augustine points through the beauty of his prose.

The primary training for any author is reading. From Augustine's own reading experience, he assumed that he knew what any reader expects to experience. And he expected the reader of the *Confessions* to be as affected as he was when he read. We must ask first, then: What was Augustine's reading practice? What did he expect his reader to experience? The simple answer to this latter question is that Augustine expected reading to be a powerful, life-changing experience. He gives several accounts of life-altering and -orienting experiences—his own and others—which revealed to him the potentially powerful effects of reading. His repeated use of the metaphor of fire in connection with reading

expresses this. For example, Augustine described his own reading, at the age of nineteen, of Cicero's *Hortensius*. He credits his reading of this now lost work by a pagan author with dramatic results:

It was this book which altered my way of feeling, turned my prayers to you, Lord, yourself, and gave me different ambitions and desires . . . What moved me was not the style but the matter. I was on fire, then, my God, I was on fire to leave earthly things behind and fly back to you. (III.4)

Augustine missed only one thing in the *Hortensius*: the "deeply treasured" name of Christ, imbibed with his mother's milk. He therefore decided to study the scriptures, but his first perusal was deeply disappointing. The Christian scriptures "seemed to me unworthy of comparison with the grand style of Cicero" (III.5). Later, after God has "rescued my tongue as you rescued my heart" (IX. 4), Augustine will revise his judgment of the scriptures, finding in his own earlier disappointment the evidence of his alienation from God. He will come to criticize, not the scriptures, but his own reading of them.

In spite of his early dissatisfaction with scripture, Augustine's own most intense and transformative reading experiences as a convert were his reading of scripture and devotional literature. In the *Confessions*, he combines the language and style of each, recounting his own journey to God by the use of scriptural phrases, interwoven through his narration. Because Augustine expected his confessions to act powerfully in the lives of his readers, he used in them the most powerful language he knew, a vocabulary of scriptural

phrases well known and richly evocative to his anticipated audience of fellow Christians. His memory of hearing the story of Simplicianus's conversion may have been in his mind as he crafted his own conversion story. Hearing Simplicianus's conversion account, Augustine was "on fire to be like him" (VIII.5).

Shortly before Augustine's conversion, he heard about another powerful reading experience. Ponticianus, finding Augustine reading the writings of Saint Paul, told him about *his* own conversion, which was precipitated by reading a life of Saint Antony (VIII.6). Augustine describes Ponticianus's reading as a process of direct conversation with the text in which Ponticianus allowed the text to evaluate and judge his life and to point the way to a new life. The metaphor of birth expresses both the labor and the ultimate joy of the experience:

. . . he turned back to the book, troubled and perplexed by the new life to which he was giving birth. So he read on, and his heart, where you saw it, was changed, and, as soon appeared, his mind shook off the burden of the world. While he was reading and the waves in his heart rose and fell, there were times when he cried out against himself, and then he distinguished the better course and chose it for himself. (VIII.6)

For Augustine and his friends, reading was anything but a passive process. Augustine expected a powerful text to grasp him forcefully, but he also expected to be active in the process, questioning both his own life in the text's light and the text's truth in light of his own experience.

Augustine's conversion was itself intimately inter-

twined with hearing and reading. The phrase that he heard at the moment of his conversion was *tolle, lege; tolle, lege* ("take, read"). To read, for Augustine, was to swallow, to assimilate, to digest, to incorporate, to eat the text. Is it accidental that the words *take, read* parallel the central words of the mass, familiar to Augustine from his boyhood: "take, eat" (*accipe, comedite*)? Receiving the overheard words *tolle, lege* as God's instruction directly to him, Augustine trusts and obeys. But even in his receptivity, he was not passive. Even in his condition of physical and mental stress, he considers and consciously interprets the words before he appropriates them:

I began to think carefully of whether the singing of words like these came into any kind of game which children play, and I could not remember that I had ever heard anything like it before. (VIII. 12)

He also identifies a precedent for his reading of the text:

[I was] quite certain that I must interpret this as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first passage which I should come upon. For I had heard this about Antony: he had happened to come in when the Gospel was being read, and *as though the words read were spoken directly to himself*, had received the admonition: "Go, sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come and follow me." (VIII. 12)

Retracing his steps, he snatched up the "book of the Apostle" he had been reading before he was overcome by emotion, "opened it, and read in silence the passage

upon which my eyes first fell." The words Augustine reads are: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying: but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in concupiscence" (VIII.12). These words—written and read—were strong catalysts, consolidating the gradual intellectual and emotional processes that warred in Augustine. In order to understand the transformative power of reading for him, it is necessary to take into account his excitement over a newly learned reading practice.

One of the most important experiences of Augustine's early days in Milan was the discovery of a new method of reading, one with which he had been unfamiliar in North Africa. He had been taught to read in a way that maximally engaged the body and senses: reading aloud, seeing and hearing words, simultaneously moving the lips, an art of tone and emphasis, expressive reading. So he was astonished as a young man, new to the sophisticated imperial capital of Milan, to witness Ambrose reading silently: "When he was reading his eyes went over the pages and his heart looked into the sense, but voice and tongue were resting" (VI.3). Together with his mother, Augustine sat in silence "for a long time" watching him, speculating on why he chose to read in this strange fashion. This silent reading practice, reading without the body, fascinated him.

Moreover, in Augustine's time, reading aloud was a public practice, usually conducted in a company of people, so that illiterate people could benefit from hearing words that they could not read. Ambrose read both in silence and in private, observed but not heard, his

thoughts about what he was reading unspoken, inaccessible to others.

Augustine immediately began to practice silent, private reading. In *Confessions* IX.4, he reconstructs his first passionate reading of the Psalms of David as a newly converted catechumen. He read, he says, with intense excitement and a neurasthenic responsiveness: <sup>16</sup>

My God, how I poured out my heart to you. . . . How I cried aloud to you in these Psalms! How they fired me toward you! How I burned to utter them aloud. . . . I trembled with fear, and then again I was on fire with hope and exultation . . . and all these emotions were shown in my eyes and in my voice . . . I listened and trembled . . . I cried out as I read this with my outward eye and inwardly recognized its truth . . . my heart cried out from its depths. . . . As I read, my heart became on fire . . . my heart boiled. (IX.4)

At the time of his writing of the *Confessions*, about a decade after the cataclysmic event that was to alter the course of the rest of his long and productive life, Augustine provided his readers with the potentially transformative narrative of his conversion. Reading without the body, silent, private reading, was precisely the sort of reading practice that Augustine imagined for readers of the *Confessions*. There is no indication anywhere in the *Confessions* that Augustine expected groups of people to read it aloud together. On the contrary, it always addresses the individual, alone with his private thoughts and memories. Twentieth-century readers, deeply familiar with a private reading practice that developed in the Christian West from devotional

reading, need to remind ourselves of the oddity of private reading in Augustine's time. In writing the *Confessions*, Augustine adopted and adapted an esoteric reading practice and unknowingly provided it with one of the texts that would perpetuate this practice and give it its greatest popularity.

For *whom* was—or is—the *Confessions* a pleasurable text? In his *Retractationes*, written in the year before his death, Augustine reviewed his corpus of writings, commenting on and correcting each of them. He says explicitly that in the *Confessions* he intended, and feels that he has achieved, both his own pleasure as author and the reader's pleasure. It is always an encouraging indication of a book's potential to pleasure the reader when its author testifies, as Augustine does, that the book was enjoyable to write. Augustine's *Confessions* stimulated him to happy praise, he says, when they were written, and "they work this in me when they are read."<sup>17</sup> Yet the *Confessions* was not an easy book to write; we should not confuse pleasure with ease. He also frequently exclaimed about its difficulty:

For me, Lord, certainly this is hard labor, hard labor inside myself, and I have become to myself a piece of difficult ground, not to be worked over without much sweat. (X.16)

Although he acknowledged the difficulty of his project of remembering and revealing himself in language, there is, in addition to his testimony in the *Retractationes*, additional evidence that Augustine took pleasure in writing and rereading the *Confes-*



sions. Throughout the text many abrupt interjections both explicitly acknowledge and signal a moment of particular pleasure. Sometimes he frankly states: "It is a pleasure to me, Lord, to confess to you" (IX.4). At other times, spontaneous ejaculations interrupt narrative accounts as well as densely argued philosophical or theological points when Augustine is temporarily overwhelmed by the pleasure he feels in recalling his experiences and thoughts: "Come, Lord, excite us and call us back! In flame and ravish and charm us with your sweetness! Let us love! Let us run!" (VIII.4)

Augustine was apparently not alone in his pleasure in writing and reading the *Confessions*: "they have given much pleasure, and do give pleasure, to many brethren I know." He asks rhetorically in *De dono perseverantiae* 20.53: "Which of my smaller works could be more widely known or give greater pleasure than my *Confessions*?" Augustine was gratified to hear of his project's success. While he was a rhetor, he received applause for speeches containing "a lot of lies," even though his audience recognized the lies (VI.6). Words, although they are potentially "choice and valuable vessels," if they do not carry veracity and profundity, are "mere smoke and wind" (I.17). Clearly, some of Augustine's professional pride as a rhetor in *pleasing* by the skillful use of language has carried over to his authorship as a Christian bishop.

Augustine seemed not to notice the similarity of his Christian occupation to that of his preconversion profession. Characteristically, he exaggerated their differences in order to emphasize the complete change in his life brought about by conversion. Shortly after his conversion, a physical aversion to the profession of

teaching rhetoric prompted Augustine's decision to leave it; the body, again, as in the account of his conversion is both site and symbol of "movements of the soul":

My lungs had begun to give way as the result of overwork in teaching. I found it difficult to breathe deeply; pains in the chest were evidence of the injury and made it impossible for me to speak loudly or for long at a time . . . I was being almost forced and compelled to give up this burden of teaching. (IX.2)

Augustine acknowledges the psychosomatic nature of these symptoms:

What had helped me in the past to bear my hard labor had been the desire to make money. The desire was now gone . . . I began actually to be pleased that in this illness I had an excuse. (IX.2)

Augustine the bishop remarked in recalling his resignation: "You rescued my tongue as you rescued my heart. . . . My writing was now done in your service" (IX.4). Yet, now that, in the *Confessions*, Augustine speaks truth, the skill that made him a successful rhetor has not vanished. He hopes that readers will not be conscious of his skill and artfulness, even though it is evident in every sentence. We turn now to a closer examination of some of the major devices that serve to keep readers in strong engagement with the *Confessions*, the primary requirement for a pleasurable "read."

Two of these strategies will occupy us in the rest of this chapter: indeterminacy of address and unresolved

contradiction. Both of these features render the first eight books of the *Confessions* volatile, incomplete, unstable—and thus call for readers' co-authorship. In Chapter 3, we will consider the *Confessions* as an erotic text, certainly a feature that heightens reader engagement. In these two chapters our attention will continue to be primarily on the first nine books of the *Confessions*. Theological and philosophical speculations dominate Books 10 to 13, and rather different concerns and strategies mark these books; I will focus on them in the final chapter.



The *Confessions* is addressed to multiple hearers/readers. As the text continuously slides from one addressee to another, the reader's pleasure in feeling directly addressed shifts to the rather different pleasure of overhearing a communication addressed to someone else. Along with the frequent interjections and ejaculations that interrupt the text, indeterminacy of address also opens the text, keeping it mobile, circulating, accessible but not possessable.

Augustine holds in suspension several different audiences: God, "people," and himself—self-talk. The ostensible addressee of the *Confessions* is God—"you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" (I.1). Yet, in the next paragraph, Augustine asks (whom?), "How shall I pray to my God?" Clearly, he does not imagine his conversation with God to be taking place in a closet, as Jesus taught his disciples to pray, far from the eyes and ears of other human beings. At times he specifies his ideal readers;

at other times, he simply addresses them: "fellow citizens, fellow pilgrims: those who have gone before and those who follow after and those who are on the road with me" (X.4). As I have already mentioned, Augustine was also especially eager to find readers who will not laugh at him (IV.1). And the *Confessions* is self-talk, a method of recollecting himself. Finally, the text's mobility and multiplicity of address invites—even compels—the modern reader unanticipated by Augustine to enter!

Moreover, Augustine was well aware of the persuasive effectiveness in positioning readers to "overhear" his private confessions to his confessor, especially one that promises titillating scatological detail. In his demonstration "reading" of several verses from the Psalms of David discussed above (IX.4), Augustine explicitly specifies that it would be important for those he wishes to convert to Catholic Christianity to *overhear* his passionate exegesis, rather than think themselves directly addressed:

I should have liked [the Manichees] to have been standing somewhere near me (without my knowing that they were there) and to have seen my face and heard what I said when in this time of quietness I read the fourth Psalm, and to have seen what effect those words of the Psalm had on me . . . I should have liked them to have heard me without my knowing whether they heard. Otherwise they might think that what I was saying when I read those verses was being said because of them. And in fact I should neither say the same things nor speak in the same way, if I realized that they were watching me and listening to me. And even if I did say the same things, they would not have understood how

I was speaking with myself and to myself in front of you, out of the natural feelings of my soul. (IX.4)

Both his own self-consciousness in knowing he was being listened to and his hearer's resistance to his rhetorical strategies would have weakened the force of the communication he imagines.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine has carefully crafted a communication structured in precisely this way. The speaker/author's back is to his audience; he pretends to ignore them and to speak without inhibition or restriction to God; yet sprinkled throughout are signals that, in fact, it is not God, who, after all, knows and sees all things, that needs to be made aware of Augustine's story. Rather it is the reader who must be persuaded, inspired to imitate, converted:

Anyone who cares to can read what I have written and interpret it as he likes. (IX.12)

This is what I want to do in my heart, in front of you, in my confession, and in my writing before many witnesses. (X.1)

Why, then, do I bother to let human beings hear my confessions? . . . Human beings are very inquisitive about other people's lives, very lazy in improving their own. Why should they want to hear from me what I am when they do not want to hear from you what they are? (X.3)

Appearing to address God—addressing God—Augustine interjects references to his eavesdroppers. To ignore them completely would risk their loss of interest; Augustine must keep his readers listening by frequent subtle acknowledgments of their presence.

The first nine books of the *Confessions* stay close to the process of Augustine's life, to his progress toward conversion. Although they narrate that process, they also reproduce the strains, anxiety, and energy of the life they narrate. Augustine's writing style—full of interruptions, surprises, alternation between detailed description and failure to supply important information—reflects Augustine's life, reminding us that people do not necessarily think systematically and act consistently with what they have figured out. Issues surface at particular times because events and emotions draw them to the surface, present them for examination and work. They "come up" for attention. Most people can tolerate a rather high level of logical contradiction in their ideas, values, and actions. These contradictions can even coexist without friction; they simply respond to different intellectual, psychological, and social occasions and situations. Furthermore, in life logically contradictory ideas can complement, correct, or provide alternatives, one of which may work better in one situation than another.

When we struggle as scholars to exhibit the inner consistency of an author's thought, we satisfy ourselves, catering to our own assumptions and predilections. However, to the extent that we resolve and remove contradictions that our text holds "in suspension," we both distort the author's ideas and remove the tension, discomfort, and life-likeness of the text, making it bland. We bleach out its strident, sometimes confusing colors, and leave it orderly, consistent, boring. In short, we do what Augustine *instructs* his readers to do rather than what he himself *does* as an author. The explicit agenda of the *Confessions* is an

ordering of experience and world so that ideas and desires do not contradict one another, but *fit*—and can be shown to *fit*—each in its proper place. What Augustine *does* in his text, however, is to maintain unresolved contradictions that disturb a reader, keeping her awake, irritated, engaged. Is not a “text of pleasure” necessarily a text containing contradictions that create tension, that provoke and stimulate author and reader to attempt to overcome them *as* contradictions in order to display them as mutually supporting and reinforcing insights?

Unresolved textual contradictions do not necessarily signal the author’s confusion about the topic about which he writes. Rather, as I suggested above, contradictory explanatory theses deal with phenomena more adequately in one existential situation than in another. And the juxtaposition of pairs of contrasting entities—God and human, body and soul, flesh and spirit—does not necessarily reveal the presence of a dualistic metaphysic. Metaphysical dualism, which is found less often than generally supposed in Augustine’s thought, entails not merely contrasted, but mutually exclusive entities. Augustine’s contrasting pairs are mutually necessary in that each requires and defines its opposite. As contradictions, they generate a textual instability that creates discomfort, and therefore attention, in the reader.

The *Confessions* is riddled with contradictions that have, for sixteen hundred years, irritated and stimulated readers to excited labor and play. The simplest level of contradiction in the *Confessions* is the ubiquitous oxymorons Augustine uses, for example, “living death . . . dying life,” “sane madness” (VIII.8);

Augustine uses these tightly packaged verbal contradictions to signal an occasion of great complexity and intensity. He does not pause to break these oxymorons down, to dilute them into discursive explanation, but allows them to boggle the mind, to block the reader's satisfaction along with her impression of intellectual grasp.

But figures of speech—oxymorons—are only the most obvious and least disturbing level of contradiction in the *Confessions*. There are also contradictions even in Augustine's "resolutions." Although he claims to have solved to his own satisfaction the urgent puzzles of his youth, contradictions remain. The major contradictions of the *Confessions* revolve around bodies, their status and their meaning. God's body, initially a problem for Augustine in that he cannot imagine a body that is not extended in space, remains contradictory in Augustine's attempts throughout the *Confessions* to understand and explain God's existence and activity. Christ's body also puzzles Augustine; he struggled to understand "divinity in the weakness that it had put on by wearing our 'coat of skin'" (VII.18). Finally, the status and meaning of human bodies and the world's body with all its creatures constantly occupy—and elude—Augustine's effort to place bodies in a coherent and stable order. These lively and volatile bodies consistently refuse to stay in the places to which Augustine has assigned them; their insubordination, however, creates a large part of the pleasurable tension of the text. Let us look more carefully at each of these contradictions and their textual effects.

*God's body:* Augustine's first difficulty in thinking



about God was his inability to think of God as anything but "a corporeal substance, extended in space" (VII. 1).

So I . . . considered that whatever was not extended in space, whether diffused or condensed, or swelling out or having some such qualities or being capable of having them, must be, in the full sense of the word, nothing. The images in my mind were like the shapes I was used to seeing with my eyes. . . . I thought of you as an immensity through infinite space, interfused everywhere throughout the whole mass of the universe and extending beyond it in every direction for distances without end, so that the earth should have you, the sky should have you, all things should have you, and they should be bounded in you, but you should be boundless. (VII.1)

Augustine's image of an infinitely extended God, filling all things, however, was problematic in that it posited a God susceptible to corruption. Augustine found a changeable God intolerable on psychological as well as logical grounds. Even as he struggles to form an idea of God, there are certain commitments he will not negotiate: God exists; God is unchangeable; God cares for human beings; and God will judge them. These beliefs were "firmly and irrevocably rooted in my mind" (VII. 7). And the image of a God whose body fills all things fails both to specify how God can be unchangeable and to show how and why that God can be a personal God who cares for people. Augustine's two notions about God are in conflict: each identifies a different arena and method for searching for God. Can God be found in the created world, in the beauty of God's creation? Or must one shut out created beauty in order to search for a God accessible only to the

mind? Augustine continues to use both methods—inspection of sensory objects and introspection which begins by rejecting sensible things.

Augustine describes his search for God in the sensible world of bodies and objects: "And what is this God?" he asks the earth, all the things that are on the earth, the sea, creeping things with living souls, the blowing breezes and the cosmic air, heaven, the sun, moon, and stars:

I said to all those things which stand about the *gates* to my senses: "Tell me about my God . . . tell me something about him." And they cried out in a loud voice: "He made us." My question was in my contemplation of them, and their answer was in their beauty. (X.6)

While using this inductive method, Augustine uses created things to focus his attention: the soul, he says, "rises out of its lethargy, supporting itself on created things" (V.1). Moreover, he does not subsequently pass over, or go beyond, sensible things in order to find God, but looks more deeply into them. And sensible things do not lie; they tell him plainly, we are not your God. Yet, as the creation of God, they can give important information about the kind of creator they have: "their answer was in their beauty," which witnesses to that of the Great Beauty which was their origin. Augustine asks rhetorically: "Is not this appearance of the universe evident to all whose senses are not deranged?" Furthermore, sensible objects do not mislead the inquirer by presenting a beautiful appearance; their structural beauty exceeds even that of their surface beauty.

Yet Augustine is not content with the information

he receives from sensible objects. There are two problems with their testimony: first, their surface beauty can capture the unwary lover; second, perception of sensible objects is not unique to the human race but is also shared by animals. Augustine states the first problem in this way: "By loving these things, [people] become subject to them, and subjects cannot judge" (X.6). If the objects of the sensible world are to reveal God, a faculty of educated discernment must be brought to perception. The passive viewer—one who does not insist on "the question" ("What is this God?")—will never receive the answer: "He made us." Many people, as well as "animals, small and great, see [the world], but cannot ask the question." And Augustine also finds it necessary to "pass on beyond" perception and its evidence, since "the horse and the mule have it too" (X.7). He has used one epistemological method, finding it fruitful, but not decisive in its information about God.

At the same time—just before the conversion of his will in book 8—Augustine found an alternative explanation of God. In "some books written by the Platonists," Augustine found a transcendent God. Instructed by these books to search for God as an "unchangeable light" within his own soul, Augustine experienced this God as he "by stages" shed his earlier images of God as a body.

And so I went by stages from the body to the soul which perceives by means of the bodily senses, and from this to the inner power of the soul to which the bodily senses present external things . . . from this point I went on to the faculty of reason to which sense data are referred for judgment. It then, as it were, raised

itself up to the level of its own understanding, freed my thoughts from the tyranny of habit, and withdrew from those crowds of contradictory phantasms. . . . And then, in the flash of a trembling glance [*trepidantus aspectus*], my mind arrived at that which is [*id quod est*]. . . . I had not the power to keep my eye steadily fixed; in my weakness I felt myself falling back and returning again to my habitual ways, carrying nothing with me except a loving memory of it and a longing for something which may be described as a kind of food of which I had perceived the fragrant aroma but which I was not yet able to eat. (VII.17)

This God is beyond images drawn from sensory experience, beyond human imagination which is inevitably informed by sensible objects, and beyond accessibility by means of the human repertoire of perception and logical thought. Augustine understood this God through an experience of being ravished<sup>18</sup> by God's beauty; almost immediately, however, he was torn away by the weight of the habits of physical existence. Augustine's problem of a method for experiencing and thinking of God is unresolved. He has identified two methods, each of which assumes quite different and contradictory roles for sensible objects: Is sensible beauty the starting point in a search for God so that the seeker must look more deeply *into* bodies in order to learn something about the God who created them? Or are all bodies and objects to be dismissed, excluded from a search for God that begins with the human mind but must necessarily transcend the mind's changeableness if it is to achieve even a "trembling glance" of "that which is?" Augustine does not decide between the two methods; both omit something of great importance to him. Together, however, in a con-

tradiction that works more as cyclical oscillation than as impasse, Augustine finds them mutually corrective and thus necessary to sustain in suspension. This contradiction in Augustine's assessment of the role and status of human bodies in the search for God renders the text questionable, problematic, incomplete, *interesting*.

*Christ's body:* The issue of method was made even more gripping for Augustine by his struggle to understand Christ's divine and human natures. If Christ was really divine, his bodily existence on earth was initially, he tells his readers, impossible for him to understand. Indeed, it is only in coming to recognize Christ as indispensable *mediator* between God and human beings that Augustine began to *enjoy* God. The missing quality, that which had made him fall away from the vision of "that which is," was a humility he learned only by embracing "Jesus in his humility" and weakness as God.

He built for himself a humble dwelling out of our clay, by means of which he might detach from themselves those who were to be subdued and bring them over to himself, healing the swelling of their pride and fostering their love, so that instead of going further in their own self-confidence they should put on weakness, seeing at their feet divinity in the weakness that it had put on by wearing our "coat of skin"; and then, weary, they should cast themselves down upon that divinity which, rising, would bear them up aloft. (VII.18)

But the meaning of the scriptural words, "I am the way, the truth and the life," was hard-won by Augustine: "This was not the way I thought then." He

admired the virgin birth of Christ "as an example of how temporal things should be despised for the sake of gaining immortality," but did not have "the faintest notion of the mystery contained in 'The Word was made flesh'" (VII.18).

Augustine describes his own inadequate understanding of the divinity and humanity of Christ as well as that of his friend, Alypius. On the one hand, he could not imagine that God could be born of the Virgin Mary, literally "sifted together" with her flesh, without defilement by that flesh (V.10). Yet Augustine thought of Christ as fully human, a man "to be preferred to others, not because he was Truth in person, but because of the exceptional qualities of his human nature and his more perfect participation in wisdom" (VII.19). He cannot see how divinity *and* humanity can coexist in one person without contamination of the divine by the human nature. Alypius, on the other hand, held what later came to be called "the error of the Apollinarian heretics" in imaging Jesus as a God clothed in flesh, but lacking a human soul (VII.19). Yet it was not primarily misunderstandings that thwarted Augustine's search for God. Rather it was that he was "puffed up with my knowledge" and "the swelling of my pride; it was as though my cheeks had swollen up so that I could not see out of my eyes" (VII.7). This self-important blindness, by young adulthood a habitual posture toward the world, held Augustine so that he was still "too weak to be able to enjoy" God: "if I had not sought the way to [God] in Christ our Saviour, what would have been finished would have been my soul" (VII.20).

Fortunately, Augustine's driven search continued:

he continued to read. However, in addition to missing any reference to Christ Jesus in "those books of the Platonists," Augustine says, "humility was not a subject which those books would ever have taught me." And humility, as revealed in the human Jesus, was precisely the "strength" Augustine needed in order to enjoy God. He learned the difference between "those who see their goal without seeing how to get there and those who see the way which leads to that happy country which is there for us not only to perceive but to live in" (VII.20).

Now Augustine began to read Paul "very greedily," finding in the scriptures everything he had found true in the Platonist authors he had read—and more. In the scripture, "one is not only instructed so as to see you . . . but also so as to grow strong enough to lay hold on you" (VII.21). Without settling the question of how divinity and humanity could coexist,<sup>19</sup> Augustine is content to come to an understanding of Christ as mediator, the *method* or road to God. He understands Christ's human and divine nature as logical contradictions that are nevertheless *necessary*; in discovering humility, he has found the strength to hold them together and thus to identify the road to God. The way, he says, is "first humility, secondly humility, and thirdly humility." Now Augustine does not require conceptual smoothness in his ideas about God, but rather a concrete and energizing connection with God. It was the human Christ who made the difference between the presumption of the learned Platonist books and the humility that is required "to walk along the road by which he will arrive and see [God] and lay hold on [God]" (VII.20). The "face and look of pity" and the

“tears of confession” are the method of access to God, not the pride of intellectual grasp.

Two further contradictions relating to bodies are present in the *Confessions*, and they should be mentioned here briefly, although I will discuss them more fully in chapter 3: human bodies and the world’s body. We have seen that far from “disdaining the body,” Augustine pays the minutest attention to physical movements, feelings, and appearances in order to identify the state of the soul. Emotions, yearnings, even the truth of a human life are described as somatic; the soul’s movements are describable only as physical events. We have also seen in the earlier part of this chapter that living things and the earth’s body provide important information about God to the intent questioner. Certainly, bodies have a high epistemological status in Augustine’s search for God.

Yet Augustine also assumes—and reveals—a hierarchical ranking of human attributes and capacities in which the soul has far greater value than the body. Augustine switches, sometimes with remarkable rapidity, from privileging bodies as site and symbol of subjectivity to describing the soul as vastly superior to the lowly and problematic body. Augustine’s formula is the following: the human soul is inferior to God, and the body is inferior to the soul; if the soul is in a state of insubordination to God, it loses its control over its own body; it is attracted by—and thus is connected to—every physical object that crosses its path in the anxious fear that something will be missed.<sup>20</sup> The created order is overturned by the disorderly, or concupiscent, affections:



I was superior to [things which are in space], but inferior to [God]. . . . This was the correct admixture—that I should remain in your image and, by serving you, be master of the body. . . . But when I arrogantly rose up against you . . . these inferior things became above me and kept me under, and there was no loosening of their hold and no chance of breathing. (VII.7)

What is at stake is not the value of human bodies, living beings, or the natural world, but the attitude with which they are sought. The trouble with bodies is that they are moribund, subject to corruption. Yet their very corruptibility testifies to the goodness of their creation and existence: if they were “to be deprived of all good, they will cease to exist altogether. . . so long as they exist they are good.” The problem of evil, Augustine saw, was not to be settled by assigning evil to bodies:

So I saw plainly and clearly that you have made all things good, nor are there any substances at all which you have not made. And because you did not make all things equal, therefore they each and all have their existence; because they are good individually, and at the same time they are altogether very good, because our God made all things very good. (VII.12)

In spite of the fact that “all things are very good,” they are, for Augustine, untrustworthy in two ways: because they are finite, they cannot absorb and fulfil infinite longing; and, we will see when we focus, in chapter 4, on Augustine’s resolution of his scattered and driven longings, “things” remain problematic—magic—for him in their capacity to distract him by

their surface beauty from recognition of their deep beauty as created beings. Augustine's contradictory account of the meaning and value of created things—at once good and dangerous—is not resolved in the *Confessions*.



Certainly the absence of contradiction where it can be achieved—that is, within carefully limited segments of logical reasoning—is among the finest achievements of human thought. Yet unresolved contradictions in a text create a pleasurable tension; they function to invite the reader into the text as conversation partner, opponent, supporter, and co-author. Attempting to remove textual contradictions by explaining their inner coherence and demonstrating their consistency, scholars often simultaneously remove much of the reader-author's pleasure. That is why commentary is usually so much less vivid, engaging, and interesting than the text it seeks to display. It is not the case that all authors intend and must achieve—or be helped by their interpreter to achieve—consistency of thought. This assumption excludes the possibility that by the skillful use of unresolved contradictions the author purposely constructed the reader's disequilibrium, and thus her focused attention.

Augustine was acutely aware of the role of dis-ease, disequilibrium, and tension in producing pleasure. He ponders this very topic meticulously, exhaustively, in book 8. He begins, "O good God, what is it in human beings that makes them rejoice more when a soul that

has been despaired of and is in very great danger is saved than when there has always been hope and the danger has not been so serious?" He puzzles over the apparent perversity that requires a prior discomfort, distress, or anxiety to augment the pleasure that accompanies the alleviation of the tension. He multiplies examples; "the evidence is everywhere, simply crying out: 'it is so'" (VIII.3). He cites scriptural parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. "What is it in the soul," he asks, "that makes it take more pleasure in the finding or recovery of things it loves than in the continual possession of them?" Victorious generals, storm-tossed sailors, the illness of a friend: all confirm Augustine's analysis of how "more pleasure" is achieved by a prior condition of lack.

In contrast to God, who is always the same, rejoicing in the spiritual and material creation, human beings require the cyclic oscillation of deprivation and satisfaction if they are to achieve the greatest pleasure. Even the ordinary pleasures of life are sought by purposely cultivating "difficulty and discomfort which are voluntary and self-chosen." Hunger and thirst create pleasure in eating and drinking; lengthy engagements produce a pleasure in sexual satisfaction that would not exist if marriage were quicker. Alternations "between deprivation and fulfillment, between discord and harmony" characterize not only "disgraceful" but also legitimate pleasures. "Everywhere we find that the more pain there is first, the more joy there is after" (VIII.4). Surely an author so sensitive to degrees of pleasure and to the amount of tension needed to produce each increment of pleasure, and who insists that



## Notes

1. *Confessions* XIII.9; frequent references to the *Confessions* throughout the text follow this form. English translations are based on Rex Warner, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: New American Library, 1963); I have frequently changed the translation when the Latin supported a more literal or vivid word or phrase.

2. See "Infancy, Parenting and Nourishment in Augustine's *Confessions*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, September 1982.

3. See *Augustine on the Body* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1979).

4. See *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Westminster Press, 1981), chap. 3.

5. *Confessions* IX. 2.

6. "Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in St. Augustine's *De trinitate* and the *Confessions*," *Journal of Religion*, April 1983, and *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

7. Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*; English trans. *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

8. *De anima* 1A. 1. 403a. 15.

9. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies* X: "und wir, die an steigendes Glück/denken, empfänden die Rührung,/die uns beinahe bestürzt,/wenn ein Glückliches fällt."

10. *Disorder and Early Sorrow* is the title of a short story by Thomas Mann, in *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1963).

11. *Confessions* IV.11.

12. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 55.

13. *Ibid.*, 23.

14. James Salter, *Light Years* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), 161.

15. Annette Kuhn, "The Body and Cinema: Some Problems for Feminism," in *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Susan Sheridan (New York: Verso, 1988), 22.

16. Compare Luther's hermeneutical principle: "For when a man does not take his subject seriously and feels no personal interest in it, never has his heart in it and finds it wearisome, chilling, or nauseating, how can he help saying absurd, inept, and contradictory things all the time, since he conducts the case like one drunk or asleep, belching out between his snores, 'Yes, No,' as different voices fall on his ears? . . . theology requires such feeling as will make a man vigilant, penetrating, intent, astute, and determined." *The Bondage of the Will*, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, trans. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 179.

17. *Retractationes* II.6.

18. *rapio*: the verb carries connotations of violence.

19. The Council of Calcedon in A.D. 451, fifty years after Augustine's *Confessions*, decided on a definition of belief in the full humanity and full divinity of Christ.

20. As Thomas Traherne said twelve hundred years later, "We love we know not what, and therefore everything allures us." *Centuries of Meditation*, ed. Bertram Dobell (London: n.p., 1908), 3.

21. In 426–27, when he wrote the last book of *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine acknowledged the importance of rhetorical skill: "Who would dare to say that truth should stand in the person of its defenders unarmed against lying, so that they who wish to urge falsehoods may know how to make their listeners benevolent or attentive or docile in their presentation, while the defenders of truth are ignorant of that art? Should [the defenders of falsehood] speak briefly, clearly, and plausibly while the defenders of truth speak so that they tire their listeners, make themselves difficult to understand and what they have to say dubious? . . . Should [the defenders of falsehood], urging the minds of their listeners into error, ardently exhort them, moving them by speech so that they terrify, sadden, and exhilarate them, while the defenders of truth are sluggish, cold, and somnolent? Who is so foolish as to think this to be wisdom? While the faculty of eloquence, which is of great value in urging either evil or justice, is in itself indifferent, why

should it not be obtained for the uses of the good in the service of truth if the evil usurp it for the winning of perverse and vain causes in defense of iniquity and error?" (IV. 2).

22. *Confessions* IX.1.

23. Eileen O'Neill, "(Re)presentations of Eros: Exploring Female Sexual Agency," in *Gender/Body/Knowledge*, ed. Alison M. Jagger and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 70.

24. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press), 57.

25. Elizabeth Spelman and others have recently criticized the claim that one can read, think, or write "as a woman" on the grounds that this locution masks the enormous differences among and between women. I recognize the validity of this criticism and acknowledge that it is unjust and deeply problematic for white feminists to assume that they can speak for all women. My claim, then, is not that I can read as a—meaning any—woman, but that I read as one woman, formed and informed nonetheless by experiences common to many North American women. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

26. For a discussion of representations of the female body, see Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 22.

27. *Gender/Body/Knowledge*, 70.

28. James Hillman, *Myth of Analysts* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 141. I am grateful to Professor David Miller of Syracuse University for this citation.

29. *Eptstula* cxxxv.6.

30. Clarissa W. Atkinson has demonstrated that the figure of Monica was an important model for the social construction of motherhood for more than a thousand years, and with effects that reach to our own time. *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

31. The words here translated "drunkenness" and "intoxication" are the same Latin word: *inebrio*.

32. Geoffrey Galt Harpham named and discussed the dynamic of temptation and resistance in a remarkable book, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

33. Augustine, *De musica* VI. 11. 29.

34. *Confessions* XIII.27.

35. 1 Corinthians 13:12 is the second most frequently quoted scriptural verse in the *Confessions*. The most frequently quoted verse is Romans 1:20: "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature . . . has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made."

36. The Cambridge Patristic Texts edition of the *Confessions* notes that this conflation of male and female reproductive organs is "a remarkable example of catachresis," adding that "it is to be explained, no doubt, by the fact that 'Adam' is used generically rather than personally"; this interpretation misses the point that since it is the male body and male sexual experience that structures the text, it is startling to find Augustine suddenly grafting a female reproductive organ onto a male body. *The Confessions of Augustine*, ed. John Gibb and William Montgomery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), 428, n. 9.

37. Augustine narrated his baptism in one sentence, in striking contrast to the lengthy painstaking description of his conversion to continence (IX.6; see also XIII.34).

38. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 55.

39. Augustine remarks of the *Confessions*: "There believe what is said of me, not by others, but by myself . . . there mark me, and see what I have been in myself, by myself" (*Epistula cccxxd.6*).

40. Teresa De Lauretis comments on "the weakness of female desire, its reticence to expose itself, its lack of symbolic authorization." "The Essence of Triangle, or Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Critical Studies* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 22.