

THE
CONFESSIONS
OF
Saint
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This Whitaker House edition of *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* is a revision of the highly respected Edward B. Pusey English translation. This version has been edited for content and also slightly updated for the modern reader. Words, expressions, and sentence structure have been revised for clarity and readability.

THE CONFESSIONS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

(Originally titled *The Confessions*)

ISBN: 978-1-64123-145-9

eBook ISBN: 978-1-62911-088-2

Printed in the United States of America

© 1996 by Whitaker House

Whitaker House

1030 Hunt Valley Circle

New Kensington, PA 15068

www.whitakerhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data (Pending)

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INTRODUCTION

Aurelius Augustinus, better known as Saint Augustine, was born of poor parents in the small town of Thagaste in Numidia, North Africa (present-day Algeria), AD 354. His father, Patricius, a pagan who lived somewhat of a loose life, was converted to Christianity before his death; his mother, Monnica, on account of her personal piety and her influence on her son, is one of the most revered women in the history of the Christian church.

Augustine was educated at the University of Carthage and, according to his own account, belonged to a group of rowdy friends and joined in their intemperate living. While there he entered into a fourteen-year relationship with a young woman who became the mother of his son, Adeodatus. He also joined the heretical sect of the Manicheans, who professed to have received from their founder a higher form of truth than was taught by Christ.

At the close of his university career, which had been brilliant in spite of distractions, he returned to his native town, and first there, and later in Carthage and Rome, he practiced as a teacher of rhetoric, training young lawyers in the art of debating. By the time he was about twenty-seven he had begun to have doubts as to the validity of the Manichean faith, but it was not until 387,

while he was professor of rhetoric in the University of Milan, that he was converted to Christianity and received baptism. He then gave up his profession and became an ascetic, studying the foundations of faith; writing, chiefly against his former sect; and conversing with a group of disciples, first at Rome and then in his native town.

When he was on a visit to Hippo, not far from Thagaste, he went into the priesthood, and in 395, he became Bishop of Hippo, an office which he filled for the remaining thirty-five years of his life. Though he took a leading part in the activities of the African church through all this time, and gradually became one of the most distinguished ecclesiastical figures in the Roman Empire, the care of his diocese and the writing of his books formed his chief occupations. He continued to lead a life of extreme simplicity and self-denial, and in his pastoral establishment he trained a large number of disciples who became leaders in the church. The strength of his hold on these younger men was due not merely to his intellectual ascendancy but also to the charm and sweetness of his disposition.

A large part of his literary activity was devoted to controversy with the heretics of his time. His two most important books are *The City of God* and the *Confessions*. The former of these was provoked by the attacks upon Christianity, which were roused by the disasters that began to fall upon the Western Empire in the beginning of the fifth century. Augustine replies to these by pointing out the failure of the heathen gods in former times to protect the people who trusted in them, and he goes on to expose the evil influence of the belief in the old mythology, in a detailed examination of its traditions and mysteries. The second part of the book deals with the history of the "City of Man," founded upon love of self, and of the "City of God," founded upon love of God and contempt of self. This work is a vast storehouse of the knowledge of the time, and it is a monument not only to

Augustine's great learning but also to the keenest metaphysical mind of the age.

The Confessions speaks for itself. The earliest of autobiographies, it remains unsurpassed as a sincere and intimate record of a great and pious soul laid bare before God.

BOOK ONE

*Confessions of the greatness and unsearchableness of God,
of God's mercies in infancy and boyhood, and of human
willfulness. Of Augustine's own sins of idleness, of the abuse
of his studies, and of God's gifts up to his fifteenth year.*

Great are You, Lord, and greatly to be praised. Great is Your power, and Your wisdom infinite. (See Psalm 145:3; 147:5.) And man wants to praise You; man, but a particle of Your creation; man that bears about him his mortality, the witness of his sin, the witness that You “*resisteth the proud*” (James 4:6; 1 Peter. 5:5). Yet man wants to praise You, he, but a particle of Your creation. You awaken us to delight in Your praise, for You made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.

Grant me, Lord, to know and understand which is first: to call on You or to praise You? And, again, to know You or to call on You? Who can call on You, not knowing You? For he that does not know You may call on You as something other than You are. Or, is it rather that we call on You so that we may know You? But “*how then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?...how shall they [believe] without a preacher?*” (Romans 10:14). And, “*they shall praise the LORD that seek*

him” (Psalm 22:26). For they who seek will find Him (see Matthew 7:7), and they who find will praise Him. I will seek You, Lord, by calling on You, and will call on You, believing in You, for to us have You been preached. My faith, Lord, will call on You, my faith which You have given me, by which You have inspired me, through the Incarnation of Your Son, through the ministry of the preacher, St. Ambrose.

And how shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord, since, when I call for Him, I shall be calling Him to myself? And what room is there within me, where my God can come into me? Where can God come into me, God who made heaven and earth? Is there, indeed, O Lord my God, nothing in me that can contain You? Do heaven and earth then, which You have made and wherein You have made me, contain You? Or, because nothing which exists could exist without You, does therefore whatever exists contain You? Since, then, I too exist, why do I seek that You should enter into me, who would not exist were You not in me? Why? Because I am not now in hell, and yet You are there also. For if I go down into hell, *“thou art there”* (Psalm 139:8). I could not exist then, my God, could not exist at all, were You not in me. Or, rather, I would not exist unless I were in You of whom are all things, by whom are all things, and in whom are all things. (See Romans 11:36.) Even so, Lord, even so. Where do I call You, since I am in You? Or from where can You enter into me? Where can I go beyond heaven and earth that thus my God should come into me, He who has said, *“Do not I fill heaven and earth?”* (Jeremiah 23:24).

Do the heaven and earth then contain You since You fill them? Or do You fill them and yet overflow since they do not contain You? And where, when the heaven and the earth are filled, do You pour forth the remainder of Yourself? Or do You have no need that anything should contain You, who contain all things, since what You fill, You fill by containing it? For the

vessels which You fill do not uphold You, since though they were broken, You were not poured out. And when You are poured out on us, You are not cast down, but You uplift us; You are not dissipated, but You gather us. But You who fill all things, do You fill them with Your whole self? Or, since all things cannot contain You wholly, do they contain part of You? And all at once the same part? Or each its own part, the greater more, the smaller less? And is, then, one part of You greater, another less? Or, are You wholly everywhere, while nothing contains You wholly?

What are You then, my God? What but the Lord God? "*For who is God save the LORD?*" (Psalm 18:31). Or who is God save our God? Most high, most good, most potent, most omnipotent; most merciful, yet most just; most hidden, yet most present; most beautiful, yet most strong; stable, yet incomprehensible; unchangeable, yet all-changing; never new, never old; all-renewing and bringing age upon the proud, and they did not know it; ever working, ever at rest; still gathering, yet nothing lacking; supporting, filling, and overspreading; creating, nourishing, and maturing; seeking, yet having all things. You love, without passion; are jealous, without anxiety; repent, yet grieve not; are angry, yet serene; change Your words, Your purpose unchanged; receive again what You find, yet never lost; never in need, yet rejoicing in gains; never covetous, yet exacting interest. You receive over and above so that You may owe, and who has anything that is not Yours? You pay debts, owing nothing; remit debts, losing nothing. And what have I now said, my God, my life, my holy joy? Or what does any man say when he speaks of You? Yet woe to him who does not speak, since even the most eloquent are mute.

Oh, that I might repose on You! Oh, that You would enter into my heart and inebriate it, that I may forget my ills and embrace You, my sole good! What are You to me? In Your pity,

teach me to utter it. Or what am I to You that You demand my love, and, if I do not give it, are angry with me and threaten me with grievous woes? Is it then a slight woe not to love You? Oh, for Your mercies' sake, tell me, Lord my God, what You are to me. "*Say unto my soul, I am thy salvation*" (Psalm 35:3). So speak, that I may hear. Behold, Lord, my heart is before You; open the ears of it, and "*say unto my soul, I am thy salvation.*" After this voice let me run and take hold on You. Do not hide Your face from me. Let me die—for fear that I die—only let me see Your face.

Narrow is the mansion of my soul; enlarge it so that You may enter in. It is ruinous; repair it, Lord. It has that within which must offend Your eyes; I confess and know it. But who will cleanse it? Or to whom should I cry, except You? Lord, "*cleanse thou me from [my] secret faults*" (Psalm 19:12), and spare Your servant from the power of the enemy. "*I believed, therefore have I spoken*" (Psalm 116:10). Lord, You know. Have I not confessed against myself "my sins to thee," and You, my God, have forgiven "*the iniquity of my sin*" (Psalm 32:5)? I do not contend in judgment with You (see Job 9:3), You who are the truth; I am afraid of deceiving myself for fear that my iniquity will lie to itself. Therefore, I do not contend in judgment with You, for "*if thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?*" (Psalm 130:3).

Yet allow me to speak to Your mercy, me, "*dust and ashes*" (Genesis 18:27). Yet allow me to speak, since I speak to Your mercy and not to scornful man. You too, perhaps, despise me, yet You will "*return and have compassion on [me]*" (Jeremiah 12:15). For what would I say, O Lord my God, but that I do not know from where I came into this dying life—shall I call it?—or living death. Then immediately did the comforts of Your compassion take me up, as I heard, for I do not remember it, from the parents of my flesh, out of whose substance You

did at some time fashion me. Thus there I received the comforts of woman's milk. For neither my mother nor my nurses stored their own breasts for me, but You did bestow the food of my infancy through them, according to Your ordinance, by which You distribute Your riches through the hidden springs of all things.

You also gave me to desire no more than You gave, and to my nurses willingly to give me what You gave them. For they, with a heaven-taught affection, willingly gave me what they abounded with from You. Therefore, this my good from them was good for them. Indeed, it was not from them but through them, for from You, God, are all good things, and from my God is all my health. This I have since learned, when You, through these Your gifts, inside me and outside, were proclaiming Yourself to me. Then I knew only to suck, to repose in what pleased, and to cry at what offended my flesh, nothing more.

Afterward, I began to smile, first in sleep, then waking. So it was told to me of myself, and I believed it, for we see the like in other infants, though of myself I do not remember it. Thus, little by little, I became conscious of where I was and began to want to express my wishes to those who could content them. But I could not express them because the wishes were inside of me, and they outside; nor could they by their senses enter into my spirit. So I flung about at random, limbs and voices, making the few signs I could and such as I could, like—though in truth very little like—what I wished. And when I was not immediately obeyed, my wishes being harmful to me or unintelligible, then I was indignant with my elders for not submitting to me, with those owing me no service, for not serving me, and avenged myself on them by tears. Such I have learned infants to be from observing them. That I was myself such, they, all unconscious, have shown me better than my nurses who knew it.

And, behold! My infancy died long ago, and I live. But You, Lord, live forever, and in You nothing dies, for before the foundation of the worlds and before all that can be called “before,” You are, and You are God and Lord of all which You have created. The first causes of all things unabiding and of all things changeable abide in You, fixed forever. The springs abide in You unchangeable, and the eternal reasons of all things unreasoning and temporal live in You. Tell me, Lord, as Your suppliant, all-pitying, tell me, Your pitiable one, tell me, did my infancy succeed another age of mine that died before it? Was it that which I spent within my mother’s womb? For of that I have heard something and have myself seen women with child; and again, before that life, God, my joy, was I anywhere or anybody? This I have none to tell me, neither father or mother, nor experience of others, nor my own memory. Do You mock me for asking this and bid me to praise You and acknowledge You for that which I do know?

I acknowledge You, Lord of heaven and earth, and praise You for my first rudiments of being and my infancy, of which I remember nothing, for You have appointed that man should from others guess much about himself and believe much on the strength of weak females. Even then I had being and life, and, at my infancy’s close, I could seek for signs by which to make known to others my feelings. Where could such a being come from, except from You, Lord? Will any be his own designer? Or can there elsewhere be derived any vein, which may stream essence and life into us, except from You, Lord, in whom essence and life are one? For You Yourself are supremely essence and life.

You are most high and are not changed (see Malachi 3:6), neither does today come to a close in You. Yet in You does it come to a close because all such things also are in You. For they had no way to pass away unless You upheld them. And since “*thy years shall have no end*” (Psalm 102:27), Your years are one

today. How many of ours and our fathers' years have flowed away through Your "today" and from it received the measure and the mold of such being as they had, and still others will flow away and so receive the mold of their degree of being. But "*thou art the same*" (Psalm 102:27), and all things of tomorrow and all beyond and all of yesterday and all behind it, You have done today. What is it to me if any do not comprehend this? Let him also rejoice and say, "What thing is this?" (See Exodus 16:15.) Let him rejoice even thus and be content by not discovering it to discover You, rather than by discovering it, not to discover You.

Hear, O God. Alas, for man's sin! So says man, and You pity him, for You made him, but sin in him You did not make. Who reminds me of the sins of my infancy? For in Your sight none is pure from sin (see Job 25:4), not even the infant whose life is but a day upon the earth. Who reminds me? Does not each little infant in whom I see what I do not remember of myself? What then was my sin? Was it that I hung upon the breast and cried? Should I now do so for food suitable to my age, I would justly be laughed at and reproofed. What I then did was worthy of reproof, but since I could not understand reproof, custom and reason forbade me to be reproofed. For when we are grown, we root out and cast away those habits.

Now, no man, though he prunes, wittingly casts away what is good. Or was it then good, even for a while, to cry for what, if given, would hurt? Or bitterly to resent that people free and my own elders, the very authors of my birth, did not serve me? That many besides, wiser than me, did not obey the nod of my good pleasure? To do my best to strike and hurt because commands were not obeyed, which would have been obeyed only to my hurt? The weakness then of an infant's limbs, not its will, is its innocence. I myself have seen and even known an envious baby; it could not speak, yet it turned pale and looked bitterly on its foster brother. Who does not know this? Mothers and nurses

tell you that they appease these things by I do not know what remedies. Is that, too, innocence, when the fountain of milk is flowing in rich abundance, not to allow one to share it, one who is in extreme need and whose very life as yet depends on that? We bear gently with all this, not as being no or slight evils, but because they will disappear as years increase. For, though tolerated now, the very same tempers are utterly intolerable when found in riper years.

You, then, Lord my God—who gave life to this my infancy, furnishing thus with senses, as we see, the frame You gave, compacting its limbs, ornamenting its proportions, and for its general good and safety, implanting in it all vital functions—You commanded me to praise You in these things, to confess to You, and “*to sing praises unto thy name, O Most High*” (Psalm 92:1). For You are God, almighty and good, even if You had done nothing but only this which none could do but You, whose unity is the mold of all things, who out of Your own fairness makes all things fair and orders all things by Your law. This age, then, Lord, of which I have no remembrance, which I take on others’ words and guess from other infants that I have observed, true though the guess be, I am loath to include in this life of mine which I live in this world. Much like the time I spent in my mother’s womb, is it hid from me in the shadows of forgetfulness. But if “*I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me*” (Psalm 51:5), where, I beseech You, my God, where, Lord, or when, was I, Your servant, guiltless? But, behold! That period I pass by, and what have I now to do with that of which I can recall no vestige?

Moving on from infancy, I came to boyhood, or rather it came to me, displacing infancy. Nor did that depart—for where did it go?—and yet it was no more. For I was no longer a speechless infant, but a speaking boy. This I remember, and I have since observed how I learned to speak. It was not that my

elders taught me words in any set method, as, soon after, they did with other learning. I, rather, longing by cries and babblings and various motions of my limbs to express my thoughts that I might have my will, and yet unable to express all I willed, or to whom I willed, did myself, by the understanding which You, my God, gave me, practice the sounds in my memory. When they named anything, and turned toward it as they spoke, I saw and remembered that they called what they pointed out by the name they uttered. That they meant this thing and no other was plain from the motion of their body, the natural language, as it were, of all nations, expressed by the countenance, glances of the eye, gestures of the limbs, and tones of the voice, indicating the affections of the mind as it pursues, possesses, rejects, or shuns. Thus by constantly hearing words, as they occurred in various sentences, I understood gradually what they stood for, and, after having imitated these signs with my mouth, I thereby could express my will through language. Thus I exchanged with those about me these current signs of our wills and so launched deeper into the stormy intercourse of human life, though still depending on parental authority and the beck of elders.

Oh God, my God, what miseries and mockeries did I now experience when I was taught that it was proper for a boy to be obedient to his teacher, in order that in this world I might prosper and excel in rhetoric through which I should receive the "*praise of men*" (John 12:43) and deceitful riches. Next, I was put in school to get learning, in which I, poor wretch, did not know what use there was. Yet, if I was idle in learning, I was beaten. This was considered right by our forefathers, and many who followed the same course before us framed for us weary paths through which we were obliged to pass, multiplying toil and grief upon the sons of Adam. But, Lord, we found that men called upon You, and we learned from them to think of You, according to our ability to comprehend, as of some great One

who, though hidden from our senses, could hear and help us. In this way I began, as a boy, to pray to You, my aid and refuge. In praying to You, I broke the chains of my tongue. Though I was small, I prayed to You with no small earnestness, that I might not be beaten at school. And when You did not hear me, my elders, my own parents who did not wish me any harm, mocked my beatings which were then so great and grievous to me.

Is there anyone, Lord, who is so noble of soul and who is devoted to You with such intensity and love—for there is a kind of thick-witted person who is able in some way to do this—but is there anyone who, from cleaving devoutly to You, is endued with so great a spirit that he can think lightly of the racks and hooks and other torments, against which, throughout all lands, men call on You with extreme dread? Does anyone mock at those who are most bitterly feared, as our parents mocked the torments which we suffered in boyhood from our masters? We did not fear our torments less, and we did not pray less to You to escape them. Yet we sinned, in writing, reading, or studying less than was demanded of us. We did not want, Lord, memory or capacity of what Your will provided in proportion to our age, but our sole delight was play. For this we were punished by those who yet themselves were doing the same. But elder folks' idleness is called "business." The idleness of boys, which is really the same, is punished by those elders, and no one sympathizes with either boys or men. Will any of sound discretion approve of my being beaten as a boy because, by playing at ball, I made less progress in studies that would only lead me to play more unbecomingly when I became a man? And did not the one who beat me do the same thing for which I was beaten? And was not he, if defeated in some trifling discussion with his fellow-tutor, more embittered and jealous than I when beaten at ball by a play-fellow?

And yet, I sinned in this, Lord God, the creator and orderer of all things in nature—but of sin the orderer only. Oh, Lord my God, I sinned in transgressing the commands of my parents and those of my masters. For what they, with whatever motive, would have had me learn, I might afterward have put to good use. I disobeyed, not from a better choice, but from love of play: loving the pride of victory in my contests and to have my ears tickled with lying fables that they might itch the more. The same curiosity was flashing from my eyes more and more for the shows and games of my elders. Those who give these shows are held in such esteem that almost all parents wish their children to become like them. Yet, they are very willing that their children should be beaten if those very games detain them from the studies which would enable them to become the givers of them. Look with pity, Lord, on these things, and deliver us who call upon You now; deliver those too who do not yet call on You, so that they may call on You and You may deliver them.

As a boy I had already heard of an eternal life, promised us through the humility of the Lord our God who stooped to our pride. Even from the womb of my mother who greatly hoped in You, I was sealed with the mark of His cross and salted with His salt.¹ You saw, Lord, how while I was yet a boy I was once seized by a sudden stomach ailment and was near to death. You saw, my God, for You were my keeper, with what eagerness and what faith I sought, from the pious care of my mother and Your church, the baptism of Your Christ, my God and Lord. Upon which the mother of my flesh was much troubled, since, with a heart pure in Your faith, she even more lovingly “*travail[ed] in birth*” (Galatians 4:19) for my salvation. She would in eager haste have provided for my consecration and cleansing by the health-giving sacraments, confessing You, Lord Jesus, for the

1. A rite in the western churches, on admission as a catechumen, previous to baptism, denoting the purity and uncorruptedness required of Christians.

remission of sins, if I had not suddenly recovered. And so, in case I would again be polluted, should I live, my cleansing was deferred because the defilements of sin would, after that washing, bring greater and more perilous guilt. I then already believed, as did my mother and the whole household except my father. Yet he did not prevail over the power of my mother's piety in me, so that I should not believe as he did not yet believe. For it was my mother's earnest care that You, my God, rather than he, should be my father, and in this You did aid her to prevail over her husband whom she, the better, obeyed, therein also obeying You who have so commanded.

I beseech You, my God, I would like to know, if You so will, for what purpose my baptism was then deferred? Was it for my good that the rein was laid loose, as it were, upon me for me to sin? Or was it not laid loose? If not, why does it still echo in my ears on all sides, "Let him alone, let him do as he will, for he is not yet baptized"? Yet regarding bodily health, no one says, "Let him be worse wounded, for he is not yet healed." How much better then if I had been at once healed, and then, by my friends' diligence and my own, my soul's recovered health had been kept safe in Your keeping, You who gave it. Better, truly. But how many and how great the waves of temptation seemed to hang over me after my boyhood! These my mother foresaw, but she preferred to expose to them the clay out of which I might afterward be molded, rather than the very cast when made.

In boyhood itself, however, so much less dreaded for me than youth, I did not love study and hated to be forced to it. Yet I was forced, and this was good for me. But, I did not do well, for, unless forced, I would not have learned anything. But no one does well against his will, even though what he does is done well. Yet neither did they who forced me do well. What was well came to me from You, my God. They were without regard as to how I should make use of what they forced me to

learn, except to satiate the insatiate desires of a wealthy beggary and a shameful glory. But You, by whom the very hairs of our heads are numbered (see Matthew 10:30), did use for my good the error of all who urged me to learn. And my own error, that of not wanting to learn, You used for my punishment—a fit penalty for so small a boy and yet so great a sinner. So by those who did not do well, You did well for me, and by my own sin You did justly punish me. For You have commanded, and so it is, that every inordinate desire should be its own punishment.

But why did I so much hate the Greek which I studied as a boy? I do not yet fully know. Latin I loved—not what my first masters taught me but what the so-called grammarians taught me. Those first lessons of reading, writing, and arithmetic, I thought were as great a burden and penalty as any Greek. And yet where did this come from, except from the sin and vanity of this life because I was *“flesh; a wind that passeth away, and cometh not again”* (Psalm 78:39)? For those first lessons were certainly better because they were more certain. By them I obtained, and still retain, the power of reading what I find written and writing what I will. In the others, I was forced to learn the wanderings of one Aeneas, while not considering my own wanderings, and to weep for dead Dido because she killed herself for love. All the while, with dry eyes, I endured my miserable self dying among these things, far from You, my God, my life.

What is more miserable than a wretched being who does not pity himself, weeping over Dido who died out of love for Aeneas, but not weeping over his own death for lack of loving You, O God? Light of my heart, Bread of my inmost soul, Power who gives strength to my mind, who quickens my thoughts, I did not love You. I committed fornication against You, and all around me as I was fornicating there echoed, “Well done! Well done!” For the friendship of this world is fornication against You (see James 4:4), and “Well done! Well done!” echoes on

until one is ashamed therefore to be a man. All this I did not weep for, I who wept for Dido slain, and “seeking by the sword a stroke and wound extreme,” I myself sought all the while a worse extreme, I the worst and lowest of Your creatures, having forsaken You though I was dust returning to dust. And if forbidden to read all this, I was grieved that I could not read what grieved me. Madness like this is thought a higher and a richer learning than that by which I learned to read and write.

But now, my God, cry aloud in my soul, and let Your truth tell me, “Not so, not so. Far better was that first study.” For, behold, I would readily forget the wanderings of Aeneas and all the rest rather than how to read and write. But over the entrance of the grammar school a veil is drawn! This is not so much an emblem of “nothing hidden,” as it is a cloak of error. Do not let those whom I no longer fear cry out against me while I confess to You, my God, whatever my soul will and acquiesce in the condemnation of my evil ways that I may love Your good ways. Do not let either buyers or sellers of grammar-learning cry out against me. For if I question them whether it is true that Aeneas came one time to Carthage, as the poet tells, the less learned will reply that they do not know, the more learned that he never did. But should I ask with what letters the name “Aeneas” is written, everyone who has learned this will answer me rightly, according to the symbols which men have agreed upon. If again, I should ask which might be forgotten with the least detriment to the concerns of life, reading and writing, or these poetic fictions, who does not foresee what all must answer who have not wholly forgotten themselves? I sinned, then, when as a boy I preferred those empty studies to those that are more profitable, or rather, loved the one and hated the other. “One and one, two,” “two and two, four.” This was to me a hateful singsong. “The wooden horse lined with armed men,” and “the burning of Troy,” and “Creusa’s shade and sad similitude,” were the choice spectacles of my vanity.

Why then did I hate the Greek classics which have similar tales? For Homer also curiously wove similar fictions and is most sweetly vain, yet he was bitter to my boyish taste. And so I suppose would Virgil be to Grecian children when forced to learn him as I was Homer. Difficulty, in truth, the difficulty of a foreign language, dashed, as it were, with gall all the sweetness of the Grecian fables. Not one word of it did I understand, and to make me understand I was urged vehemently with cruel threats and punishments.

There was also a time in which I knew no Latin, but this I learned, without fear or suffering, by mere observation amid the caresses of my nursery and the jests of friends, smiling and playfully encouraging me. This I learned without any pressure of punishment to urge me on. For my heart urged me to give birth to its conceptions, which I could only do by learning words not of those who taught, but of those who talked with me; in whose ears also I gave birth to the thoughts, whatever I conceived. There is no doubt, then, that a free curiosity has more force in our learning these things than a frightful enforcement. Yet this enforcement restrains the roving of that freedom, according to Your laws, my God. Your laws, administered from the master's cane to the martyr's trials, being able to temper in us something that is wholesome out of something that is bitter, bringing us back to Yourself from that deathly pleasure which lures us from You.

Hear, Lord, my prayer. Do not let my soul faint under Your discipline. Do not let me faint in confessing to You all Your mercies, by which You have drawn me out of all my most evil ways so that You might become a delight to me above all the allurements which I once pursued, that I may most entirely love You and clasp Your hand with all my affections. You may yet rescue me from every temptation, even to the end. Behold, Lord, my King and my God, it is for Your service that I speak, write, read, think. For You did grant me Your discipline while I was learning vanities, and

my sin of delighting in those vanities You have forgiven. In them, indeed, I learned many a useful word, but words may as well be learned in things that are not vain. That is the safe path for the steps of youth.

But woe is the torrent of human custom! Who will stand against it? How long will it not be dried up? How long will the sons of Eve roll into that huge and hideous ocean which even they who climb the cross scarcely overpass? Did not I read in it of Jove the thunderer and the adulterer? Both, doubtless, he could not be, but it was so the false thunder might resemble and pander to real adultery. And now which of our gowned masters lends a sober ear to one who from their own school cries out, "These were Homer's fictions, transferring things human to the gods; would he had brought down things divine to us!" Yet more truly had he said, "These are indeed his fictions, but attributing a divine nature to wicked men, that crimes might be no longer crimes, and whoever commits them might seem to imitate not abandoned men, but the celestial gods."

And yet, you hellish torrent, into you are cast the sons of men who pay rich fees for obtaining such learning. A great solemnity is made of it when this is going on in the forum within sight of laws appointing a salary beside the scholar's payments. This torrent lashes the rocks and roars, "Hence words are learned, hence eloquence most necessary to gain your ends, or maintain opinions." As if we would never have known such works as "golden shower," "lap," "beguile," "temples of the heavens," or others in that passage, unless Terence had brought a lewd youth upon the stage, setting up Jupiter as his example of seduction.

Viewing a picture, where the tale was drawn,
Of Jove's descending in a golden shower
To Danaë's lap, a woman to beguile.

And then mark how he excites himself to lust as by celestial authority:

And what God? Great Jove,
 Who shakes heaven's highest temples with his thunder,
 And I, poor mortal man, not do the same!
 I did it, and with all my heart I did it.

Not one bit more easily are the words learned for all this vileness, but by their means the vileness is committed with less shame. Not that I blame the words, for they are, as it were, choice and precious vessels; rather, I would blame that wine of error which is drunk to us in them by intoxicated teachers. If we, too, do not drink, we are beaten and have no sober judge to whom we may appeal. Yet, my God, in whose presence I now without hurt may remember this, all this wretchedly I learned willingly with great delight, and for this was pronounced a promising student.

Bear with me, my God, while I say something of my intelligence, Your gift, and on what feebleness I wasted it. For a task was set before me, troublesome enough to my soul, upon terms of praise of shame and fear of being beaten, to speak the words of Juno as she raged and mourned that she could not, "This Trojan prince from Latium turn." These words I had heard that Juno never uttered, but we were forced to go astray in the footsteps of these poetic fictions and to say in prose much what the poet expressed in verse. The one whose speaking was clothed in the most fitting language, maintaining the dignity of the character, in which the passions of rage and grief were most preeminent, was most applauded. What is it to me, my true life, my God, that my speech was applauded above so many of my own age and class? Is not all this smoke and wind? And was there nothing else on which to exercise my wit and tongue? Your praises, Lord, Your praises might have kept firm the yet tender shoot of my heart by the prop of Your Scriptures, if it had not trailed away amid these

empty trifles, a defiled prey for the fowls of the air. For in more ways than one do men sacrifice to the rebellious angels.

But is it surprising that I was thus carried away to vanities and went from Your presence, my God, when men like this were set before me as models: men who, if in discussing some action of theirs—in itself not evil—committed some barbarism or grammatical error and were embarrassed when criticized? But they, when using rich and adorned and well-ordered speech while talking about their own immoral life, were delighted when they were praised? These things You see, Lord, and You hold back Your anger. *“Long suffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth”* (Psalm 86:15). But, will You hold Your peace forever?

Yet even now You draw out of this horrible gulf the soul that seeks You, that thirsts for Your pleasures, whose heart says to You, *“Thy face, LORD, will I seek”* (Psalm 27:8). For evil desires mean separation from You. (See Romans 1:21.) It is not by walking or a change of location that men leave You or return to You. Or did Your younger son seek out horses or chariots or ships, fly with visible wings, or journey on foot so that he might in a far country waste in riotous living all You gave him at his departure? You were a loving Father when You gave, and even more loving to him when he returned empty. So then it is in lustful, that is, in evil desires that we are truly removed from Your face.

Behold, Lord God, behold patiently as You are accustomed, how carefully the sons of men observe the established rules of grammar received from those who spoke before them, neglecting the eternal covenant of everlasting salvation received from You. A teacher or learner of the hereditary laws of pronunciation seems to offend men more by speaking without the aspirate, leaving off the “h” in “human” and mispronouncing it as “*uman* being” in defiance of the laws of grammar, than if he, a “human being,” hated a “human being” in defiance of You. As

if any enemy could be more hurtful to him than his own seething hatred toward his adversary. Or as if he could more deeply wound someone he is persecuting than he could wound his own soul by his own hatred.

Assuredly no science of letters can be so innate as the record of a person's conscience that he is doing to another what from another he would be loath to suffer. How deep are Your ways, God, You the only great One, who sit silent on high and by an unwearied law, dispensing the punishment of blindness for lawless desires. In quest of the fame of eloquence, a man standing before a human judge, surrounded by a human throng, declaiming against his enemy with fiercest hatred, will take heed most watchfully, lest, by an error of the tongue, he murder the word "human being," but takes no heed, lest, through the fury of his spirit, he murder the real human being.

This was the world at whose gate I lay unhappy in my boyhood; this was the stage where I had feared more to make an error in speech than, after having committed one, to envy those who had not. These things I speak and confess to You, my God, for which I received praise from men, whom I then thought it all virtue to please. For I did not see the abyss of vileness where I was "*cut off from before thine eyes*" (Psalm 31:22). Before them, what could be more foul than I was already, displeasing even such as myself? With innumerable lies I deceived my tutor, my masters, and my parents, because of my love of play, my eagerness to see vain shows, and my restlessness to imitate them!

I was also enslaved by greediness and stole from my parents' cellar and table, so that I could barter with other boys for their games, which they enjoyed as much as I did. In this play, too, I often tried to win unfairly, but in doing so I conquered myself through my vain desire for preeminence. The behaviors I refused to put up with or which I fiercely reprimanded in others were the

same offenses I was committing toward others. If I was detected and was upbraided, I chose rather to quarrel than to yield.

Is this the innocence of boyhood? Not so, Lord, not so; I cry for Your mercy, my God. These very sins, as we grow older, these very sins are transferred from tutors and masters, from nuts and balls and sparrows, to magistrates and kings, to gold and manors and slaves, just as severer punishments replace the cane. It was the low stature then of childhood which You, our King, did command as a symbol of humility when You said, "*of such is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 19:14).

Yet, Lord, my thanks were due to You, the Creator and Governor of the universe, most excellent and most good, even if You had destined for me boyhood only. Even then I was alive. I lived and felt and had an implanted providence over my own well-being—a trace of Your mysterious unity out of which I was derived. By the inward sense, I guarded the rest of my senses, and in these minute pursuits and in my thoughts on things minute, I learned to delight in truth. I hated to be deceived, had a vigorous memory, was gifted with speech, was soothed by friendship, and avoided pain, baseness, and ignorance. In so small a creature, what of this was not wonderful, not admirable? But all are gifts from my God; it was not I who gave them to me. These are good, and these together are who I am. Good, then, is He who made me; He is my good, and before Him I will exalt Him for every good that I had as a boy. For it was my sin that I sought pleasures, sublimities, and truths in His creatures—myself and others—and not in Him. Therefore, I fell headlong into sorrows, confusions, and errors. Thanks be to You, my joy and my glory and my confidence; my God, thanks be to You for Your gifts, but do preserve them in me. For in doing so You will preserve me, and those things which You have given me will be enlarged and perfected. And, I myself shall be with You since You have given me the gift of life.