AUGUSTINE'S RENUNCIATION OF CLASSICAL LITERATURE

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This article examines St. Augustine's relationship to classical literature, the Aeneid in particular. It explores the complex nature of Augustine's early love and later rejection of the classics. Tracing his narrative in the Confessions, a parallel is drawn between Augustine's experiences, in particular his relationship with his mother Monica, and the stories of Aeneas, Dido and Creüsa in the Aenied.

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> *Give me a man in love: he knows what I mean. Give me one who yearns; give me one who is hungry; give me one far away in his desert, who is thirsty and sighs for the spring of the Eternal country. Give me that sort of man: he knows what I mean. But if I speak to a cold man, he just does not know what I am talking about...*
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> - *Augustine*, On the Gospel of St John[1]

There is a passage in Book I of the *Confessions* in which St Augustine looks back upon his childhood education from a station somewhere about the middle of his life. It is a passage which disappoints me, much as one is hurt by any matter of disagreement with a friend, and where the disagreement only becomes the deeper for trying to resolve it. I am not presently concerned with what Augustine says about Greek versus Latin, in this passage, or with what he says about pedagogy, but with what he says about the *Aeneid*.

> Even now I cannot fully understand why the Greek language, which I learned as a child, was so distasteful to me. I loved Latin, not the elementary lessons but those which I studied later under teachers of literature. The first lessons in Latin were reading, writing, and counting, and they were as much of an irksome imposition as any studies in Greek. But this, too, was due to the sinfulness and vanity of life, since I was *flesh and Blood, no better than a breath of wind that*

[1]*Confessions*, I: 13. Augustine's treatise *On the Gospel of St John* is cited in Peter Brown's fine biography, *Augustine of Hippo* (NewYork: Dorset, 1986).

> *passes by and never returns.*[2] For these elementary lessons were far more valuable than those which followed, because the subjects were practical. They gave me the power, which I still have, of reading whatever is set before me and writing whatever I wish to write. But in the later lessons I was obliged to memorize the wanderings of a hero named Aeneas, while in the meantime I failed to remember my own erratic ways. I learned to lament the death of Dido, who killed herself for love, while all the time, in the midst of these things, I was dying, separated from you, my God and my Life, and I shed no tears for my own plight...
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> What can be more pitiful than an unhappy wretch unaware of his own sorry state, bewailing the fate of Dido, who died for love of Aeneas, yet shedding no tears for himself as he dies for want of loving you? O God, you are the light of my heart, the Bread of my inmost soul, and the Power that weds my mind and the thoughts of my heart. But I did not love you. *I broke my troth with you*[3] and embraced another while applause echoed about me. For to love this world is to break troth with you, yet men applaud and are ashamed to be otherwise. I did not weep over this, but instead I wept for Dido, who surrendered her life to the sword, while I forsook you and surrendered myself to the lowest of your created things. And if I were forbidden to read such books, I was sad not to be able to read the very things that made me sad. Such folly is held to be a higher and more fruitful form of study than learning to read and write.[4]

Apart from a distinction between what we might call primary and secondary schooling (to which I will return later), the passage turns upon the trope of a set of interconnections between love and death. Dido's love for Aeneas leads to her death: Augustine's love for Dido – more properly, for the Dido story - would lead to his death too, if he only knew it. And just as the full pathos of Dido's love was not in that love itself, but in love unreturned, so by implication was God's love, that love which he now understands to be "the light of his heart," and "the Bread of his inmost soul," unreturned. He has been a sort of faithless Aeneas. And yet, what was he to Dido, or Dido to him, that he should weep for her?

The episode recalls a strange experience that St Jerome had as a young man. Augustine's contemporary, Jerome had his education in grammar and rhetoric from the best teachers in Rome, where

[2] Psalm 77.
[3] Psalm 72.
[4] All references to the *Confessions* are to the translation of R.S. Pine Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

Augustine's had been a mere provincial education. As Jerome told it later in a Letter to Eustochium, instead of the Scriptures he used to read his Cicero by day and his Plato by night, because, as the medieval *Golden Legend* tells the story, "the coarse language of the prophetic books displeased him."[5] One time during Lent he fell into a high fever, and he had one of those dreams in which you cannot tell whether you are sleeping or waking, either during the dream or afterwards. In this state he saw that preparations for his funeral were already under way - as they may well have been, for he was gravely ill - and he found himself on trial before an unnamed tribunal. It was a Kafkaesque kind of trial, one of those in which you do not know at first, what you are on trial for - and yet you did know it, all along. In this waking dream the judge asks him what his profession is; and he replies without hesitation that he is a Christian. "You lie!" the judge says. "You are no Christian, you are a Ciceronian, for where your treasure is, there your heart is also." At first Jerome is shocked and can make no reply. But when he is about to be flogged, he bursts out passionately begging the Lord to have mercy upon him (the judge had not previously been given a name – if indeed the Lord is the judge). Others present plead for him too, on the ground of his youth. And he takes an oath that if ever he reads or even possesses worldly books again, he will be knowingly denying the Lord. Suddenly his case is dismissed; and with its dismissal, both his dream and his fever are dismissed too - though his shoulders still ache from the flogging.

It is a remarkable story, where the oneiric continues to resist explanation on merely physical and psychological grounds. But the thrust of the dream is clear. "What has Horace to do with the Psalter...?" he writes (echoing Tertullian's "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between Academy and Church?" when commenting upon the Alexandrian theology's conciliatory attitude to Greek philosophy).[6] "What has Horace to do with the Psalter," Jerome writes, "Virgil to do with the Gospel, Cicero with Paul." How can the Christian continue to love the pagan literature and love Christ at the same time, and in the same mind? "Where your heart is, there your treasure is also," the judge says in a terrible voice, making the words into an accusation. Christ has

[5] The story of Jerome's dream/vision is retold in *The Golden Legend*, the compendium of legends made by Jacobus de Voragine in the 13th century; translated William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[6] Hamlet's "For what is Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba" etc., seems to be echoing everyone.

warned the Christian about trying to serve two masters, and about the house divided against itself that cannot stand. Jerome's dream-vision seems to arise from just such a house divided against itself. The fables of the gods and heroes, as Augustine calls them, may not have been believed in by the later 4th century; but neither were they disbelieved, as they commonly are disbelieved in the modern era - leaving the way clear, as we have congratulated ourselves, for modern appreciation. The pagan gods were a much nearer presence to such as Jerome and Augustine, requiring a more strenuous rejection than we would see any need for.

Here then, in the latter half of the 4th century, are two of the four (western) Fathers of the Church who go through something of the same crisis of relation to the classical literature in which, metropolitan and provincial, both were educated, and for which both show a love. Both reject it, or try to reject it. Yet their relation to the pagan authors remains inconsistent, or complex. So far as Augustine is concerned, his renunciation of the pagan writers may in some part proceed from the accident of his intense dislike of school, and of anything associated with it. Even all those years afterwards, his memory for the child's sharp sense of pain, and for that oppressive dread of punishment under which children sometimes live, are both still as fresh to him as any of his memories. And this is notwithstanding his entirely competitive wish to succeed at school, whenever he is challenged. He recalls a school prize that he won for the recitation of a speech composed in the character of Juno, at the point where she was "pained and angry because she could not prevent Aeneas from sailing to Italy."[7] (We will see that his example has a later significance in his own story). He is too young yet for ambition to have formed - but turn anything, even school, into a contest, and he will rise to it. It is an instance of that sense of the contradictions of the human soul which makes reading Augustine an experience to quicken the reader's attention towards life itself. It is part of what makes him read, for us, as we read a modern writer. He is not a satirist, because he lives in the eye of God; but he could be, if he wanted. His eye for human inconsistency, in general, is as sharp as a satirist's, as it is for his own inconsistency in that opening passage. We only overlook his sharpness because of his charity. Some part of his renunciation of the pagan authors may also be owing to a dislike of the uses to which such literature was put in the course a rhetorical education. Later in the *Confessions*, he refers to

[7] *Confessions*, I: 17.

very summit of his career, his professorship of rhetoric at Milan, as "a chair of lies."[8] And earlier in the book, he writes of rhetoric in scathing terms, as an art which when exercised in order to gain a conviction in a criminal trial, whether the man is guilty or not, is nothing less than murderous.

But why Virgil? Well, there are several reasons why he might choose to ground his renunciation of all the pagan writers, not on Cicero, as Jerome does, but on Virgil. For Virgil was not only admired, but loved – and loved, it is clear, by the young Augustine himself. Moreover, it is only what we might expect that Virgil's epic poem should have been at the centre of the curriculum of a North African literary education, and that Augustine should cite it, since it afforded, not an imaginary past exactly, but a place in the imagination, for him and for other North Africans of Roman culture. For such a North African, Virgil's poem would give to one of the highest of one's faculties - the imagination - a local habitation and a name: Carthage and Dido.

But it may also be that Virgil was Augustine's chosen ground because Virgil was used as a kind of source-book by those nostalgic late-4th century pagans, trying to revive the rituals of ancient Rome. For there was the pious Aeneas, with his father on his back, and the household gods along with him, trying to preserve them all from the destruction of a whole civilisation, much as these 4th-century pagans might see themselves as doing in the face of the Christians and Goths. There is no sign of such a reason for his choosing Virgil as this. But then the *Confessions* is, as I take it, a most restrained text, and not at all what might be expected from something called, or miss-called, 'a confession.'[9] It is not a tell-all book, but continually says far less than it might. Other passages elsewhere in the first Book of the *Confessions* state the common moral objection to pagan literature, one that already had a long history and, as Augustine points out, was advanced by pagans themselves. Homer, for example, makes human beings into gods, and not very moral ones at that. And the comic theatre is worse, since it mocks the gods, and accords to them the flippancy of the dissolute.[10]

Yet Augustine's objections seem to go deeper still than to pagan poets and writers as such. At bottom there seems to be an objection

[8] *Confessions*, IX: 2.
[9] Garry Wills argues for a renaming of the book, *The Testimony*, in the Introduction to his *Saint Augustine* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999).
[10] *Confessions*, I: 16

to poetry and story in themselves. That is to say, the objection seems to be to what we would now call "imaginative literature."[11] One of the most startling aspects of the passage quoted above is the wholly instrumental view of education that it proposes – a primary rather than a secondary education is what it amounts to. It is unwise to suspect of philistinism such a writer as can say of his elementary lessons in Latin, irksome though they were: "They gave me the power, which I still have, of reading whatever is set before me and writing whatever I wish to write." Yes, one feels it to be there presently. This is writing – and reading – that becomes aware of itself, without in the least confusing or impeding the simplicity of its utterance. Lamenting, as he says in this passage, for the dying Dido, while yet himself separated from the springs of his own life, in God; or sad when he could not read what yet made him sad, he shows a capacity to make our common worldly reasonableness seem a ramshackle construction of inconsistencies. And yet, such an instrumental view of education is still startling. What is one to make of such a radical rejection of poem and story in themselves, as Augustine does here - especially for such a one as the present writer who has long made a profession of them? Augustine puts you on the spot, with himself as an example - a young man who, in his own view of it, went on professing rhetoric years after he should have known better. I can only make some kind of an answer by continuing to apply my profession to Augustine's own book.

Jerome could not keep his promise to renounce the pagan authors. "After frequent night vigils," he wrote, "after shedding tears, with the remembrance of past sins brought forth from my inmost heart, I would take up my Plautus."[12] And later, when his former friend and now bitter enemy, Rufinus taxed him with his backsliding, he seems to have settled for living with his own inconsistency. "It was only a dream," he said on another occasion, of the vision of the trial. Augustine did not himself come to a moment of personal crisis over the pagan authors as Jerome had done. He seems, rather, to have left them behind him than to have renounced them, exactly. There is already a distance from them by the time he

[11] See also Confessions, III: 2 for Augustine's objections to the theatre – though at III: 6 he does explicitly allow some virtue to imaginative literature: "There is certainly more to be gained from verses and poems and tales like the flight of Medea than from their [the Manichees'] stories of the five elements disguised in various ways by the five dens of darkness."

[12] Charles Christopher Mierow, *St Jerome: The Sage of Bethlehem* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1959), 18.

writes the *Confessions*, when he has been only a few years a bishop. (The *Confessions* was written 397-400 A.D.) You can see it in the way in which he writes of "being obliged to memorize the wanderings of a hero named Aeneas," as if the reader might need to be reminded of who these characters are, and as if the "wanderings" were more than Aeneas's. The vagueness that he professes is of course strategic, not real.

He was as imbued with those pagan authors as Jerome was. He was never less than the grateful reader of Cicero's (lost) *Hortensius* – even though I gather that it was probably one of those obligations which was in excess of the writer's merits. His debt to the neo-Platonic philosophers was much greater still, as he also warmly acknowledged. The encounter with Cicero's book was an accident. He might have found something else to cause the same shift in his attitudes. But the neo-Platonic ascent from the mutable to the immutable was structural. Everything that he subsequently thought was built upon it.[13] Pagan writers might come to his mind still at any time, to make a distinction with, or to set a meaning resonating. In the *Confessions*, for example, he will quote Sallust so as to make a point about violence – though I think it happens to be a mistaken one - and that the violent come to engage in political murder for its own sake, and not for some other end.[14] In an extended passage in Book IV, on the sudden death of a friend whom he carefully does not name (to which I will return later), he analyses his own responses with the aid of a reference to the friendship of Orestes and Pylades. And a few lines later, he will help to ground his own confusing and contradictory state by another reference, this time to Horace: "I wondered that other men should live when he was dead, for I had loved him as though he would never die. Still more I wondered that he should die and I remain alive, for I was his second self. How well the poet put it when he called his friend the half of his soul."[15]

As for Scripture, his case is once again similar to Jerome's: when he first read the Scriptures he found them just as Jerome had done, disappointing, and uncouth. Such a reaction is surprising, surely.

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[13] For Augustine's sense of obligation to Cicero's Hortensius, see *Confessions*, III: 4. For his debt to Platonism, see VII: 17-20.

[14] *Confessions*, II: 5. Augustine's point is that not even Catiline, whom Sallust tells us 'was a man of insane ferocity', and who encouraged his men to random killing so as to keep their hands in, did so for the sake of doing evil in itself, but for the honour and power and wealth that it was thought to serve. After the 20th Century, perhaps it is easier for us to see that Sallust has the right of it.

[15] *Confessions*, IV: 6.

What expectations, what standards could they have been bringing to their reading? What assumptions?

> I discovered something that was at once beyond the understanding of the proud and hidden from the eyes of children. Its gait was humble, but the heights it reached were sublime. It was enfolded in mysteries, and I was not the kind of man to enter into it or bow my head to follow where it led. But these were not the feelings which I had when I first read the Scriptures. To me they seemed unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero, because I had too much conceit to accept their simplicity and not enough insight to penetrate their depths.[16]

Apparently Augustine, for his part, would have been reading the so-called old Latin Bible of Africa, rather than Jerome's Latin; and the old Latin version, Peter Brown says, was harsh and slangy, and used what Augustine would have found an alien and inward-looking jargon.[17] Yet it is still difficult to comprehend the strength of the habits that they must have brought to their reading from their rhetorical education in the classical authors. We seem to be as far removed from their expectations and satisfactions in literature as Augustine is here from those of Scripture, however barbarous the form in which it came to him. Augustine seems to have been unable even to read Scripture, until he encountered Bishop Ambrose in Milan. It was not however the famous personal eloquence promised in Ambrose's name that opened his eyes, even though he says in the *Confessions* that it was to listen to Ambrose as a rhetorician that he first attended his sermons. It was rather the dawning of an understanding of a new way to read and to think, altogether.

> ...Every Sunday I listened as he preached the word of truth to the people, and I grew more and more certain that it was possible to unravel the tangle woven by those who had deceived both me and others with their cunning lies against the Holy Scriptures. I learned that your spiritual children...do not understand the words God made man in his own image to mean that you are limited by the shape of a human body, and although I could form not the vaguest idea, even with the help of allegory, of how there could be substance that was spiritual, nevertheless I was glad that all this time I had been howling my complaints not against the Catholic faith but against something quite imaginary which I had thought up in my own head...O God, you who are so high above us and yet so close, hidden and yet always present,

[16] *Confessions*, III: 5.
[17] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London: Faber, 1967), 41.

> you have not parts, some greater and some smaller. You are everywhere, and everywhere you are entire. Nowhere are you limited by space. You have not the shape of a body like ours. Yet you made man in your own likeness, and man is plainly in space from head to foot.[18]

The tardiness of his grasp of the idea of a non-literal interpretation of a text is surprising to us, now. This too is one of those places where one feels our distance from him, that he should have had such difficulty in getting beyond the literalism and materialism of the Manichees (the Manichees are the others "who had deceived him with their cunning lies against Scripture" in the passage above). Or it would be, were it not that language is already working in a new and tentative way in that passage, directing, or leading us to what cannot be contained by language.

Over the last half of his life, when he was continuously engaged as Bishop of Hippo in preaching and writing for the occasion, and even down to the last year of his life, Peter Brown makes it clear that Scripture was to become for Augustine nothing less than an alternative literature to the classical tradition: "For such is the depth of the Christian Scriptures that, even if I were attempting to study them and nothing else, from boyhood to decrepit old age, with the utmost leisure, the most unwearied zeal, and with talents greater than I possess, I would still be making progress in discovering their treasures..."[19] Its importance was founded upon his sense of the soul's relation to God - which in turn was working itself out in a new theory of language and reading, where the mind feels its way beyond the word to what draws it:

> The presentation of truth through signs has great power to feed and fan that ardent Love, by which, as under some law of gravitation, we flicker upwards, or inwards, to our place of rest. Things presented in this way move and kindle our affections far more than if they were set forth in bald statements...I believe that the emotions are less easily set alight while the soul is wholly absorbed in material things; but when it is brought to material signs of spiritual realities, and moves from them to the things they represent, it gathers strength just by this very act of

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[18] *Confessions*, VI: 4.

[19] *Letter 137*, cited in Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 263. For a revolution in the classical 'levels of style' in the new Christian writing – a revolution implicit in the Incarnation itself – see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. Willard Trask (New York: Dooubleday, 1957), chapter 3 and especially 58-66.

> passing from the one to the other, like the flame of a torch, that burns all the more brightly as it moves...[20]

That concluding image of the moving torch itself both clarifies and convinces of what the mind can scarcely grasp. Here in itself is a new literature, in a new culture. Yet Augustine still shows himself to have been a warm, passionate reader of the *Aeneid*, even in seeming to renounce it. His inclination is clear: it is to love those stories - though an inclination of nature is no validation of itself, since it may be a distraction from one's true nature. I note that, from all of the *Aeneid* his examples are from the first books, and that his instances are Dido and Creüsa and, as we have seen, Juno. The conjunction of Dido and Creüsa is significant.[21] It is a response to precisely the two places in the early books of the poem, of the utmost pathos – perhaps the two such places in the whole poem. One, Dido's death, is long prepared for by the narrative. The narration of her self-immolation on own funeral pyre reverberates with the magnificent, baleful account of the burning of Troy, two books earlier. But the other one, the manner of Creüsa's death, that night when the Greeks were found to be already within the city, and when all was flame and darkness, and death or survival a matter of chance, Creüsa's fate catches one's breath with its unexpectedness. The two kinds of end seem balanced against one another in the turn of the narrative.

But how could a boy's being moved by Dido and by Creüsa be a "breaking of his troth to God," I want to ask? Here is Aeneas's recollection of that terrible night, when he lost Creüsa:

> I was already near the city gates and thinking that I had come all the way in safety, when suddenly we seemed to hear hurrying steps and my father, looking forward through the darkness, cried, 'Son, you must run for it. They are drawing near; I can see shining shields and flashes of bronze.' Then, in the severe stress of my anxiety and haste, some unkind power robbed me of my wits. For after leaving the streets, which I knew, I lost direction, and I was running over trackless country when - oh, terrible! - my wife Creüsa - did she stop running because some bitter fate meant to steal her away from me, or did she perhaps stray from the path or just sink down in weariness? We cannot know; but we never saw her again. I had never looked back for her when she was first lost, or given her a thought till we came to the hillock consecrated to the worship of Ceres. There we finally rallied all our

[20] Letter 55.
[21] *Confessions*, I: 13.

> company and found that she alone was missing, and that without knowing it her husband, her son, and her friends has lost her forever.[22]

Here is a loss perhaps more grievous than any other would have been. Life, it seems, is such that we can lose what is most cherished, and not even know that we are losing it. At least Orpheus *knew* what he was losing. In what follows the passage above, Aeneas retraces his steps through the streets of Troy, scarcely registering the burning buildings, the heaps of plunder, the sudden sight of mobs of Greek soldiers, the odd doorways of strange silence. He fills the empty streets with crying out her name, calling for her, heedless of anything else; and then finally he meets her spirit, there in the dark, taller and more majestic than in life, and at first his hair stands on end. She speaks to him of pointless grieving, and prophesies his destiny. And she, the spirit of the lovely wife, comforts him in his loss of herself, the dead comforting the living, at once close and immensely distant. She speaks of the queen that he will marry – the wife who will replace her, some time in the future. How hard it must have been to say that; how profoundly gentle the soul that can say it. The difficulty and the ghostly grief that she herself suppresses, even as a spirit, is left hanging in the air in her very last words, "And now goodbye. And guard the love of the son whom we share." It scarcely matters to the reader what Aeneas feels here, for the loss is felt even more as our own than it is his.

How can it be wrong for the boy, Augustine, to love the sadness of this? I would hope that the *lacrimae rerum*, the immeasurable sorrow of things, while it intensifies the conscious recognition of just how much this life is to be loved, yet points beyond itself – a sorrow arising from this life that this life cannot contain - as does his sorrow for the death of his Un-named Friend, in those deeply moving chapters in Book IV of his own book. The expression, there, of his own grief is as memorable as Virgil's, or anyone else's, though of a quite different quality from Virgil's. The pain of loss forces its way into utterance at once analytic of his own state, and a lyric expression of it. It is a grief that has been felt in, and passed through, the intellect. He, like Aeneas, searches for the lost one. But his reactions are stranger far than in Virgil, and quickly noted; and his eye for his own momentary falseness, intellectual rather than emotional, is merciless:

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[22]*Aeneid*, Book II, in the translation of W.F. Jackson Knight (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956).

> My heart grew sombre with grief, and wherever I looked I saw only death. My own country became a torment and my own home an abode of misery. All that we had done together was now a grim ordeal without him. My eyes searched everywhere for him, but he was not there to be seen. I hated all the places we had known together, because he was not in them and they could no longer whisper to me 'Here he comes!' as they would have done had he been alive but absent for a while. I had become a puzzle to myself, asking my soul again and again 'Why are you downcast? Why do you distress me?' but my soul had no answer to give. If I said 'Wait for God's help', she did not obey. And in this she was right because, to her, the well-loved man she had lost was better and more real than the shadowy being in whom I would have her trust. Tears alone were sweet to me, for in my heart's desire they had taken the place of my friend.[23]

I began by speaking about the intellectual friendship that a reader may feel for what he or she reads. Augustine was, and remained, a man of warm attachments – of friendships. The man who could write of disagreements in friendship as part of their pleasure, "as a man might differ with himself,"[24] must be as joyous in friendship as he is subtle in it. There were many such friends, most of them left un-named. But among those who are given a name, there was Alypius, Nebridius, and, it seems strange to say, his son Adeodatus – of whom he writes little, but writes of him more as friend than son.[25]

Yet his deepest attachment was to Monica, his mother. More even than an attachment, he writes of her, after her death: "It was because I was now bereft of all the comfort I had from her that my soul was wounded and my life seemed shattered, *for her life and mine had been as one*."[26] And it was this Monica with whom he had equivocated about his plans for leaving Africa, and for trying himself out in the metropolitan centre. It was she whom in some sense he had betrayed, putting to sea in the dark as Aeneas had done to Dido. There is a scene in both the *Aeneid* and the *Confessions* where each of the two women is lied to, and where each more or less knows it, but does not wish to believe it.[27] "Traitor," says Dido bitterly, "did

[23] *Confessions* IV: 4.
[24] *Confessions*, IV: 8.
[25] For Augustine's friendship with Alypius and Nebridius, see for example, VI: 7-10, where Alypius is the subject of several anecdotes.
[26] *Confessions*, IX: 12, emphasis mine.
[27] *Aeneid*, IV: l. 296ff; *Confessions*, V: 8.

you actually believe that you could disguise so wicked a deed and leave my country without a word?" But her denunciation of Aeneas does not mean, even now, that she has relinquished all hope of him. Not even when she makes her own death the more likely by predicting it can she separate self-torment from desperate hope: "And can nothing hold you, not our love, nor our once plighted hands, nor even the cruel death that must await your Dido?" Similarly, there is a scene in both where the sun comes up on the women's desertion, and where the wind fills the sails of Aeneas and Augustine, in an action that implicitly mingles their relief with their remorse. Yet no explicit connection is ever made, in Augustine's book, between Aeneas's desertion of Dido and his own of his mother. Ever a restrained, and even a reticent author, whose continuous allusions to the Psalms and other Scripture, and to the pagan authors, have been a way of mediating between a deeply private and a public discourse, he leaves the connection to be felt.

The shaping narrative of the first nine Books of the *Confessions* – which is to say, of the more *narrative* part of the whole book – is ostensibly the story of Augustine's conversion. And the nearer Augustine approaches to that conversion, the more intensely it is delayed, both historically and narratively. First it was delayed year by year; and then in Book VIII, it is delayed day by day. So it will not do to diminish the importance of the conversion narrative. And yet I believe that there is what amounts to another narrative in the book, more or less in parallel with this ostensible one, and to some extent in tension with it. For the story of his conversion is also the story of himself and Monica. She is a very impressive woman. His flight from Carthage is a flight from her, as it is a flight from God. And as we have seen, this double narrative takes its shape, at a critical juncture, from the *Aeneid* - though the *Aeneid* had seemed in Book I to have been renounced, as the exemplary case of the pagan literature that he himself had once loved.

It seems, from what we read in Book X, that Monica was an uneducated woman, as well as an obviously persistent one. She seems to have been a woman of confused, or impure will. But she also came to learn how to know her own mind. She has dreams; and she knows how to distinguish true from false significances in them.[28] In Book III, Chapter 2, Augustine recalls just such an episode: fearful of her son's involvement with the Manichees, she

[28] For Monica's impressive level-headedness about the varying significance of her own dreams, see *Confessions*, VI: 13.

tells him one day of a dream she has just had, in which she is standing upon a wooden rule, and is approached by a young man out of a splendour, who asks her why she grieves, though it seems that she knows his question is a way of delivering a message to her, and that he already knows why. When she replies that her tears are for her son's lost soul, the angel bids her take heart, for if she were to look carefully she would see that her son was there with her. And as in dreams the word becomes the deed, she does look and find Augustine "standing there beside her on the same rule." Yet it was not quite the dream itself that was the point of Augustine's story, so much as it was the interpretation of it. Augustine, the bright young intellectual, tells his peasant mother that the dream meant she should take comfort, and that one day she should be with him, such as he was then. But with utter assurance, she instantly corrects him about what is after all her own dream. She points out that the angel did not say "Where he is, there you are," but "Where you are, he is." Similarly, there is a briefer mention of her while on her own way to Rome, following her son, and of her calming, if not the sea as Christ had done the Sea of Galilee, then the sailors on the ship on which she was taking passage, which must have been just about next in order of difficulty. And she was able to impose the calming force of her nature because, once again, she had seen a vision, and in that vision that she would be with her son – and by inference, with him upon land.[29] Augustine must feel that there is a God-like knowledge of himself, in Monica. The whole book, the *Confessions*, is written in the expanded consciousness of knowing that what he is writing is already known to God, who is one of the readers of it. Monica too seems to know him better than he knows himself - and rather as God knows us, not us God. Augustine lives in the condition of being known – known by God of course. But Monica is an earnest of such a knowledge of his inner self, beyond that self's own knowledge.

But to return, finally, to the matters of grief and loss, love and death: there are many deaths in the book. Whether or not there is an unusual number for the time, these intense feelings of loss and grief are in tension with the main narrative of conversion and of joyous surrender to God, a tension that Augustine has difficulty in resolving. Their note is first sounded in his recalling of Dido and Creüsa; and they are given fuller resonance in the extended passage in Book IV (chapters 4-10) on the death of the Un-named Friend, where they generate a train of thought that leads us to God via the

[29] *Confessions*, VI: 1.

sense of the transience of all things, and the permanence of God. And then in Book IX there are three more deaths, suddenly, unexpectedly: Verecundus and Nebridius,[30] and then "the boy Adeodatus," who had not even been named previously, until we are told of his death.[31] He is named in the book, and thus enters it more fully, only to be lost to it.

But the last of the deaths in Book IX is also the most extended in treatment, as if all the others had been unrecognised portents of it – a treatment that answers in gravity to the death of the Un-named Friend in Book IV. It is the death of Monica herself. Monica's death clearly precedes the death of Adeodatus in time; but Augustine has left it till last. When mother and son had returned to Ostia, waiting to take ship at last for Africa, Monica, strong to the last, had in effect given herself her own release. The relevant passage is a long one, and difficult to summarise, since it consists of something rare that happened to them both, without their either intending or expecting it. And what happened did so because it happened to both of them at the same time. It all happened in a sort of momentary quiet in their lives, one of those phases of hiatus in which we are more open to change than we know. They stood at the window of the house where they were staying, and looked out upon a garden in the courtyard, talking first of bodily pleasure and passion, and then in a kind of ascent, of all the things of this earth. And they began to be moved by the love in which, as they saw, these things find their true purpose for us.

> Higher still we climbed, thinking and speaking all the while in wonder at all that you have made. At length we came to our own souls and passed beyond them to that place of everlasting plenty, where you feed Israel for ever with the food of truth. There life is that Wisdom by which all these things that we know are made, all things that ever have been and all that are yet to be. But that Wisdom is not made: it is as it has always been and as it will be for ever – or, rather, I should not say that it *has been* or *will be*, for it simply *is*, because eternity is not in the past or in the future. And while we spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it. Then with a sigh, leaving out *spiritual harvest* [*Romans* 8: 23] bound to it, we returned to the sound of our own speech, in which each word has a beginning and an ending...[32]

[30] *Confessions*, IX: 3.
[31] *Confessions*, IX: 6.
[32] *Confessions*, IX: 10.

This was five days before Monica died, and before the sudden fever caught perhaps from the swamps round Ostia, where Augustine too had fallen ill on his arrival in Italy. Among the things that Augustine was to remember of his mother as she lapsed in and out of consciousness is a sort of contentment. She had long spoken of her wish to return to Africa, to end her days there, and to lay her mortal remains down by her husband Patricius - the troublesome and not always faithful husband round whom she seems to have grown her affections. Now she is to die not in Africa, but here in Ostia, indifferent now to wherever she dies. "It does not matter where you bury my body," she tells him. "Do not let that worry you! All I ask is that, wherever you may be, you should remember me at the altar of the Lord."[33]

Ever the sharp analyst of his own state, he goes through a confusion of responses to her death. First, suppressing his tears, he begins to find next that the tears do not come when he has the time for them. And when finally they do come, unbidden, he feels the need to apologise for his grief, as being guilty of "perhaps too much worldly affection."[34] One is reminded of grief and loss, extending all the way back to Dido and Creüsa, in Book I. Though there of course the grief and loss were imagined, yet they do represent a similar kind of attachment to this life through the profundity of emotional response to it. He has undergone his conversion – he is not supposed to feel like this. And yet he is incapable of fudging what he does feel. The conclusion of Book IX is, I believe, the closure of the narrative:

> Let her rest in peace with her husband. He was her first husband and she married no other after him. She served him...so that in the end she also won him for you. O my Lord, my God, your servants my brothers – they are your sons and my masters, whom I serve with heart and voice and pen – inspire those of them who read this book to remember Monica, your servant, at your altar and with her Patricius, her husband, who died before her, by whose bodies you brought me into this life, though how it was I do not know. With pious hearts let them remember those who were not only my parents in this light that fails,

[33] *Confessions*, IX: 11.

[34] Gary Wills, op. cit., p.63, contrasts Augustine's uncontrollable grief at the death of his Friend in Book IV with what he says is a new-found control of that grief at the death of his mother. But Augustine's response seems to me only to be suppressed, and delayed, rather than controlled, as becomes clearer from what immediately follows.

> but were also my brother and sister...and will be my fellow citizens in the eternal Jerusalem for which your people sigh throughout their pilgrimage, from the time when they set out until the time when they return to you. So shall it be that the last request that my mother made to me shall be granted in the prayers of the many who read my confessions more fully than in mine alone.

I read this final paragraph as a reparation for his leaving Monica behind, at Carthage. It joins her to her dead husband, though she had died far from him. And it joins the book to its audience, both the readers for whom Augustine first wrote the *Confessions*, at their insistence – the "brothers," the community of friends referred to above - and the readers who read it still. All are joined in a single action of remembering her in prayer, as she had asked him to do; so that our own reading, of itself, has been made to take on the condition of prayer too, and of remembrance of Monica - she whom he had once abandoned, grieving on the shore, as Aeneas had abandoned Dido.