

LET IN THE LIGHT

LEARNING TO READ
ST. AUGUSTINE'S
CONFESSIONS

With Attention to the Latin Text

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To my Latin teachers with deep gratitude



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PREFACE

I can best explain what kind of book you have in your hand if I tell you first how it was that I became engaged with the *Confessions* of Augustine. It is a simple story. I had heard over and over again that this was one of the most important and valuable books in the Western tradition: the first full expression of human inwardness, the deepest actualization of the human self as we have come to know it since, full of depth and mystery. It was fascinating, enlightening, and a true shaper of our culture.

I started to read the *Confessions*, many times in many translations, but I found it impossible. I felt that I was drowning in an ill-shapen mass of pious platitudes taken from second-rate nineteenth-century theologians, who seemed to speak as if their language was not problematic in any way, but simply said what needed to be said clearly and with the authority of the ages. I could not grasp either the outline or the details of the story. I could not imagine building on what I read.

In these English versions,¹ Augustine seemed to use theological terms in what lawyers call a conclusory way, that is, as though they did not need further elaboration or definition. His psychology likewise seemed elementary and unsophisticated, again as though his words explained themselves. As for the narrative, that

seemed pointlessly complex and substantively trivial. What, for example, is this big deal about stealing pears? It was an adolescent prank, not a serious sin. And why was the story more generally so hard to follow? Why does he so often fail to tell us where he is and who he is with? And so on. If you have tried to read the *Confessions*, maybe you have had such a response yourself.

None of this helped me discover what his religious experience was, or how the language he used might be connected with the events of ordinary life, in his era or our own. The whole experience was deeply unsatisfactory. I know other people have had different responses to the translated Augustine, but this was mine, and I saw no way to change it.

Then—now many years ago—I read the first page of the *Confessions* in Latin. I was, in the modern idiom, blown away. All the impressions I had of this text were exploded. It was full of life and immediacy and urgency. In the Latin text Augustine seemed to use his terms of theology and psychology, indeed all of his languages, with a constant sense of what they could and could not do, of what they left out or distorted. His sense of God was not reducible to theological cliché, but was deep, vital, and original. I felt that I was directly hearing his actual voice, not listening to a voice muffled and distorted by being forced to speak English.²

In recent years my retirement has made it possible for me to read the whole work through in Latin, and for me it has become one of the most important books of all.

The present book is meant as a reading of the *Confessions* that recognizes it as a Latin text, as it was written by Augustine himself. I want to help you see how it is that this book can take on meaning of a different and deeper kind when it is read in its original language—and read closely. Thus in early chapters I shall try to explain in detail how Augustine is at work in the Latin in a small number of sentences, so even if you know no

Latin at all you may get a sense of the way it works here and to what end Augustine directs it. As we proceed, we will do less of that, but I will always try to give you, in English, a sense of the Latin text at hand.

If you do not have any Latin, I want to help you learn just a tiny bit, enough to enable you to get some feel for what this text is actually like as it was written. My hope is that the experience of being exposed to the mind of Augustine speaking the language in which he lived and thought will bring you to want to learn at least a little more.

Working with the Latin as well as the English will, I hope, be a rewarding process, but it will necessarily and properly be a very slow one. It is an extreme form of close reading, which is in my view all to the good. The result is that in Part I of this book I will treat in detail only the first book of the *Confessions*. In Part II and Part III I will give less comprehensive attention to the other books.

The question I ask throughout is: What is it like to read the *Confessions* of St. Augustine? In addressing this question, why is it important to read the *Confessions*, at least in part, in Latin? Why exactly can it not be fully and properly translated?

* * *

I will speak to these questions repeatedly throughout the book. But I can say now that one important reason for reading at least some of it in Latin is that Augustine's mind is present in the original text in a way it cannot be in a translation, even a very good one. Of course there are good translations of books from one language to another, and we should be thankful for them. But there are always what the Spanish scholar Ortega y Gasset called "exuberances and deficiencies" of meaning, that is, ways in which the translation both fails to

express what is said and done in the original and adds meanings that are not there.³

This is true not only of translations across languages but translations within a language. Think of a poem, for example, and how much its life and meaning are particular to its form. If you want to engage with the mind of Shakespeare, you will insist upon reading his own words, not a version found in student aids like CliffsNotes. Or, if like me you are a lawyer, think how hard it is to explain what is meant by terms like “jurisdiction” or “equity” or “common law” to those who do not have a legal training. To understand these words you need to learn the language. That is in fact what happens, or ought to happen, in law school.

If we hope to engage in a full way with the movements of Augustine’s mind and imagination, then, it is important to read him at least in part in Latin. Another way to put it is to say that his voice can fully be heard only in that language, and as I will try to show, his voice is crucial to the meaning of the whole. Or, putting it another way, in the Latin he is present, in mind and soul, in a way he cannot be present in English.

Another reason to read the Latin is that the Latin language that Augustine learned as a child and worked with as an adult was a carrier of his culture, a culture in which he was caught up when he was young—as we are all caught up in the cultures in which we are raised—and of which, when he was older, he came to be in some ways critical, in others accepting, in still others transforming. To put it slightly differently, a central part of the drama of the *Confessions* lies in his struggles with his culture and the language that embodied it. In this sense the Latin language he knew is one of his most important subjects. We can have access to what he does with this language, and why, only as we come to share it.

In addition, as I hope to show, Augustine not only uses the Latin he has inherited; he remakes it in important ways as he

uses it. In doing so he is teaching us how to remake our own languages, our own ways of imagining and talking. All this requires us to pay attention to what he has done in the Latin.

This point is all the stronger, for me at least, when I recognize how little of what Augustine says can be reduced to a set of propositions. Sometimes scholars seem to see him as promulgating a philosophic or theological system. But in my experience this is just what he is *not* doing, at least in the *Confessions*. The life and meaning of what he does lies rather in the way he confronts and uses his language and the expectations it generates; in the way he establishes and builds relations with his two audiences, his reader and his God; and in the way he stimulates perception, feeling, thought, and imagination in us. This book is not reducible to a narrative, nor is it propositional in character. Rather, I think it can best be understood as offering us as we read it a set of experiences, in our minds and our inner beings. It is in these experiences that its meaning lies.

* * *

A third benefit of reading some of it in Latin is that its very foreignness and difficulty forces us to slow down as readers—to admit uncertainty, to look for meanings that are not obvious on the surface, and to regard our initial understandings as incomplete, all in a good way.

Think of what it is like to skim through a newspaper column or detective story in English. It can go so easily that it is hardly happening at all. In a way it would not necessarily be a huge advantage to us as readers of the *Confessions* if we were as fluent in Latin as we are in English, for then we might just skim through it. This book should not be read in such a way, nor should it be swallowed whole. Rather, like Shakespeare's plays or the poetry of Donne or Eliot, it requires sustained attention and

thought, an active and imaginative engagement, if we are to read it well. One of the advantages of the Latin is that it makes skimming impossible, at least for us. We are forced to slow down, and that is a good thing.

Also, in reading the *Confessions* we are reading a book that has an original form. It is a new genre, and to read it well we need to see how that genre is given shape and meaning as the book is written. This requires us to look with special care at what Augustine says, and how he says it. To do this we need to pay attention to its language and how he uses it.

Despite all I have said, I know that good translations obviously have their own importance and value. In what follows I myself translate almost every Latin passage into English. If I have done my job well, there and in the commentary, I think that even if you were to read only these translations, skipping the Latin entirely, you would acquire a real, though incomplete, sense of who Augustine is and a deeper connection with him and his life.

As for the Latin, I hope that even if you cannot read it, the presence of this language is a constant reminder that you are not reading the real thing. I hope you will be aware that the English you do read in the translations, including my own, has something unexpressed behind it, something you can see and in a sense touch, or let touch you. I hope that the Latin in this book can in this way have real value even for someone who reads little or none of it.

* * *

The first chapter of this book is a kind of summary of the whole of the *Confessions*, offered not as a scientific statement of some kind but simply as one reader's effort to sum the work up. My hope is that this will help you start to tune yourself to the actual

text when we turn to it. The next chapter will focus on the opening sentences, which are reproduced in Latin with notes and comments. Subsequent chapters will build on these two. From time to time throughout the book I will ask you to think about the way a particular Latin sentence actually works, giving you what help I can.

It is important to understand that while we shall work with passages taken from each of its books, we shall in total read only a rather small portion of the *Confessions*. My choice of passages is of course not beyond criticism, but it is perhaps comforting to think that our selection of passages will leave lots of the *Confessions* for you to turn to when our work together is over.

* * *

I should add, loudly and clearly, that I am not a professional Latinist, nor an Augustinian scholar, but just one mind engaging as well as I can with what Augustine has written. This is not a work of scholarship in the usual sense, but an exploration of the experience this wonderful book offers its readers. You might perhaps think of me as a friend with whom you happen to be reading this text closely, asking questions, making suggestions, and in general carrying on a conversation, without making any claims to perfection.

In this connection I imagine you, the reader, as someone who wants to come to terms with the experience of reading this text, even to the extent of learning to use at least a little Latin, and who is willing to give the conversation that it wants to establish with you a try. I think that if you ever studied Latin, in high school say, you should be able to follow a good bit of the Latin you will be presented with. If you have no exposure to Latin, you may want to look also at the resources in the note appended to this paragraph, or even better, to ask a Latinate friend to help

you. Everything I do here is meant as an invitation or introduction, a first step in coming to terms with this remarkable work.⁴

Finally, I might add that in having these hopes for the use of Latin I am moved by my own experience, not of Latin this time, but of Dante's Italian. With a couple of friends, one of whom knew Italian well, I read through the *Commedia*, one canto every week for three years. I used a text with Italian on one side, English on the other. I was never able simply to read the Italian, but I could often reconstruct much of its meaning with the help of the translation, then read it in Italian. This gave me an experience of reading Dante in Italian, which changed my whole sense of what he was doing and how.⁵

What happens in such a case is that the language is brought to life as a language, even though not fully understood, and this connects the reader with the mind of the writer in a new way. In the case of Augustine you will find that what is written in Latin, when it is understood even a little, will have a kind of firmness or solidity, as well as a life, that a translation cannot have. These are the words he wrote; there is nothing behind them but his mind. With a translation, by contrast, there is always something behind the language you read, something hidden, uncertain, obscure.⁶

As you will see, I am present throughout the book as an interlocutor with you, the reader, continually making comments and asking questions. I hope you will look at these critically. I do mean what I say, but I do not propound it with any external authority. As you read, ask what you think of my comments and questions, and the way, or ways, of thinking they express. How would you do it differently?

On another note. It has been suggested to me that you may already, and understandably, have an unappealing image of Augustine as an authoritarian, rigid, misogynistic, self-certain figure constantly engaged in doctrinal battles that have no real

meaning today. While I cannot speak of all of his writings, I hope that you will discover that the Augustine at work in the *Confessions* is not like this at all. As you will see, his central term is *caritas*, another word for “love.”

If you do need a quick antidote to the image I have presented above, I suggest you read his Sermon 9.⁷ Here he treats the sin of adultery, which men in his culture felt privileged to commit, while women were meant to be completely faithful. The women, who are present with their husbands in the congregation, are understandably afraid to speak to them about this difficult subject. Augustine speaks for them, in the presence of their husbands, giving them a voice they otherwise would not have had and claiming for them in no uncertain terms a fundamental equality in the face of a culture that denies it. While doing this he explicitly creates a sense of the Scriptures not as demanding grim obedience to a set of severe commands but as offering a life of song and joy.

* * *

There is one more aspect of this work I want to mention now, namely, its connection to the world in which I write—a world in which we face a serious pandemic, the possible loss of our democracy, and the consequences of global warming. In this world it is not possible to rely unthinkingly on existing institutions or traditions or established practices and attitudes. We do not know where we are going but we know it is not into a version of our own past. In 2019 I published a book, *Keep Law Alive*,⁸ which was about contemporary threats to our way of doing law, indeed to law itself, in which I tried to show how we might keep alive this crucial element of our culture. I had to consider as well how we might respond if we lost the law as we know and admire it; my response was to turn to Augustine who

lived in a worse world than our own—one in which the Roman Empire was collapsing and invaders were taking its place—yet in my view found a way to maintain his psychic and intellectual integrity, his integrity as a person. The chapter in which I tried to explain this reappears with little change in this book as its first chapter. The rest of this book could be read as an elaboration of what I saw to be so remarkable in Augustine's *Confessions* and what it might mean for us, living as we do in a culture that is collapsing, perhaps to be reborn, perhaps not.