

Writing the Grace of Life: A Brief Reflection on St. Augustine's *Confessions**

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St. Augustine's *Confessions* was written ca. 397–400, shortly after Augustine was consecrated as bishop and made assistant to Valerius, the Bishop of Hippo. Even though the *Confessions* is an ancient work, it is still prodigiously engaged as “a storehouse of thought for the philosopher and the theologian, and for others as well.”¹ In addition to its thought-provoking content, Peter Brown attributes the enduring “appeal” of the *Confessions* to its striking affective quality, specifically, to the fact that Augustine, “in his middle-age had dared to open himself up to the feelings of his youth.”² Moreover, the title and the discursive methods of this celebrated text has also been influential in Western literary works.³ In fact, the *Confessions* has been heralded as the first of a new autobiographical genre, a textual prayer with emphasis on oral performance, a

* This paper is based on my dissertation, “The Textuality of Grace in St. Augustine's *Confessions*: A Ricoeurian Analysis,” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003).

1. John K. Ryan, “Introduction,” in *Confessions* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 17. This paper uses Ryan's translation of the *Confessions*. See also Langdon Gilkey, “Ordering the Soul: Augustine's Manifold Legacy,” *The Christian Century* 105 (April 27, 1988): 426.

2. *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 170. Consider, for example, how Augustine's vulnerability is made transparent in his recounting of bidding farewell to his son's mother in Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.15.25.

3. Ryan, “Introduction,” 33-35; Robert J. O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 91-129. See Robert A. Herrrea's “Augustine: Spiritual Centaur?” in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue*, ed. Frederick Van Fleteren, Joseph C. Schnaubelt, and Joseph Reino (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 159-161 for a brief summary of the works that have been shaped by the *Confessions*.

confessional literature, a paradigm of narrative theology, and a didactic discourse conveyed in a narrative form.⁴

Most significantly for this paper, the *Confessions* illustrates a “vivid portrayal of a man in the presence of God, of God and the self intimately related but still separated by sin, and of a struggle for mastery within the self longing for final peace” in the mode of a sustained textual prayer.⁵ The thesis of this paper is that the contents, plot, and styles employed in Augustine’s *Confessions* manifest that its aim was not to introduce Augustine’s life as such. Rather, by unveiling his personal struggles with spirituality in the *Confessions*, Augustine has depicted a “dramatic theme” of life; and by “means of his extraordinary spiritual fortitude,” he has carved out an enduring paradigm of the Christian life.⁶ Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine briefly the background of the *Confessions* to delineate how Augustine’s text can perform as a model that unpacks and elucidates the grace of life.

The Occasion for the *Confessions*

The etymology of Augustine’s Latin title (*confession*), *confiteri*, means “to agree” or “to acknowledge.”⁷ The Latin word *confessio* comes from the Greek word ὁμολογεῖν, which was used on religious, philosophical, and legal levels to convey a general sense of “to agree with,” “to agree to,”

4. The citations given below follow the order of genres given in the text. For autobiography, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 307; Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, trans. E. W. Dicks, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 1:17 and 2:633. For prayer, see Robert, McMahon, *Augustine’s Prayerful Ascent: An Essay on the Literary Form of the “Confessions”* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), xi-xxii. For confessional literature, see Shirley J. Paolini, *Confessions of Sin and Love in the Middle Ages: Dante’s “Commedia” and St. Augustine’s “Confessions.”* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), 4-5. For narrative theology, see Christopher J. Thompson, *Christian Doctrine, Christian Identity: Augustine and the Narrative Character* (New York: University Press of America, 1999), 71-96. For didactic discourse, see John J. O’Meara, “Augustine’s *Confessions*: Elements of Fiction,” in *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian* Joanne McWilliam, ed. (Waterloo: Willfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 77-95.

5. James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), 81.

6. Karl Joachim Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual/Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 21; Brown, *Augustine*, 162-8.

7. James Scott, “From Literal Self-Sacrifice to Literary Self-Sacrifice: Augustine’s *Confessions* and the Rhetoric of Testimony,” in *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian* Joanne McWilliam, ed. (Waterloo: Willfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 35; James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine, Confessions: Commentary of Books 8-13*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 3-7.

or “to make a confession of guilt.”⁸ Hence, embedded in the meaning of confession is the sense that the source of confessing is not in the confessor but in another being. Confession also carries the meaning of “accusing” oneself before God as well as rendering praises to a divine being.⁹

In biblical homology, two senses of confession are found: confession of human guilt and of praises to God.¹⁰ These two forms, which imply faith in God, are repeatedly found in the Psalms of the Old Testament. The most commonly used *Septuagint* equivalent of ὁμολογεῖν is its derivative, ἐξομολογέω. The LXX translates the Hebrew ׀ָ׀ָ —which carries both senses of confession—into ἐξομολογέω. Hence, biblical uses of confession reveal that the task of confessing entails not only giving intellectual assent, but also giving genuine consent and commitment from the confessor. In the New Testament, the many nuances of ὁμολογεῖν are tied to the church’s confession and proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ.

Specifically, the New Testament shows that confessing faith in Jesus Christ at the time of baptism was essential to demonstrating commitment to him, especially during persecution. To confess faith in Jesus Christ was to submit to the authority of Christ. Post-apostolic writings reveal that confession became more concretely tied to its legal roots, thus making it a duty of the Christian. Two forms of public confession developed: one for confessing faith during baptism and worship and another for confessing sin, especially of apostasy. It should be noted that among the various elements that have shaped the early church’s confessions, the most influential one was persecution. Furthermore, not only were confessions offered orally, but also they were written down, making them indispensable to the vitality of the early church. Over time, the written form of confessions developed into authoritative or codified creeds to be used as a test or standard of orthodoxy.

By Augustine’s time, the church was already using written confessions as part of authoritative codes or creeds. Augustine’s *Confessions*, however, was not written during persecution. Historically, by Emperor Theodosius’s reign, Christianity was established as the official state religion for all practical purpose.¹¹ Despite the lack of external persecution, however, the West was undergoing “profound cultural changes” when

8. See Otto Michel’s word study in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “ὁμολογέω κτλ.”

9. Brown, *Augustine*, 175. See also O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 2:5.

10. Michel, “ὁμολογέω κτλ,” *TDNT* 5:207-216.

11. Weintraub, *Autobiography*, 20. Julian the Apostate failed in his attempt to create a counter-religious culture to Christianity in Roman Empire and the altar of Victory from the Roman senate chamber was discarded at the demand of Bishop Ambrose to Emperor Valentinian II.

Augustine penned the *Confessions* (ca. 397–400).¹² As Christianity was settling into the Roman world, it was reshaping or modifying the ethos of the classical world. The source of struggle or temptation during this period was not necessarily from the external—that is, apostasy “by literal trial at the hands of the Roman magistracy”—but took on “the form of an inner trial—whether of Donatists and Pelagians within the body of the church, or of personal sins and doubts within the hearts and minds of individual believers.”¹³

What, then, was the occasion or purpose of Augustine's *Confessions*? Augustine states that he wrote the *Confessions* to give an account of his life before God and others for the purpose of praising, loving, and thanking God and to edify others (1.1.1; 5.1.1; 10.1.1–10.6.6).¹⁴ A renowned Augustine scholar, Henry Chadwick, asserts that “no [other] work by Augustine reveals more about his understanding of the high calling of the priesthood” than the *Confessions*.¹⁵ Writing his book as a new bishop of Hippo, as a man “who had come to regard his past as a training for his present career,”¹⁶ Augustine used the *Confessions* to communicate enduring theological insights and perspectives on Christian life as a graced journey of faith.¹⁷

In addition to the expressed purposes of the *Confessions*, additional purposes or sub-purposes have been proposed based on the text's generative capacities. These theories stem not only from the content but also from the complex or intersecting genres employed in the *Confessions* which heighten the text's textuality. Among them, the following are most significant for the purpose of this paper because they highlight or explain Augustine's stated purposes for the *Confessions*. First of all, although the *Confessions* was not written at the time of active persecutions against the church, the remarkable extent to which Augustine so frankly and vulnerably textualized his internal struggles of sin, faith, and continence indicates that Augustine wrote his text, at least in part, to work out his personal struggle with spirituality against the backdrop of the eclectic

12. Weintraub, *Autobiography*, 20.

13. Scott, “Literary Self-Sacrifice,” 39. See also John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine: The Growth of St. Augustine's Mind up to His Conversion*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Alba House, 2001), xvii-xix.

14. Augustine, *Retractations*, 2.6.1, in *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, vol. 7. The Library of Christian Classics, ed. and trans. Albert C. Outler (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 24.

15. See Henry Chadwick, “On Re-reading the *Confessions*,” in *St. Augustine the Bishop: A Book of Essays*, ed. Fannie LeMoine and Christopher Kleinhenz (New York: Garland, 1994), 139-165.

16. Brown, *Augustine*, 162.

17. See Chadwick's article “On Re-reading the *Confessions*,” 139.

cultural-religious ethos of the fourth-century Roman world.¹⁸ In fact, the *Confessions* is often classified as a religious autobiography or a confession form of autobiography because of its narrative mode and style.¹⁹

The motif and contents of the *Confessions* reflect Augustine's Greco-Roman heritage.²⁰ For instance, it has been suggested that Augustine frequently incorporated and reinterpreted Plotinus' *Enneads* in the *Confessions*.²¹ Robert J. O'Connell argues that the *Confessions* is a Christianized version of Platonic philosophical anthropology that describes a soul's ascending return to God.²² Robert J. Forman claims that the *Confessions* is, basically, a "reworked *Aeneid*" in Christian language.²³ Like *Aeneid*, the *Confessions* describes a soul's movement from the physical

18. Weintraub, *Autobiography*, 19-21. Weintraub rejects the socio-economical or political changes as being the primary reasons for the writing of the *Confessions*, although the social changes would have had a greater impact than the political.

19. Jaroslav Pelikan, "Writing as a Means of Grace," in *The Art and Craft of Religious Writing*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 87-88. Although the autobiographical character of the *Confessions* is generally accepted, some scholars view the distance between the textualized self and the historical self of the *Confessions* with more skepticism. They question the genre based on two main reasons. One comes from the speculations regarding the overall historicity of the *Confessions*, particularly of the conversion scene in the ninth book. The other comes from the purpose and function of the last four books and how they adhere to the first nine books. See Robert J. O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 3-11.

20. Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960), 92.

21. Ryan, "Introduction," 18, 22; Brown, *Augustine*, 166-168; John F. Harvey, "Moral Theology of the Confessions of Saint Augustine" (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1951), xxi.

22. *Augustine's Confessions*, 188. O'Connell maintains that Augustine's quest for God by turning inward is Neo-Platonic in orientation and content. Christianity and Platonism are "substantially at one" for Augustine. Philip Cary also concludes that the self of the *Confessions*' assiduous turning toward the divine in the self's interiority makes the text essentially Platonic. What Augustine does in the *Confessions* is to turn upwards or outside the self to envision God but only to turn back inward. There is, therefore, a lack of durable "otherness" in Augustine's return to inwardness. See P. Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 140-145.

23. *Augustine and the Making of a Christian Literature: Classical Tradition and Augustinian Aesthetics*. Text and Studies in Religion, vol. 65 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1995), 39-100.

to the metaphysical in a metaphorical mode to reach its goal, but in Augustine's text, the "hero" of the text "actually made the journey."²⁴

It should be noted, however, that Augustine was not a mere "spiritual centaur" and that the *Confessions* is not just "a bizarre fusion of Christianity and Neo-Platonism."²⁵ Rather, the *Confessions*, on the one hand, "powerfully expresse[s] both the breakdown and the rescue of classical culture;"²⁶ while, on the other hand, portraying a vivid Trinitarian theological analysis of Christian spirituality (13.12.13; 13.13.14).²⁷ Because Augustine believed that the chief responsibility of a bishop is to interpret the biblical texts properly and because he had concluded that his involvement with the Manichees was not a philosophical problem but ultimately a "failure to accept the Bible," he especially sought "to exegete his life by the teachings of the scriptures" (11.2.2; 11.2.4).²⁸

Therefore, Augustine's *Confessions* is decisively a Christian product in its content and goal. In it, Augustine, having already renounced secular language and rhetoric (9.4.7), puts to test his proficiency with a new language mediated by the biblical texts.²⁹ The *Confessions* contains references from over fifty books of the Bible.³⁰ Not only do the last three books comprise Augustine's exegesis of the beginning verses of Genesis, but also other books are replete with direct or paraphrased biblical verses.³¹ In fact, "[p]ractically every page of the *Confessions* includes a refer-

24. Forman, *Augustinian Aesthetics*, 51.

25. Robert A. Herrera, "Augustine: Spiritual Centaur?" in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue*, ed. Frederick Van Fleteren, Joseph C. Schnaubelt, and Joseph Reino (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 159-161, 172.

26. Gilkey, "Augustine's Legacy," 426. Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.27.38.

27. Herrera, "Augustine: Spiritual Centaur?," 172. See also Susan Mennel, "Augustine's 'I': The 'Knowing Subject' and the Self," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (Fall 1994): 291; Calvin L. Troup, *Temporality, Eternity, and Wisdom: The Rhetoric of Augustine's Confessions* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 7. Troup repudiates "the alleged influence of Neoplatonism" in the *Confessions*. His entire work is an attempt to demonstrate that Augustine's understanding of and incorporation of the incarnation of the Word of God thoroughly colors Augustine's hermeneutics. See also Troup's discussion on chapter two entitled as "The Significance of Incarnational Wisdom in Time," 82-116.

28. Brown, *Augustine*, 162.

29. Paul Burns, "Augustine's Distinctive Use of the Psalms in the *Confessions*: the Role of Music and Recitation," *Augustinian Studies* 24 (1994): 143.

30. Harvey "Moral Theology of the Confessions of Saint Augustine," xx.

31. Burns, "Augustine's Distinctive Use of the Psalms," 133. For a comprehensive list of the scripture verses directly cited or alluded to in the *Confessions*, see the index in *Les Confessions*, vol 2, French trans. E. Tréhorel and G. Bouissou. Oeuvres de Saint Augustine, 13 (Paris, France: Desclée De Brouwer, 1962).

ence to a biblical text or at least an allusion to a biblical theme. Augustine frequently refers to the Psalms, and it is not unusual to find three or four quotations from the Psalms on a single page of the *Confessions*.³² Among over five hundred references to the Old Testament, more than two hundred citations are from the Psalms. In fact, the *Confessions* opens with words from Psalms 144:3 and 146:5.³³ From the New Testament, Pauline letters are most frequently cited.³⁴ Indeed, the famous “*tolle lege*” scene (8.12.29) leads Augustine to open up Romans 13:13-14.

Secondly, some scholars claim that Augustine purposely fashioned his text in the spirit of Athanasius’s *The Life of Anthony* in order to provide a model ascetic text for devotional life.³⁵ Within the *Confessions*, Augustine makes several direct references to St. Anthony the ascetic monk and the ascetic lifestyle in his text (6.13.24; 8.6.15; 8.11.29; 9.12.33). According to Chadwick, Augustine saw asceticism as “a means to an end,” perhaps as a necessary “means” to maturing as a Christian.³⁶ Also, another distinguished Augustine scholar, Pierre Courcelle, conjectures that Augustine’s depictions of several critical scenes in the book demonstrate a skillful fictional and symbolic literary adaptation of an earlier ascetic text such as *The Life of Anthony*.³⁷ For Geoffrey Galt Harpham, the *Confessions* is “an exemplary ascetical text” deliberately partitioned into three seemingly unrelated yet integral ascetic stages of development so that it can function as a text of sacrificial offering unto God.³⁸

32. George Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 179.

33. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1: “You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised: great is your power and to your wisdom there is no limit.” See also Psalms 144:3 and 146:5. Augustine’s Old Latin Bible uses a different numbering system of the Psalms. The readers of the *Confessions* should note that Augustine’s Bible edited Psalms 9 and 10 as well as Psalms 114 and 115 as single Psalms but divided Psalm 116 and Psalm 147 into two. See Henry Chadwick, “Introduction,” in *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xxxvi. This paper refers to Augustine’s own numbering of the Psalms.

34. Burns, “Augustine’s Distinctive Use of the Psalms,” 133.

35. Tyler T. Roberts, “Confessing Philosophy/Writing Grace: Derrida, Augustine, and the Practice of Deconstruction,” *Soundings* 79 (Fall/Winter 1996): 494.

36. Henry Chadwick, “The Ascetic Ideal in the History of the Church,” in *Monks, Hermits, and the Ascetic Tradition*, ed. W. J. Sheils (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 1-23.

37. Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les “Confessions” de saint Augustine* (Paris: De Bocard, 1950), 188-202. See also Weintraub, *Autobiography*, 18-25.

38. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 91.

Thirdly, Chadwick also sees an apologetic dimension in the “undercurrent” of the *Confessions* and hence claims that it was written not just for Christians but also “addressed to a critical pagan intelligentsia, in whose eyes the Church was a collection of largely uneducated people.”³⁹ Chadwick’s conjecture may explain why Augustine included refutations against Manichees and other religious/philosophical thoughts as well as his inclusion of the extensively philosophical/theological discussions contained in Books X to XII, before concluding his text with Book XIII on the creation of the world.

In conclusion, although Augustine’s *Confessions* was not produced to in times of persecution, that it was written for edification of the church is unquestionable by its content and form. As Eugène Portalié, an esteemed Augustinian scholar noted, the *Confessions* enjoys unrivaled appreciation among his extant works.⁴⁰ The church’s historic engagement with this text testifies to its capacity to generate heuristic insights regarding Christian life and to rejuvenate the spirit of confession in the life of the church.⁴¹

The Source of the *Confessions*

If Augustine wrote the *Confessions* for the double purpose of edifying others and praising God, what would ensure the integrity of Augustine’s text? In Augustine’s *Confessions*, the word “confession” occurs a hundred and eleven times in verb form (*confiteor*) and noun (*confession*) form.⁴² As it has been explained previously, Augustine’s choice title carries a double sense of “accusation of oneself” and “praise of God.” The entire *Confessions* is composed as a collection of the confessions of faith, sin, and praise in which each part of the threefold confessions is interweaved with others.⁴³ Often, one form of confession leads to other forms of confessions, and all the modes of confession in the text culminate in praising God for pardoning Augustine’s sins, for healing his sick soul, and for revealing to him who he is as God’s redeemed creature and a conversational partner. In fact, the entire text “rests in the imparted sense of grace, and the heart filled with this flows over in *confessio laudis*.”⁴⁴

39. See Chadwick, “On Re-reading the *Confessions*,” 139-165.

40. Eugène Portalié, *A Guide to the Thought of St. Augustine*, trans. Ralph J. Bastian with an introduction by Vernon J. Bourke (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1960), 40.

41. Scott, “Literary Self- Sacrifice,” 39.

42. Brown, *Augustine*, 175-176.

43. Brown, *Augustine*, 166-167; Mary T. Clark, “Introduction,” in *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings* (Ramsey: Paulist, 1984), 9.

44. Weintraub, *Autobiography*, 22. See also Scott, “Literal Self-Sacrifice,”

The inevitable difficulties involved in this daunting task of textualizing confessions include being confronted by the scrutiny of the indubitable Truth as well as the anticipatory criticisms from the intended readers (10.3.3-4.6).⁴⁵ As Augustine confesses, taking an inventory of memory involves having to deal with the ever-ominous propensity toward self-delusion induced by pride and opacity of the mind and heart.⁴⁶ However, Augustine's predicament does not consummate in despair, for the arduous and poignant task of narrating his conflicted, obscure interior is munificently propelled by the grace that restrains him from sin and the grace that supplies hope to run toward "truth" and "light," God (1.5.5 and 10.1.1). Therefore, built within the construct of confession in the form of self-accusation are the belief in God's revealing grace and an anticipation of God's pardoning grace, both of which lead the confessor to praise God. Without God's preceding revelation of Himself and of the confessor's sinful state, the confessor would not be able to accuse himself or praise God with integrity. In this way, Augustine's experience of rendering textual confessions is raised up to the level of writing the grace of life precisely because his writing is an inscription of a genuine divine-human interaction. Throughout the *Confessions*, the dynamics of grace involved in confessing serves as a framework within which to understand the work's entire content and motive.⁴⁷

Augustine's first *Confessions* illustrates what is discussed above and thereby functions as the "initial coordinates" of the entire *Confessions*:⁴⁸

You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised: great is your power and to your wisdom there is no limit. And man who is a part of your creation, wishes to praise you, man who bears about within himself his mortality, who bears about within himself testimony to his sin and testimony that you resist the proud. You arouse him to take joy in praising you, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. Lord, grant me to know and understand which is first, to call upon you or to praise you, and also which is first, to know you or to call upon you? But how does one who does not know you call upon you? For one who does not know you might call upon another instead of you. Or must you rather be called upon so that you may be known? Yet, "how shall they believe without a preacher?" "And they shall praise the Lord that seek him," for they that seeks him find him, and finding him they shall praise

39.

45. See also O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 1: xvii-xviii.

46. Book X is especially colored with such preoccupation. See, for instance, Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.28.39; 10.32.48; 10.35.56–10.36.60; 1.5.6.

47. Brown, *Augustine*, 175.

48. Troup, *Temporality, Eternity, and Wisdom*, 39-43. See Augustine, *Confessions*, 5.1.1; 10.1.1; 10.1.2; 11.9.11.

him. Lord, let me seek you by calling upon you, and let me call upon you by believing in you, for you have been preached to us. Lord, my faith calls upon you, that faith which you have given to me, which you have breathed into me by the incarnation of your Son and through the ministry of your preacher.⁴⁹

Augustine orchestrates the *Confessions* like a “symphony” that begins with a dramatic prelude of “notes” interpolated from the psalms of praise: “You are great, O Lord, greatly to be praised: great is your power and to your wisdom there is no limit.”⁵⁰ With these resounding melodies that are words, the first confession signals that all the confessions must be interpreted from the vantage point of praising God. Moreover, implicit in these decisive opening words is Augustine’s unwavering confession of faith in the biblical testimonies of God. Augustine’s desire to praise God, however, is quickly—and perhaps even destined to be—halted by the inevitable apprehension a mortal being experiences when invoking God. God had “aroused” in him a “desire” to praise God, yet the confessor knows that this task is presumptuous. Who shall supply proper speech to articulate this noble yet impossible desire?

Augustine, therefore, is suspended in a tensive interplay between the gift of the “joy in praising” God, which is the consummate desire, and the inherent incapacity to penetrate into his own opacity and the mystery of the Creator.⁵¹ In other words, Augustine realizes that to address God in a form of confession requires proper knowledge of both himself and God, neither of which he confidently possesses. At this critical junction, the tempo of praise quickly digresses into “self-reflection and doubt,” where Augustine ends up confessing the anxiety and anguish of being alienation from God.⁵² In the postlude, Augustine finally summons God again by the fortitude of his faith and thereby grounds his confession in God. Here, Augustine realizes that in the incarnation of the Son, grace has already preceded Augustine’s own invocation of God (1.10.16; 10.5.7).⁵³ Just as God is the only proper origin of the mystery of life, God is also the fountain of Augustine’s confessions of praise and faith.

49. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1.

50. O’Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine*, 91. For the verses interpolated see Ryan, “Notes,” in *Confessions*, 371. He cites Ps 144:3 and Ps 146:5.

51. See also O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 2:12; Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 321.

52. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 2:12.

53. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 2:17; William Mallard, *Language and Love: Introducing Augustine’s Religious Thought through the “Confessions” Story* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1994), 11.

Consequently, throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine essentially “disclaims the authority for his own text” and points to God as being the source of his confessions.⁵⁴ See, for instance, *Confessions* 5.1.1:

Accept the sacrifice of my confessions from the hand that is my tongue, which you have formed and aroused to confess to your name. Heal all my bones, and let them say, “Lord, who is like to you?” No man who makes confession to you teaches you what take place within him, for a closed heart does not close out your eye, nor does man’s hardness turn back your hand. You loose it when you will, either in mercy or in vengeance, and there is no one that can hide himself from your heat. Let my soul praise you, so that it may love you, and let it confess your mercies before you, so that it may praise you.

The implication of invoking God in confessions is enormously significant, for in doing so Augustine is indicating that his text is not a mere collection of self-contained thoughts but a product of reciprocal exchange between God and Augustine.⁵⁵ The *Confessions* invokes God’s name in personal terms and fully anticipates a “responsive engagement”—an event of revelation and inspiration—from God.⁵⁶ For this reason, the *Confessions* is often classified as a text of sustained prayer.⁵⁷ As such, the *Confessions* “does not represent Augustine’s prayer life as signifier represents the signified; the text is itself the thing signified, the very prayer itself the act of communication between Augustine and God.”⁵⁸

In conclusion, Augustine’s *Confessions* is not an abstract or impersonal treatise about confession or prayer. Rather, in its remarkably vivid and intentionally personal (even vulnerable) tone, the text conveys the sense that Augustine is inscribing the contents of his conversations with God. This highly unusual method of writing informs the reader that Augustine’s text is a result of the faithful engagement between God and Augustine. Here, faith as a response to divine love shown toward the confessor functions as a vehicle of divine-human dialogue and thereby

54. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 2:5. See also John Cooper, “Why Did Augustine Write Books XI-XIII of the *Confessions*?” *Augustinian Studies* 2 (1971): 42.

55. Just within Book I, the references to the Psalms specifically to invoke God are found as many times as the following examples: 1.1.1–1.2.4; 1.4.4; 1.5.5; 1.6.10; 1.20.30. See Chadwick’s parenthetical citations of the biblical texts Augustine alludes to in his confessions in Chadwick, *Confessions*, Book I. Chadwick traces down more references than does Ryan.

56. Robert, McMahan, *Augustine’s Prayerful Ascent: An Essay on the Literary Form of the “Confessions”* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), xv, 5-22.

57. McMahan, *A’s Prayerful Ascent*, xi-xxii.

58. O’Donnell, *Augustine*, 83.

donates integrity to the text's content. The content of the *Confessions*, therefore, becomes endowed with God's enlightening and guiding grace.

The Gifts of the *Confessions*

As already mentioned, Augustine wrote his text to give an account of his life before God and others in service to God (1.15.24). In doing so, Augustine chose to use a surprisingly unprecedented personal resource for analysis and reflection—himself.⁵⁹ Fully cognizant of the implications and responsibility of textualizing his “inside” for the public eye, Augustine offered the *Confessions* as a sacrifice of gift to “stir up” his and others' hearts and to edify them (5.1.1; 9.13.34; 10.3.4; 10.4.5; 11.2.3). He writes that he is confessing his inner-self with “the hand that is [his] tongue” and offering it as a “sacrifice” (5.1.1).

Although Augustine's *Confessions* contains narrations of his life, however, he “imposed a drastic, fully conscious choice of what is significant” to his narrative.⁶⁰ He left behind “many things,” so that the he might “hasten” toward making urgent confessions to God (3.12.21). By his “heart's hand” he “brushes” away from the “palace of his memory” the elements of his life that are non-essentials to his purpose and strives to “unveil” only the elements that are significant to his purpose (10.8.12). In addition, throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine's vivid and intimate textual prayer maintains “an unflinching consistency of tone and authenticity of style;” it is unassuming, unpretentious in a manner appropriate to a man praying with a “pen in hand.”⁶¹

Whether or not Augustine's text is authentically and exclusively autobiographical, it is indelibly marked by an intensely personal tone

59. For instance, even though prayer was already “a recognized vehicle for speculative inquiry” in Augustine's time, it was usually included only as “a preliminary stage” of lifting up the philosopher's mind to God. Also, a tradition of writing a religious autobiography that includes prayers and discussions on mortality and temptations was available to Augustine, but he took this tradition to a “climax” in the *Confessions*. What is also unique about the *Confessions* is that the format of prayer is maintained throughout the book as a literary device that carries vivid, intimate conversations with God. See Brown, *Augustine*, 158, 165-167; Ryan, “Introduction,” 33; O'Donnell, *Augustine*, 82.

60. Brown, *Augustine*, 169. See also Harvey, “Moral Theology of the *Confessions*,” xix; Outler, “Introduction,” in *Confessions*, 7. Augustine gives details about certain events while burying others between the lines. See Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.7.11 and 2.4.9. He, however, says very little about the events or persons that did not contribute significantly to his conversion to the Christian faith—that is, his father or his concubine.

61. O'Donnell, *Augustine*, 82.

and thereby bequeaths extraordinary relevancy.⁶² The readers, though distanced from Augustine by fifteen centuries of “wrenching cultural differences,” still find themselves powerfully engaged by “an account that seems so compellingly familiar” and are inspired to examine their own lives through the textuality of Augustine’s text.⁶³ Therefore, this final section will deal with the question, “What does the *Confessions*, by its composition and style, bequeath to the reader about life?” In other words, “In confessing his life before God and others, what has Augustine bequeathed to the reader for edification?”

First, Augustine’s textual conversations unveil vividly that the task of praising the Creator confronts the human with a dual dilemma of acquiring a proper knowledge of God and of himself; hence the plea “I shall know you, my knower, I shall know you, ‘even as I am known’” (10.1.1).⁶⁴ Through the modality of an extended textual prayer, the *Confessions* shows that one can only pursue a relationship with God from a “God-centered reference point” in the paradoxical context of the intimacy and distance between God and the human.⁶⁵ For God cannot be properly known in solipsistic abstraction, Augustine, through the reenactment of his own struggle, explains that a man’s “flighty mind [wandering] among mental pictures of past times” can dare to behold

62. As mentioned before, Augustine’s *Confessions* is also classified as a spiritual autobiography by some scholars. The biography of Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, is the nearest antecedent for Augustine’s work. The *Confessions*, however, show considerable innovations from that of Aurelius’s autobiography in structure, style, and content. In the Roman world, the “I” of the autobiography was used in a social sense of the “we,” but Augustine deliberately broke with that tradition and uses it both in a public and private sense. See William S. Babcock, “Patterns of Roman Selfhood: Marcus Aurelius and Augustine of Hippo,” *Perkins Journal* 29 (Winter 1976): 2-19.

It should also be noted that James M. Campbell and Martin R. McGuire argue contrary to above. They claim that even though the *Confessions* use emotionally powerful expressions, the work as a whole conveys an impersonal, objective tone because the theme is controlled by Augustine’s theocentric interests. See James M. Campbell and Martin R. McGuire, “Introduction,” in *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. James M. Campbell and Martin R. McGuire (New York: Prentice Hall, 1936), 16-17.

63. Donald Capps and James E. Dittes, “Introduction,” in *The Hunger of the Heart: Reflections on the Confessions of Augustine*, ed. Donald Capps and James E. Dittes. Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Monograph Series 8 (West Lafayette: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1990), xi.

64. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 175-176.

65. William Mallard, *Language and Love: Introducing Augustine’s Religious Thought through the “Confessions” Story* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1994), 12; O’Donnell, *Augustine*, 80.

the mind of God by grounding oneself in God's eternity (11.13.15–11.31.41).

Secondly, the intertextual dynamics of Augustine's text make an implicit claim that a genuine dialogue (prayer) cannot circumvent the risk of a self-disclosure to the partner, God.⁶⁶ Hence, the *Confessions* offers the reader a powerfully relevant model of dealing with the perennially enigmatic, elusive, intriguing and yet compelling questions regarding selfhood and self-understanding.⁶⁷ Augustine's text illustrates forcefully the dilemma of a man who is baffled with himself, while simultaneously driven to unveil himself. His cry "To myself I became a great riddle (4.4.9)" and that he can neither "easily gather" himself together (10.24.40), nor flee from himself (8.7.16), still continues to resonate with the hearts and mind of the contemporary readers of his text.

Thus, the *cogito* of the *Confessions* is not the autonomous, abstract Cartesian *cogito* and as such has made an undeniable impact in Western consciousness.⁶⁸ The text dramatically portrays that the human-self is "chronologically and tragically tempered" and that this predicament forces him to depend on divine grace for continence (10.5.7).⁶⁹ Self-knowledge, therefore, is to be established "by discovering how one is oriented to" God, who "is the ultimate context and power of life" (10.6.8-10.6.10); it is a mediated, radically finite, and relational knowledge.⁷⁰ Also, self-understanding can only emerge through unending, integrative processes of gathering and recasting the past stored in the opaque recesses of memory by grounding oneself in God (1.6.7; 5.2.2; 10.40.65).⁷¹ In sum, Augustine's text instructs that the tasks of

66. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 175-176.

67. The self-knowledge portrayed in the *Confessions* has stirred up a "renewed" response from Augustine scholarship. See Robert Dodaro, "Loose Canons: Augustine and Derrida on Their Selves," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 103 n. 29.

68. Margaret R. Miles, "Infancy, Parenting, and Nourishment in Augustine's *Confessions*," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 3 (September, 1982): 351; John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 87-8. See also Lawrence Rothfield, "Autobiography and Perspective in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine," in *Comparative Literature* 33 (Summer 1981), 212; Troup, *Temporality, Eternity, and Wisdom*, 150-172.

69. R. C. Dean, "A Social Profile of Christian Experience: Language - Praxis . . . Self . . ." (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1994), 229.

70. Donald Capps and James E. Dittes, "Introduction," xi.

71. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X and XI. They are devoted to the function of memory in relation to selfhood and temporal existence in relation to the eternity of God.

knowing God and understanding oneself are intricately linked to each other insofar as “all true knowledge of God impinges on how a person understands his or her identity and personal history, and the final meaning of the events that make up personal history can be determined only in light of what one knows about that ultimate reality who is Creator and Redeemer of everything that is.”⁷² By implication, in writing out the process of gaining a truer self-knowledge in proper relation to God, Augustine has bequeathed a text about life that is engraced by personal divine attention.

Thirdly, the *Confessions* conveys that praying, whether in addressing God or confessing oneself, requires the use of proper language.⁷³ The *Confessions* reminds the reader that the Bible is the ultimate text that gives a voice to one’s otherwise chaotic past and feelings for reflection or reimagining (10.5.7–10.8.15).⁷⁴ Through the words of the Bible, faith calls to faith so that God may grant the grace of words to the opaque self.⁷⁵ The *Confessions*, therefore, teaches that self-integration is “a process” that “is at once psychologically acute, Christologically centered, and ecclesiastically directed.”⁷⁶ Here, the early church’s practice of confessing faith in the context of community is made radically personal and existential in Augustine’s *Confessions*.

Specifically, Augustine’s theological appropriation of the expressions and literary style found in the Psalms into his own textual prayer informs the reader that Psalms can serve as a model of prayer and of interpreting one’s life, emotions, and thought.⁷⁷ In other words, it instructs that the

72. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 175-176.

73. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1–1.5.6.; 10.41.66–10.43.70; 11.2.4; 11.22.28; 8.1.1. See also O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, vol. 1, xvii.

74. Stroup, *Narrative Theology*, 180.

75. Thompson, *Christian Doctrine, Christian Identity*, 83. John C. McCarthy illustrates the same point in his perceptive analysis of 1.1.1. See his “Desire, Recollection, and Thought: On Augustine’s *Confessions* I, 1,” *Communio* 14 (Summer 1987): 146-157.

76. Pamela Bright, “Singing the Psalms: Augustine and Athanasius on the Integration of the Self,” in *The Whole and the Divided Self*, ed. David E. Aune and John McCarthy (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 119-120.

77. Basil Studer, *The Grace of Christ and the Grace of God in Augustine of Hippo: Christocentric or Theocentric?* trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1997), 78. It has been pointed out that daily recitation, singing, and reflection on the Psalms formed a major part of Augustine’s daily prayer and that this practice contributed significantly to Augustine’s writings and his self-understanding. Augustine began his works on the Psalms around 392 and by the time the *Confessions* were being written, he would have become well acquainted with them. In fact, the content, structure, and style of the *Confessions* are deeply affected by the orality, expression of pathos, and existential characteristics of the

world of biblical texts can create a “permissive atmosphere of God’s felt presence,” where the human subject can freely converse with God in space and time.⁷⁸ Furthermore, Augustine’s courage to disclose in his textual prayer the “sudden leaps of thought and resolutions of perplexing difficulties” illustrates that God graciously intervenes, directs, and guides our prayers.⁷⁹ Therefore, by showing that the human in the poverty of his soul can meet God—which is the life’s consummate goal—in the grace-generating atmosphere of biblically and theologically shaped prayer, the *Confessions* teaches its readers to celebrate life in all of its cadences.⁸⁰ In writing the *Confessions*, Augustine is essentially writing about the opulence of divine grace poured out in and through all experiences of human life.

Fourthly, in offering a “penetrating analysis of” the “complex experiences” of his heart in the form of an extended prayer, Augustine has textualized a stirring concerto of feelings in a manner that can be appropriated and reenacted by readers.⁸¹ The “relentlessly gripping” affective power of Augustine’s text continues to generate fruitful discussions and a passion for life and God.⁸² As Paul Ricoeur’s works have shown, human life consists of a dense and complicated affective dimension. Feelings are more than emotions triggered by biochemical functions of the body, for they hide “the implicit intention of ‘tensions’ and ‘drives’ of the human subject.”⁸³ Feelings precede reflection and have ontological bearing. Therefore, it is through interpreting one’s fundamental feelings

Psalms. The intertextuality of the *Confessions* reveals, however, that Augustine is not just psychologizing the words of the Psalms, for they bear a definite Augustinian theological cast even as they are appropriated on existential terms. See Burns, “Augustine’s Distinctive Use of the Psalms,” 133-142. See also Vernon J. Brouke, “Augustine on Psalms,” in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Augustine, Biblical Exegete*, ed. Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 56.

78. Outler, “Introduction,” in *Confessions*, 17

79. McMahon, *A. ’s Prayerful Ascent*, xiii.

80. Pelikan, “Writing as a Means of Grace,” in *Art and Craft*, 87.

81. Portalié, *A Guide to the Thought of St. Augustine*, 40.

82. Donald Capps and James E. Dittes, “Introduction,” xi. The collection of articles presented in this book shows the breadth of contemporary psychological and psychoanalytic engagement with the *Confessions*. Walter Houston Clark also gives a similar appraisal of Augustine’s *Confessions*. See “Depth and Rationality in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5 (1965): 144-148. See also Sandra Lee Dixon, *Augustine: The Scattered and Gathered Self* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 1-24 for a historical survey of the major essays written on the topic.

83. Paul Ricoeur, *The Fallible Man*, rev. and tran. Charles A. Kelbley (1965; repr., New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 86-90.

that one can learn about life's goals, actions, aspirations, passions, and desires directed toward the world and the transcendence.⁸⁴

Centuries before Ricoeur, Augustine penned the *Confessions* as a book that exegetes the affective force of life in order to understand and fulfill his desire to "desire God's will" and to praise him properly.⁸⁵ His text demonstrates that feelings find their highest expressions in the mode of prayer because prayer articulates the suppliant's desire and struggles to conform to God's will.⁸⁶ In Augustine's analyses of "his feelings with ferocious honesty," the reader learns that an earnest prayer requires a proper condition of the heart just as it would require the right use of language.⁸⁷ Specifically, the *Confessions* demonstrates that the language of biblical texts can ably lead the confessor to exegete his obtuse, confused, and even unformed feelings and eventually transform them to declaring love and praise to God (10.2.2; 10.27.38). Hence, in textualizing his personal confessions, Augustine has offered an enriching possibility for gaining clarity to otherwise obtuse feelings.

In conclusion, the *Confessions*' personally and conscientiously narrated interior gives the text a sense of immediacy and relevancy that in turn invites others to partake from the same pardoning and transforming grace inscribed in it.⁸⁸ Even though Augustine chose to use himself as the object of analysis in the *Confessions*, his text is decidedly not about himself. Rather, it is a testimony about the Triune God's, "the life of life," gracious dealings with him in life (11.2.3; 9.13.34). It is about "the mysterious actions of God's prevenient and provident grace" bestowed upon human life.⁸⁹ In this way, Augustine's *Confessions* announces that Augustine's story is ultimately every believer's story of pilgrimage of grace and hence offers itself as a grace suffused prescription for life.⁹⁰

Therefore, central to what the text instructs is to "read" one's own life through Augustine's textualized life, which he has configured and

84. Ricoeur, *The Fallible Man*, 83-132.

85. Roberts, "Confessing Philosophy," 493.

86. Timothy Maschke, "St. Augustine's Theology of Prayer: Gracious Transformation," in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Augustine, Mystic and Mystagogue*, 32.

87. Brown, *Augustine*, 171.

88. Edward Pusey, "Introduction," in *Confessions*, trans. Edward Pusey (1838; repr., New York: Dutton, 1936), xii; Outler, "Introduction," in *Confessions*, 15. The dynamic interplay between "I" and "we" in the way Augustine addresses God in the *Confessions* supports this conjecture. See, for instance, Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1; 11.1.1; 13.3.3; 13.32.47-13.38.53.

89. Outler, "Introduction," 17.

90. Thompson, *Christian Doctrine, Christian Identity*, 72.

refigured in the ultimate text and context for life—the Bible.⁹¹ Particularly significant in this invitation is the famous conversion scene in Book VIII, which seems to have been strategically designed to invite the reader to emulate Augustine's decision to "Take and Read."⁹² With poignancy and humility providentially punctuated by hope and trust in God's gracious love, Augustine's text illustrates that life is a hermeneutical journey to be configured and refigured through the grace of the biblical texts.⁹³ In writing the *Confessions* as a textual theological sacrifice to God, Augustine has bequeathed a text that testifies to the extravagant divine grace bestowed in life and thereby unpacks and elucidates the grace of life.

91. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.3.3–10.4.6. See also his *Retractations*, 2.6.1–2.2.6.

92. Leo C. Ferrari, "Saint Augustine on the Road to Damascus," *Augustinian Studies* 13 (1982): 151-170 argues that the *tolle lege* scene is dramatized to create a mimetic affect upon the reader.

93. Stroup, *Narrative Identity*, 209.