

# Hating Homer, Fighting Virgil: Books in Augustine's *Confessions*

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The title of this paper implies some exceptional criticism of two of the most famous poets of antiquity. The work in which this can be found is itself one of the masterpieces of ancient literature, the *Confessions* by St. Augustine, commonly considered to be the first great autobiography of antiquity.<sup>1</sup>

There is, inevitably, a first, major point of debate here: can this work be studied at all in the context of the ancient novel, fictional as the novel is?<sup>2</sup> In the first part of my paper, I will deal with this important question. I will then move on to some remarkable observations by Saint Augustine on Homer and Virgil, and on the crucial role of reading and writing books in his narrative.

## *Narrative elements*

The *Confessions* are generally regarded as a true, if somewhat subjective, account of Augustine's life and spiritual development. So which possible links may be said to exist between the *Confessions* and the genre of the ancient novel and its essentially fictional nature?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The leading Latin text and commentary is O'Donnell 1992. Among modern English translations are Chadwick 1992 and Boulding 1997. The bibliography on Augustine and the *Confessions* is alarmingly vast. Convenient starting points are O'Donnell 2005 (a new biography; on the *Confessions* see 35-86) and Mann 2006 (a collection of studies on the *Confessions*), both with references to further literature.

<sup>2</sup> In the field of ancient novel studies, the work has been linked with Apuleius' *Met.* only in Shumate 1996, who studies both works as tales of conversion.

<sup>3</sup> The notion is modern, of course, since 'fictionality' as such was not felt to be a specific criterium in Greek and Roman literature. Meanwhile, it seems interesting to note that the fictional nature of ancient novels has not always been clearly seen by ancient and later readers. There is a famous remark on Apuleius by Augustine in *Civ.* 18,18, where he

There are in fact several general points of similarity between Augustine's book and the fictional narratives. First, the *Confessions* are a narrative text in prose, or more specifically, a first person narrative, which easily ranges the work along the *Satyrical* and the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>4</sup> One might doubt whether we should associate the *Confessions* with the 'comical-realistic' or the 'idealising' subgenres distinguished by Holzberg in his excellent handbook on the ancient novel.<sup>5</sup> 'Comical' seems rather misplaced as a description of Augustine's work, and 'realistic' is what most of his readers would probably accept as a relevant term. On the other hand, there is also clearly a lot of idealisation, both of Augustine's own spiritual growth and of his religious feelings. So the book seems to fit both subgenres.

In addition to being a first person narrative, the *Confessions* also have a manifest protagonist, young Augustine,<sup>6</sup> whose tale involves all kinds of adventures, even if religious sentiments and reflections seem to dominate much of the text. Augustine relates his early youth (book 1), his period in Carthage (book 3), his gradual growth to baptism (particularly book 8), and baptism itself (9,14).<sup>7</sup> The story is, in the end, the quest of a hero who has to surmount great difficulties (his aversion of Christianity, his propensity for sinning, the long psychological struggle with his mother), but who succeeds in the end.

Of course, Augustine's quest implies a spiritual journey, but there is actually also a lot of regular travel, from Thagaste to Madauros and Carthage, from Carthage to Rome, further to Milan, Cassiciacum, and back to Ostia<sup>8</sup> and, by implication, to Africa, as Hippo is the final destination in

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seems inclined to take the *Metamorphoses*, with its magical elements, as a personal account by Apuleius himself; see Hunink 2003, 86-87 and Holzberg 2006, 100.

<sup>4</sup> The sheer association of the *Confessions* with the two Roman novels raises some serious questions straight away. Modern research into Petronius and Apuleius has shown that the reliability of the narrators in both novels is dubious and problematic. This, then, should make readers of Augustine's ego-narrative suspicious from the start: what we read may be something more than plain facts.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Holzberg 2006, 38-39.

<sup>6</sup> One might consider the possibility that the real protagonist in the *Confessions* is God, since for Augustine He is no doubt infinitely more important than his own mere person. However, in technical, narratological terms, God does not really enter the story as an actor, but rather as a driving force motivating events.

<sup>7</sup> As O'Donnell 2005, 61 remarks, Augustine's words referring to his baptism are 'long hidden away not only in mid-book and mid-paragraph but mid-sentence by most editors of the *Confessions*'.

<sup>8</sup> In the actual text of the *Confessions*, the physical travel continues only as far as Ostia, the scene of Monnica's death in book 9. In books 10-13 there is no more travel, as the book ends with reflections on various major themes of philosophy and theology. Incidentally,

Augustine's life and also the place where he composed the *Confessions*.<sup>9</sup> Most of these travels are described shortly, but there is considerable narrative tension in some of them. For instance, in 5,15, Augustine secretly sails to Rome, sneaking away by ship and leaving his mother behind while she is praying. The passage graphically describes their separation and adds a portrait of Monnica's grief that is full of pathos.<sup>10</sup>

With a protagonist (Augustine), interesting minor characters (such as Alypius, Ambrose, and Monnica), changes of setting, a clever story-teller, and some dramatic action, the *Confessions* seem to fit in quite well with the general pattern of the ancient novel.

### *Typical motifs*

But there is more than these rather superficial resemblances. If conscious literary reflection is also typical of the ancient novel,<sup>11</sup> much of this can also be found in the *Confessions*. I will return to Homer and Virgil shortly. Let me just add that Augustine has drawn in another major text of reference, the Bible, and notably the book of Psalms. At every page of his book there are echoes, allusions and quotations from the Psalms, and the *Confessions* may even be seen as a running reflection on this important book,<sup>12</sup> which was as well known by Augustine's readers as Homer and Virgil were to readers of the ancient novels.

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this may recall the final, eleventh book of Apuleius' *Met.*, which is dominated by the Isis religion.

<sup>9</sup> The sea storms and pirates that are so typical of the ancient novel are missing here, but one might underscore the important role of the harbour city of Ostia in book 9, which at least recalls the many harbours in ancient novels such as Chariton and Petronius.

<sup>10</sup> The travel element is effectively used by Augustine. Notably, half way in 5,15, he inserts a brief description in epic terms of the receding shore, as seen from the ship, with Monnica remaining behind: *Flauit uentus et impleuit uela nostra et litus subtraxit aspectibus nostris, in quo mane illa insaniebat dolore*. Then follows the portrait of Monnica desperately crying and mourning, but in the end praying for her son again. Only at that point, the final destination of the ship is mentioned, with the name of Rome actually closing the passage: *Et tamen post accusationem fallaciarum et crudelitatis meae conuersa rursus ad deprecandum te pro me abiit ad solita, et ego Romam*. Thus, the details on the journey frame the portrait of 'Monnica left in Africa.'

<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to refer to specific articles or books here, but even a quick glance in some recent volumes of *Ancient Narrative* will easily illustrate this point.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. e.g. Fiedrowicz 1997, 47 with some judgments and quotations from earlier studies on Augustine, e.g. that his *Confessions* can be considered as an 'amplifiziertes Psalterium'.

There even seems to be a deliberate confusion of literary genres in the *Confessions*, which is reminiscent of a similar phenomenon in the *Satyrica* and *Metamorphoses*.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Augustine's book is difficult to classify in terms of genre: it can count as a narrative, but also as lyrical, philosophical, or theological, or as a great prayer, a hymn or a panegyric, to mention only the most conspicuous generic associations.

But what about love? At first sight, this crucial element of the novel narratives<sup>14</sup> seems absent. However, Augustine actually does tell us about his relations with women, notably his first amorous encounters in Madauros, and his concubine, who gives him a son, Adeodatus, but surprisingly remains anonymous herself. There is also a second concubine who plays a role in Augustine's life (*Conf.* 6,25), and one might even mention Augustine's mother Monnica, whose love for her son plays an important role in the entire *Confessions*.<sup>15</sup>

All these earthly loves<sup>16</sup> are abandoned and sacrificed for the sake of a higher, heavenly love, the love of man for God. It would not seem misplaced to call the love between Augustine and God the real theme of the book. This love, which has to be discovered and brings all forms of suffering and happiness, produces much of the force and development in the tale. It is symbolized in Augustine's subsequent baptism. Intriguingly, the books 10-13 do not deal with the man Augustine but with God and his creation of the world. So the combination of man and God seems to be very much at the heart of the *Confessions*.

Finally, I briefly mention some other well-known elements from the novel for which some parallel may be found in the *Confessions*. For instance, there is something like the traditional element of 'Scheintod' (apparent death): Augustine regards his whole life before his baptism as a form of death. There are typical motifs like the hero's despair: for many books, Augustine seems utterly unhappy, as he is unable to attain his goal and reach

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Hunink 2006, where I suggested that deliberate genre confusion had become a typical generic element of the ancient novel.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Holzberg 2006, 39, which explicitly refers to 'erotische Motive' as a defining element in the ancient novel.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine and his relation to women has become a fairly popular topic of research, cf. e.g. Power 1995, 71-128 (esp. 71-107) and Seelbach 2002, 24-61 (Monnica) and 93-117 (Augustine's first concubine).

<sup>16</sup> There is even the occasional touch of nearly explicit eroticism, as in the remark on Augustine's father who observes his young son's sexual maturity in the bath: *Quin immo ubi me ille pater in balneis uidit pubescentem et inquieta indutum adulescentia, quasi iam ex hoc in nepotes gestiret, gaudens matri indicauit* (*Conf.* 2,6).

the love of God. The narrative structure also recalls that of the novel: the tale is told in linear, chronological order, but with digressions and inner stories, and there is even room for moral criticism, e.g. of the school system, the élite, or the vain search for worldly glory.<sup>17</sup>

If all elements are considered in combination, there seems to be more than just the occasional likeness. The great ego tale that is the *Confessions* actually has much in common with the ancient novel, and was arguably influenced by it.<sup>18</sup>

### *Spiritual portrait*

These parallels with the ancient novel do not imply that the *Confessions* should be taken as a piece of fiction. Although it seems wise not to take the book as a factual, objective autobiography, there is no need to assume that the texts do not have any relation to Augustine's life at all and are merely a product of fantasy. A prudent middle course would be to read the *Confessions* as a self-consciously stylized narrative about a man's development, much in line with well-known Latin texts in which authors such as Cicero, Pliny the Younger, or Seneca talk about their lives.

It has frequently been remarked that Augustine also wished to present a specific view of his life. It is not an autobiography in our sense of the word but a 'spiritual portrait', a theological idealisation, in which much has been left out or, in contrast, highlighted. There seems to be a great distance between the narrator and the ego of the past. This is so strong, and the narrator is so negative about his past life (his 'first death'), that there may be said to be a real gap. It is as if the life of a stranger is being told.

Typically, Saint Augustine opens the book with some striking observations about his earliest days: he does not know anything about them from

<sup>17</sup> One may further point to other biographical texts in the ancient tradition, such as Xenophon's *Cyropedia*, Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, and early christian models such as the canonical book of *Acts*, the *Apocryphal Acts*, and early novels on prophets, such as the Pseudo-Clementina; cf. Holzberg 2006, 34-38.

<sup>18</sup> It cannot be proved that Augustine extensively read novels other than Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (see above p.254-255 n.3), which he certainly read. Indeed, it seems difficult to imagine Augustine reading a book like Petronius' *Satyrica*. On the other hand, his incessant search for truth may have inspired him to read anything available in North-Africa. Prior to his inspirational reading of Cicero's *Hortensius* (*Conf.* 4,7) he may even have indulged in reading 'bad' literature which he does not wish to mention in detail, but which may be indicated in general terms in e.g. 1,16 (*falsis fabellis*, mentioned in the immediate context of *curiositas* for *spectacula*) and 4,13 (*libros dulciloquos*).

personal experience, only from hearsay and observation of others and he asks some relevant questions about how he was in his mother's womb and before (*Conf.* 1,7). That would seem a rather unsettling start in a true 'autobiography'.

Worse, the adult Augustine cannot rely on his memory. In book 10 the theory is developed that human memory is as difficult to penetrate as the notion of time. All that we know and remember comes to us through the senses or is already in our mind. Our knowledge of the world around us can only be expressed in terms of expectance, remembrance and oblivion: it is never fixed, it can never be pinned down, but is constantly changing. And concerning time, it seems at least clear that for Augustine the present cannot be grasped, while past and future are non-existent as separate entities, but rather extensions of the present.<sup>19</sup>

I do not wish to elaborate on these philosophical matters, but one thing is clear: these intellectual positions on memory and time imply that a straightforward autobiography with claims of truth is simply impossible. As Augustine says:

*hic est fructus confessionum mearum, non qualis fuerim sed qualis sim*  
(*Conf.* 10,6)

'This is the fruit of my confessions, not how I have been, but how I am'

For him, the tale of his life is, at best, a reconstruction, a convincing account, something on which certain knowledge is beyond reach. One might call this a tale which remains somewhere between fact and fiction.

### *Greek and Latin*

In the second part of this contribution, I will discuss Augustine's remarks on readers and writers, paying special attention to his remarks on Homer and Virgil, and to some key sections in the *Confessions* that involve reading books.

Generally speaking, one may observe that the *Confessions* are full of writers, readers, and books. It is a book based on other books, which is pervaded by Roman learning.<sup>20</sup> The constant intertextual links with the Psalms and the Bible as a whole were already mentioned above. The philosophical

<sup>19</sup> On 'the book of memory,' cf. Wills 2006.

<sup>20</sup> The standard work on Augustine's reception of the Latin classics is Hagendahl 1967.

and theological discussions of books 10-13 are difficult to imagine without books as 'pre-texts', and much the same goes for discussions of Manichaeian teachings, as in book 5. The Manichaeian teacher Faustus is actually well versed in pagan literature<sup>21</sup> and several writers are named, such as Cicero and Seneca (5,11). Various other books and genres are mentioned in the course of the *Confessions*, e.g. books of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. The novel, however, is not mentioned among these, although there is an intriguing reference to *aniles fabulas* in 5,17.<sup>22</sup>

A most surprising piece of literary criticism is provided by Augustine in the first book of his *Confessions*. Here he tells us about his own primary education. Contrary to what might be expected from such a great writer, he writes that he actually hated it. Unlike the capacity to speak, which is learnt spontaneously and freely (1,13), forced education seems a miserable thing to him. The first thing he mentions is that he was beaten at school (1,14). Augustine took a proper aversion for study and school, so he tells, through a lack of inner motivation. This is particularly so in relation to Greek. The crucial passage here is 1,20, which is worth quoting in full.

*Quid autem erat causae, cur graecas litteras oderam, quibus puerulus imbuebar, ne nunc quidem mihi satis exploratum est. Adamaueram enim latinas, non quas primi magistri, sed quas docent qui grammatici uocantur. Nam illas primas, ubi legere et scribere et numerare discitur, non minus onerosas poenalesque habebam quam omnes graecas. Vnde tamen et hoc nisi de peccato et uanitate uitae, qua caro eram et spiritus ambulans et non reuertens? Nam utique meliores, quia certiores, erant primae illae litterae, quibus fiebat in me et factum est et habeo illud, ut et legam, si quid scriptum inuenio, et scribam ipse, si quid uolo, quam illae, quibus tenere cogebam Aeneae nescio cuius errores oblitus errorum meorum et plorare Didonem mortuam, quia se occidit ab amore, cum interea me ipsum in his a te morientem Deus, uita mea, siccis oculis ferrem miserrimus.*

Even now I have not yet discovered the reasons why I hated Greek literature when I was being taught it as a small boy. Latin I deeply loved, not at the stage of my primary teachers but at the secondary level taught by

<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, Augustine is full of scorn for him, and he actually says that he was so disappointed in him that it started his moving away from the Manichaeians.

<sup>22</sup> For readers of the ancient novel, the phrase will evoke the famous remark introducing the Cupid and Psyche tale in Apuleius' *Met.* 4,27 *narrationibus lepidis anilibusque fabulis*, but Augustine's immediate model is probably rather biblical: *ineptas autem et aniles fabulas deuota* (1 Tim 4,7).

the teachers of literature called “grammarians”. The initial elements, where one learns the three Rs of reading, writing, and arithmetic, I felt to be no less a burden and an infliction than the entire series of Greek classes. The root of this aversion must simply have been sin and the vanity of life, by which I was ‘mere flesh and wind going on its way and not returning’ (Ps 77:30). Of course, those first elements of the language were better, because more fundamental. On that foundation I came to acquire the faculty which I had and still possess of being able to read whatever I find written and to write myself whatever I wish. This was better than the poetry I was later forced to learn about the wanderings of some legendary fellow named Aeneas (forgetful of my own wanderings) and to weep over the death of a Dido who took her own life from love. In reading this, O God my life, I myself was meanwhile dying by my alienation from you, and my miserable condition in that respect brought no tear to my eyes. (*Conf.* 1,20; translation: Chadwick 1992, 15)

His early hatred of Greek and of elementary Latin, to both of which he was forced, sharply contrasts with his early love of Latin literature to which he felt attracted. Both then are contrasted to his present judgment at the time of writing. ‘Aeneas and Dido’ now seem silly to him, while the elementary capacity to read and write is now highly appreciated as something useful (also in 1,22).

The next few pages of the *Confessions* explore the subject somewhat into depth. Augustine cried over Dido’s sorry fate, he says, but he was unaware of his own situation, his moving away from God, something that was far worse. Moreover, his love for Virgil was encouraged by his surroundings, but for the wrong reasons: it was merely a symbol of learning which served his prestige and worldly honour.

It remains a question why Augustine did not feel attracted by the similar Greek stories of Homer, who is, as the old and wise writer now says, *dulcissime uanus* ‘most sweetly hollow (useless, unreliable)’ (1,23). His answer is clear: Homer was bitter (*amarus*) for him as a boy, as Virgil is bound to be for Greek boys, for learning a foreign language is a huge obstacle. Again, the writer blames the unnaturalness of being forced, of duty and external motivation.

Inevitably, the old Augustine also strongly objects to various immoral stories told by Homer, such as Jupiter’s adultery (1,25). In this, he stands in a long tradition of anti-Homeric sentiments among philosophers and espe-

cially Christians. Nonetheless, Augustine knew his Homer well enough, as is shown by several quotations and references outside the *Confessions*.<sup>23</sup>

But Vergil's *Aeneid* was different. Young Augustine was fascinated by the love story of Dido and Aeneas, and shed tears for Dido's sorry fate, and he was enthusiastic about stories on Troy: the wooden horse, the fall of Troy, the *umbra Creusae* (1,22), all obviously themes from *Aen.* 2.<sup>24</sup> To a modern reader, it is not immediately clear what exactly can be wrong about being fascinated by a text and feeling emotionally attracted to it. Augustine's answer here is that it is these very emotions that are the problem. As the quotation from 1,20 already showed, in hindsight the author thinks that his emotions were misdirected from what would really be good for him: a concern for Dido replaced concern for his own soul, and reading the story carried him away from himself and from God.

A second argument against Vergil emerges from 1,22. If it is asked, so he argues, whether Aeneas has actually been in Carthage, some scholars will say yes, some no, but if it is asked how his name is spelled, the answer is clear to all, since the name A-e-n-e-a-s is beyond dispute. Here there is a clear contrast again between the certain knowledge reached by 'basic learning' (which is good) and High Literature (which is useless and bad). Literary stories, then, are *poetica figmenta* (1,22), they are simply 'not true'. Surprisingly, it is the very element of fictionality, so crucial to our understanding of the genre of the novel, with which Augustine finds fault in the case of the *Aeneid*.

So Augustine fundamentally disliked Homer, but actually did like Virgil, a love which he tried to eradicate as much as his other worldly loves, notably the love for women and the fascination for public spectacle. But obviously, such great loves cannot be eradicated or denied. As for the *Aeneid*, it is referred to many times in Augustine's works. The book was clearly just too difficult to fight against. It can even be said that the *Confessions* are, to some extent, modelled on the *Aeneid*. The dominant element of suffering, of having to give up one's great love for the sake of a higher, but unknown pur-

<sup>23</sup> For instance, there are eleven occurrences of the name Homer in *Civ.*, mostly for details of mythology.

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, Augustine manages to insert a Virgilian quotation in this larger context in which he distances himself from Virgil: *Iam uero unum et unum duo, duo et duo quattuor odiosa cantio mihi erat et dulcissimum spectaculum uanitatis equus ligneus plenus armatis et Troiaei incendium 'atque ipsius umbra Creusae'* (*Aen.* 2,772). In general on Virgilian quotations in Augustine, see now Müller 2003; on the function of such references in the *Confessions* further Bennett 1988.

pose, the element of self-denial and repressing normal human feelings, all of this is as much typical for both Aeneas and young Augustine.<sup>25</sup>

Even in a more literal sense, the church Father follows the trail of the epic hero by sailing from Carthage to Rome (5,14-15), although Augustine acts entirely freely and on his own accord, unlike Aeneas. Ultimately, he even outdoes Aeneas, for in the end he will also *return* to Africa. In this biographical sense, there is both *imitatio* and *aemulatio*: Augustine surpasses Aeneas.

### *Books at turning points*

Reading books, so it has appeared, was hugely important for Augustine. And this concerned much more than the epics of Homer and Virgil. On closer scrutiny, books appear to be at the very heart of the action at several key moments in the *Confessions*. To conclude this paper, I will briefly mention some major examples to illustrate my point.

In 3,7 Cicero's *Hortensius* is said to be the book that opened Augustine's eyes in the first place, and started his quest for wisdom. Therefore it is reading Cicero that started Augustine's development that lead to his conversion to God:

*et usitato iam discendi ordine perueneram in librum cuiusdam Ciceronis, cuius linguam fere omnes mirantur, pectus non ita. Sed liber ille ipsius exhortationem continet ad philosophiam et uocatur Hortensius. Ille uero liber mutauit affectum meum et ad te ipsum, Domine, mutauit preces meas et uota ac desideria mea fecit alia. Viluit mihi repente omnis uana spes...*

Following the usual curriculum I had already come across a book by a certain Cicero, whose language (but not his heart) almost everyone admires. That book of his contains an exhortation to study philosophy and is entitled *Hortensius*. The book changed my feelings. It altered my prayers, Lord, to be towards you yourself. It gave me different values and priorities. Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me...(*Conf.* 3,7; transl. Chadwick 1992, 38-39)

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<sup>25</sup> One might go further along this line and also compare Monnica with Dido, particularly in the scene mentioned above in which Monnica is left behind in Africa.

In Milan, Augustine is eager to meet the famous Ambrose to ask him some personal questions, but he does not dare to disturb him. This brings in the famous image of Ambrose reading in silence.

*Cum quibus quando non erat, quod perexiguum temporis erat, aut corpus reficiebat necessariis sustentaculis aut lectione animum. Sed cum legebat, oculi ducebantur per paginas et cor intellectum rimabatur, uox autem et lingua quiescebant.*

When he was not with them, which was a very brief period of time, he restored either his body with necessary food or his mind by reading. When he was reading, his eyes ran over the page and his heart perceived the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent. (*Conf.* 6,3; transl. Chadwick 1992, 92).

The lines are well-known for the detail about Ambrose's uncommon manner of reading, and prove that 'reading' in antiquity invariably meant 'reading aloud'. They also simply show the importance of reading for Ambrose, a man who greatly influenced Augustine.

Perhaps most markedly, books trigger important developments in a truly dramatic scene which leads up to a climax in the *Confessions*. In 8,14, Augustine is visited at his home in Milan by Ponticianus, a fellow African. When he observes that Augustine has been reading a book of Saint Paul, he brings up the life of the Egyptian hermit Anthony (c.251-356). The tale about the hermit's life truly captivates Augustine and his friends, and so Ponticianus continues to tell it, and also mentions a book on this life, the *Vita Antonii*. This concerns the famous Greek life by Athanasius of Alexandria (c.293-373), obviously in a Latin translation, possibly the influential one by Evagrius (c.373). As Ponticianus tells, friends of his in Trier (the emperor's residence at that time) read the book and decided to change their lives radically and follow the same monastic pattern.

At that point, twelve years after his reading Cicero's *Hortensius*, as Augustine adds explicitly (8,17), this tale about the *Vita Antonii* makes him feel ashamed about himself, and provokes what can be called an emotional and spiritual crisis. Augustine feels he must now finally give up everything and follow God. He ends up in tears, because he also feels attracted by all kinds of worldly pleasures. This finds a climax in the famous *tolle lege* scene in the garden of his house.

*Et ecce audio uocem de uicina domo cum cantu dicentis et crebro repentis quasi pueri an puellae, nescio: 'Tolle lege, tolle lege'.*

...(I) suddenly heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again: 'Pick up and read, pick up and read.' (*Conf.* 8,29; transl. Chadwick 1992, 152).

Following the example of Anthony, who initially was drawn to solitary life by accidentally hearing the a Gospel passage 'give up everything and follow me' (Mt 19,21), Augustine decides to pick up the first book he can find and read the first chapter his eyes fall on. What he reads then is a passage from the epistles of Saint Paul:

*Non in comessationibus et ebrietatibus, non in cubilibus et impudiciis, non in contentione et aemulatione, sed induite Dominum Iesum Christum et carnis prouidentiam ne feceritis in concupiscentiis. (Rom 13,13)*

Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts.

This single line changes his life and confirms him in his determination to devote his life to God. Alypius then reads the sequel (*Rom* 14,1) and decides to join Augustine. Together they go to Monnica and tell her.

Finally, in *Confessions* 9,31, after Monnica has died, first a verse from the Psalms brings back peace in the house and gives consolation (Ps 100,1). Next night, as Augustine wakes up and finds his grief much diminished (9,32), he recalls and quotes eight lines from Ambrose's evening hymn *Deus creator omnium* (with lines 5-8 on sleep diminishing grief). This immediately brings to his mind's eye a portrait of his dead mother (9,33), which in its turn is explicitly said to be included by Augustine in *this* book, his own *Confessions*:

*Et nunc, domine, confiteor tibi in litteris: legat qui uolet, et interpretetur ut uolet. (Conf. 9,33)*

And now, Lord, I confess it to you in my book; read it, who will, and interpret it, how he will.

Thus a series of books, ending with the *Confessions* themselves, effectively rounds off the 'narrative' part of Augustine's text.

As these examples show, reading and writing mean very much to Augustine. At crucial moments in his life, as told and stylized in his *Confessions*, books are the triggering element of capital developments.

### *Conclusion*

Reading and writing were central in Augustine's life. Reading effectively changed the course of his life several times. No wonder then that books occur again and again in this stylized ego-narrative, the *Confessions*. But not all books are equally represented: the author consciously moves away from his pagan education and his instinctive preferences, and so surprisingly and somewhat provocatively rejects both Homer and Virgil. Other genres, such as the ancient novel, are hardly even mentioned.

Moreover, Augustine appears to value the talent to write down one's thoughts, to transform ideas to something external, fixed down in order to reach out to others. And this is exactly what his entire *Confessions* are all about: the book is not a lyrical expression of sentiments or just a story for entertainment (and so admittedly not a 'novel' in that sense of the word). On the contrary, it is meant to have a serious and lasting effect upon readers. Augustine is constantly aware of his readers and occasionally even speaks about them, expressing his hope that the book will influence them. Reading books changed Augustine's life, writing books is one of his preferred means to change the lives of others.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In his use of written texts to spread the good word, Augustine was of course also inspired by the four Gospels and the other writings in the New Testament. For classical scholars, it may be tempting to think of *imitatio* and *aemulatio* here too. This, however, is decidedly a step too far, and it seems too much a pagan thought for Augustine. For him and many of his readers, there can be no way to rival with the Word of God.

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