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The Subtle Art of Plagiarizing God: Some Personal Notes on Augustine's Dialogue with Divine Otherness

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I have to confess that, when asked to contribute an essay to this volume, I was inclined to say no. I had various reasons to hesitate. Although no demands were made about the exact content of the piece, I felt I *had* to write about Augustine's *Confessions* (*Confessiones*). After all, an earlier piece of mine, which was also about the *Confessions*, had been the occasion for the request. I have to confess that I was not entirely satisfied with that earlier piece. I felt that I had not fully respected the form of the 'confessions', reducing my discussion entirely to Augustine's invention of a new temporal vocabulary. I was not sure whether I could say anything beyond that. I also have to confess that, even while framing these notes as little 'confessions', I do not have access to the true form of a confession. As such, they are presented under a false name. Before they become a falsification of Augustine's entire project, I have to strike them through, marking their intention to be confessions, while also signifying their failure to become such. As such, I present them here as notes that are on the verge of becoming confessions.

Some readers might now protest, saying: "Aren't you forgetting something? You were explaining why you were not inclined to write this piece, and now suddenly the piece has already arrived." The readers are right, of course. *The piece had already arrived*. In confessing to myself why I could not write about Augustine's *Confessions*, I was already writing about it. And this mode of writing/non-writing somehow suited me and allowed me to say what I otherwise could not.

Another confession is in order. My own book of confessions, if I would ever write one, would probably be a point-by-point reversal of Augustine's book, despite some occasional overlaps (a senseless theft, a mother who prays for the soul of her son). I started out as a devout Christian in my childhood and moved through some heterodox phases when I was a student. After finishing my studies in philosophy and comparative literature, I gradually became closer to what is usually identified as atheism. A tragi-comedy indeed: a tragedy insofar as it tells the story of losing faith (against one's own will); a comedy insofar the one who lost faith (I, the undersigned) is still defined by this faith and cannot— would not, will not— shake it off.

The condition of 'having lost faith' is fundamentally different from the condition of 'not being religious' or of 'never having had faith.' Despite the negation that both conditions share, only the first is ultimately defined by a loss. "This loss," I told myself, "keeps manifesting itself as an absence." Is anything gained therein? It's hard to tell, really. The absence resists its proper place, forever shifting its internal economy of loss and gain.

Sometimes I simply want to denounce the absence. Here my tragic sense of self gives way to despair, while refusing to recognise its own comical nature, mistaking it instead for a deep insight. At other times, I try to find my way back to what I lost. When that happens, a form of despair seeps in that simply ignores the loss and I feel myself becoming utterly comical. Most of the time, however, I prefer the ambiguity of the in-between. The shifting economy of absence seems to suit me. It gives me access to multiple selves that will never coincide. Despair is still lurking under these multiple selves, but at least the comic and the tragic remain caught in an undecided balance, simultaneously opening up both sentiments.

In his own 'true' *Confessions*, Augustine tells the story of several former selves some of which are children, some of which are teenagers, some of which are adults. All these earlier selves dissolve into the converted self he has become by the time he writes the *Confessions*. "Does it matter for our relationship to former selves," I asked myself, "whether we have found faith or lost it?" I had the feeling that my former selves (religious as well as non-religious ones) gave me access to different viewpoints. As such, I did not feel the need to silence these selves or to actively denounce them. Augustine, on the other hand, seems to want to purge himself of the otherness of his former selves.

"Is that really his position, though?" I asked myself. "After all, he takes great pains to give these former selves a voice."

I was not fully sure how Augustine sees his former selves. I did know, however, that for him the former selves would never dissolve into the current self. His conception of life was not linear, but was defined by an outside that breaks into that linearity. An ultimate otherness: God. "For, what am I for myself, without you," Augustine writes, "but a guide unto destruction?"[1] Another type of otherness prevails for Augustine. And even when he ultimately seeks unity from that otherness, he still respects it to a fault. I did not fully understand how, but that is how it appeared to me when reading the book.

From the beginning, the *Confessions* present itself as a dialogue with God. Taking a cue from Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity (Das Wesen des Christentums)*, this dialogue can easily be dismissed as a projection of the self.[2] This would imply that the divine otherness is

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[1] Augustine, *Confessiones,* 4, 1, 1 (134): "Quid enim sum ego mihi sine te nisi dux in praeceps?". (Bourke's translation, slightly altered). I will cite the Latin text from the Loeb Classical Library Latin-English edition, referring to the page in that edition, followed by a more general reference, as is the common practice (e.g. [4, 1, 1], book 4, chapter 1, paragraph 1). Augustine, *Confessions, Volume I: Books 1-8,* trans. Carolyn J.B. Hammond (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). Augustine, *Confessions, Volume II: Books 9-13,* trans. Carolyn J.B. Hammond (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). For this essay, I have retranslated most of the quoted passages, using Bourke's translation as a starting point. Partly to modernise the translation (*you* instead of *thou*), partly because by translating the words myself I got a better grasp on the text (hence, I am most definitely not trying to improve Bourke's translation or suggesting that there is anything wrong with it). Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Catholic University of America Press, 1953). At times I have also consulted a German-Latin edition: Aurelius Augustinus, *Confessiones/Bekenntnisse: Lateinisch-deutsch*, trans. Wilhelm Thimme (Düsseldorf: Artemis & Winkler Verlag, 2004). In addition, some other English translations were consulted: the one by Hammond (in the already mentioned Loeb Classical Library edition) and the one by Boulding, Saint Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012). Initially I also had access to a Dutch translation. Aurelius Augustinus, *Belijdenissen*, trans. Wim Sleddens (Eindhoven: Damon, 2018).

[2] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 74: "Man makes to himself an image of God, i.e., he converts the abstract Being of the reason, the Being of the thinking power, into an object of sense or imagination. But he places this image in God himself, because his want would not be satisfied if he did not regard this image as an objective reality, if it were nothing more for him than a subjective image, separate from God, — a mere figment devised by man."

nothing more than a mirror of one's own fears and preferences. "Does this critique," I asked myself once again, "really do justice to a position like that of Augustine?" Feuerbach's views on religion (especially in the parroted versions in which one usually encounters them) had always seemed too confident to me, at times resembling those of the 'benign' colonizer who, being overly convinced of his own truth, does not shy away from simply silencing the views of others.

"How then," I wondered, "does Augustine succeed to do justice to divine otherness in his attempted dialogue with God?" It was a huge question. Not allowing self-confidence, it demanded sensitivity instead. To respond to it, I first had to retrace my own encounters with the *Confessions*, uncovering my own access to the book. This would slowly enable me to articulate a (preliminary) response.

Becoming a Reader of the *Confessions*

In good Aristotelian fashion, I had to begin from the beginning: my first, youthful encounter with the *Confessions*, heavily determined by the milieu in which it took place. I grew up in a Protestant household in which religion was initially more a practical than an intellectual concern. Despite that we had many theology books at home. "Where did these books come from?" I often wondered. "Nobody ever seems to read them." Later I learned that my grandfather, who was a car mechanic at a big transportation company, used to read and write about theology in his limited spare time. It was from him that our household inherited a small library that was filled with intimidating volumes of (Calvinist) Protestant theology, written by figures like Karl Barth or Herman Bavinck.

Within this little library there was not much to draw the attention of a schoolboy, however pious that boy might have been. Of all these books, my former self only studied the enormous, 3-volume brown book that carried the title *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (*Institutio Christianae Religionis*) and was written by the French reformer John Calvin.[3] "Why did I even open that book?" I asked myself, unsure whether I could trust my ever-fading memories.

[3] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume 1*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). The Dutch edition I encountered in my youth must have been the following:

"Didn't it have something to do with swearwords?" It slowly came back to me now. Calvin was supposed to be well versed in fulminating against dissenters. Some older guys I knew had even compiled a list of Calvinist retorts that could be used for ranting and raving Protestant style. They were not willing to share it with me so I had to create my own list. I found some appropriate phrases (appropriate to me, that is) like 'deadly pestilences' and 'wriggling snakes'. However, I was not too impressed by them and the sheer length of the book exhausted me. Before long I put it away.

While leafing through the pages of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, my former self must have found a few remarks that pleased me. If my memory could be trusted, these remarks concerned the authority of the church. "A subject close to your heart," my memory told me, "as you would always try to provoke that authority." These remarks must have pushed me to go back to Calvin again. The relevant section was called 'Augustine cannot be cited as counter evidence.' It starts as follows: "Indeed, I know that statement of Augustine is commonly referred to, that he would not believe the gospel if the authority of the church did not move him to do so."[4] At the time, the name Augustine did not mean much to me, but it somehow invoked the pope and the "accursed idolatry" of the mass of which article 80 of our *Heidelberg Catechism* spoke (much to my frustration we had to learn these articles by heart).[5] That only increased my curiosity.

"Two things struck you upon reading this section," my memory told me about my former self. *"Was it really my memory?"* I wondered later. In any case, two things stood out. First, although the quoted

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Johannes Calvijn, *Institutie of onderwijzing in de christelijke godsdienst*, trans. A. Sizoo (Delft: Meinema, 1931).

[4] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 76. Calvin refers here to Augustine's *Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti v*, as quoted in English in footnote 6 on the same page: "For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church."

[5] Various authors, "The Heidelberg Catechism" in Lyle D. Bierma, *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism: a reformation synthesis* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 171. In this version the earlier phrasing of 'accursed idolatry' ('*vervloekte afgoderij*,' in Dutch) has been tuned down to the slightly more tolerant 'condemnable idolatry'. In my youth, I encountered article 80 in the so-called 'church book' that included a rhymed version of the psalms, the 'three forms of unity' (among which the Heidelberg catechism), and some other liturgical forms. Various authors, *Gereformeerd Kerkboek* (Heerenveen: Uitgeverij Jongbloed 1986).

sentence from Augustine seemed to affirm the authority of the church, Calvin immediately turned it upon its head and came to the opposite conclusion, suggesting that the "faith we hold in the scriptures" does not "depend upon the assent or judgment of the church."[6] A neat rhetorical trick. "You knew instinctively," my memory assured me, "that you would be able to use this trick to your own advantage." The second thing that stood out had to do with the fact that Calvin himself—still considered to be one of the founders of the Reformed Church (Liberated) that I was born into—already disputed the authority of the church. "You would exploit this point," my memory said, "in your ongoing disputes with the reverend during Bible classes." It was only later that I learned that this view was typical for Protestantism in general. The reverend must have been less impressed by my arguments than I imagined it back then.

"It must have been a few months later," my memory stated with a confidence that ringed slightly false, "that you came across a copy of Augustine's *Confessions* in the public library." By that time I had become interested in Augustine and someone had told me that the *Confessions* would provide a good entry point into his work. "More importantly," my memory added, "you had heard that it was supposed to be an astonishingly good read in comparison to other books on these matters."

The library book in question was most probably the first edition of Gerard Wijdeveld's Dutch translation of the *Confessions*, published in 1963.[7] "It was a worn out copy," my memory reminded me, "that smelled like dust and stale coffee and was heavily marked by underlines and small notes of various kinds." The handwriting of one particular person appeared again and again, expressing dissatisfaction in a rather direct way. Remarks like 'nonsense!', 'liar!', and 'this has been refuted many times!' were written in broad strokes throughout the book. There was such a stark contrast between these impudent remarks and the self-effacing tone of Augustine's text that they often set me off laughing.

At later moments, I would encounter the handiwork of this 'critical' reviewer several times again in other books I borrowed from the same library. These futile attempts at censorship provided an interesting

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[6] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 77.

[7] Augustinus, *De Belijdenissen van Aurelius Augustinus*, trans. Gerard Wijdeveld (Baarn: Uitgeverij de Fontein, 1963).

counter perspective on the censure project in which the mum of one of my friend's was heavily engaged. "Every time you see a curse word in your library book," she would tell us, "you take a black pen and cross it out." "Of course," my memory assured me, "you never did any such thing. Instead, whenever you encountered a crossed out sentence, you would try to guess the curse word that was hidden there. This made the reading all the more fun."

"A few years later," my memory remarked wryly, "you learned that Gerard Wijdeveld, the Dutch translator of the *Confessions*, had been a collaborator of the Nazis during the Second World War. In fact, he even published an ode to Adolf Hitler." Not very promising conditions for a first encounter with Augustine! It is the mark of a great book that, even when filtered by the mind of a former Nazi sympathizer and accompanied by discouraging remarks, the core of the text still remains intact. That is why, despite the biased framework in which my former self encountered it, the *Confessions* got through to me more or less unscathed.

From the first pages onwards I was struck by the direct way in which Augustine addressed God: "Tell me through your mercies, Lord my God, what you are to me. Say to my soul, 'I am your salvation'."[8] There was a strange mixture of audacity and humility in this address that, at least initially, reminded me of the way one of our reverends spoke to God in his prayers. "At Sunday service," my memory told me, "this reverend would often use the moment for prayers to comment on small issues within the community or to give his viewpoint on larger political events."

"We rest assured, O Lord," the reverend would pray, "that you would condemn these sins even stronger than we do." "We realise. O God," he would state at other times, "that you have hardened the hearts of our enemies. We are confident you will give us the patience and perseverance to hold on to our rightful demands." In these prayers the humility of *speaking to God* was mixed with the audacity of *speaking in the name of God*. As if the audacity was somehow justified by the humility that preceded it. "It seemed to you," my memory assured me, "that this double rhetoric relied on the principle of *impersonating God for personal gain*; the same principle that also underlay the many atrocities that have been committed in the name of God throughout

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[8] *conf.* 1, 5, 5 (trans. based on Bourke): "Dic mihi per miserationes tuas, domine deus meus, quid sis mihi. dic animae meae, 'salus tua ego sum'."

the ages." From my (at the time rather purist) perspective, such an attempt to impersonate God ultimately came down to a blasphemous reversal of the incarnation.

Even though my former self sensed a similar mixture of humility and audacity in Augustine's *Confessions*, it somehow seemed to differ from the Reverend's prayer. "At the time," my memory said, "you could not yet articulate that difference, but you felt it had something to do with the personal tone in which Augustine wrote. As well as the way in which he constantly incorporates quotations from the Bible into his discourse."

A Dialogue with God

For a long time, I did not know how to approach what I had — provisionally — called Augustine's dialogue with God. It appeared to me that Augustine, in an accidental and indirect way, had re-invented the Platonic dialogue and had turned it into a new Christian genre. "It is true," I told myself, "that the genre of the *Confessions* shows family resemblances with the hagiography and the autobiography. But most certainly it cannot be reduced to these genres." The Greek words '*hagios*' (holy) and '*autos*' (self) are in flagrant contradiction with the intention of the *Confessions*. Augustine tries to stay clear of any claim of holiness and only highlights his own 'self' to immediately question it.

"Is the Platonic dialogue," I asked myself, "not a far more appropriate predecessor for Augustine's dialogue with God?" Both types of dialogues can be seen as true *dia logoi* in which at least two different voices emerge. However, contrary to what one would expect, it is not the dialogue form itself that frames these two voices. Instead the two voices emerge within the discourse of a single speaker, incorporating true otherness within the discourse of the self. A more extensive study would be needed to fully examine this hidden affinity between Plato and Augustine in terms of genre. At this point, it was no more than a tentative suggestion allowing me, at least for the time being, to pin down where Augustine's discourse differs from that of the reverend I encountered in the church of my youth.

My contention was that Augustine is keenly aware of the dangers of his approach and takes pains to ensure that the 'voice of God', which he invokes within his own speech, is carefully constructed on the basis of unmarked quotations from the Bible. As a trained philosopher and

literary scholar, moulded by the ideas of Boris Uspensky's *A Poetics of Composition* and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, I was well aware of how common it is that more than one voice manifests itself in the discourse of a single speaker.[9] When a mother says to her child, "Let mummy help you," she is referring to herself ('me') from the perspective of the child ('mummy'), subtly incorporating the perspective and voice of that child in her own speech. Everyday language is constantly being dialogised in this manner and this is exactly what allows us to take up the perspective of someone else or even to speak with the voice of the other. "How do we do this," I asked myself, "without projecting our own viewpoints on the other person that is invoked in this way? Or rather, how does Augustine do it?"

From the first page onwards, it is clear that Augustine is directly addressing God. "You are great, Lord, and greatly to be praised. Your power is great and of your wisdom there is no number."[10] How does he balance the humility of this address with the audacity of speaking to God in such a lengthy and elaborate way? Augustine's first strategy is ensuring that he speaks *to God* without saying anything about him that was not first said *by God*. He does so by interweaving his text with quotations and paraphrases from the Bible. As O'Donnell remarks, references to at least four different Bible verses can be found in the just quoted opening passage only (Ps 47:2;95:4, 144:3 and Tob 13:1).[11] This subtle art of plagiarizing God alone is not enough to set Augustine

9 Boris Andreevich Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form*, trans. Valentina Zavarin and Sussan Wittig (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970). Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

10 *conf.* 1, 1, 1 (trans. Based on Bourke): "Magnus es, domine, et laudabilis valde. magna virtus tua et sapientiae tuae non est numerus." James O'Donnell remarks about this passage: "There have been various attempts to find precedents for this form of opening, but in the history of Latin literature, its originality and oddity are clear. Most Latin prose works begin with a dedicatory epistle or a formal proem: this work has neither. It begins abruptly, with speech directed to a silent God — but speech chosen from the words of that God himself. The first sentence is followed by a reflective pause for inquiry, which should not blur the main purpose: invocation, an opening more appropriate to poetry than prose." James O'Donnell, *Augustine Confessions: Volume 2: Commentary, Books 1-7* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 9.

11 Ibid.

apart from the reverend I spoke about earlier.[12] After all, it is quite easy to selectively quote from the Bible and take unwarranted conclusions from it, ascribing one's own views to God.

Kenneth Burke's study '*Verbal Action in St. Augustine's Confessions*' gave me some pointers for a better understanding of the continuous interaction between *ego* (I) and *tu* ('*you*' or '*thou*') that structures Augustine's text as a whole.[13] Burke's book provided a good insight into the way that Augustine adapts the Latin of the Vulgate to the flow of his text, without twisting the text for his own purposes. "It does not fully reveal, though," I said to myself, "how Augustine's text escapes Feuerbach's projection charge." To get to that point, I had to take a little detour.

A Detour: "O my theft"

The detour was set in motion by an intriguing passage in Book 2 of the *Confessions* that Burke briefly discusses, without analyzing it fully. It appears almost in the middle of the famous story about the pear theft; Augustine's personal variation on the fall of Adam and Eve. "What did I [*ego*], poor wretch, love in you [*in te*]?"[14] Augustine asks there, carefully repeating the *ego*/*tu* dynamic that was, by then, familiar to me. The first time I read the sentence, I sort of expected that the *tu* in question would, of course, be God. "Wait a minute," I said to myself, "that cannot be true. Isn't the love put in question here? That does not fit in with the general pattern of the *Confessions* now does it?" I quickly realized that the address had shifted from God to another *tu*. In classical rhetoric such a "diversion [*aversus*] of our address" from the immediate addressee to someone or something else is called an

[12] There is an interesting link here between Augustine and Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Crumbs or a Crumb of Philosophy,* who accuses himself of plagiarism*.* For more on this, see: Martijn Boven, "The Incognito of a Thief: Johannes Climacus and the Poetics of Self Incrimination," in *The Kierkegaardian Mind*, ed. Adam Buben, Eleanor Helms, and Patrick Stokes (London: Routledge 2019), 409-420.

[13] Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 43-171.

[14] *conf.* 2, 6 , 12 (my translation, based on Bourke): "Quid ego miser in te amavi…."

apostrophe.[15] It is usually announced by an exclamation like the one that follows the already-quoted line from Augustine (*O my…*). The whole passage reads:

> What did I [*ego*], poor wretch, love in you [*in te*], O my theft [*o fortum meum*], O that nocturnal crime of mine [*o facinus illud meum nocturnum*] committed in my sixteenth year? There was nothing beautiful about you, for you were nothing but a theft. Are you really anything at all [*aliquid*], that I speak to you like this?[16]

In this passage, the apostrophe announces a shift from 'you, my God' (as the main addressee of the book) to 'you, my theft' and 'you, my nocturnal crime'. It took me a while to grasp the implications of this shift and even then it was continuously slipping away from me. As usual, brief moments of insight were immediately followed by longer periods of despair and incomprehension. "Nevertheless," I assured myself, "this passage is of much more significance than Burke (or even Derrida) suggests.[17] The dialogical structure of the book as a whole is at stake."

It occurred to me that the passage was a perverse imitation of the form of the confession as such. It brings Augustine to a point where it becomes impossible to sustain his confession, because it is no longer

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[15] Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, book 7-9, trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 1922), 397. I have cited the 1922 Loeb Classical Library edition as it suits the context here. Recently Loeb produced a new edition in the translation of Russell, where the full passages reads: "Speech 'averted' [*aversus*] from the judge, which is called Apostrophe, is also remarkably effective, whether (1) we turn on the adversary ('What was that sword of yours doing, Tubero, on the field of Pharsalus?') or (2) proceed to some kind of invocation ('On you I call, ye hills and groves of Alba') or (3) to an appeal designed to create odium ('O Porcian and Sempronian laws!')." Quintilian. *The Orator's Education, Volume IV: Books 9-10,* trans. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 55. The term 'apostrophe' comes from ancient Greek (Quintilian uses the Greek script) and literally means 'turning way.' It is used as "a figure of speech in which a thing, a place, an abstract quality, an idea, a dead or absent person, is addressed as if present and capable of understanding." J.A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 5th ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 49.

[16] *conf.* 2, 6, 12 (trans. based on Bourke): "Quid ego miser in te amavi, o furtum meum, o facinus illud meum nocturnum sexti decimi anni aetatis meae? non enim pulchrum eras, cum furtum esses. aut vero aliquid es, ut loquar ad te?"

[17] Cfr Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion*, 98; Jacques Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon," in *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002), 82.

addressed to God, but to the nothingness of the theft. The rhetorical effect is striking: while describing the moment when he was furthest removed from God, Augustine interrupts his confession to God and starts addressing his theft instead. "At the heart of recounting the pear theft," I told myself, "Augustine literally turns his back to God, briefly re-enacting this moment within the dialogic structure of the text itself."

It reminded me of how Augustine describes the theft later on when he asks himself the following: "was I, while being a captive, imitating a crippled freedom (*mancam libertatem*) by doing what was forbidden without being punished, in a shadowlike parody of omnipotence (*omnipotentiae similitudine*)?"[18]

Was Augustine's apostrophe not a similar kind of parody? Perhaps a deliberate one? After all, it imitates the form of the *Confessions*, while directing itself to an addressee that ultimately has no substance. It was as if Augustine was already aware of the charges that Feuerbach would later bring against Christianity, refuting them by showing how a true case of projection (directly addressing the theft) differed from a confession to God.

It is true that Augustine uses the apostrophe in several other places.[19] What made this one different? All this time, I had a sense what it was, without being able to pin it down. Nowhere else was the apostrophe put to use with greater rhetorical effect than here. Why was that? Slowly I started to see what it was. The interruption of the confession as such, the displacement of the *ego/tu* dynamic, all these things pointed towards the importance of the addressee. "For Augustine," I said to myself, "God is the one who initiates the confessions, he is the condition of possibility to say anything truthful about oneself. The apostrophe highlights this address, by shifting it to its opposite." Once I grasped this, it seemed so obvious that I could hardly believe I had not seen it before. Every page of the *Confessions* suddenly appeared to reiterate it.

In this way, I stumbled upon Augustine's second strategy: constantly invoking God as his addressee and making sure that the reader never

[18] *conf.* 2, 6, 14 (trans. based on Bourke):"…Quia potentatu non poteram ut mancam libertatem captivus imitarer, faciendo impune quod non liceret tenebrosa omnipotentiae similitudine?"

[19] E.g. *conf*. 2. 6, 14; 2, 9, 17. For a full list of the apostrophe's used in the *Confessions* as well as some general remarks on their interpretation, see O'Donnell, *Augustine Confessions:* Vol. 2: *Commentary, Books 1-7*, 87.

forgets to whom the confession is addressed and for what reason. Something still bothered me about all this. After all, what I just said seems to imply a double addressee: God and the reader. "How does that work?" I wondered. "Can these two addressees be separated? Augustine clearly thinks they can be. But how?"

Self-Effacement and Deliberate Plagiarism

It is only in Chapter 3 of Book 2 that Augustine explicitly mentions the second addressee of his book: the reader. Before that, he only addresses God, never even mentioning that he is aware of another audience as well. Chapter 3 opens with a narration about what happened around the time Augustine was sixteen. "My studies were interrupted during that year, when I was brought back from Madaura."[20] Midway, as if a new thought suddenly struck him, Augustine reflects on his own narration:

> Who am I telling this to? Not you, my God [*deus meus*], but in front of you [*apud te*] I am telling my own kind, the human race, about it, no matter how few of them may happen upon these writings of mine. For what reason? So that I [*ego*], and whoever reads this [*quisquis haec legit*], may realise out of what depths one must cry out to you [*ad te*]. What is closer to your ears than a heart that confesses [*confitens*] to you and a life founded on faith [*vita ex fide*[?[21]

At first, this statement bewildered me. It seemed as if Augustine suggests here that he was not addressing God after all, but was instead speaking to the human race. Before long it occurred to me that Augustine was not so much talking about the recipient of his narration, but rather about its content. His question, 'Who am I telling

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[20] *conf.* 2, 3, 5 (trans. Bourke): "Et anno quidem illo intermissa erant studia mea, dum mihi reducto a Madauris."

[21] *conf.* 2, 6, 14 (trans. based on Bourke): "Cui narro haec? neque enim tibi, deus meus, sed apud te narro haec generi meo, generi humano, quantulacumque ex particula incidere potest in istas meas litteras. et ut quid hoc? ut videlicet ego et quisquis haec legit cogitemus de quam profundo clamandum sit ad te. et quid propius auribus tuis, si cor confitens et vita ex fide est?" For an extensive analysis and comparison of several translations of this passage (among which that of Bourke), cfr Burton Raffel, *The Art of Translating Prose* (University Park, *PA: Pennsylvania* State University Press, 1988), 71-76.

this to?' comes to the fore in light of the omniscience ascribed to God. There is no need to tell God these things, since he already knows them. It remains addressed to God, but in front of God (signified by *apud te*), Augustine also speaks to himself (signified by *ego*) and his readers (signified by *quisquis haec legit*). His point is that, even when he provides details about his own life, he only does so to highlight the need for confession.

Augustine often comes back to this point, as it is important for him to avoid the impression that he is engaged in self-glorification or attempts to further his own agenda. He expresses this particularly well in an extraordinary passage from Book 10 that took me a while to translate properly. "Partly because I only have a shaky grasp on Latin," I admitted to myself. "Partly because it says something essential about the dialogical structure that underlies the confession as such." To unpack this passage, I will divide it in three parts:

> I have been speaking about the rewards of my confession, not with words of the body and the voice [*verbis carnis et vocibus*], but with words of the soul and cries of the mind [*verbis animae et clamore cogitationis*], recognised by your ear.[22]

Even though the *Confessions* is built up with the words of the body and the voice, Augustine believes they were preceded by a more fundamental inner confession that was expressed by words of the soul and cries of the mind. This reiterates his point that God is his primary addressee, highlighting that God is the defining figure in the dialogical structure of the confession. Augustine continues:

> For when I am wicked, confessing to you [*confiteri tibi*] means nothing else than being displeased with myself [*displicere mihi*]; and when I am pious, confessing to you [*confiteri tibi*] simply means not attributing it to myself [*tribuere mihi*]. For you, Lord, bless the just [*iustum*], but first you rectify [*iustificas*: make just] their impiety. That is why my confession to you, my God, is made silently in your sight, and yet not silently: for it is silent in sound, but cries out in affection.[23]

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22 *conf.* 10, 2, 2 (trans. based on Bourke): "Et quo fructu tibi confitear, dixi, neque id ago verbis carnis et vocibus, sed verbis animae et clamore cogitationis, quem novit auris tua."

23 Ibid., "Cum enim malus sum, nihil est aliud confiteri tibi quam displicere mihi: cum vero pius, nihil est aliud confiteri tibi quam hoc non tribuere mihi, quoniam

There is an interesting causality at play here. God blesses people who are just, but they can only become just insofar as God first made them so. The circle starts and ends with God. The self only plays a role there to the extent that it effaces itself. Without this effacement, confession is not possible. In its final sentences this paragraph—"Or rather a confession about confessing," I said to myself—comes to a crucial culmination when Augustine states:

> I cannot say anything true to other people unless you would first hear [*tu prius audieris*] it from me [*a me*], nor can you hear any such thing from me [*a me*] unless you would first tell [*tu prius dixeris*] me.[24]

"Why is it," I wondered, while pondering this striking sentence, "that the causal order is somewhat reversed here?" I was well aware that such a reversal of time was sometimes employed to create a rhetorical effect. In classical rhetoric this is called a *hysteron proteron*, putting first what should be last.[25] The classical example comes from Virgil's *Aeneid*, "But let us die, rushing into the thick of battle."[26] Virgil uses it to highlight the desperate position of the Trojans. "One hope saves the defeated: they know they can't be saved!"[27] It was not yet clear to me, however, what Augustine's tried to achieve here by reversing the logical order.

After studying the sentence a bit more closely, I started to realise that the *hysteron proteron* provided the right direction for interpreting it, but did not fully cover it. "It is more complicated than that," I told myself. "In fact, it is a ring structure: saying – hearing – hearing – saying." This did not fully explain it either. After all, the causal relationship between *hearing* and *saying* was still messed up. Augustine starts by identifying himself as the speaker (saying). Then he goes on to describe his secondary audience, other people, and

tu, domine, benedicis iustum, sed prius eum iustificas impium. confessio itaque mea, deus meus, in conspectu tuo tibi tacite fit et non tacite: tacet enim strepitu, clamat affectu."

24 Ibid., "Neque enim dico recti aliquid hominibus quod non a me tu prius audieris, aut etiam tu aliquid tale audis a me quod non mihi tu prius dixeris."

25 *Hysteron Proteron*, "a figure of speech which reverses the logical or chronological order of things; it comes from Gr. for 'latter former'." Jonathon Green, *Dictionary of Jargon* (London: Routledge, 2015), 293.

26 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 2010), 87: "Moriamur et in media arma ruamus." (translation slightly altered).

27 Ibid., "Una salus victis, nullam sperare salute."

his primary audience, God, as the first listener (hearing). He ends by indicating that God, as primary audience, only hears from Augustine (hearing) what he has first told him (saying).

Something seems off though. God is both the *first to hear* and the *first to speak*. Moreover, there is no mention of Augustine role as a listener. "Isn't that the crucial moment, though?" I asked myself. "Isn't Augustine's whole point that he can only tell his readers what he has first heard from God?" Given that, how can he write himself out of the dialogical structure that is set up here? It seemed to me, something important was at stake here. Important to Augustine, that is.

"It must have something to do," I told myself, "with Augustine's earlier distinction between the words of the soul and the words of the body." When I started thinking about this a bit more, it suddenly dawned on me that, for Augustine, a confession always has to appear twice: first as words of the soul (directed to God) then as words of the body (directed to the self and other people). "That is," I thought to myself, "how serious Augustine takes his self-effacement. For him, neither the cause (speaking) nor the effect (hearing) can be ascribed to the self." Augustine lacks God's ear. That's why he cannot even hear the words of his own soul. He receives the words from someone else, someone who was the first to hear them: God.

"But how then does Augustine receive these words," I asked myself, "if he is not even seen as a listener in relation to them?" It seemed that for Augustine, *the saying* and *the hearing* coincide. "But who is speaking?" I wondered. "Whose voice is heard?" This brings us to the heart of the issue. Augustine has to find a fine balance between two voices: his own voice and that of God. In fact, it seems that the doubling of the confession can only happen if these two voices merge in some way or another. "But that is nearly impossible," I thought to myself. "Either one ascribes human words to God, opening oneself up to Feuerbach's projection charge; or one appropriates the divine words and ascribes them to oneself, which can easily slip into a deification of the self." To avoid these two scenarios Augustine has to ensure that the blending of voices never gives way to an *ascribing the self* or to an *appropriating the other*. Augustine tries to achieve this by combining a radical self-effacement with the subtle art of plagiarizing God. This double movement defines the *ego/tu* dynamic underlying the *Confessions* as a whole.

"Of course," I told myself, "all of this is still a carefully constructed rhetorical strategy that, ultimately, can be traced back to Augustine's

own convictions." Even when Augustine is quoting the words of God from scripture, they are still moulded by the context of his text and adapted to the rhythm and tone of his sentences. Or rather, the two texts—that of scripture and that of Augustine—are mutually shaping each other. It is only through the words of the Bible that Augustine can understand himself, making his own confession possible. At the same time, he can only speak about himself—"Literally inserting himself into the text," I said to myself—by merging the words of the Bible with his own, only highlighting the self by immediately effacing it. This dramatisation of self-effacement—"Enacted in the language of the Bible," I added in my head—makes the *Confessions* such a powerful and effective book.

"What about my own notes?" I asked myself. "I have presented them as *being on the verge of becoming confessions, hovering there*. Could they ever truly transform into confessions in the sense of Augustine? If so, to whom will they be addressed?" It was clear to me that Augustine's address — God — was not available to me. Did that mean that the confession as a dialogical modus was not available to me either? "Well, Rousseau did it!" a voice in my head shouted triumphantly. It is true that Rousseau's French title (*Les Confessions*) echoes Augustine's Latin one (*Confessiones*), but that does not mean that they refer to the same thing. "Thus I learned," Rousseau confesses, "that it was not as terrible to steal as I had thought."[28] This is a far cry from the world of Augustine. In fact, there is little to no self-effacement in Rousseau, quite the opposite. "I wish to show my fellows a man in all the truth of nature; and this man will be myself."[29] Nor does Rousseau resort to the subtle art of plagiarizing God. The confession enters an entirely different register in his work.

Confessions in the sense of Augustine required an addressee who hears before anything is said. "Who can that be?" I asked myself, "Apart from God?" Our former selves, still lingering within us, might have some claim to become an addressee like that. "These former selves define us while differentiating us from within," I thought to myself, "but are they different enough to become a true addressee? And where are they exactly? Do they dwell in our memories only? Or do they have

[28] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions and, Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*, ed. Christopher Kelly, Roger D. Masters, and Peter G. Stillman, trans. Christopher Kelly (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), 28.

[29] Ibid., 5.

a different mode of existence as well?" What about other people then? Those who know us well (parents, partners) are occasionally able to grasp what's bothering us before we ourselves are even aware of it. "Point taken," my inner voice admitted, "but that is still not the same thing." In addition, Augustine never claims that he has some kind of privileged access to God (or God to him). On the contrary, God only speaks to him through what is available to all: God's word (the Bible) and, God's creation (Nature). "What is the role of the text in all this?" I wondered. "If the Bible can act as an interface for confession, wouldn't other texts be able to so as well? In fact, isn't that exactly what I have tried to do here with Augustine's *Confessions*?" If so, then these little notes of mine might still become true confessions one day. For now, they remain hovering on the border, marking their attempt to become confessions while recognizing their inability to do so.

Works by Augustine cited in the articles and their abbreviations

Acad.	De Academicis libri tres
an. quant.	De animae quantitate liber unus
beata u.	De Beata vita
c. ep. Pel.	Contra duas epistulas Pelagianorum libri quattuor
c. Iul.	Contra Iulianum libri sex
c. Iul. imp.	Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum
cat. rud.	De cathecizandis rudibus liber unus
ciu.	De ciuitate Dei libri uiginti duo
conf.	Confessionum libri tredecim
cons. eu.	De consensu euangelistarum libri quattuor
disc. chr.	De disciplina christiana
diu. qu.	De diuersis quaestionibus
doctr. chr.	De doctrina christiana libri quattuor
en. Ps.	Enarrationes in Psalmos
ench.	Enchiridion de fide spe et charitate liber unus
ep. Io. tr.	In epistulam Iohannis ad Parthos tractatus decem
ep.	Epistulae
exp. Gal.	Expositio epistulae ad Galatos liber unus
Gn. adu. Man.	De Genesi aduersus Manicheos libri duo
Gn. litt.	De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim
gr. et pecc. or.	De gratia Christi et de peccato originali libri duo
imm. an.	De immortalitate animae liber unus
Io. eu. tr.	In Iohannis euangelium tractatus CXXIV

lib. arb.	De libero arbitrio libri tres
mag.	De magistro liber unus
mor.	De moribus ecclesiae catholicae
mus.	De musica libri sex
nat. b.	De natura boni liber unus
nat. et gr.	De natura et gratia liber unus
nupt. et conc.	De nuptiis et concupiscentia ad Valerium libri duo
op. mon.	De opere monachorum liber unus
ord.	De ordine libri duo
pecc. mer.	De peccatorum meritis et remissione et baptismo paruulorum ad Marcellinum libri tres
retr.	Retractationum libri duo
s. dom. m.	De sermone domini in monte libri duo
s.	Sermones
sol.	Soliloquiorum libri duo
trin.	De trinitate libri quindecim
uera rel.	De uera religione liber unus
uirg.	De sancta uirginitate liber unus
util. cred.	De utilitate credendi liber unus