

FICTIONAL SELVES AND GHOSTS: ST. AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS

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Howard Zeiderman

In Book vi of the Confessions, Augustine describes an incident which he observed in Northern Italy. At that time, Augustine was still a professor of Rhetoric. He was in love with words; he was not yet a lover of the Word. The incident occurred in Milan. He had travelled there in order to hear the man purported to be the greatest speaker alive. That man was Ambrose, the Archbishop. Ambrose was a very busy man, who was almost constantly surrounded by people. It was during one of his rare moments of solitude that Augustine observed him. Here is Augustine's description:

For very short periods of time, when he was alone, he was either refreshing his body with food or his mind with reading. When he was reading, his eyes went over the pages and his heart looked over the sense, but his voice and tongue were resting.

This picture of a tired man reading alone is not unusual for us. We might well wonder why it is even mentioned. Is to show that the great Ambrose is like the rest of us--tired, somewhat harassed, and in need of solitude? No. Augustine does not see the similarity. He sees difference--and it startles him. He cannot understand why the bishop, though alone, is not reading aloud. He puzzles over the sight for the next fifteen lines, but cannot come up with a convincing explanation. In the end he must resort to the holiness of Ambrose. As Augustine says: whatever his reason for acting in this way, it would certainly be a good one.

This passage about Augustine's incredulity at Ambrose's reading silently startles me. What should I make of it? I feel that, although I understand the words, I am missing something. And a

careful re-reading of the passage doesn't bring me any closer to the sense. Such a passage--and each text that we read here contains many of them--does not immediately occasion my approval or disapproval, my agreement or disagreement. Usually, it is so far from helping me understand something that I feel as if I understand nothing. Eventually I must move on to more familiar ground, but the passage stays with me. It is like the ghost of a text. And like a legitimate ghost, it haunts me. It is haunting because, through it, a remote, dead world momentarily becomes visible.

Let me try to explain what is so troubling for me about this passage. Reading is a fairly complicated activity. When I read, I try to understand. And I succeed when I am being thoughtful about the meaning of words. Thinking and understanding are private activities. They occur ultimately in a place I call 'inside myself'. So I tend to think of serious reading as an inside activity as well. Of course there are special circumstances in which we read aloud, either with others or alone. People read aloud when they are learning to read, or when they are sharing with others what they've previously read. Sometimes we do in fact read aloud what we have never read before, but then, frequently, we lose track of the passage, and have to back-track for a silent re-reading. And there are very special passages, like Augustine's description of Ambrose, which we read aloud to understand what, on a previous silent reading, we had not understood.

Now in this passage about Ambrose, Augustine is startled by the very opposite of what would startle me. In order to make sense out of the passage, I would like to claim that reading aloud plays the same role for him that silent reading plays for me. But I can't do

that. To do so would be to turn what is inside and private - what I think of as reading - into what is outside and public. Where would I find the place I called 'inside myself'? And what would happen to the thing I call myself? What on earth could Augustine mean by the words 'myself' and 'me'. Our 'selves' don't seem to have the same boundaries.

The same difficulties arise if, instead of actually re-writing the text, I simply interpret the reading aloud which Ambrose and Augustine usually did while alone with a form of what we call by the same name. However, this won't work either because all of the forms that I have described are modifications and variations of 'reading-as-I-know-it' - that is, variations of silent reading. We cannot strip from what we know as reading aloud the circumstances of its particularity and dependence, and then take what results as a general case.

You're probably beginning to feel lost. As these questions open out, I too begin to feel lost. In fact, I begin to lose myself. The categories that are implicated in these questions - reading, understanding, thinking, physical, meaning, sharing, inside, outside, public and private - are not just peripheral to what I am. They are the crucial items in terms of which I define myself. When those categories become fluid, who and what I am becomes fluid.

What can one do in such a state? One can, of course, retreat from such a passage to recover oneself and one's sanity. But there is a kind of arrogance in retreating back into myself untried. Or, one can push forward to lose oneself completely in madness and absurdity. This is the path of despair, where nothing, least of all myself, has

meaning. It is at just these moments, when facing this choice, that I need others. What I can not do alone and yet must do - precisely because I am haunted - I may be able to do with others.

I hope this exploration has given you a sense of a relation between us as readers and a certain kind of passage. Such passages are to be found in every work we read here. They assert something which is not just wrong, or unusual, or distasteful, but rather, uncanny. This kind of uncanniness I have called 'haunting'. And this characteristic does not only apply to passages. Entire texts can haunt. In fact every text we read here can haunt. I will explore this characteristic through the work which haunts me most - the Confessions. It is this work, too, which is my favorite of the books we read here, and the one that I judge to be the greatest. Since these are more common ways of describing books, we will look at these approaches in order to approach how a book haunts.

There are many accounts of the greatness of the texts we read. Some of these focus on the style or beauty of the work; others focus on the content and depth. Dante is a good example of the former, Descartes of the latter. Described differently, these two categories may be called rhetoric and poetry for style and beauty, and philosophy for content. A much more serious characterization of greatness breaks through the perspective of the two categories just mentioned. This third type of characterization shows the remarkably intimate connection between the how and the what. Examples of this sort of work are Platonic dialogues, and Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind. These two are obvious candidates for the third approach which looks at

style and content, the poetry and philosophy, at the same time. This approach is, as I said, the most serious. I believe that all the works we read here, not just the Dialogues and the Phenomenology, satisfy it. In any case, one consideration is basic to each of these three approaches: by calling a book great - with respect to its form, its content, or both of these combined, we are intending to describe the book itself, and not ourselves. The search for a suitable definition and characterization has objectivity as its goal.

At the other end of the spectrum is the subjective approach to a text. This, of course, has more to do with us as individuals than with the text. Each of the works is loved by some, hated by others. We frequently admit to our friends, though not in seminar, that one or another book is our favorite. This occurs with friends because usually our friends are interested in our likes and dislikes, without demanding 'proof'. And in their company, I may feel encouraged to try to reveal my concerns, affections or disaffections. That is, in talking about my 'favorite' book, I may reveal important things about myself, not about the text.

So the characterization 'great book' speaks ostensibly about the book, and the characterization 'favorite book' speaks primarily about me. Since, in my judgement, the Confessions is the greatest program book, and since it is also my favorite program book, I will use it to illustrate these two categories. Yet, neither of these two categories is what I mean by a 'haunting text.' That characterization is a description which is equally about me and a text. How a text haunts may be made clearer by pointed contrast to the other two categories. And here again, the Confessions will illustrate what I

mean, because it is the book which haunts me most. In fact, the Confessions is most haunting, and raises the question of haunting texts to starkest visibility, perhaps because, in it, Augustine himself is haunted.

The Confessions is probably the easiest work on the list to misread, and the way we misread it is predictable. There is nothing more common in our world than writing autobiographies. Everyone in this room has probably written at least one, even if only as a part of an application requesting an autobiographical essay. And it is very hard not to read the Confessions as autobiographical. Yet, insofar as we do, it becomes difficult to see in what way the Confessions is great. Though we, here and in the rest of the world, expect application essays to be autobiographical, we do not expect seminar essays, lectures, and important books to be autobiographical. The autobiography is not viewed as an activity, or a part of one's ongoing life; it is viewed usually as the record of one's activity, composed at a distance from oneself.

A bit of history may be useful here, not, as we often rightly fear, to dismiss a work, but rather, to help us avoid dismissing a work by misconstruing it. The Story of My Life, by Cellini, and the Confessions by Rousseau, written 1400 years after Augustine, define our notion of autobiography. These works help set the stage in the 18th century for the emergence of the form of writing which both attracts and repels us. There are so many examples of such autobiography to choose from--and yet none of them are on our reading list. And when one reads Augustine's Confessions as an example of this category, in many respects, created by Rousseau--in other

words, as autobiography—then its place on our list seems suspect. Of course, we might then include Augustine's Confessions not because of its merits but because other texts which we consider great require this particular work. In other words, the Confessions is considered great by other writers, whom we consider great. A few of these writers are Anselm, Aquinas, Dante, Chaucer, Luther, Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau, Hegel, Kirkegaard and Wittgenstein. So we include it too. Faced with our own uneasiness about the greatness of a work, we sometimes allow this kind of evidence to count. However, this kind of approach can be dangerous, if we grow complacent, and put the book on our list only for the sake of reading another work. But if we regard the evidence of those other great thinkers as an incentive to exploration, then we put the book on the list because it presents a task. This leads to what could be a hard and probing kind of questioning about ourselves and about those other thinkers, though still not necessarily about the book in question. It leads to investigating how we and those we consider great are different on fundamental matters of judgement or thought.

Let us take another step to see how the greatness of the Confessions may be viewed more from the inside than from the outside. Let us take three approaches to the text which we can initially describe as the perspectives of Dante, Descartes, and Hegel. These three were on the list of those who were in awe of Augustine, and their concerns may help direct our attention to aspects of the work which viewing it as autobiography makes suspect —if not impossible. In another rough characterization of these three approaches, Dante may stand for poetry, Descartes may stand for philosophy, and Hegel stands

for the attempted reconciliation of the other two. This third characterization, Hegel's perspective, may be obscure. However, if we remember that in Plato's dialogues, philosophy deals with being, while poetry is enmeshed in becoming, Plato's 'ancient feud' between philosophy and poetry may be understood as the feud between being and becoming. Seniors, if any are here instead of working on their essays, can inform their less knowing friends that in Hegel's Phenomonology of Mind, the two realms of being and becoming become so intimately involved with one another that they are no longer two realms.

We will look at the poet's perspective first. Virgil appears as Dante's guide in the Inferno, and much of the Divine Comedy involves the relations between Virgil's poetry and Dante's own. Virgil does not appear as a character in the Confessions. His Aeneid, however, does. Augustine states that when he was young, reading the Aeneid was a source of pleasure, and reciting it was a source of glory. As an older man, he views his youthful devotion to the poem as a waste of his time and talents. Yet, in spite of what he claims was a waste of time, he acknowledges that he also learned to read and write from this effort. The question arises whether this boy who grew up in and around Carthage and who, like Aeneas, finally found his home in Rome, was able to turn his childhood love for the Aeneid into something fertile and memorable in his adult life. I will mention only a few parallels with the Aeneid to show the extent to which Virgil's fiction echoes in Augustine's account.

In the Aeneid, Aeneas meets Dido in Book i. So too in the first book of the Confessions, Augustine meets Dido, as Virgil's

character. In Book ii, Aeneas moves in and out of Carthage in his narrative to Dido; Augustine at the same time moves in and out of Carthage spatially. In Book iii Aeneas finally finishes his account of his arrival on Dido's shore. As he speaks and Dido listens, she is increasingly captivated by his words and falls in love with him through his account. So too in Book iii, Augustine finally brings his wanderings to a pause in Carthage; like Dido, he too falls in love. And he says that the object of his love is the idea or the account of love.

In book iv of the Aeneid, we read of the seduction in the grove, and of Aeneas' reawakened desire to go to second Troy-Rome, though he only knows of it by indirectly. In order to leave Carthage, he must deceive Dido; she despairs and dies by her own hand. In book iv of the Confessions, we read that Augustine too has moved on to seduction. He writes:

So for the space of nine years [in Carthage] I lived a life in which I was seduced and seducing, deceived and deceiving, the prey of various desires.

And later in Book iv, Augustine, too, is moved by the rumor of Rome:

Why was it, Lord my God, that I decided to dedicate this book to Hiereus who was an orator at Rome? I had never seen the man but had come to love him because of this very great reputation.

It is at this point that Augustine's desire to go to Rome emerges. Both he and Aeneas set out on their journeys in Book v. In Book vi when Aeneas is in the underworld viewing shadows, Augustine is struggling to break the bonds of the Manicheans. That is, while

Aeneas is seeing spirits without their bodies, Augustine is grappling with the idea of spiritual substance. These new ideas seem as insubstantial to Augustine as the shades of Hades seem to Aeneas. And as in Hades Aeneas is both alive and dead, so too Augustine in Book vi says:

My life in you I kept on putting off from one day to the next, but I did not put off the death that daily I was dying in myself.

Aeneas leaves the underworld of shadow at the end of Book vi, but it takes Augustine many more pages to be freed.

The Aeneid plays a role in the Confessions, but the Confessions are not merely a duplication of a previous book. The Aeneid had twelve books, the Confessions thirteen and in many cases--crucial ones--the characters and incidents of the Aeneid are displaced in the Confessions. The most startling transformation is that of the story of Dido's abandonment, lament and death. In Book v of the Confessions, it is Augustine's mother who takes on the role of Dido, and it is in there--not Book iv as in the Aeneid-- that he leaves her weeping in Carthage and that he acknowledges the lie he told her. And both of these kinds of changes are the same. The increase in the number of books and the displacement of incidents occurs because there is another book which is also woven into Augustine's text. That book is, of course, Genesis - with all that this portends. The last books of the Confessions is Augustine's treatment of Genesis, but again, a careful reading will show that Genesis pervades the entire work. For instance, when Augustine describes his mother in Carthage crying over

his departure to Rome, he speaks using the language of Genesis:

So she wept and cried aloud showing in herself the  
heritage of Eve.

Having begun to look at the Confessions in this way, we see that it could not conceivably be an autobiography. The events are artfully recounted, following patterns provided by the Aeneid and glosses provided by Genesis. And although the end of book ix seems to mark the end of the domination by the Aeneid and the beginning of the movement toward Genesis, there is in fact at each moment an interplay between the two texts. The Aeneid supplies the external circumstances of the account, the outer facts, and Genesis fills what is internal. Now the Confessions begins to take on the shape of a fiction, or even a poem—in Latin or Greek, something made. We could continue in this way, admiring the subtlety of composition and the attention to detail in this beautiful piece of rhetoric. At the end of it, we would be vindicated in not viewing it as autobiography. We might then feel inclined to include the Confessions on the reading list as a work great in itself, not just as a work admired by those whom we take as great.

This little account was a sample of the lecture you might have heard on the Confessions as a great poem. If we now adopt the perspective of Descartes, we can both take what we've seen further and also see the Confessions from yet another angle. This perspective would have us focus on the role of philosophy. Philosophy appears prominently in three books of the Confessions. These are, first, Book vii, and then, Books x and xi. In Book vii, where Augustine has just

entered his final struggle with the Manicheans, he discovers books of philosophy. Reading them is what first leads him to the possibility of immaterial substance, not just as the negation of matter, or as a shadow in Hades, but as something positive and distinct: as soul. Yet, even the notion of soul is treated as merely theoretical. At this time, both the books and their ideas are represented as things interesting but external. And in Book vii Augustine keeps his distance from these books for another reason. He realizes there is one thing he could not learn from them. He could not learn humility. In Book x philosophy reappears, no longer as a study but as a way of life. Philosophy is now Augustine's own activity. And the living philosophy effects a movement similar to, but greater than, the movement effected by the reading of the books. The activity of philosophy leads Augustine from the outside to the inside. He begins to investigate his own soul, to search for traces of his being.

The activity of philosophy in Books x and xi marks the transition from the narrative of external circumstances, patterned on the Aeneid, to the investigation into spiritual considerations, as seen in the treatment of Genesis. So we see that for Augustine, philosophy plays the role of the in-between. It is the in-between of inside and outside, of flesh and spirit. The role of philosophy for Augustine--as the movement from outside to inside--dictates its form. For, of all our faculties, it is not reason nor imagination nor sensation which first presents itself as taking the outside into the inside. Rather, it is memory. And memory becomes the locus of Augustine's investigation, which in turn opens the question of past, present and future. This focus on time in Book x sets the stage for

the treatment of how to construe the account of beginning-- that is, Genesis--in Books xii and xiii. The activity of Philosophy in the Confessions thus plays a role which is the re-enactment of the role that his passive dependance on the books of the Platonists played in Book Seven.

Such would be the sketch of another lecture on the Confessions as a great book. This time the concern was with the content of the work itself rather than with the way the work echoes other great works. And the content--Philosophy--is not in conflict with the poetry but has a definite relation with it. For now, looking back on his use of the Aeneid, we can see that Augustine, like Virgil, created a memory, or a kind of story. Poetry has set the stage for philosophy. What poetry presented, through books, for a passive audience, philosophy makes one's own, through activity.

I have presented two sketches for lectures on the greatness of the Confessions; the first took greatness to be something in the style or poetry; the second took it to be something in the content or philosophy. These two sketches together form a prelude for yet a third lecture, which take the third approach to greatness. It would begin with the status of reader--how should the reader read the Confessions? Is the reader passive as Augustine was in the Aeneid section or active as he was in the philosophical exploration of memory and time? It is this aspect which probably most intrigued Hegel. It is his Phenomenology of Mind, of all the books we read, which most requires the reader to supply, in response to one section of the text, a transition to the next. The role of the reader of the Confessions is comparable, though as different as the Hegelian dialectic is from

sin. An example may bring out the course a reader undertakes in the Confessions.

At the end of Book ii, Augustine describes an incident which no reader of the text ever forgets. When he was a boy, Augustine and a few friends stole some pears from a neighbor's tree. The fruit - unlike that fated fruit in the Garden - was neither pleasing to the eye, nor good to eat. In fact, the boys threw the pears away. When he asks himself why he did this, Augustine's only answer is that he did it for the sake of doing wrong - that he loved sin for its own sake. The whole description is so vivid that the incident becomes a kind of drama for the reader. In fact, the reader witnesses the wrongdoing. Thus the reader plays the role of spectator. He observes a scene in which Augustine, and not himself, plays a part.

This in fact sets the stage for the next scene of the Confessions. At the opening of Book iii, when Augustine is a student in Carthage, he himself becomes enmeshed in being a spectator. He attends the theater, revelling in the grief, sadness, and joy that he witnessed there. He remarks again and again that these spectacles are external and utterly remote from him, displayed for him insofar as he is their witness. But was not this the reader's relation to the story about the pears? What has happened here is that Augustine has prepared a place for the reader, and then occupies that place himself within the text.

There must be some distance between the author of a text and the readers of that text. However, Augustine, by writing about himself, makes that separation between reader and text as extreme as possible. And yet, we have just seen how Augustine, in making the

reader play the part of spectator, has started to diminish that very distance. Elsewhere in the text, the reader adopts other roles - listener, judge, critic, admirer. At each step, the separation between external reader and the text diminishes. This distance vanishes completely at the end of Book ix. This is also exactly the place that marks the culmination of the external circumstances supplied by Virgil's Aeneid. There, at the death of Monica, Augustine's mother, Augustine's Dido, he prays. (How unlike Aeneas!)

And so by means of these Confessions of mine, I pray that my mother may have her last request of me still more richly answered in the prayers of many others besides myself.

In other words, Augustine invites the reader to join with him in prayer, to do the very thing that Augustine is doing. The distance between Augustine and the reader, between Augustine and me, or between me and not-me, dissolves if we join him in the activity of prayer.

Again, at the very same place, at the end of Book ix, Augustine leaves the account of his external circumstances and goes on to philosophical activity. And what is the topic of that activity? Memory. Memory--we all have it, although what Augustine remembers is different from what I remember, or from what you remember. And even within each memory, the me and the not-me differ, since each of us is a different thing from the content of our memory. The tension between reader and text, between me and Augustine, between me and not-me has been brought into the text itself here at the end of Book ix. And that tension moves on into Book xi and the treatment of time. The

distinction between me and not-me culminates by placing the self in time: now there is a difference between the me-I-am, the me-I-was and the me-I-will-be.

And why is the distinction between what I am (or have been or will be) and what I am not so very important? It is important because it is the distinction between my soul and my sin. For Augustine, the soul is who he truly is, and the sin, although in some way his, is what he is not. With the treatment of time, we and Augustine finally face, in its clearest form, the inheritance of the eating of the first fruit. For Adam and Eve, looking for godhead, found sin, death, and time. Augustine invites us to pray with him at his mother's death. If we join him in prayer at the end of book ix, and through that initial breaking of the barriers of self are able to reach the question of time, then we are ready, at Book xii, to enter the book of Genesis.

Thus the reader moves from passive to active. He was merely a passive spectator at first, when he watched the drama of Augustine's life. If he responds to the invitation to pray, then he becomes active. But the core of that activity is precisely the difference he has just gone through... the difference between action and passion, what I do and what happens to me, or in other words, between the me and the not-me.

The account you have just heard takes the previous accounts into a new mode. For the poetry or fiction which became a stage for philosophy is now so entwined with it that both the how and the what, and the text and the reader, are revealed as temporary categories. Yet, though this account is about the reader, it does not essentially

touch us. It is about not about us as individuals, but about us as the readers of this particular text. In other words, this is still a lecture about the Confessions as a great book. And in all such lectures, the audience, like Augustine and the reader in the first nine books, is passive. The lecturer, who has spent time making himself passively dependent on a book in studying it, reveals some of its subtleties, and invites the listeners to undertake a similar relation. And although a listener may leave the lecture and go on to study the text with others, the effort suggested by the lecturer remains an individual and solitary one.

So in all of these sketched lectures, the greatness of the book has been the concern. The approaches that I have associated with Dante, Descartes, and Hegel, do not involve me-as-an-individual, because their focus has been the text itself. It has been with something which is not me.

The other end of the spectrum from looking at the Confessions as a great book is viewing it as my favorite book. Such a perspective is not primarily focused on Augustine but on myself. When I view the Confessions as my favorite book, I don't stand on the ground of the text. Instead, I consider the text on my own ground and as dependent on my activities. And, although considering the book's greatness necessitated avoiding reading it as autobiography, considering the book as my favorite book is intimately connected with autobiography. In fact, it involves me in giving an autobiographical account of myself. By this, I do not intend to surge into the story of my life. But I do have to give an account--as one does with friends-- of what the Confessions has meant to me as an individual. It has meant many

things--the most suitable of which to address in a lecture has to do with my life and thought, and the works of two modern philosophers: Wittgenstein and Heidegger.

Both these writers are from our world, a world where 'reading' means 'reading silently'. One or the other of them absorbs and influences many of our contemporaries. Their work makes them as different as two thinkers can be, and yet they display two significant similarities. For both, their work falls into an earlier and later stage, with the latter stage being an explicit denial or rejection of the former, like Augustine in the Confessions, and both wished to end philosophy. Please don't misunderstand when I say they wish to end philosophy. That does not mean they wished to end thought, or seriousness, or responsibility. Rather they felt that philosophy as a separate and autonomous activity, which they both associated with Descartes, made one thoughtless, frivolous and irresponsible.

These two were never casual about philosophy. At one time, there was nothing more important, or more natural, for them to do. They did not criticize philosophy from the outside; they were 'insiders'. Yet, in spite of heroic efforts to end philosophy, they each failed--not just once, but twice! My own thought has gravitated around their efforts because I agree with them--I feel their desire and I feel their failure. And like them, I don't feel it from the outside. Considering the One and the Many, being and non-being, categories, language, and truth, was more important, and more natural, than anything else for me. In fact, at one time it was

life's breath. Yet, at times one recognizes that what comes naturally - one's gifts, one's abilities, even one's breath itself - causes one to suffocate.

Though I had been drawn to Wittgenstein and Heidegger before that crisis, my shortness of breath involved me with their work more and more intimately. They were a kind of artificial respirator through which I could consider my own task and theirs. If I scrutinized their work, I might be able to avoid their failure. In those days, I was like a chess player studying the games of past grand masters, or like a pathologist doing an autopsy on a victim of the disease I myself was suffering. However, the more I thought about what they had attempted and failed, the more I realized it was not a matter of their lack of cleverness and intelligence which was responsible. In fact, quite the opposite. It was precisely their intelligence and cleverness which caused for each not only one failure, but two. They failed because they were geniuses and because their proposed audience was an elite group of thinkers who could fathom the issue and comprehend certain works. The result was not the end of philosophy at all. Instead, there was an increase of technical and arcane talk. And, because Wittgenstein and Heidegger were 'canonized' as new philosophers, they gave rise to a grotesque hagiography, developed and carried on by their own disciples, who should have known better.

The more I studied them, the more I agreed with them on their diagnosis of the ailment. But the more pervasive the disease appeared. Those infected were not just readers of certain books, or practitioners of a certain philosophical school of thinking. The

diseased were not just the intellectual inheritors of Descartes, but in fact everyone who lived in a Cartesian world--which is just a shorthand for the modern world in which we all perform every act or gesture of our lives.

It was at this moment that I remembered the Confessions. Was not Augustine similar to Heidegger and Wittgenstein? Was not he himself burdened with his own gifts and was not he as skilled at technical rhetoric and philosophy as anyone? He felt, as acutely as anyone, the desire for philosophy and the hunger both for truth and for his own discovery of that truth. And did he not only face these horrors but succeed in resolving them in a work that was for everyone, not merely professors and intellectual technicians? And wasn't Augustine's indictment of philosophy similar to my sense of why Heidegger and Wittgenstein failed? For their greatness prevented them from seeing beyond their greatness. Augustine recoiled from philosophy because it could never teach him humility.

It was because of these concerns and thoughts that I was drawn to the Confessions. In my own concerns and confusions, I needed an ally and a friend. And I didn't turn to the Confessions because he had achieved what I was attempting. His concern and mine differ. Unlike Augustine, the name I heard with my mother's milk was not Christ's. I was not a Christian and the task and need I felt were mine, not Christian. So I didn't read him to learn "how-he-did-it". I read the Confessions as the struggles of someone similar but yet quite different from myself. In short, I read it as autobiography, and it is as autobiography that it has been my favorite book.

We have now looked at two ways of reading the Confessions - as a great work and as my favorite work. As a great work I read him as a scholar would, bringing to bear a knowledge of other books he uses, the responses of other writers to his work, and what, for lack of a better word, I must call history. It is because I am familiar with the genesis of what we call autobiography, that I realize that reading the Confessions as autobiography would be remarkably anachronistic. Once I hold that tendency in check, the book opens up, and I can become in some sense passive as I learn from it.. On the other hand, when I read the Confessions as my favorite book, I read it quite differently. Then I read out of my own activity and I read it precisely the way I guarded against before.

In the first case I read him out of knowledge, in the second case out of need. Although both these ways of reading may involve other people, they are primarily solitary. When I speak about the greatness of the Confessions, I'm telling you something. I may depend on the work of others and even prompt you to find aspects of the work I had missed or gotten wrong. I could, therefore, in telling you, also gain something in return. But our relation to each other is essentially solitary. In sharing with you remarks about the Confessions as my favorite book, we again can become useful to one another. Your need may be similar to mine, and you too may decide to turn to the Confessions. But again my reading the Confessions was private and silent - just like the kind of reading Ambrose did one time in Milan. Both of these silent ways of reading are important, even though they are so different from one another. In fact from the perspective of one kind of approach, the other is suspect. From the

vantage point of my need when I read Augustine as my favorite book, the greatness of the Confessions seems sterile, a mere diversion. From the perspective of my studies of Augustine, reading the work for encouragement and consolation seems undisciplined and self-indulgent. Yet, as I said, both approaches are important and even necessary.

The third approach to a text, where we are haunted by a text, overlaps with these two familiar approaches and yet differs importantly from them. In the third approach to the text we may start by reading the words silently and privately, but we must go beyond this to reading publicly. What I mean by public reading is an essentially cooperative activity. In this approach, not only do we depend on one another, but knowledge and need are also no longer held apart. They too merge toward one another. This occurs when the Confessions begins to haunt us. Need stops being my particular need, but it is rather a need we all feel, and the relevant knowledge is precisely what we all lack. It is in this context that we no longer read as solitary explorers or solitary sufferers; an individual reads as preparation for what reading makes necessary--a conversation.

In reading the Confessions as a great book, I withheld viewing it as an autobiography. In reading it as my favorite book, I read it as I would read such a work written by one of our contemporaries. My expectation in seeing such a work is that it is autobiographical and I read it as such. Though I said both readings had a kind of legitimacy, nonetheless a tension and conflict exists within me between these readings. For is it or is it not autobiography? Well, in one sense it is clear that it isn't. Yet, it isn't just not-autobiography. Our normal expectation on reading the Confessions, and

the label it often carries on its book jacket aren't just misplaced. To view it without keeping in mind that a man Augustine wrote about his life--and therefore that it is autobiography--would be to fathom its greatness but lose the life of the text. But imagine such a work being published today. It might gain a few readers and perhaps even a sympathetic review or two. But on the whole it would be viewed as silly, or pretentious, or even irresponsible and absurd. It is a text which could not be written now, in our present. It is a past text, but clearly it is not a dead text--nor it is a text which is truly alive. The text is an in-between text--not entirely dead nor entirely alive. It is a ghost.

I need to describe more clearly what such a ghost text is and how it haunts. The Confessions haunts because its greatness --some aspects of which I mentioned--seems incompatible with its form as autobiography. Insofar as we penetrate the scope and intricacy of the work, the expectation of a roughly factual account of someone's past life becomes increasingly problematic. And as the work begins to look fictional, its truth becomes suspect. Fictionalization, whether intentional or accidental, will earn our criticism because fact and fiction have to do with truth and not-truth. The evidence, however, from the earlier part of this lecture, is that Augustine did indeed shape his story in a way which we would call fictionalizing. If he is replacing fiction for fact, is he truthful? The answer seems obviously to be no. But suppose that fact and fiction are different for Augustine than for us-- that truth is different for him than for us. By this I don't mean that he holds truths different from the ones which we hold, but rather, that he means something other than what we

mean by the word truth. What a strange suggestion--and yet it has already been come up earlier in this lecture. For to ask about what one means by truth will involve what one means by self. And then, if a self is different, then the thing which a self writes--an autobiography--will be different from any autobiographical essay or text we have ever read or written before. I think that this suggestion is right--that truth means something strange for Augustine. But though I say this, and though I can explain why I say this, I don't understand what it means.

Augustine reaches a conclusion about truth in his discussion of Genesis. In pondering the meaning of its first line--In the beginning God created heaven and earth--he considers various possibilities. In the end, he presents his opinion, that every truth which any reader knows is contained in the first line of Genesis. In trying to understand this startling suggestion, I come up with analogies. Is the first line of Genesis like a mathematical axiom of such power that in itself it contains all other truths? Or is it like a painting, which presents to each viewer a personal and legitimate vision? Or is the first line like charity, or love, without which, says Paul, one's words are like the clanging of a bell. This looks more promising. Love or Charity turns sound into meaning and, one could say, into truth. But if charity gives meaning to utterable things, and makes them true, then it seems that all utterances would mean the same truth. As I say these words, you may feel we have returned to Paul's clanging bell. Without having resolved this riddle about the first line of Genesis, let me go on to another one. Augustine states that If his task had been to write such a book, he

would have wanted to write it as Moses did. Is it possible that he did this very thing in writing the Confessions?

Let us think about what we mean by confession. Usually, confession involves an acknowledgment of a past action, and a resolution with respect to the future. Confession is a bridge, an inbetween like the ghost text and like philosophy was for Augustine, between the past and the future. The security of that bridge depends on the commitment of the confessor. Only time can reveal that commitment. When the confession is made to another person, then that person must risk entering into the confessor's future. When the confession is made to God, there can be no secrets between the confessor and God. In such a case, however, those outside the confession know of it only what the confessor then chooses to make public.

With this much to guide us, can we say whether the Confessions are addressed to us or to God? Augustine speaks often, and passionately, to God, referring to him as 'You.' And, although it occurs less often, he does speak both directly and indirectly to the readers. So the answer seems to be that the Confessions are addressed both to us and to God. Now, God can certainly hear this confession and judge or forgive Augustine. But can we? Were we his contemporaries, we would be able to forgive Augustine some personal offense. But of course, we are not his contemporaries; our forgiveness would be irrelevant to him. But can we even presume to forgive him? For what? His recorded offenses are against God, not against us. To say this another way, only God can judge or forgive. So although Augustine is in part writing for us, he can not be

confessing to us. By confessing to God in our presence, Augustine affords us the opportunity to listen neither in judgment nor in forgiveness. What is the alternative to listening in judgement or with forgiveness. It is to listen charitably.

Now remember what Augustine said about Genesis--that he would have liked to have written a book like that. Somehow, Genesis was written through or in charity. Somehow Moses was able to write such a book. Augustine could not presume to reproduce this effort. But he has been able to produce a text which can be really read only with charity. If it is read without charity, the Confessions becomes the mere clanging of a bell. We try to disguise the clanging by reading it as a great book, or as our favorite book. It is when we read it with charity that each of its lines--like the first line of Genesis--becomes all of the truths we know. It is when we read with charity that the differences between me and not me, between my truths and your truths, vanish.

Do you really understand what I'm saying about the Confessions. Its hard for me to see how because I don't. And its not from ignorance or lack of effort that we don't understand. If you feel that my words shimmer before you, tempting you, yet eluding your grasp, then you feel what I feel. You are in the presence of a ghost, as I am. The Confessions are a ghost which haunts. The Confessions succeed at the task which Augustine set for himself, or which was set for him. But what such a task is and how it was fulfilled remains deeply impenetrable. And we do not penetrate it by learning yet another ingenious aspect of the text, which might emerge from reading

still more carefully. For when a text begins to haunt, the locus of attention is not the text, as it is when the text is a great book, nor ourselves, as it is when the book is one I love or hate. In other words, we are neither passive nor active. Rather, the locus of attention is what I can best describe as what is in between us and the text--the gap between our deepest expectations and those of the text.

Becoming clearer about this haunting in-between can not be a solitary activity. I need others--but not for their information or insights and not for encouragement. That is, I need others neither as scholars nor as friends. At this stage, I need others to help me see something about myself. To use their help, and to offer help to them, my private and solitary reading must give way to public reading. Our public reading, a modern reflection of the sort of reading Augustine expected of Ambrose, is conversation. Our understanding of the Confessions as a great book or as my favorite book may be enhanced by conversation; our facing it as a haunting text is absolutely dependent on conversation.

A ghost text has two interrelated functions. It elicits the most salient categories of our world. It also affords us the opportunity to think through those deepest habits which have thoughtlessly determined our lives. So a ghost text brings to the surface the true ghosts. These do not reside in texts but rather in ourselves. They are the haunting accretions of our past, our educations, our social, economic, and political environments. It is in the presence of the ghost text that these other ghosts come forth. To confront one means to confront them all.

And so what do these considerations have to do with our activity here? Great books are, as I once read on an envelope, great teachers. Great books are written by great minds--great thinkers--and understanding these books involves understanding these minds. But that requires understanding the languages in which they wrote as well as understanding the other works that they produced. In other words, this effort is scholarship. Some of us are better, some are worse at it. If our communal task is scholarship, then our activities here are doomed to failure. For we read only parts of books, in a variety of translations, and make the effort to speak with one another about them in the strange format we call 'seminar'.

Another approach to the reading of great books is to read them because they raise timeless concerns--the issues which have troubled or absorbed humanity. Among these concerns we will find some which are of particular importance to each of us. But if this is our approach, it is hard to grasp why we read our particular texts to raise these issues. There are hundreds of textbooks which have been written precisely to raise these timeless concerns. There, these concerns are called the problem of free-will, the problem of meaning, the problem of justice. And the result of this attitude is what one would anticipate. Our texts would evaporate. Problems and issues require solutions or stances. The result is an argument or debate among those animated by a particular issue, with others who are unmoved having nothing much to say. The text would become either loved or despised depending on whether one agrees or disagrees with Plato's politics or St. Paul's theology.

These two ways of reading are like those intermediate parts of Plato's divided line where opinion and understanding are highlighted. Reading for greatness belongs to the part of the line where understanding resides; reading for the timeless issues belongs to the part where opinion resides. There is a next step in Plato where one struggles to move beyond hypotheses. What I am describing also leaves the realms of personal opinion and scholarly understanding in order to face one's most invisible assumptions and have the courage to explore them.

The relation to texts which I am calling haunting can make this possible. The tension between my sense of meaning, language, truth, fiction, fact, and life and that in the Confessions first forces me to attend to what is so pervasive in me as to have been invisible. Because my sense of these terms constitutes my world, the Confessions seem otherworldly, or ghostly. So some translation is necessary. Yet, it does not matter that these texts are read in various translations, because the true effort of translating begins once the ground opens between me and the text. It is also alright that we read parts of works. For we are not reading authors or books, but what I call texts. Authors and their corpuses--intact entities--give an artificial appearance of life. The temptation is very great to enter into them and to substitute them for ourselves.

In this task of confronting a haunting text, each of us is essential. Though ghosts are hard to see, they, like everything we see, may be seen from different perspectives. What haunts me will overlap with but will not be identical with what haunts you. And if I make that attempt to confront these ghosts, and to exorcise them, then

I will need your help. If you are making that attempt, you will need mine. Descartes, making the effort without help, so lost his sense of perspective that he looked for certainty to hold onto, conflating it with knowledge.

So, I need your certainties to risk exploring what has become uncertain for me. I need your uncertainties to help reveal to me the fabric of my own beliefs. The problems we face are not timeless and universal. They are absolutely timely, because they are yours and mine. And the text is essential because without it thought is not sufficiently decisive--neither sufficiently radical nor sufficiently conservative. In my example, I would have circled endlessly around questions of meaning, truth, and their relation to thought. Only by allowing the Confessions to haunt me, am I enabled, however dimly, to sense the possibility that these questions may not concern thought but rather will, and might be answered not by my words but by something which I have the entirely unphilosophical humility to hear. These are disturbing prospects which I have few notions how even to explore. As bare possibilities, they shatter my pride but in the same moment hold open possibilities which my despair has foreclosed. The proper way to address such matters can be neither monologue nor argument, even if at times we do speak that way. Rather, speech must be confessional. Yet one is not confessing for oneself alone nor for something that one has done. Confession is the acknowledgment of a chasm between us and the ghost-like text, and it is the commencement of the exploration of the ghosts in us--those beliefs and opinions which we have inherited and which invisibly chart the courses of our thoughts, our desires, and our lives. It is when a text haunts us

that we are both ready for and in need of conversation.

Every text we read here is such a haunting text. You can see that if you ask yourself if any of them could be written now. The answer probably is that more or less they all could. Insofar as they could be written now, they are great or our favorites. Insofar as they could not be, they are ghosts. Haunting texts afford us the opportunity to make visible these most salient and elusive aspects of ourselves. Yet within this realm of exploration and change, these texts also can be great books, and we can love some and recoil from others. In fact, the same work can be all of these. Everything that I have said tonight I have in some measure learned from Augustine. These remarks are Augustinian. That I am here to attempt this task, I owe to the role the Confessions has occupied in my life as my favorite book. Yet, what I have learned and gained from him takes its true measure from my response to those ghosts which this and other ghostly texts revealed in me. And ultimately, the ghostly quality of the text makes me recoil from it. That recoiling also makes the Confessions one of my least favorite texts. For though I learn from his ability and subtlety, feel encouraged and comforted by the similarity of our purposes, and see myself for the first time through our differences from him, ultimately I recoil because his world and his God are not mine.