

CONFESSIONS

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SAINT AUGUSTINE

TRANSLATED By
ANTHONY ESOLEEN

TAN Books
Gastonia, North Carolina

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

It is a daunting thing indeed, to translate the first and, for all I can tell, the greatest autobiography ever written, the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine, especially when the acts of speaking and writing, of prayer and praise, are central to the work itself. For Augustine was trained up in the art of rhetoric, and he taught young men how best to choose their words, arrange their material, and craft their sentences so as to be most persuasive in courts of law, and though he looks upon his former line of work with disgust, knowing the immoral uses to which the art would often be put, he was still the rhetor, and he aimed to persuade.

Yet there is a difference between that old pagan rhetoric and the rhetoric of Augustine the Christian, and it means all the world. We hear the clear ring of the difference from the first sentences of the *Confessions*:

You are great, O Lord, and to be praised indeed: great is your power, and your wisdom is beyond reckoning. And man, a mere part of your creation, desires to praise you, man, who bears his mortality about with him, and the testimony of his sin, and testimony that you resist the proud; and still this man, this part of your creation, desires to praise you. You rouse him up to take delight in praising you, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

That is not mere stylishness. The pilgrim Dante would later say, when he stood in the presence of God, that whatever he could say of what he saw would be no more than what a baby could say, “who wets

his tongue still at his mama's breast"¹ What can the finite creature say of the infinite God? That is the paradox of praise. We are a part, a tiny part, of creation, but we are made in the image and likeness of God, made to praise God, and to revel in his love. What can we say? But what can we not say? What Sidney's *Astrophil* says of his beloved Stella, Sidney the poet, thinking of Augustine, intends that his readers should apply to God:

*Not thou by praise, but praise in thee is raised:
It is a praise to praise, when thou art praised.*²

The wisest of pagans could but stand upon the shores of this mystery, because even if they—I am thinking here of the Neoplatonic philosophers³ whom Augustine himself read before his conversion and to whom he gives generous credit for seeing what they did see, though there was much they did not see—knew somehow that the divine must

¹ *Paradiso* 33.108.

² *Astrophil and Stella*, 35.13–14.

³ Plato (428?–348?), the first and perhaps greatest titan of ancient philosophy, taught that there was a realm of changeless and non-material “Forms” or ideas, things to gaze upon with wonder, whereof the objects in the material world were but shadows. Objects, as he taught, possess different levels of existence, depending upon how closely they approach to the changeless and therefore eternal. Man is meant to hunger for what is true and beautiful, and thus was Plato the father of what we might call a philosophy of attraction and love. The highest and most beautiful object of man's contemplation is the form of the Good. The Neoplatonist philosophers whom Augustine read—Iamblichus (c.242–325), Porphyry (c. 234–305), and their leading light, Plotinus (204–270)—were less interested in Plato as a political philosopher than as a mystic and a contemplative, someone searching, with all the energy of love, after the changeless source of existence itself, which Plotinus called “the One.” It was not difficult for Christians to see in the Neoplatonists, who themselves used the term “Logos,” “Word,” to identify the mediating principle between the One and the soul, a kind of natural insight into the existence of God, especially as Saint John had used the word “Logos” to refer to Christ himself: “In the beginning was the Word” (Jn 1:1). We must keep in mind, though, that for the Neoplatonists, the Logos was not a personal being, nor indeed was the One, which overflowed, by its own nature and not by any free decision, into the lower levels of existence, as the water of a fountain flows from the highest basin to the lower basins. It is also quite likely that the Neoplatonists were influenced, if grudgingly, by Christianity and by the more mystical strains of Jewish thought and worship. Porphyry, for one, wrote a fifteen volume work, *Against the Christians*.

be the object of their love, they did not see that they had first been the object of God's love. "God is love," says Saint John, filled with joyous contemplation of Father and Son and the Spirit of love they mutually enjoy.⁴ The One, the distant and divine Alone to whose contemplation the pure Plotinus aspired with all his heart, spilled forth a measure of his being to all subordinate beings, automatically, impersonally, inevitably, as a fountain spills its water. There can be no story in that, no story whereof the divine is the author, because story implies decision, not necessity, and personhood, not impersonality. Only the God who creates can, if I may be permitted the metaphor, write a story: and then God is not simply an agent in the story of the universe he has made, but is the author and comprehender of all, the originating spring and the final end of all.

If we are going to speak about God the Creator, God who spoke that we may speak, God in whose eternal Word all things were made, we require a style that is not shy of paradox, because whatever we predicate of God may be true and not true at the same time, depending on how we mean it. And the paradox is not just an obstacle to our thought, but an invitation to penetrate more and more deeply into the divine, into God's self-revelation, and into his very life of love. It would be absurd to say that Augustine merely employed the artifices of rhetorical paradox, such as he had learned in the pagan schools, and turned them to Christian use. Scripture itself is full of paradox. God has a name that may not be uttered, the name that is beyond all naming, as it is an expression of his pure being, not to be qualified, not to be penned in—a name utterly unlike Zeus or Osiris or Baal. God is love, and he is a consuming fire. His glory is set above the heavens, and yet he visits the son of man and cares for him. He made the stars as it were in an afterthought, but he cares for the young of the ostrich though she does not care for them herself, and not a sparrow falls to the ground without his will. The very person of Christ is a scandal, a paradox, for, as Saint

⁴ 1 Jn 4:8.

Paul says, the Greeks seek wisdom and the Jews demand a sign, but we preach Christ crucified. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men.

Then it is not artfulness but joy, the rush of intellectual seeking and finding and seeking all the more, that we find in these fine early expressions of wonder, in paradoxes that both express a truth and open our minds to the mystery of it:

You love, but you do not burn with passion; you are jealous for what is yours, though you are secure in your possession; you regret, though you do not grieve; you grow angry, though you are at peace; you alter your works but not your counsel; you take up what you find though you have never lost it; you are never needy, but you are glad in your winnings; you are never covetous, but you exact interest. Men pay and overpay you, that you may be in their debt, and yet what does anyone have that is not already yours? You pay debts though you are in debt to no one; you forgive debts, and you lose nothing.

The art of such sentences, then, is not decoration, not “style” in an ornamental and arbitrary sense, but a formal embodiment of the truths Augustine is attempting to name, and in naming to describe, and in describing to praise and to give thanks. The style is indivisible from the matter, just as, let us say, the form of Michelangelo’s *David* is indivisible from the monumental stone.

What, then, shall the faithful translator do? I have long believed that when it comes to works of literary art, and the *Confessions* is one of the most stupendous ever wrought, the best translations are those that retain and reveal the figurative *by hewing as closely as possible to the literal*, both in the significance of individual words and in the manner of the author’s expression. And that is what I have tried to do here, though I have avoided English archaisms and I have attempted to render the sentences with some speed, occasionally dividing one long sentence into two or three, when the division did no harm to the meaning or the emphasis. I have paid close attention to the literal meanings of words we may be tempted to consider merely abstract, so that we may hear what Augustine assumed his careful readers would hear. “The

comforts of your mercy took me up,” he says of his infancy, and the verb there, *susceperant*, might easily be rendered as *sustained*, without any apparent injury to the meaning. But Augustine really does think of the action of God as bearing him up from below, and as the life of sinful and redeemed man is one of fall and rise, of loss and restoration and elevation infinitely beyond the initial loss, it behooves the translator to keep that literal-figurative in mind, and to suggest it to the mind of the reader. Unless the attempt would result in something ridiculous or glaringly conspicuous, I have attempted always to do so.

And then there is the matter of prayer. We, in our strangely inartistic time, find it hard to imagine that common people, often enough illiterate people, *prayed in artistic form*, in immemorial songs and poetry. The great prayer book of the Jews was a book of poems, the psalms, and many of the Lord's own sayings, including the beloved prayer he taught to his disciples, are Semitic poems too. Saint Paul urges the Ephesians to encourage one another in “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,”⁵ and Saint Ambrose, the man whose careful and learned and poetically sensitive readings and expositions of Scripture first taught Augustine how to read those writings at once humble and highly exalted, was himself a composer of hymns, which Augustine must have heard and sung, and which moved his heart so powerfully, he wonders sometimes whether the joy of it were not beyond what is permitted in due measure.

Prayers, then, must not be translated as office memoranda, or as mere colloquial requests, as if you might ask a waiter for a hamburger and a bottle of beer. The *Confessions* is one continued and coherent prayer, a profound profession of faith, and a plea for more, ever more wisdom, ever more love. It is artistic in its whole conception, in its parts and their arrangement down to the merest sentence. It is closer to the Gothic cathedrals that would grace Europe eight hundred years later than to anything that you or I might write about ourselves and our lives. Then the translator must not be embarrassed by prayerful

⁵ Eph 5:19.

expression, by the heightened word, the unusual phrasing, the order of petitions, and the music of contemplative thought.

This too have I attempted to render into English, again with expressions I hope will speed the reader along:

Then tell me, O God to whom I bend the knee, have pity on your pitiable servant and tell me, did my infancy follow upon some other age of mine that had died?

If I were writing in the mode of a memorandum, I might simply say, “Then I beg you, God, to have mercy on your miserable servant, and tell me whether,” and so forth. The reader would understand the request, but he would not hear the prayer in it. The words would be objects to process, containers to open and then to toss aside once you had gotten the meaning out of them. But that, I believe, does injustice to the form and matter of the work, to what Augustine intends by the work to move in the soul of those who hear it.

One final point: Before his baptism, Augustine and his friends would sometimes call on the bishop Ambrose, and they often found him reading silently, perhaps to save his voice, which was prone to going hoarse, or perhaps to grasp more fully with the mind the import of what he was reading. At such times, they would not disturb him. But Augustine remarks on it as unusual, even unexampled, and that leads me to consider that he assumed that his own readers would *hear* his work, and thus did he write not simply to be read but to be *heard*. And that returns us to the matter of song. When God made the world, the sons of morning sang for joy,⁶ and indeed J. R. R. Tolkien, thinking of that verse from Job, and thinking as any medieval artist would have thought, presents in his *Silmarillion* the creation of all things as having come about not by declaring merely, but by singing. The proper song has a beginning, a middle, and an end, not randomly or arbitrarily set in this or that way. For the end of the greatest songs is present from the beginning, and all times are present, in the song, in any single note, just

⁶ Job 38:7.

as the infinite God is present in his totality and eternity in each least particle of matter and each fleetest moment of time. Then the story of Augustine is but the whole story of salvation made manifest in this matter, in this time, and so also the stories of salvation that Augustine hears about or reads, those of Victorinus, of Anthony, and of the imperial guardsmen, for the stories are incorporated into the stories, as human artists can with all their intelligence but flail about and attempt in a small way to do, but as God has done and always does, in his creation and his providence. Then the *Confessions* is a vast human song in praise of the song of God, timeless not because it is great literature, though it is, but because its root is in the Word through whom all things were made, and its crown reaches toward him who sits upon the throne, and says, "Behold, I make all things new."

—Anthony Esolen

BOOK ONE



1

You are great, O Lord, and to be praised indeed:⁷ great is your power, and your wisdom is beyond reckoning. And man, a mere part of your creation, desires to praise you, man, who bears his mortality about with him, and the testimony of his sin, and testimony that you resist the proud;⁸ and still this man, this part of your creation, desires to praise you. You rouse him up to take delight in praising you,⁹ for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

Lord, give me to know and to understand which comes first, to call upon you or to praise you, to know you or to call upon you? But who could call upon you without knowing you? For without knowing it, he might call upon another instead of you. Or rather must you be called upon, to be known? But how can they call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how can they come to believe, without a preacher?¹⁰ And more: They shall praise the Lord who seek him, for

⁷ Ps 144:1.

⁸ Jas 4:6; cf. Job 22:29, Mt 23:12, 1 Pt 5:6.

⁹ Cf. Ps 122:1. Praise is the gift whereby we who receive the gift of grace participate in the being and the goodness of God, the giver.

¹⁰ Rom 10:14. Notice that reason alone, without the revelation of Christ, cannot attain to faith.

they who seek him shall find him,¹¹ and they who find shall praise him. I shall seek after you, O Lord, as I call upon you, and I shall call upon you, believing in you; for you have been preached to us. My faith calls upon you, Lord, the faith you have given to me and breathed in me by the humanity of your Son, through the ministry of your preacher.

2

And how shall I call upon my God, my Lord and God, seeing as when I invoke him, I seem to invoke him into myself? For what place is there in me, where my God might enter?¹² What place for God to enter, God who made heaven and earth? My Lord God, is it so? Is there anything in me that can contain you? Why, even the heavens and the earth you have made, wherein you have made me—can even they contain you? Or is it this way: because without you nothing that is could ever have come to be, it follows that whatever does exist must contain you? I too exist, and so what do I beg for when I ask you to enter me, when I would not exist in the first place unless you were in me already? For I am not in the nether world, and yet you are there too. And “even if I should descend to the world below, you would be present there.”¹³

So, my God, I could not be, I could not be in the slightest, unless you were in me. Or is it rather that I would not be, unless I were in you, from whom and through whom and in whom all things are? This too, this too, O Lord. But if I am in you, why do I call upon you? From what place can you enter into me? Where can I go beyond heaven and earth, so that my God can enter into me from there, my God, who has said, “I fill heaven and earth”?¹⁴

¹¹ Cf. Jer 29:13, Mt 7:7–8. Augustine will end his work with the same echo of Scripture.

¹² Augustine had been a materialist, so that his emphasis here on place is quite significant. What, in fact, does it mean that God is “in” us if we conceive of things only as bodies taking up space?

¹³ Ps 138:8.

¹⁴ Jer 23:24.

3

Do heaven and earth then contain you, because you fill them? Or, after you have filled them, does some part of you remain that they cannot grasp hold of? When you have filled heaven and earth, where do you pour out that part of you that is left over? No, you have no need of that, no need for a place to contain you, because all that you fill, you fill by containing it. Those vessels that are filled with you do not provide for you a settled place of rest, because if they were shattered, you would not be spilled. And when you shed yourself upon us, you do not fall, but you raise us up; you do not trickle away, but you gather us together.

You fill all things, and it is with all of yourself that you fill them. Or, because all things cannot contain the whole of you, do they hold only a part of you, and do they all hold the same part? Or do various things contain various parts, the greater containing the greater, and the lesser the lesser? Or are you everywhere in your totality, even though no one thing can contain you wholly?

4

What then is my God? What, I ask, but the Lord God? “For who is Lord, but the Lord? And who is God, but our God?”¹⁵

Supreme, best, most mighty, most omnipotent, most merciful and most just, most hidden and most immediately present, loveliest, strongest, steadfast and impossible to grasp, unchanging and yet changing all things, never new, never old, making all things new; driving the proud to the decay of old age though they know it not; ever in act, ever at rest, gathering up and never in need, bearing and filling and sheltering, creating and nourishing, bringing to perfection, seeking, though of nothing are you in want.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ps 18:31.

¹⁶ Augustine’s emphasis here is on the personhood of God and his free and providential action as the Creator and the fulfillment of all things.

You love, but you do not burn with passion; you are jealous for what is yours, though you are secure in your possession; you regret, though you do not grieve; you grow angry, though you are at peace; you alter your works but not your counsel; you take up what you find though you have never lost it; you are never needy, but you are glad in your winnings; you are never covetous, but you exact interest. Men pay and overpay you, that you may be in their debt, and yet what does anyone have that is not already yours? You pay debts though you are in debt to no one; you forgive debts, and you lose nothing. Then what shall we say, my God, my life, my sacred sweetness, or what does anyone say, when he speaks of you? But woe to them who keep silent about you, when those who chatter most are like the dumb.

5

Who shall give me the gift, to take my rest in you? Who shall give me the gift, that you may enter my heart and so fill it with drink,¹⁷ that I may forget all my ills and embrace you, my only good? What are you to me? Have pity on me, that I may speak. What can I possibly be to you, that you command me to love you, and if I do not do so, you grow angry and threaten me with mighty sorrows? Is it then by itself only a little sorrow, if I should not love you? Ah me, tell me, my Lord God, in your mercy tell me what you are to me. Say to my soul: "I am your salvation."¹⁸ Say it aloud, so that I may hear. Behold, O Lord, the ears of my heart are before you; open them, and say to my soul, "I am your salvation." I shall run after that voice, I shall take hold of you. Hide not your face from me!¹⁹ Let me die to see it, lest I die.²⁰

¹⁷ Cf. Ps 23:5, 42:1. We thirst for the living God, while the drink of this world can provide a brief satisfaction at best.

¹⁸ Ps 35:3. The Latin means also, "I am your health."

¹⁹ Ps 27:9. Isaiah cried out that he was a dead man because he had seen the face of God, 6:5, but now the Son has come into the world, and we can seek the face of God with confidence.

²⁰ Death is the lot of all men, but God gives us the grace of dying with Christ, that we may live; cf. Rom 6:8.

The house of my soul is too cramped for you to enter: make it more spacious. It is falling to ruin; repair it. Much inside it offends your sight; I know it and I confess it. But who shall cleanse it? To whom else but you shall I cry: “Cleanse me, O Lord, from my hidden sins, and from the sins of others deliver your servant?”²¹ I believe, and that is why I speak. You know this, O Lord. Have I not given witness before you against my own crimes, my God, and have you not forgiven the impiety of my heart? I shall not contend in judgment with you,²² who are Truth yourself; and I do not want to deceive myself, lest my iniquity bear false witness in its own behalf. So I shall not contend in judgment with you, for “if you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, who shall stand?”²³

6

Nevertheless, permit me to plead before your mercy, though I am but earth and ashes.²⁴ Permit me to plead, for it is to your mercy that I speak, and not to some man who smiles at me in scorn. And maybe you smile at me also, but when you turn you will have pity on me. What do I want to say, O Lord, except that I do not know from what place I came into—what shall I call it—a dying life, or a living death? I do not know. And the comforts of your mercy took me up, as I have heard from the parents of my flesh, from whom and in whom you formed me in the course of time; I myself have no memory of it. And so the comfort of human milk came to me, though neither my mother nor my nurses filled their breasts. It was you who by their means gave me the nourishment my infancy required, according to the natural law you have established, and the riches you have shed even upon the least of your creatures.²⁵ And you gave me the desire to want no more

²¹ Ps 19:13.

²² Cf. Job 9:32.

²³ Ps 130:3.

²⁴ Cf. Job 42:6.

²⁵ We should try to enter into the wonder that Augustine here expresses at the beauty and the mystery of creation and the natural laws that govern it, whereby God provides for all

than what you gave, and to those who nourished me, the desire to give me what you gave to them; for they were willing to give to me by well-ordered affection what they had from you in abundance. For it was good for them that my good should come from them, though really it was only by their means, as indeed all good things come from you, O God, and from you comes all my health. It was only later in life I took note of this, as you were calling me by those faculties you had endowed me with, both within and without. For then I knew how to suck at the breast, and to rest content with what pleased me, and to cry whenever something hurt my flesh. That was all I knew.

Then I began to laugh, first while I was sleeping, and then when I was awake. At least, so was I told about myself, and I believed it, because we see other babies doing the same; but of what I myself did, I remember nothing. And sure enough, little by little I began to be aware of where I was, and I had a will to express my desires to those who would fulfill them, but I could not do so, because the desires were within me while the people were without, nor could they by any power of their senses enter my soul. So I thrashed about and I spluttered, and made signs that somehow were like what I wanted, only a few, and only such as I could make. And when the people did not obey me, either because they could not understand me, or what I wanted would hurt me, I would grow indignant with my elders, because they were not my underlings, and with free-born children, because they were not my slaves,²⁶ and I avenged myself against them by wailing. And this is the way all speechless babies are, as I have since learned by observation, and they have shown me, without their knowing it, that I was just the same—shown me it better than did my nurses who knew.

And see, my infancy of long ago is dead, and I am still alive. But you, Lord, live forever and nothing in you dies, for you are God and Lord of

living things; cf. Job 39.

²⁶ The words for “slave” and “servant” are the same in Latin, as in Hebrew and Greek. Notice that man’s fallen nature expresses itself, from our earliest years, in the desire to dominate others, to be first rather than last.

all the things you have created, before the beginning of the ages, before anything that can be said to come before.²⁷ In your presence stand the causes of all things that do not stand still; in your presence abide the changeless founts of all things that suffer change; in your presence live the eternal reasons²⁸ of all things temporal and unreasoning. Then tell me, O God to whom I bend the knee, have pity on your pitiable servant and tell me, did my infancy follow upon some other age of mine that had died? Was it the time I spent in my mother's womb? For I have been told a little about that too, and I myself have seen women with child. And before that age, was there another, my God, my sweet delight? Was I somewhere? Was I anyone at all? I have no one to tell me about it, neither my father nor my mother, nor anyone else by experience, nor my own memory. Do you laugh at me for wondering about these things, you who command me to praise you and to confess to you for what I know?

I confess to you, Lord of heaven and earth, and praise you for the first stirrings of my infancy, which I do not remember; and you have made men to guess from other people at many things about themselves, and to believe many such things upon the credit of weak little women. For I existed then, even then was I alive, and as my infancy drew to its end, I sought out the signs to make my meanings known to other people. Whence could such a living soul come, O Lord, but from you? Can any man be his own craftsman, to shape himself? Whence could any stream of being and life flow into us apart from you who made us, Lord, you for whom to be and to live are not separate things, for the summit of being and the summit of life are one and the same?

²⁷ God does not dwell in time as created beings do; he is the creator of time. Augustine will address the question of what God did before He created the world, affirming that the question has no meaning, since "before" and "after" come into existence only with time, which God has created.

²⁸ We may think here of the immaterial laws which govern the created world. When the modern physicist says that the "nothing" that existed before the physical universe burst into being was not "nothing" but rather full, we may say, of potentiality and the laws that would govern the matter about to exist, they are not doing philosophy very well, and they have, besides, unwittingly said nothing that Augustine has not said here more precisely.

For you are the highest, and you do not change. Nor is this present day past in you, and yet in you it does pass, for in you are all such things, and they would never have their ways to come and pass except that you hold them in your grasp. And because your years never fail, your years are this present day, and no matter how many are our days and the days of our fathers, through this present day they all pass, and thence do they receive their manner of being, and that they have being at all; and then other days come and likewise pass away. But you, Lord, are the selfsame, and all the tomorrows and beyond, and all the yesterdays and before, you are creating today, you have created today.²⁹

What is it to me, if someone should not understand this? Let him be glad anyway, and say, “What is this?”³⁰ Let him be glad, and let him love to find you in not finding it, rather than in finding it to fail to find you.

7

Give ear to me, O God! Woe to the sins of men!³¹ But it is a man who says this, and you have mercy upon him, because you made him, but the sin within him you did not make.³² Who shall recall to my mind the sins of my infancy? For no man is clean of sin in your sight, not even the infant whose life is but one day upon the earth. Who shall recall it to my mind? Why not any little child at all, in whom I now see what I cannot remember about myself?

²⁹ Again, Augustine insists that God does not suffer time, as the false gods of the pagans do, because they are conceived as existing on the same plane with everything else. If we ask when God created the world, we must be careful lest we identify a specific time after which God, like any lesser craftsman, might cease to work. The creation was at the beginning, and it is now, and it shall be till the world comes to its consummation.

³⁰ Ex 16:15. The Israelites found flakes like hoarfrost on the ground, and they said, “What is this?” – in Hebrew, *mah na*, “manna.” Even if we do not understand these tremendous mysteries about God’s being and his creation, we should be glad, and partake of the bread of heaven.

³¹ Mt 18:17.

³² Cf. Ws 11:25. God loves all the things he has made, but he hates sin; he is its punisher, not its author. Augustine will return to the question of what evil can even be, seeing that it is not something God made, who made all things.

How did I sin then? That I wailed open-mouthed for the breast? For if I wailed like that now, not for mother's milk, but for some food fit for my years, I would be laughed at, even reprehended, and rightly too. So I did reprehensible things, but since I could not understand anyone who might blame me, neither custom nor reason permitted me to be blamed. For as we grow, we root out such things and throw them away, nor have I ever seen anyone who knew what he was doing clean out the bad and throw away the good. Or are we to think that for the time being it was good to cry for something that would hurt me if it was given, to be bitterly angry with freemen and elders and even those who gave me birth if they did not truckle to me, to lash out as much as I could and try to hurt those who were wiser than I, for not obeying the nod of my godlike will, because they did not heed my commands, which would have done me harm had they heeded them? Then it is not the will of the infant that is harmless, but the weakness of his little limbs. I myself have seen and observed a little baby rife with jealousy. He could not yet speak, but he went pale and cast a bitter glare at the child nursing at the breast beside him.³³

Who is unaware of this? Mothers and nurses say they have some remedies or other to allay such things. But is it really innocence, to be full fed from a fountain flowing and dripping with milk, and not to suffer a poor fellow nursling to share in the one nourishment he needs to stay alive? We bear with these things, we smile, not because they are nothing, or little and insignificant, but because they are going to pass away as the child grows older. To prove it, one can consider that the same things, if an older person should do them, would be condemned and not to be borne with a patient mind.

You, O Lord, who have given life to the speechless baby, and a body, as we have seen, furnished with senses, fitted with members, and shaped in beauty, and for his integrity and safety have instilled in him

³³ For Augustine, man's fallen nature is evident from his earliest days on earth. He is not saying that such a child is evil, but that our inclinations have been distorted by the effects of the sin of Adam.

all the powers of a living being, you command me to praise you for them, and to sing psalms to your name, O Most High. For you are a God almighty and good, even if you had made these things and no more, which none other than you could have made, you single and one, from whom comes all measure, you most beautiful, who lend form to all things and set them in order by your law.³⁴ So then, O Lord, I consider this age of my life which I cannot recall, which I have learned of by crediting the accounts of others, and guess at by observing other infants, and indeed the guesses are much to be trusted, and only grudgingly do I count it a part of the life that I live in this time now. In the darkness of my forgetting, it is like the age I passed in my mother's womb. Now if I have been conceived in iniquity, and if in sin my mother fed me in her womb, then where, I beg you, my God, where and when, O Lord, was I your servant ever innocent? But now, see, I shall let that time pass. What does it matter to me now, when I cannot recall a trace of it?

8

What happened then? From infancy did I pass into boyhood? Or did that come to me, following upon my infancy? Nor did my infancy depart—for where would it have gone? And yet it no longer was. For I was no longer an infant that could not speak, but a gabbling little boy indeed. I do remember this, but it was only later that I became aware of how I learned to talk. For the grownups did not teach me how to talk by giving me words in a certain plan of instruction, as they did when they taught me my letters a little later on, but I myself, with the mind you gave me, my God, by moaning and making various sounds and moving my limbs, tried to bring forth the senses of my heart, so that my will would be obeyed, though I could not express everything I wanted to, no matter for all the signs I made. Then I remembered the word they used when they called something by a name and moved their

³⁴ Cf. Ws 8:1.

bodies toward it, and I saw it and I grasped that the thing was called by the sounds they made when they wanted to show it to me. That they wanted to do this was clear to me by the movement of the body—by natural words, so to speak, common to all peoples, made by the face or a wink of the eye or the motion of other members or the sound of the voice, to show the affections of the soul, to ask for things, or grab hold of them, or shove them aside, or flee them. So, little by little, by words set in their right places in various sentences and heard time and again, I gathered what they were the signs of, and my mouth was tamed to these signs, and through them I expressed my will.³⁵

So did I learn to exchange, with the people among whom I lived, the words people use to tell what they want. And I set forth more deeply into the whelming ocean of human society, dependent upon the authority of my parents, and at the beck and call of those who were greater than I.

9

O God, my God, what miseries and mockeries did I suffer in that age! For then it was put to me, when I was just a boy, that to live a good life meant to obey those who urged me to flourish in this world, and to excel in the arts of the tongue, arts that go slaving after false riches and honor among men. And so I was sent to school to learn my letters, and, poor lad that I was, I did not know what use there was to it. Yet if I was sluggish in learning, I got beaten. The adults praised this form of discipline, and so did many people who led this life before us, and it was they who paved the way for these troublesome roads we had to travel, multiplying labor and sorrow for the sons of Adam.

³⁵ Augustine will devote much of his treatise *On Christian Doctrine* to the nature of signs, their fitness to the things they signify, and the degree to which they participate in those things, rather than being merely arbitrary. Language, after all, must be near to the heart of a Christian who meditates on what it means for God to speak, whether in words to the prophets or in signs and wonders.

Yet, Lord, we observed people calling upon you in prayer, and from them we learned to think of you, so far as we were able, as someone great, who even though you did not appear to our senses could hear our cry and come to our aid. For while I was but a boy I began to call to you, my help and my refuge, and in prayer to you I loosened the knots of my tongue, and small though I was I begged you, with no small feeling, that I would not be beaten in school. And when you did not hear me out, and it was by no means foolishness in me, my elders took these plagues of mine in sport, even my own parents, who never wished me any harm. But for me then it was a great and burdensome evil.

Is there any man, O Lord, so great of soul, cleaving to you with so strong a love, is there, I ask, anyone—though sheer dullness can sometimes make a man so—is there, then, anyone who by piously cleaving to you is so profoundly moved that he can reckon as trifles the racking-horse, the hooks, and other tortures of that kind, which make people all over the world beg you with great fear to help them to escape, going so far as to make fun of people he loves who are terrified of them, as our parents laughed at the torments which we boys suffered from our masters? For we were no less afraid of them, and no less did we pray to you to escape them. And still we sinned by not writing or reading or pondering our lessons as much as we were told to.

It was not, Lord, that we were lacking in memory or in native intelligence. You had willed to bestow on us as much as we needed for our age. But we loved to play games, and people who did the very same thing took it out on us. For the frivolities of grown men are called business, yet they punish children for the like, and no one has pity on the children or on them or on both. But maybe some good judge of things would say I was rightly beaten, because I was a schoolboy playing ball, and so it took me more time to learn the lessons I needed for more disgraceful foolery once I was grown up. Or did my master who beat me do anything other than what I did?³⁶ If some other schoolmaster

³⁶ Augustine has said that if a grown man should wail like a baby because he was hungry,

defeated him in some petty question, he was racked worse with gall and envy than I was when I lost a game of ball to my playfellow.

10

Despite it all I did sin, O Lord my God, ruler and creator of all natural things, but of sin the ruler only; O Lord my God, I did sin by acting against the commands of my parents and those masters. For I could have gone on to put those lessons to good use, no matter what my people had in mind. I did not heed them, not because I had better things to choose, but because I loved to play, relishing in my sports the pride of victory, and loving to have my ears scratched with stories full of lies, which inflamed them to itch all the more.³⁷ And then the same sort of curiosity flashed from my eyes, to gape at the spectacles and the plays my elders put on. And the producers of these plays rise to such honors that almost everyone would wish the honors for their own children, whom they are glad to see bruised if the plays keep them from their studies. And why do the parents want them to study, but to grow up and put on the very same? Look upon these things with pity, O Lord, and deliver us who call upon you now, and deliver also those who do not yet call upon you, that they may call upon you to deliver them.

11

When I was still only a boy I had heard of the life eternal you promise to us, by the humility of our Lord God who descended to our pride, and I was signed with the sign of his cross, and was seasoned with his salt as soon as I came forth from the womb of my mother, whose hope in you was great. You saw, Lord, how when I was yet a boy I was seized one day by a sudden fever and cramps in the stomach, and was close

he would be laughed at and reprov'd. Now, though, he suggests that in fact grown men and women do often behave as children—as spoiled, irresponsible, and willful children.

³⁷ As we will see, worldly desires are like itches: they grow worse when we try to allay them by scratching.

to dying—you saw, my God, for you were my keeper then, with what passion and faith I begged, of the piety of my mother and your Church that is the mother of us all, for the baptism of your Christ, my Lord God. Then the mother of my flesh, deeply troubled, for with a chaste heart that trusted in you she was most dearly in the throes of labor for my everlasting salvation, now took all care and haste to see that I might be initiated and washed clean by the health-giving sacraments, after I had confessed to you for the remission of my sins; but all of a sudden I recovered. So then my cleansing was put off, as if I must needs get even filthier in sin by living longer, for obviously it would be a more serious and dangerous thing to be fouled with sins after the bathing than before.³⁸

So I was a believer at that time, as were my mother and the whole household except for my father, though he did not overrule in me the law of my mother's devotion, to hinder my belief in Christ, just as he himself did not yet believe. For she did all that she could so that you, my God, would be my Father, rather than he. And you came to her assistance, so that she overcame her man whom she served, though she was the better of the two, for in serving him also she was serving you, who had commanded her to serve.³⁹

I beg of you, my God, for I wish to know, if it should please you to tell me, to what end was I then put off, so that I was not baptized? Was it for my good that the reins of sin were then relaxed? Should they have been relaxed at all? Why then are our ears abuzz even now from this person and that person all around us, who say, "Leave him alone, let him do what he wants, he hasn't been baptized yet!" But when it comes to the health of the body, we do not say, "Let his wounds grow worse awhile, because he hasn't yet been healed!" How much better it would

³⁸ It was not the custom in North Africa to baptize infants and small children. Augustine sees in the delay an attempt to play God, as if we could arrange our times and seasons by our own efforts, and as if God must submit to the arrangement, or must be deceived by a sort of temporal trick.

³⁹ Saint Monica's submission to her husband, Patricius, may scandalize some of us now, but she did exactly what Peter recommends for wives of unbelievers; cf. 1 Pt 3:1.

have been for me to have been healed right away! And then, for my own diligence and that of my family to have made sure that my soul's health, which you had bestowed upon it, would remain safe under your guardianship! Surely that would have been better. But how many and how violent were the waves of temptation that were going to loom above me when my boyhood should pass! Of these my mother was well aware. So she would sooner expose to them the earth from which I was formed, than the image and likeness that had been created first.

12

Still, in that boyhood of mine, wherein there was less to fear for my sake than in my adolescence, I did not love my lessons, and I hated to be forced to do them. But they forced me anyway, and it did me good, though I did nothing good myself, for I never would have learned a thing if I had not been compelled. No man does good if he does it against his will, even if the thing itself is good. And those who compelled me did not do well either, but what was good for me came from you, my God. For they who made me learn could not see what I would do with my learning, unless it was to sate the insatiable lusts of a plentiful neediness and an ignominious glory.⁴⁰ But you, to whom every one of our hairs is numbered, made use, for my benefit, of the error of all those who insisted that I should learn, while you made my own error, since I did not want to learn, into the whip I deserved for my punishment, such a little boy as I was, and so great a sinner. So you did well for me from those who did not do well, and you paid me most justly what I as a sinner deserved. For you have commanded it and so it is, that every man's disordered soul shall be his own punishment.⁴¹

⁴⁰ As always, Augustine stresses the paradox of sin, that it should be and not be; it is a contradiction in being. Its glory has no glory, and its fulfillment empties the soul.

⁴¹ That evil is its own punishment was taught also by the Greek philosophers. It gives the lie to those whose idea of God is of an arbitrary and cruel avenger. Sin is a self-inflicted wound, a self-infecting disease.

13

But why I hated Greek, which I was steeped in when I was little, I still have not quite puzzled out. For I fell in love with Latin—not with the rudiments, but with what those who are called men of letters teach. As for those rudiments, to read, to write, and to do numbers—they were no less a burden and a punishment for me than was everything Greek. Since I was but flesh, and a breath that passes and does not return,⁴² where could this come from, if not from sin and the vanity of this life? For those rudiments were better, as they were more certain. From them was first wrought in me what I still possess, the skill to read what I find written, and to write what I want to. Better, than those later lessons whereby I had to commit to memory the wanderings of some Aeneas or other, while I forgot my own, and to weep for the death of Dido, who slew herself for love, when at the same time I, most pitiable, bore with dry eyes my own dying to you, O God, my life.⁴³

⁴² Ps 78:39.

⁴³ With remarkable insouciance, Augustine has reduced the legendary founder of Rome, Aeneas, to “some Aeneas or other.” The story of Aeneas is told by Virgil, in his epic *Aeneid*, the basic text for schoolboys in the Latin-speaking world for centuries. Aeneas, it was said, was a prince of Troy, and on the night when the city was being destroyed, he and other refugees fled the land, guided by a prophecy that he would settle the people in a new land, Italy, and there be the progenitors of a great nation and empire. Aeneas thus wandered about the seas, like Odysseus before him, but unlike Odysseus, who was notable for his cunning and trickery, Aeneas was notable for piety, which the poet Virgil wished to identify as the most Roman of all virtues, combining duty to one’s family, to the household gods, to the fatherland, and to the great gods. Amid his journey, Aeneas and his ships were blown by storm to the shores of a newly founded city in North Africa, Carthage. There, the queen Dido, herself a refugee and a victim of evil and cunning, welcomed Aeneas and the Trojans, and, by the machinations of the goddess Juno, who wanted to keep the Trojans from reaching Italy, and the goddess Venus, Aeneas’s mother, at enmity with Juno, she falls madly in love with Aeneas, going so far as to offer to make the Trojans equal to her own people. But when Aeneas, warned by the gods, must abandon Carthage after all, Dido erupts into fury, and curses Aeneas and his descendants, as she dies by her own hand. The wandering of Aeneas, whom the learned of Augustine’s time knew was but a fictional character, proceeds from Troy to Carthage to Italy, and thus to the Rome that is to be. Augustine’s history would bring him also to Carthage and then to Rome—but his will be the history of a true pilgrimage. Since the *Aeneid* was for the Romans a sacred text, Augustine’s dismissal of it was a direct challenge to the heart of imperial paganism and the myths upon which it attempted to found itself.

For what can be more pathetic than this? That a pitiable fellow should have no pity on himself, but should shed tears for Dido who died from loving Aeneas, but shed no tears for his own death, which comes from not loving you, God, the light of my heart and the bread for the mouth of my soul within, the virtue that weds my mind and the bosom of my thought? I did not love you, and I fornicated against you, and from everywhere came cheers for the fornicator, “Well done, well done!” For to be friendly with this world is to fornicate against you, and so often do we hear, “Well done,” that we are abashed not to be so. But I did not weep for that. I wept for *Dido who came to death by the sword, seeking after the last things*,⁴⁴ all the while I sought the lowest of your creatures, abandoning you; I, mere earth, sinking to earth. But had I been forbidden to read these things, how sad I would have been—sad, not to read what made me sad! Such mindless stuff was thought to be more profitable and commendable than those lessons by which I learned how to read and write.

But let my God now cry out in my soul, and let your truth speak to me, “It is not so, it is not so; that first learning was far better.” For look now, I am far readier to forget the wanderings of Aeneas and everything else like that, than to forget how to write and read. Sure, they hang curtains to veil the entry to the grammar schools—not as a cloth of honor for some mystery, but as a cover for error. Let those buyers and sellers of literature not cry out against me, my God, for I do not fear them anymore, as I confess to you what my soul desires, and I take my rest in reprehending my evil ways, so that I may love your ways that are good, let them not cry out, if I should put them to the test and ask, “Is it true that Aeneas once came to Carthage, as the poet says?” The less learned among them will say they do not know. The more learned will say it never happened. But if I ask them with what letters “Aeneas” is written, everyone who has gotten so far in learning will reply with the

⁴⁴ *Aeneid*, 6.457. The words are spoken by Aeneas in the underworld, when he sees the shade of Dido, and he appeals to her to speak to him, since he did not leave Carthage willingly. Dido will turn away without a word.

truth, according to the rule that men established among themselves to govern these signs. And if I should go on to ask which would make for more difficulty in this life, to forget how to read and write, or to forget these figments of poetry, who would not see right away how to respond, unless he had forgotten himself completely? And so I sinned, still but a boy, when I gave more love to those empty things than to these that were better for me—rather, I hated these outright, but I loved those. To tell the truth, “one and one are two, two and two are four,” was for me a detestable jingle, but what a sweet spectacle of emptiness it was, the wooden horse full of men at arms, the burning of Troy, and *even the shade of Creusa*.⁴⁵

14

But why then did I hate Greek literature, that sings of such things? For Homer was skillful at weaving tales, and is a most delightful liar,⁴⁶ and still he was a bitter pill for me when I was a boy. I suppose Virgil is the same for Greek boys when they are forced to study him, as I was forced to study Homer. The difficulty, the sheer difficulty of learning a language from a far-off land, sprinkled with gall all the Greek delicacies of those fabulous stories. I understood not a word of it, and yet was I threatened with savage terrors and punishments to make me understand.

Now, when I was a baby, I did not understand a word of Latin, but by observation I learned it without any fear or torture, just by the sweet baby-talk of my nurses, and the jests of those who laughed

⁴⁵ *Aeneid*, 2.773. Creusa was Aeneas’s wife. She was to follow him as they made their way through the burning city of Troy, but she lost the path, and when Aeneas tried to retrace his steps, crying out for her, her shade appeared to him and told him to leave Troy, to be at peace, and to care for their child, the boy Ascanius.

⁴⁶ Plato had accused Homer of weaving lovely falsehoods about the gods, and that is why, in the *Republic*, his Socrates banishes the poet from the ideal city he is imagining. Thus was pagan instruction based upon what the most learned men acknowledged were fictions, but perhaps useful fictions for governing the people.

with me, and the happy chatter of my playmates. So I learned to talk without any grievous pain to goad me on, as my own heart led me to make its conceptions clear, and it never would have been so, unless I had learned words not from teachers but from people who talked to me, into whose ears in turn I brought forth whatever I was thinking. Hence it is clear that for a child learning a language, free curiosity has more power than does enforcement, bristling with threats. But by your laws that enforcement restrains the wild tossing of liberty, your laws, O God, from the birch rod of the master to the trials of the martyrs, your potent laws that mingle the wholesome and the bitter, to call us back to you from the plague-ridden pleasure whereby we had first wandered away from you.

15

O Lord, hear my prayer, and let not my soul faint under your discipline, let me not grow faint in confessing to you your mercies, by whose means you pulled me up from all my worst ways.⁴⁷ Hear me, that you may be sweeter to me than all the enticements I always followed, and that I may love you with all my strength, and lay hold upon your hand with all my heart, and that you may draw me away from every temptation, unto the end.

For behold, O Lord, my king and my God, let whatever useful things I learned when I was a boy serve you, let whatever I speak and write and read and reckon serve you, for you gave me discipline while I was studying those empty lies, and you forgave the sins I committed in taking delight in them. In those studies, I learned many useful words, though I could have learned them from things that were not mere vanity. And that is the truly safe path for children to walk.

⁴⁷ Cf. Ps 6:1–2. Discipline is literally a means of instruction. The worldly teachers applied the rod to beat falsehood and false ambitions into their young charges. God's discipline is at once gentler and sharper, to bring the soul to humility and the truth.

16

But woe to you, river of human custom! Who can stand against you? How long must it be before you run dry? How long shall you keep on tossing the sons of Eve into that great and terrible ocean, which they who have set sail by the mast-tree hardly manage to cross? Was it not in you that I read of Jove thundering and committing adultery?⁴⁸ In truth he could not do these two things at once. It was all put-on, that someone might have the authority to imitate adultery in fact, with the false thunder playing the part of a pander. But which of our long-robed teachers can with a staid ear hear a man of their own field crying out and saying, “Homer made these things up, and gave human features to the gods—I’d rather he had given divine features to us!”⁴⁹ But it is closer to the truth to say that Homer made these things up indeed, attributing godlike features to wicked men, so that crimes would not be reckoned as crimes, and anyone who committed them would seem to be imitating not lost men but the gods in heaven above.

Nonetheless, O floodwater from hell, the sons of men are cast upon you, and they even pay money to learn these things. And a great production is made of it, when they stage the fables in public, in the marketplace, and the teachers by law are granted a salary over and above the tuition the students pay. And you crash against your rocks and roar, “Here, here are words to learn, here you gain skill in speaking, the skill you need above all to persuade when you need to persuade, and to make your thinking plain!” Else we would never have understood these terms, the Shower of Gold, the Lap, the Makeup Trick, the Temples of Heaven, and all the other words written in that place, where Terence

⁴⁸ Augustine is perhaps thinking of the myth of Danae, whom Zeus (Jove) impregnated by means of a shower of gold. In general, the adulteries of the chief of the gods were frequent and utterly untrammelled from considerations of good and evil.

⁴⁹ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, I.26.65. Cicero (106–43 BC) is discussing the nature of the gods and of the human soul, in part to console himself after the loss of his beloved daughter, Tullia. What divine features? “To live, to know, to find things out, to remember.” Augustine will return, in the final books of the *Confessions*, to those divine features of the soul.

leads on stage a lewd young man who wants to use Jove as a model for his own corruption. For he gazes at a painting on a wall, portraying the tale in which Jove pours a golden shower into Danae's lap, a makeup trick to fool the girl. And look how he rouses himself to lust, as if by some teaching from heaven:

*What god do I follow, but him who shakes the heavens with
thunder?*

*Shall I, but a man, not do the same? I have, and I love it!*⁵⁰

There is no way, none, that these words are more easily learned by this filthy stuff. Rather, by these words is the filthy deed perpetrated with the firmer confidence. I do not accuse the words, which are like choice and precious vessels, but the wine of error in them which our drunkard teachers gave us to drink, and unless we drank, they beat us, and we had no sober judge to appeal to. And even so, my God, in whose sight my memory can rest secure, I learned these things with a will, I took delight in them, poor fellow, and was accounted a lad with good prospects.

17

Allow me, my God, to say a little about my inborn talents, your gift to me, and upon what raving nonsense I wasted it. I had a task to do, full of trouble to my soul, with praise for a reward if I did well, and shame and the dread of beatings if I did not. I was to speak the words of Juno in her wrath and sorrow, because she could not *turn away from Italy the king of the Trojans*.⁵¹ I had heard that Juno never uttered those words,

⁵⁰ Cf. Terence, *The Eunuch*, 585. Terence (d. 159 BC) was, with Plautus, one of the two great comic playwrights of ancient Rome. The play hinges on a trick played by a young man who uses Jove as an excuse for his wickedness. Since he does not have a beard, the boy passes himself off for a eunuch and slave, and once he is admitted into the household, he rapes the girl he is in love with.

⁵¹ *Aeneid*, 1.38. Rage and inordinate desire are, in Virgil's poem, the two most destructive forces in human life. Augustine has criticized the adulterous lust of Jove; now he strikes at

but we were compelled to wander off and follow in the footsteps of these poetical fictions, and to speak in free prose what the poets had spoken in metered verse. And the boy won the most praise if, in accord with the dignity of the personage he was shadowing forth, he gave the most lifelike semblance of wrath and sorrow, dressed up in words most fit for the meaning.

But what was that to me, O my true life, my God? What was it to me, that for my recitation I got more acclaim than did so many of my fellow readers, my own age? Was that not all just smoke and wind? Was there nothing else for me to exercise my talents and my tongue on? Your praises, O Lord, your praises, through your Scriptures, might have propped up the young vine of my heart, and it would not have been ravaged by empty frivolities, a prey to winged spirits of filth. For there is more than one way to offer sacrifice to the transgressing angels.

18

What wonder was it that I was carried along into vanities, and that I left you and your house, my God? For I was encouraged to imitate men who, if they recounted things they had done that were not evil, and they slipped into some bad style or bad grammar and were criticized for it, would be covered with confusion; but if they told of their lusts in a polished style, rich in words well-chosen and properly placed, they would glory in the praise they got. You see these things, O Lord, and you keep silence, for you are long-suffering, but shall you keep silence forever? Even now you will draw up out of this most horrible pit the soul that seeks you and thirsts for your delights, whose heart says to you, "I have sought your face, your face, O Lord, will I seek."⁵² For I had wandered far from your countenance, in the dark fog of my desires. For we do not depart from you or return to you on foot, by

the fury of Juno, Jove's much sinned-against wife.

⁵² Ps 27:8.

change of place. Truly, that younger son of yours⁵³ did not look for horses or wagons or ships, nor did he fly away on a wing that could be seen, or move his legs to go on that road where he might live in a far country and spill away what you had given him, you the sweet and gentle Father, for you gave him his portion when he set out, and you were sweeter still to him when he returned destitute. No, he left you by the lust of his desire. That was the darkness, that was to be far away from your face.

See it, O Lord my God, and see it with patience, as you ever do; see how careful the sons of men are to observe the rules of letters and syllables they have received from speakers before their time, and how careless they are with the rules of everlasting salvation they have received from you. Suppose someone holds to and teaches the old rules of pronunciation, and suppose, contrary to good grammar, he fails to aspirate the first syllable and says *'uman* instead of *human*. He will make men more disgruntled than if he should hate a human being, though he himself is one. It is as if he thought that some enemy of his could be more pernicious to him than his own hatred that goads him on against the man; or that he could work more destruction on the man he persecutes, than on his own heart by his enmity. Surely the knowledge of letters is not more interior than is this law written in the conscience, that we are doing something to another person what we ourselves would not endure.⁵⁴

How secret you are, dwelling in silence in the heavenly heights, O God who alone are great! By a tireless law you cast blindness as a penalty for unlawful desires. When a man seeking fame for his eloquence stands before a human judge, surrounded by crowds of men, assailing his enemy with the most savage hatred, he is on the strictest watch lest by a slip of the tongue he say *among 'uman beings*. But he has no

⁵³ The prodigal son: cf. Lk 15:11–31.

⁵⁴ Cf. Mt 7:12, Lk 6:31. The sin, again, is a self-contradiction, setting man not only against his fellow man but against himself.

fear lest by the fury of his mind he take from *among human beings* the human being he hates.

19

So there I was, a wretched boy, lazing about at the threshold of these customs. And that was the arena where I was more wary of committing a grammatical blunder, than I was of glaring with envy, supposing I did commit one, at those who committed none. I say these things and confess them to you, my God. For such was I praised, and to please the sorts of men who praised me seemed a life well lived. I did not see the whirlpool of filth into which I had been cast from your eyes. What in your sight was fouler than I was? For I displeased even such people, and told any number of lies to deceive my tutor, my masters, and my parents, all for the love of play, and for my restless passion to gape at spectacles that meant nothing, and to imitate what I saw on stage.

I even stole from my parents' pantry and table, either because my gullet commanded me, or because I needed something to give to the boys to play games with me, because they sold their play, though they enjoyed it as much as I did. And in these games, overthrown by an empty desire to be regarded as excellent, I would often cheat to win. So what I would never put up with, but would most bitterly protest if I caught someone else at it, I would do to others. But if I were caught, I would protest, and would rather rage than give in.

Is that childlike innocence? It is not, O Lord, it is not. I beseech you, my God; for these are the same things, the very same, as we go from tutors and teachers, from nuts and sparrows and balls, to governors and kings, gold, booty, property for sale, just as we grow older, as the birch rod gives way to greater punishments. It was therefore, O King, the stature of the child you approved as a sign of humility, when you said, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Mt 19:14.

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Nevertheless to you, our Lord and God, I owe thanks, to you, most excellent creator and ruler of the universe, even if you had willed that I should be no more than a boy. For I existed, I was alive, I could perceive things; I took care for my well-being, and that was a trace of the most secret unity whence I had my being; by an inner sense I brought my outward senses into one fold, and in these little things and in my thoughts about them I delighted in the truth. I did not want to make mistakes; I had a vigorous memory; I was well taught in speaking; I was soothed by friendship; I fled from pain and sorrow and ignorance. What in such a living soul was not marvelous and worthy of praise?

But these were all gifts my God gave me; I did not give them to myself. And they were good, and all together they made up myself. Good, therefore, is he who made me, and he himself is my good, and I rejoice before him for all those good things that made my being when I was a boy. But this was my sin: I sought delights, and lofty places, and truths, not in him, but in his creatures, in myself and in others. And so I rushed headlong into sorrows, defeats, and errors. Thanks be to you, my sweetness and my honor and my trust, my God, thanks be to you for your gifts! But preserve them for me, and so shall you preserve me too, and what you have given me will grow and be brought to perfection, and I shall be with you, for my very being is your gift.