

AUGUSTINE
OF HIPPO

A Life



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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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A PERSONAL QUEST



AUGUSTINE felt the cold. He is one of the few men of antiquity about whom we know a great deal of personal detail of this and a more serious kind.

No figure of the ancient world is more accessible to us. But we go to him for more than the vivid detail. He has a special place in the history of Christianity in the West, and through that place has left a permanent mark on the general consciousness of humanity. Augustine saw in the limited circumstances of his life and times an element of the universal, a clue to the very nature and destiny of man, a glimpse of what God intends for all of a fallen race. Thereby he became a thinker and analyst of the human condition with an extraordinary sense of the glory and the misery of man. Just because he looms so large in the story of Christianity and of the making of the European mind, it is never easy to achieve sufficient distance and detachment to see him in the round. His culture and training were initially more literary than philosophical, and merely as a literary figure he must rank as one of the most remarkable writers of his age. When he tells a story, its dramatic force is given the maximum effect by consummate artistry, with an exact eye for the differing motives of human character, but above all by the manifest affection that he feels towards frail mortals whose actions he thinks far from

a model of conduct. His autobiographical *Confessions* contain numerous examples of this rare narrative gift where he is visibly acting out his own maxim 'Hate the sin, love the sinner' (QA 34. 78, S 4. 20). 'We are all human; let us hate, not one another, but errors and lies.' Without illusions about himself, he draws his readers into his personal quest for happiness as he feels himself driven to believe that there is nothing to keep the soul from starvation other than truth, beauty, and goodness; and they can be reached only by love, a purified and sublimated love, the beginning, middle, and end of all things.

Feeling—'the heart'—lies at the centre of whatever it is which impels a person on his way. Augustine is fascinated by the desires and ambitions which pull people's lives in this direction or that. He sees that a man's character is not described accurately by a list of epithets of his virtues or weaknesses, but rather by an examination of what he wants to achieve as shown by his actions. If you want to understand the values of a society, look at (a) its criminal code, (b) what it spends its money on.

Augustine cannot be understood at all if he is treated as some timeless figure out of relation to his age. His early boyhood coincides with the brief reign of the emperor Julian. The long conflict between a confident and conquering Christianity capturing Roman society and a fierce pagan counterattack forms the backcloth of much that he writes. By the time he is 21 years old, in 375, the first thrust of barbarian immigration into the Roman empire has occurred, casting a long shadow. His is the age of Alaric's Visigoths and their astounding sack of Rome in 410; of the unstoppable impetus that carries the Vandals from way out beyond the Rhine through Gaul and Spain until in 429 they cross the Straits of Gibraltar to occupy the western provinces of

Roman North Africa and to set up a pirate kingdom at Carthage. Augustine's death on 30 August 430 occurs during the Vandal siege of his city of Hippo (on the Algerian coast at modern Annaba or Bône) before the final collapse of the perimeter defences.

To the extent that some large proportion of society had ceased to believe in the old polytheism and adopted a general scepticism and materialism, it is fair to describe Augustine's age as 'decadent'; at least that is what he himself would have been happy to think. But in other respects his age has no more decadence than any other generation. The intellectual climate of his time is dominated in philosophy by the modern Platonism taught by Plotinus at Rome in the middle years of the third century AD. At a crucial stage of his quest this Neoplatonic philosophy came to have a permanent lodging in his mind.

By his educated contemporaries Augustine is esteemed as an exceptionally gifted man, but is not treated as a superhuman prodigy. An important element in whatever it is in him that is 'greatness' lies in an ability to articulate what the most alert people of his time were taking for granted even if (except for his senior contemporary Jerome) they could not have expressed themselves so eloquently. But he also articulated a belief about the nature of man which was divisive then and has remained so since. Augustine's readers then and now either find themselves Augustinians, though they may not have realized it previously, or feel him to be a formidably dark pessimist portraying a Kafka-like world that is unwelcome.

Augustine's life can be written on a miniature scale only by leaving much out. To tell all would be to end with a book the size of the brilliant and most indispensable of his biographies

written by Le Nain de Tillemont (2nd edn. Paris, 1710), which runs to well over 1,000 pages. We are fortunate to possess a short biography by a contemporary and pupil, Possidius, who lived with him in the house at Hippo and was then put into the nearby town of Calama as bishop. Possidius' portrait is not of a great theologian (a side of Augustine that Possidius did not understand anyway) but of a heroic pastor of his people; Possidius has the merit of being an honest uninventive man, gasping with astonishment in the presence of personal greatness. His sketch perhaps provided an hour's discourse suitable for reading on the anniversary. He felt that the books and letters failed to convey the charismatic power of Augustine's personality as experienced by those who listened to him speaking.

The principal materials for Augustine's life are provided by his own writings. In addition to the narrative of his first 33 years in the *Confessions*, we have about 245 letters from his pen and many personal references in his treatises. About a thousand of his sermons survive and offer the biographer much exciting matter. Augustine is no egotist, but he thinks it unnecessary to exclude allusions to himself or recent events in discourses to his flock.

The Making of a Professor

Augustine was born on 13 November 354.

He was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He was the child of small-town parents in Thagaste in the province of Numidia, now the large village of Souk-Ahras in Algeria not far from the Tunisian border. Thagaste lies in hilly country about 60 miles inland, south of Hippo on the coast. Hardly more than a few ruins of the bath-house now survive to remind the visitor

of its Roman past (unlike Hippo of which much more has been found by the French archaeologists). Augustine's father Patrick sat on the town council and had the status of a *curialis*, in the late empire a hard-pressed class expected by the government to keep their local community going on their personal resources. Patrick owned but a few acres. His wife Monnica bore not only Augustine but also another son and two daughters. Their relative ages are never mentioned. Monnica came of a Christian family, but Patrick remained a pagan almost until the end of his life. Monnica was regular in giving alms for the poor, devoted to the honour of the martyrs of the African churches, and daily attendant at prayers in the local church morning and evening. Her constant devotions did not make her careless, and she avoided gossip. She was often influenced by her dream-life through which she felt that God guided her.

Both Augustine's parents are likely to have been of Berber stock, but Romanized and Latin-speaking. Numidian peasants of the fourth century spoke not Latin but Punic, inherited from the Phoenician settlers who came from Tyre and Sidon a millennium before to set up their trading station and maritime power at Carthage. In Hannibal they had once offered a frightening threat to Rome's ambitions to conquer the Mediterranean. As Romans settled in their North African provinces, many took Berber- or Punic-speaking wives. In the second century AD Apuleius, of Madauros near Thagaste, author of the *Golden Ass*, had a Punic-speaking wife. In Augustine's time the Punic-speakers retained a consciousness of their old Phoenician forefathers, and could manifest a lack of enthusiasm for the Roman administration of their country now established for over five centuries. Latin culture was a veneer; those who had it tended to despise those

who had not. Augustine acquired a conversational knowledge of the patois, and never speaks of Punic language or culture with the least touch of scorn as the pagan Maximus of Madauros did. But his parents and nurses spoke to him in Latin, and education at the Thagaste school was principally in Latin language and literature, a subject which ancient men called 'grammar', taught by the *grammaticus*.

Augustine's schoolmaster, first at Thagaste, then until his sixteenth year at nearby Madauros, appears more notable for his skill with the cane than for offering a positive education. To the end of his days Augustine can hardly refer to the life of a schoolboy without recalling the misery of cruel floggings. He would not say it did him no good, for it was a training for the far greater troubles of adult life. But 'we learn better when freely trying to satisfy our curiosity than under fear or force' (C I. 14. 23). Once he had been handed Virgil's *Aeneid*, his young mind was kindled to excitement by the exquisite poetry. His school also made him learn Greek, a language spoken by a substantial minority of the North African population with links to Sicily and South Italy where Greek was widespread. A mere hundred miles of sea separate Sicily from the North African coast. Augustine found Greek hard; the difficulty soured even the reading of Homer whose poetic power he admired. In later life he was generally inclined to protest too much his ignorance of Greek. After his schooldays he did not read classical Greek texts. But he could read the language with a dictionary. In 415 in the *City of God* he makes his own translation into Latin of a piece of Plotinus, and when writing *On the Trinity* he consulted works by acknowledged masters of the Greek East. Nevertheless a very Latin pride in the cultural world of Virgil, Cicero, Seneca, Terence, and his

fellow-countryman Apuleius helped him to treat Greek theologians and philosophers as constructive helps rather than as authorities to be slavishly imitated. Aristotle first came before him in his early twenties when he was studying at Carthage. Except for Cicero's translation of the *Timaeus*, he seems to have read no Plato before he reached Milan in 384 aged 30. The standard education of the time was primarily in the art of persuasive oratory, including some logic. Looking back he realized he had come to think a fault in speech much graver than a failure in morality (C I. 18. 29). Most of the philosophy he knew he taught himself by his reading. For the contemporary professional teachers of philosophy in the Latin West, he speaks in a letter of 386 in terms of utter contempt.

From his boyhood his health gave cause for anxiety. Aged about 7 he fell seriously ill with chest pains; when his death was expected he asked Monnica to arrange for his baptism. (As an infant he had been made a catechumen with the sign of the cross and salt on his tongue.) Recovery led to deferment. Throughout his life his health was precarious, and a series of bouts of sickness made him appear prematurely old in middle age. Although after he had become a bishop his burdens were far heavier, he nevertheless seems to have enjoyed better health under greater strain. The optimum degree of tension is not nil.

Patrick nursed ambitions for his clever son. Towards Patrick Augustine shows small sign of sympathy. The devout Monnica hoped to persuade Patrick to become a Christian; perhaps once faith had come, her often erring husband would be more faithful to her. In pagan households of the time the master of the house took it for granted that he had a right to sleep with his serving

girls, and preachers did not find it easy to convince Christian congregations that this right should not be exercised (*S* 224. 3). Patrick was hot-tempered, but Monnica kept out of his way when he was cross, and so 'escaped the battering other wives receive'. Yet when serene, he was kind. Monnica herself felt it a harmonious relationship (*C* 9. 11. 28). They both realized that if finance could be found, an education at the metropolis at Carthage (by modern Tunis) could open the door to success in the great world. But when Augustine was 16, Patrick died, after being baptized during his last sickness. For Augustine a wild demoralized year followed while means were sought to enable him to continue his studies, a project in which he was eventually assisted by a wealthy landowner of Thagaste, Romanianus. (His name appears on an inscription dug up at Thagaste.) In the *Confessions* Augustine vividly describes how he stole pears from a nearby orchard not out of any wish for the fruit, which was of inferior quality, but because there is a pleasure in doing something forbidden. As he looked back on the incident, he felt himself to be repeating the experience of Adam in Genesis. The pears were accidental to the substance of his enjoyment which was simply the doing wrong; that made the story significant, not a mere adolescent prank of the most boring triviality. He went to Carthage with his mother's timely exhortation that he avoid fornication, above all adultery with another man's wife.

Carthage was 'a seething cauldron of shameful sex'. 'I was in love with being in love'. Augustine came to know the longing to discover love and, simultaneously, the destruction of both friendship and inward self-respect which results from egotistic seeking of sensual pleasure. Through the heat of adolescent calf-love, the

incapacity of human nature for pure altruism began to impinge on his consciousness. His undergraduate prayer was 'Grant me chastity but not yet' (C 8. 7. 17). 'Under the sway of passion man is as uncontrollable as a flash flood or hot wax' (EP 57. 16-20).

Unlike Thagaste or Madauros, Carthage was part of the great world of high culture. Since the occupation of North Africa by Muslim Arabs, more than two centuries after Augustine's lifetime, a cultural and religious gulf has existed between the north and south sides of the Mediterranean lake. This was not at all the case three centuries before the Arabs when Augustine was at school. From Libya to Morocco prosperous provinces of the Roman empire exported grain, wine, and olive oil. Throughout the third century there had been a recession in trade; but prosperity returned in the fourth century and Carthaginian merchants of Augustine's acquaintance enjoyed a far-flung and lucrative trade as far as India. The standard of living was often at least as high as that in many parts of Italy. Augustine records his astonishment at finding in Italy well-to-do people without a bedroom to themselves, which Africans would take for granted (O 1. 3. 6). The ambition of rich citizens was to be 'buried in an expensive sarcophagus at a funeral attended by columns of slaves both male and female, and a procession of dependent clients' (S 102. 1. 2, 2. 3). Their villas were adorned with marble and rich mosaic (such as one may see in the Bardo Museum at Tunis). Carthage had a substantial concentration of sophisticated people of high Latin culture. High officials of the Roman administration there counted a poet or an orator or a civilized bishop a welcome guest at dinner. A century previously Carthage had had the first bishop to come from the senatorial class, Cyprian, martyred in 258 and the glory of the African churches. In Augustine's time

his feast-day (14 September) was celebrated with dancing at his shrine by the harbour.

At Carthage in 373 the 19-year-old Augustine was required by the syllabus of study to read a text 'by a certain Cicero' (as he would ironically put it): the dialogue entitled *Hortensius* which medieval scribes failed to copy but which survives through over 100 quotations mainly in Augustine. The book, recommended for its fine style, had a moral content which Augustine, in his retrospect of a quarter of a century later, felt to have changed his life. Already he was by temperament a quiet and bookish person repelled by rowdy students. Here was Cicero telling him to be self-sufficient; to know there is no happiness in merely doing as one pleases (to be free but do wrong is merely the road to misery); to cultivate detachment from wealth and to practice solitude; to realize that if the aim is the highest contemplation and purification of one's immortal soul, one should not only eat and drink frugally but also live unmarried—for 'bodily pleasure is a distraction to the mind'; to admit that even oratory itself, the very door to worldly success, is not the greatest thing in life. The ultimate and dominant need is to find happiness. Men fail to find it, Cicero thought, because they seek the unobtainable or the harmful or the worthless. The dialogue concluded with the sombre reflection that the misery of man is a divine judgment: we are born to atone by punishment for sins in a higher life. Augustine was moved by these sentiments and disappointed only that Cicero's philosophical scepticism despaired of truth's attainability; 'he had no room for Christ'. Augustine also found himself divided in mind by the recommendation not to marry.

Already, aged 17, Augustine had come to keep house with a girl—friend of servile status. Augustine was never promiscuous—‘she was the only one and I was faithful to her’—but Monnica was never happy about the relationship. Augustine portrays himself as simply needing sex. The couple quickly had an initially unwanted but soon much-loved son to whom they gave the common African name Adeodatus or ‘God’s gift’ (the Latin equivalent of the Greek Theodore). As a teenager Adeodatus showed acute abilities, but died aged about 18. Even in a pagan society it was more respectable to be legally married: it meant legitimacy and ‘bona fama’ (*Solil.* I. II. 10). The relation of concubinage was less respectable than legal marriage, but not considered publicly scandalous. Marriage with a girl of servile status was in any event illegal. The Church accepted such couples as being *de facto* married provided the relation remained monogamous; if so, they were not debarred from admission to the sacraments.

During his turbulent years Augustine’s inheritance of faith became submerged by his sensual nature. When he first began studying at Carthage he had attended church services but mainly (so he felt in self-critical retrospect) to catch the eyes of pretty girls on the other side of the basilica. (African church custom segregated the sexes, keeping the laity standing while bishop and presbyters were seated.) He became fascinated by the theatre. None of his teachers commanded his respect and admiration, but he liked reading and found his way to important books. The spiritual stirrings occasioned by Cicero’s *Hortensius* led him to pick up his Bible again. Quickly he put it down. The old Latin version of the Bible had none of the noble classical prose of, say, the Authorized (King James) Version or Luther’s German Bible. It had been put

together hurriedly in the second century, probably by the missionaries who brought Christianity to North Africa. Especially in the Old Testament the version abounds in vulgar idiom and gross literalism. It defies the rules acknowledged by Cicero or Caesar. Its deficiencies are such that Jerome would soon produce a drastically corrected version which we now call the Vulgate or 'generally received' translation, which it very gradually came to be, but not until after much conservative opposition of which, as a bishop, Augustine himself was in part the mouthpiece. The young Augustine was appalled by the humble vulgarity of the old version, and had no motivation to press beyond form to content. As a guide for life's decisions he turned for a few years to astrology.

The need to earn bread for his widowed mother and family took Augustine back to Thagaste for a year or so, where he opened a school of grammar and rhetoric. At this time the death of a close friend caused him profound depression; for much of his life the fear of losing friends by death haunted him. Then the municipal chair of rhetoric at Carthage fell vacant, a post carrying a basic salary provided by the government, further supplemented by the students' fees. Such appointments much depended on influence. Perhaps through Romanianus Augustine got the job. Although far too many of the students were given to acts of mindless vandalism, which caused him gloom, his lectures on Cicero's *Rhetorica* were profitable at least to a handful of grateful pupils. We hear accidentally of one who a few years later had to lecture on Cicero himself, and experienced agonies of anxiety at his own professional inadequacy until, in a dream, Augustine explained it all. One of his best pupils was a law student from Thagaste, Alypius, who became a lifelong friend. Augustine in his spare time also studied the law.

Mani

At Carthage both Augustine and Alypius, and through them others, were drawn into the orbit of the Manichees, a half-secret theosophical society originating in Mesopotamia with Mani (216–76). Mani taught a fusion of religious elements drawn from Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and gnostic Christian sects, by which he aspired to transcend regional tribalism in religion and to construct a world-faith for all.

The problem of evil is central in Manichaeism. Mani explained evil by a myth of pre-cosmic conflict between equal powers of light and darkness, a theme elaborated with fantastic imagination and with elements of solar and lunar cult. He believed that fragments of the divine light captured by the evil powers of darkness have become imprisoned in the bodies of men and beasts, which his rites and doctrines are designed to liberate. In redemption God is therefore recovering lost bits of himself. Mani entitled himself ‘apostle of Jesus Christ’, and claimed to be the Paraclete whom Jesus had promised, supplementing and correcting orthodox Christians with a final revelation about the meaning of the sacred books. Like most gnostics, Mani rejected the Old Testament as including too many cruel and unedifying stories to be deemed God’s word. He accepted a shorter New Testament purged of ‘interpolations’ falsely portraying Christianity as a fulfilment and continuation of the Old Testament. The ‘interpolations’ include the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke (whose genealogies are so divergent), narratives presupposing that the crucifixion of the Son of God could be a physical reality (since he really had no body like ours at all), and any other texts at variance with Manichee dogma. But Pauline letters,

and especially Romans 8, were highly valued. The principle and source of evil is called Hylé, the Greek word for matter; but Mani's god of light is not actually non-physical; he is a vital presence permeating plant and animal life.

Mani's adherents were divided into two grades, Elect and Hearers. The Elect were celibate; from them Manichee clergy were recruited. They lived on a vegetarian diet supplied and cooked for them by Hearers, especially eating light-coloured fruits like melons and cucumbers. Lest they be guilty of 'murder', the Elect would not pick the fruit themselves. They were not allowed to till the soil, but could make a living e.g. by usury, which involved no ritual pollution. Hearers were allowed to marry, till the soil, and eat meat. No Manichee was allowed wine, 'a diabolical poison'. Married Hearers were allowed conjugal intercourse but ought to practice contraception or even abortion to avoid begetting children, by which process further imprisonment of the divine light takes place. Manichees observed the 'safe period' of the menstrual cycle.

The Manichee mission spread fast. It provoked hostility both in Persia, where Mani himself suffered execution, and in the Roman empire, where the emperor Diocletian thought it a corrupt occultism exported into his realm by a hostile Persian government to corrode his subjects. Fourth-century Manichees lived so as not to attract public notice. Shortly after Augustine left Carthage for Italy, the circle was severely harassed by the proconsul of Africa.

Mani presented his bizarre mythology as a rational, scientific knowledge contrasted with the mere faith asked by the Church. Augustine was attracted and, at the price of distressing Monnica, became a Hearer for ten years associated with the Manichee group in Carthage, being by his own account a very zealous

member. Monnica would not have him in her house for a time; but a wise bishop whom she consulted reassured her: 'It cannot be that the son of these tears will be lost' (C 3. 12. 21). He did not think of Manichee adherence as a break with Christ, but only with the Church of which he was highly critical. After his conversion to Catholic Christianity a Manichee reader of the *Confessions* named Secundinus told him he had never really assimilated the great truths; and probably his mind always had mental reservations about some of the mythological clap-trap. Later his Pelagian critics would say he had assimilated Mani like an incurable virus. One grand question from Mani certainly remained to worry him: Whence comes evil? Mani answered by saying divine power is limited; and that answer came to seem dissatisfying.

In his twenties at Carthage Augustine studied mathematics, geometry, and music. He tried to interpret what he learnt from Manichee myths about the divine light being imprisoned in darkness, with the help of philosophical pantheism. He wrote an essay on the beauty of the pantheistic understanding of the world entitled 'On Beauty and on what is fitting' (that is, on what has its due place in the proportion of things). He dedicated this to a successful philosophical orator at Rome, Hierius, held to be of taste and reputation, whose support he clearly hoped to enlist. His eye was already on the patrons of Rome. Although the book was lost from his library at the time he wrote the *Confessions*, its general theme is one he restates several times in writings after his conversion. But Augustine the Manichee experiments with explanations of evil in Stoic and Neopythagorean language, using quasi-philosophical jargon which in the retrospect of the *Confessions* Augustine will judge mumbo-jumbo,

certainly the inventions of a mind far distant from orthodox Christianity.

Gradually gnawing doubts grew about the reconciliation of Mani and science. In Manichee belief about sun and moon, eclipses needed an explanation, and Augustine was troubled that the Manichee account was incompatible with the best natural science. He attended disputations in Carthage, where a Catholic layman named Elpidius formulated objections to which the Manichee replies seemed weak. Among Manichee leaders in Africa a high reputation was enjoyed by Faustus of Milev (modern Mila), and Augustine was assured that after hearing Faustus all his doubts would be resolved. Faustus came and brought only disillusion. Moreover, Augustine had come to have a few moral qualms. The Manichees delighted to notice every sexual lapse among the Catholic community and contrasted this with their own rigorous ideals. But a suspicion that private lives were at variance with the austere façade was confirmed when a young virgin who kept house for one of the Elect became pregnant. Inward withdrawal from Manichaeism was taking place during 383 when he moved from Carthage to a chair in Rome where both pay and prestige were higher and, above all, the students were not turbulent. He soon found, however, that they were not honest about paying their dues. At Rome, where Alypius preceded him, he found his way to the Manichee community, one of whom nursed him through a dangerous illness. He was favourably struck by an ascetic community which one Manichee, unsuccessfully, tried to establish in his house at Rome. Through the Manichees of Rome he won an introduction to, and the potent patronage of, the mighty pagan aristocrat Symmachus, city

prefect and ardent defender of pagan cult against the attacks of Ambrose bishop of Milan.

Milan

Through Symmachus' influence, Augustine in the autumn of 384 became professor of rhetoric at Milan, residence of the emperor Valentinian II and his powerful mother Justina, and the centre of real power. At Milan on 1 January 385 he had the honour of giving a panegyric on the emperor at the consular inauguration of a Frankish army general. His provincial accent (Africans did not distinguish long and short vowels) caused wry comment, but he did well enough to have hopes of being nominated a provincial governor. One of the first people he called upon at Milan was Ambrose who received him most kindly.

Ambrose until 374 had been the governor of the province of Liguria, but by popular demand was suddenly pressed into being bishop of Milan. A highly cultivated person, he had fluent Greek as well as Latin and drew not only on Greek theologians for his sermons but also on the modern Platonists, Plotinus and Porphyry. Augustine went to hear him preach out of regard for his oratory, but soon found the content gripped him. The spiritual reading of the Old Testament eliminated old Manichee objections, and also made free use of the language of Neoplatonic mysticism. Neoplatonic texts were studied by a Christian reading-group of educated laity, led by a wise old man named Simplician. (He may have been a presbyter; in 397 he succeeded Ambrose as bishop.) The Plato circle was supported by a distinguished senator Manlius Theodorus, whose patronage Augustine was glad

to enjoy, though much later he regretted some compromise that the senator had felt impelled to make with pagan custom. Augustine passed from Manichaeism into scepticism, a mood which took him back to Cicero's philosophical dialogues. Elegant and civilized scepticism was at that time characteristic of many well-educated Romans.

The wealthy aristocracy initially felt Christianity to be embarrassingly un-Roman; but from about 350, by a gradual process lasting 150 years, they were converted. First the women came, then the men. They enriched churches by their gifts of mosaic and marble decoration or helped to build exquisite basilicas like Santa Sabina at Rome, erected on the Aventine during the last decade of Augustine's life, with finely decorated doors showing Biblical scenes, still to be seen. Virgil's Sibylline prophecy of an imperial child coming to introduce a golden age came to be widely interpreted of Jesus—a prophecy which Augustine felt to resemble that of Caiaphas in St John's Gospel who did not realize what he was saying. (The mature Augustine, though happy to say divine revelation is not confined to the Biblical canon, is cool to the Sibyl, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, and other oracular pretenders.)

Simplician quoted to Augustine a pagan Platonist who used to say that the prologue to St John's Gospel ought to be inscribed in letters of gold in churches. Augustine seems to have owed to Simplician the thought that everything in the prologue is entirely in Plato's spirit until 'The Word was made flesh', a declaration bringing the corrective of humility to the pride of man. Simplician told Augustine the story of Marius Victorinus, the most eminent orator-philosopher of fourth-century Rome who was also an African by birth. Several of Victorinus' writings survive.

A pagan drawn towards Christianity, Victorinus had translated some Plotinus and Porphyry into Latin and also studied the Bible. Inwardly he came to feel himself a Christian, or at least a strong admirer of Christ if not yet of the Church. He remained an unbaptized fellow-traveller until, suddenly, he was ashamed of being ashamed. He gave in his name for instruction preparatory for baptism, and declined the offer of the Roman clergy of a private ceremony to spare any blushes (something we often, they explained, arrange for prominent personages). The moral of Simplician's story was not lost on Augustine.

Meanwhile Augustine was joined at Milan by others from home—Alypius (still a loose Manichee adherent), Monnica herself, anxious to be close to him now her other children were grown up, and another clever friend from Carthage named Nebridius, a man with an inquiring mind especially in religion, who 'hated a short answer to a great question'. Very possibly they came as rival competitors for Augustine's religious allegiance as well as for the pleasure of his brilliant conversation and extraordinary genius for friendship. The *Confessions* presuppose a concentration of ambitious young Africans at Milan, explicable if one of the influential palace officials, with posts in his patronage, came from that part of the world and could be expected, in the manner of the times, to have a sense of regional patriotism. Alypius was on the make and obtained an introduction to a powerful senator on whom he frequently attended. Augustine too was consumed with ambition. Monnica shared his high hopes.

Monnica realized that to win the glittering prizes, her son needed a sound wife. No one at Milan was likely to arrange for Augustine to be offered a high post under the crown if his bed and board were shared by a Carthaginian concubine with a teenage

son. By law he could not marry her, and the pagan pattern would have been to send her away. Monnica saw that Adeodatus' mother must go if her matchmaking for the sake of her son's career were to have a chance. To both Augustine and the girl the parting was extremely painful. He felt a long-lasting wound. She went vowing (perhaps as a devoted and baptized Christian) that she would never go with another man, a declaration Augustine could hardly have recorded if he knew things had later turned out otherwise. The couple were the victims of the Roman class system and its intense social pressures to maintain a rigid stratification and discourage social mobility. Augustine writes as if, for all his love for his mother, he resented the position into which she and the system forced him. It did not occur to anyone concerned that for a serving girl's sake he ought to forgo his ambitions. The modern reader of the *Confessions* must be outraged by Augustine's dismissal of his son's mother; but the indictment has to read that he was not other than a man of his time. And he was not yet a Christian. We do not learn what Romanianus thought; he had invested a lot of money in Augustine's future.

Roman society expected a marriage to be arranged by the parents, and for the girl to be 12 or 13, at the start of puberty. The bride that Monnica found for him still had a couple of years to go. Augustine found himself bereft, with no companion. To allay the pain left by the loss of his beloved, and perhaps out of not wholly suppressed anger against Monnica's goodhearted concern, he tried taking another concubine. Ovid would have thought it sound advice. But the wound of the parting merely festered, and he ended the new relationship in self-disgust. Quietly the project of a marriage also fell away. His friend Alypius was much against it.

After a furtive experience in early adolescence Alypius regarded the sexual act as repulsive and humiliating. The ideal of continence had been for him among the attractions of Manichaeism. He too was moving into a Ciceronian scepticism about the possibility of religious certitude. He put pressure on Augustine to remain a bachelor and to set up house with him, perhaps with some of their other African friends in Milan. Romanianus appeared in Milan on legal business, and declared himself glad to finance a community engaged in contemplative discussion away from the hubbub of the world, if that could be realized. For a period Augustine passed through much emotional stress. In December 384 in the streets of Milan he had been inwardly disturbed by a beggar blissfully happy with intoxication. The contrast between the poor man's shortlived but carefree happiness and his own malaise plunged him deeper into moral despair and metaphysical doubts, which now became a hammering crescendo at the door.

Plato

Meanwhile Augustine's readings in the Platonists Plotinus and Porphyry in Latin translation, were convincing him that ultimate reality must be non-physical, a concept very different from that of Manichee light.

The Platonists argued that our experience of flux and successiveness is at a distance from higher reality which is unchanging. We long for satisfaction of our moral aspirations in a supreme Goodness, in derivation from which diverse earthly things are esteemed good, and for the satisfaction of our aesthetic sensibility in a supreme Beauty to which beautiful things on earth are

signposts. Truth, beauty, and goodness are eternal, above time and space. That there are timeless unchanging truths is demonstrable from mathematics. It is always true that the cube of 3 is 27, but not that the horse is at the door. Change is bound up with the successiveness of time and with the transience of physical objects in space. The world is an ordered cosmos in which everything has its own level or grade of existence. The Good at the apex of all existence is free of all limitation from particularity, the fount of being, and the ultimate Monad or One, in contrast with the plurality and conflicting vanity of earthly things. As one descends the great chain of being, in which each effect is inferior to its cause, one also increases the limitations of physicality and therefore reduces the degree of both being and goodness. This conception explains 'evil' which is a defect of goodness rather than a positive force with an independent substantiality. At times, however, Platonists also speak of matter as the root of change and therefore of evil. They think of creation as a divine ordering of a pre-existent and in part recalcitrant matter.

The Platonists speak of the soul as fallen by an act of free choice and as needing purification by liberation from bodily ties and passions. The soul needs to recover its wings. It is an immaterial entity, immortal and eternal, whose true home is with the eternal verities transcending this world of change and becoming. The soul pre-exists the body but even now retains a fragmentary half-conscious memory of its heavenly home to which it seeks to return. By contemplation or quietism (*otium* is Augustine's word) one may seek to set one's prophetic soul free to ascend to the ecstatic, dreamlike experience of union with God and a beatific vision which is inexpressible happiness.

The Platonists strongly hold the providential ordering of the world, mainly on the basis of the unending orbits of the starry heavens above, the stars being for Plato 'visible gods', and the moral law within. The discomforts, inconveniences, and even disasters of human life are either the consequences of our mistaken choices or providence's painful way of reminding us that this material earth is not the realm of our ultimate destiny. If there are men about of evil will, a discerning observer will see that they commonly bring greater misery to themselves than to their victims. The Platonists see providence in the regularity of the natural order, the laws of nature, the annual recurrence of the seasons, the framework of the environment in which mankind is called to discover itself. They do not look for signs of providence in apparent breaks in the natural order. This cosmic harmony of things has an earthly counterpart in music, a science dependent on mathematical proportion which, according to Plato's *Timaeus*, has a hidden affinity with the structure of the soul.

Plotinus and his Neoplatonic school taught a refined doctrine of the higher cosmos or 'intelligible world' of entities transcending our five senses. At the summit of things stands the transcendent One; then, midway, the divine Mind; and thirdly the divine world-soul, immanent life force, explaining both the world's creative vitality and its controlled order. This divine Triad is graded in power and glory. Between the Triad and our earthly realm stands a whole hierarchy of intermediate beings, daemons or angels; the human body is created by intermediate beings, lower forms of animal life by inferior powers. Plato believed in reincarnation, a treadmill from which one should seek to find the way of liberation. Those who live evil lives may be condemned to return later, Plato and some Platonists (not Porphyry) thought

to an animal or even in extreme cases vegetable life. Plotinus did not have room for divine grace in his thinking. There is no descent of the world-soul or Mind actively coming down to rescue man's soul from misery. But there is an undiminished giving, as sunlight is generated by the sun without loss to itself. And in the mutual relation of love, Plotinus discerned a reflection of the 'differentiation-and-identity' which is to be affirmed of the divine Triad. In God, he says (VI 8. 15. 1) love, the beloved, and the loving which returns upon its own origin, are one.

Not everything in the Platonic scheme struck an answering chord of sympathy in Early Christian hearts. Christians feared the notion that the soul is in the body now as a penalty for a wrong choice; since they believed the bonding of body and soul together in man to be the intention of the good Creator. They rejected the treadmill of reincarnation and the scarcely consistent belief that the soul in its true being belongs to the divine realm to which it should return. The very notion of world-cycles was uncongenially fatalist, and to the Christians not merely the body but the soul is created 'out of nothing', dependent for its existence on the will of God. The Christians welcomed the Platonic doctrine that the supreme God lies at the apex of all that is, but expressed his transcendence even more sharply. Augustine put it later in the formula that by 'God' we mean the highest good whence are derived all particular good things; without him nothing good would exist; and yet he is good without needing anything else to complete his being. The world contributes nothing to the transcendent being of its Maker.

Augustine heard these ideas being discussed in Simplician's circle at Milan. They offered a strong alternative to Manichee dualism and implied a wholly non-physical doctrine of the divine.

At the same time as his study of Plato, Augustine wrestled with the letters of St Paul, on which the Manichees much relied to support their dualism. He discovered the apostle could be better interpreted within a Platonic than a gnostic framework. But his reading of St Paul and experiments in using Plato as a key to unlock his obscurities did not yet mean an explicit or public association with the Church. Could he not purify his own soul and by Neoplatonic exercises lift his soul to eternal truth and union with God? His relationship to the Church was sufficiently protected by his resumption of the status of catechumen. His attempt at Neoplatonic mystical ecstasy, however, disappointed him by its transience.

An Uncomfortable Call

One day Alypius and Augustine were called on by a brother African, a devout layman named Ponticianus, highly placed at the palace and therefore an influential person for the ambitious Africans to know. Picking up a book lying on Augustine's table Ponticianus was astonished to find a codex of St Paul's letters, not a book one expected in the hands of a municipal professor of rhetoric. He was moved to tell his friends about the monastic movement quietly growing in the western churches, including one house with brothers living a common life outside the walls of Milan itself under Ambrose's care. He told them how when the court was at Trier, two friends of his who were members of the secret police discovered a similar house with a Latin translation of Athanasius' *Life of St Anthony*. The reading of this work so inspired them that they renounced their career in the imperial service, where rewards were high but tenure precarious, and

dedicated their lives to the ascetic way. (It was in just this kind of way that Jerome and his friend Bonosus were converted at Trier in the 370s, and they could conceivably be the two persons Ponticianus was referring to.)

Ponticianus' story left Augustine's mind in turmoil. He had thought such heroism occurred only in people of long ago. After Ponticianus had taken his leave, Augustine burst out in emotion: 'Simple folk are taking heaven by storm while we clever people without a heart wallow in the materialist world of flesh and blood.' Augustine describes how the lady Continence appeared to him, as if in a dream, and addressed him, with a surrounding company of boys and girls, calling him to be of her party. And now the moment of crisis came on fast. 'To reach my goal, I needed no chariot or ship' (a reminiscence of Plotinus) 'but a mere act of will.' Several times later in life Augustine will write of the suddenness of the will's turning at the hinge-point of conversion. Himself now at this hinge, he could not suppress a paroxysm of tears, and to spare embarrassment moved away from Alypius. Could he any longer echo the crow's cry 'Cras et cras', tomorrow and tomorrow (a reminiscence of Persius's fifth *Satire*). As he wept under a fig-tree (symbolic perhaps of Adam in the garden?), he heard a singing voice. Here the manuscripts of the *Confessions* vary between saying the voice came from the 'next-door house', which would seem a prosy thing to say unless it is simply factual reporting, and saying that it came from a 'house of God' (*vicina* against *divina*). The latter is the reading of much the oldest manuscript. If it is correct, there is probably a literary allusion to Psalm 42 (in Augustine's Latin Psalter, 41) 'As the hart longs for springs of water, so my soul longs for God . . .', where through his daily tears the distressed Psalmist 'poured out his soul'

amid the voice of chanting at the house of God. A sermon on this Psalm which Augustine preached some years later has striking reminders of this passage of the *Confessions*.

The singing voice, 'whether of a boy or a girl I do not know', sings a refrain repeated over and over again, 'Take, read; take, read': *Tolle lege, tolle lege*. Augustine wondered, he says, if it could be an unfamiliar formula in a children's game. Or perhaps the innocent child was a member of the lady Contenance's visionary choir, and the song echoed that sung by the ascetics of Revelation 14 who renounce marriage to follow the Lamb wherever he goes?

Augustine looked up and saw by Alypius the codex of St Paul's letters. Remembering an incident from the Life of St Anthony recounted by Ponticianus, when the saint is converted by the apparently fortuitous hearing of a Biblical text, he opened the book at random and lighted on Romans 13: 'Not in revellings and drunkenness, not in sexual indulgence and indecencies, not in contention and rivalry; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in lusts.' The mature Augustine later expresses disapproval of sortilege or divination by random texts of the Bible (better perhaps the Bible than Virgil), though on one occasion when the Hippo reader read the wrong Psalm, Augustine took it to be a providential error and preached extempore on the text read. In 386 Augustine found a way out of his psychological deadlock by introducing a random element; the chance text acted as a liberator from an intolerable situation.

And now 'I had no wish to read more, nor was there need. At once a light of serenity flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.' At last he felt convinced that it was possible to realize the ascetic life. Alypius took the same decision of dedication, and the two passed indoors to tell the overjoyed

Monnica. It was much more than she had prayed for: her son not only desired to be an orthodox and baptized Christian, but no longer wished to pursue marriage and a secular career.

Augustine's exquisite telling of the garden scene has rich echoes and literary allusions. The reader aware of these harmonics in his ear is entitled to ask whether he is reading a purely factual narrative or a partly symbolist fiction. Of the fact of a turning-point in Augustine's personal quest there is no question; but its form is not plain prose but a subtle blending of symbolic overtones, some Platonic, some Biblical, some allusions to classical Latin literature.

Augustine a few weeks later confessed himself to feel like a man on a sea voyage who has, by providence, been driven to his desired haven by a storm when he was hardly heading in that direction as long as his own hand was at the helm. God had taken him by surprise. Tempest-tossed, he had seen in Ambrose his North Star; he has returned to himself and come home, *sua dulcissima patria* (*BV* I. 2). 'Late have I loved you, O Beauty, ever new and yet how ancient' (*C* 10. 27. 38).

The *Confessions* are not the sole source for the story of Augustine's conversion, though they alone give the detailed narrative of the garden scene. The philosophical dialogues which he wrote during the next few months make several references to the change of direction that has come to his life. During the past century the learned have strenuously debated the historical evaluation of the *Confessions*, written thirteen or fourteen years later, in relation to the philosophical dialogues written within a few weeks of his conversion. There is a marked difference of tone, to which Augustine himself draws emphatic attention at one point in the *Confessions* (9. 4. 7). Already a bishop for two or three years when he wrote them, he disliked the urbane and worldly

style of the early philosophical dialogues, even though they are expressly Christian in conviction. There is no solution in treating the dialogues as factual reporting and the *Confessions* as poetry since there is an equally strong literary, Ciceronian element in the dialogues. Augustine is a man who describes important events in his life by using a high style; that is his way of saying they are important.

The date of his conversion is about three weeks before the holiday period, fixed by law to start on 23 August. A harder matter to determine is the significance which he himself attaches to the event described. He does not represent it as a decisive move out of philosophical scepticism into an obedient acceptance of everything and anything the authority of the Church may now propose for his belief. He is open to listen with serious care to Ambrose's Lenten instruction, but is not yet at the stage of having grasped all that the Christian faith involves. Something of his own experience may be reflected in a letter he writes in 409 (*E* 102. 38) commenting on some objections to Christian belief taken from Porphyry: 'if an inquirer thinks he ought to settle absolutely every question, great or small, before becoming a Christian, he little appreciates the limitations of human life or of himself.' (Augustine agrees that there are a few large questions on which a decision is needed.) Pagan cult has had no foothold in his upbringing and background, so that he hardly needs to put that behind him, and his trust in astrology had already dropped away before he left Africa. He has no magical books to burn. He sees his conversion as the culmination of a moral and intellectual struggle, not as a flight from scepticism into the arms of authority. He has not yet acquired an articulate faith, but has turned his will so as to lead in that direction. Ambrose has convinced him of

the incorporeality of God, and preached so profound a fusion of Christianity with Platonic mysticism that Augustine thinks of Christ and Plato as different teachers converging in the same truths, complementary to each other.

On the moral side, renunciation lies at the heart of his story; but it is not so much renunciation of sin as renunciation of the secular and so of marriage and sex. Every stream has come together in a great confluence to bring this about: Cicero's *Hortensius*, Neoplatonist ideals of the soul's ascent in emancipation from bodily distractions, readings in St Paul, brotherly pressure from Alypius, perhaps whatever it was inside him that for a decade made this highly intelligent man think it possible to be a Manichee—all these forces combined together to make his conversion to Christian orthodoxy a decision to live as a monk.

Only, for Augustine this cannot mean becoming a hermit like St Anthony in the Egyptian desert (C 10. 43. 70), or even knocking at the door of the recently founded house in the suburbs of Milan. Augustine's ascetic way is not to be that of Alypius whose dedication would lead him to such strenuous austerity that he walked barefoot even through the Italian winter, a form of mortification which in the late fourth-century churches of northern Italy and Spain is attested as giving rise to some controversy. Especially in Spain, critics of the practice regarded it as Manichee. Augustine wants to be a monk, but it must be in a community of brothers. For him solitude is a necessary periodic withdrawal, but not a normal road to truth, which is not something religious men find on their own. Because 'God's truth does not belong to any one man' (C 12. 25. 34), truth is found by a dialectic of question and answer. In any event at the natural level, Augustine is a born teacher who needs his pupils to get his own thinking clear.

One substantial element in Augustine's conversion is only marginally religious, namely a decision to make a shift from rhetoric to philosophy. For eight centuries past, ancient educational theorists had debated the relative value and priority of rhetoric as against philosophy. In the Latin West the debate had been less striking than in the Greek world, because rhetoric mattered much more in the lawcourts and in the political life of the State before it became a complete autocracy. The only philosophical education available in the West was that offered in schools of oratory. Augustine will now move across to the non-rhetorical camp (an anticipation of Boethius in AD 500). Philosophy in the Platonic tradition has become a consuming passion. The religious and philosophical quests are fused together in his mind, and this will remain true to the end of his life. Augustine brings philosophy and theology together in a way no earlier western Christian succeeded in doing. A century later Boethius will think the Augustinian synthesis too tight and wish to separate them a little to leave philosophy more autonomous.