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An Interminable Work? The Openness of Augustine's *Confessions*

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ABSTRACT: From opening books to read them, through the continuous effort at opening one's heart to God, to the eventual disclosure of God's mysteries to human beings, Augustine seems to trace an implicit conceptualization of *openness* in his *Confessions*. The words of Matthew 7. 7–8 underlie Augustine's engagement with openness up to the very last sentence of the book, which ends with a sequence of verbs in the passive voice that culminates with the desired manifestation of the divine. The entire endeavour of opening oneself up undertaken in the *Confessions* aims at this final passive openness, which is (always) yet to come as much as human *opera* are (always) yet to come to completion.

KEYWORDS: openness; Augustine; work; love; reading; interpretation; attunement

An Interminable Work?

The Openness of Augustine's *Confessions*

FRANCESCO GIUSTI

Quis exaperit istam tortuosissimam
et implicatissimam nodositatem?

Augustine, *Confessions*, II. 10. 18

OPENING AND BEING OPENED

'To open' is an important verb in Augustine's *Confessions* both in its active form, *aperio* (to open something), and in its passive form, *aperior* (to be opened). This is, in fact, the word with which Augustine decides to put an end to his work, without bringing it to completion, and once again he quotes Matthew 7. 7–8 (also in Luke 11. 9): 'a te petatur, in te quaeratur, ad te pulsetur: sic, sic accipietur, sic invenietur, sic aperietur' (Of You we must ask, in You we must seek, at You we must knock. Thus only shall we receive, thus shall we find, thus will it be opened to us; XIII. 38. 53).¹ In the following pages, I will discuss various uses

1 All quotations are from Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Francis J. Sheed, ed. by Michael P. Foley, intro. by Peter Brown, 2nd edn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006). For the Latin original, cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by William Watts, Loeb Classical Library, 26–27, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912). All quotations of the biblical texts outside of Augustine's text are from the New Revised Standard Version.

of this verb in the *Confessions* using selected occurrences. Augustine deploys 'to open' in four main senses: the action of opening books to read them; the opening of the words therein contained to the reader, or more precisely, the disclosure of their meanings; the continuous effort at opening one's heart to God; and finally, the eventual opening up of God's mysteries to human beings.

The hypothesis is that it may be possible to trace an implicit conceptualization of *openness* through the *Confessions*. Passive or active, literal or metaphorical, rhetorical or theological, bound to human interpretation or wholly revealed in the self-disclosure of the divine: openness and the 'act-event' of opening — the constitutive entanglement of *aperio* and *aperior* — may on the one hand acquire philosophical significance, on the other hand point to a certain way of creating and approaching human works.² The entire trajectory, whose final purpose is to find repose in God, rests on the grounds which are already contained in this prayer in I. 5. 5:

So speak that I may hear, Lord, my heart is listening; open
[*aperi*] it that it may hear Thee say to my soul *I am Thy salvation*.
Hearing that word, let me come in haste to lay hold upon Thee.
Hide not Thy face from me. Let me see Thy face even if I die,
lest I die with longing to see it.

The prolonged effort embodied in the *Confessions* is constantly directed towards an opening up of the speaker's heart (and writing) so that he can hear God speaking in him (and in his writing) and eventually see God's unhidden face.³ The human work of confession, in

2 I adopt here the compound 'act-event' proposed by Derek Attridge to indicate both the active and passive dimensions of the encounter of a reader with a literary text (*The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 26, 150–51 n. 16; *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 59–60).

3 In his introduction to the *Confessions*, James J. O'Donnell writes: 'We are presented throughout the text with a character we want to call "Augustine", but we are at the same time in the presence of an author (whom we want to call "Augustine") who tells us repeatedly that his own view of his own past is only valid if another authority, his God, intervenes to guarantee the truth of what he says. Even the self is known, and *a fortiori* other people are known, only through knowing God. So Augustine appears before us winning self-knowledge as a consequence of knowledge of God; but his God he searches for and finds only in his own mind.' Truth, however, is made in writing: 'The *Confessions* offer no unedited transcript, but a careful rhetorical presentation. But the writing of this text was itself part of Augustine's life. "Confession" for Augustine, that act of "making the truth", was itself an important part of his religion, somewhere

Augustine, is predicated upon this double speech: the 'I' speaks in order to (be able to) hear the other speaking in him. The 'I' exists and performs his confession only in so far as he is, at the same time, the 'me' who is subject to the other's action upon him.⁴ Although in quite different manners, in the last decade of the twentieth century both Jacques Derrida in his own 'Circonfession' (1991) and Jean-François Lyotard in his unfinished book *La Confession d'Augustin* (1998) recognized, and in turn pursued in their own writing, the peculiar double voice and continuous act of address to the other that characterize Augustine's confession.⁵ Their approaches to the early medieval text underpin the idea of Augustine's writing as a constitutively *open work* that these pages aim to elucidate on its multiple levels. As Maria Muresan writes about the passage from the *Confessions* (v. 1. 1) that Lyotard inserts in the section 'Oblivion' with no quotation marks, as usual in the double voice of this text in which the other speaks in 'me' while remaining other:

My inner is all you, who touches me said Lyotard-Augustine, 'receive here the sacrifice of my confessions, de manu linguae mea, from the hand of my tongue which thou hast formed and stirred up to confess unto thy name.' My inner is shaped by your strokes, it is nothing other than my openness to you, an instrument-support (suppôt) of your writing.⁶

between doctrinal disputation and cult act — perhaps even forming a link between the two' (Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. by James J. O'Donnell, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 1: *Introduction and Text*, pp. xviii, xxx).

- 4 On Augustine and his 'hetero-biography' in postmodern thought, see John D. Caputo, 'Augustine and Postmodernism', in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. by Mark Vessey with the assistance of Shelley Reid (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 492–504; *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumconfession*, ed. by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).
- 5 Jacques Derrida, 'Circonfession', in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), English version in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Jean-François Lyotard, *La Confession d'Augustin* (Paris: Galilée, 1998), English version in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, trans. by Richard Beardsworth (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
- 6 Maria Muresan, 'Belated Strokes: Lyotard's Writing of *The Confession of Augustine*', *Romanic Review*, 95.1–2 (2004), pp. 151–69 (pp. 159–60).

READING TOGETHER

Let us begin with the most practical sense of the verb ‘to open.’ The act of opening a book recurs two times in the famous scene of Augustine’s conversion (it has already appeared in VIII. 6. 14, when Alypius picked up and opened (*aperuit*) Paul’s Epistles, which Augustine was reading), right after he hears, in a moment of profound anguish and spiritual turmoil, a voice from some nearby house repeating: ‘Tolle lege, tolle lege’ (Take and read, take and read; VIII. 12. 29). He understands these words as a divine command to open his book of Pauline Epistles and read the passage found. So, he returns to the place where Alypius was sitting and where he had put down Paul’s book, and opens it at a randomly chosen page, which happens to be Romans 13. 13–14. In this scene of reading — of which Francesca’s reverse conversion in Dante’s *Inferno* v sounds almost like a deliberate parody, in particular the resonance of Augustine’s sentence ‘nec ultra volui legere, nec opus erat’ (I had no wish to read further, and no need) with Dante’s ‘quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante’ (that day we read no further; v. 138)⁷ — the act of opening is insistently repeated (VIII. 12. 29–30):

Daming back the flood of my tears I arose, interpreting the incident as quite certainly a divine command to open [*aperirem*] my book of Scripture and read the passage at which I should open. [...] So I was moved to return to the place where Alypius was sitting, for I had put down the Apostle’s book there when I arose. I snatched it up, opened [*aperui*] it and in silence read the passage upon which my eyes first fell: *Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences.* I had no wish to read further, and no need. For in that instant, with the very ending of the

7 Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l’antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67); *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Mark Musa, 3 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984–86), 1: *Inferno* (1984), p. 113. Augustine has no need to read further because the passage he has just read quenches his spiritual thirst and shows the way out of his torments; for Dante’s infernal lovers, the reading is interrupted by the sudden satisfaction of carnal desire: at that point, in fact, the trembling Paolo kisses Francesca. It is worth noting that what in Augustine is a resolution of the will becomes an event that befalls the two lovers in Dante. For a discussion of these scenes, see Elena Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2012), pp. 223–15.

sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away.

Then leaving my finger in the place or marking it by some other sign, I closed the book and in complete calm told the whole thing to Alypius and he similarly told me what had been going on in himself, of which I knew nothing. He asked to see what I had read. I showed him, and he looked further than I had read. I had not known what followed. And this is what followed: *Now him that is weak in faith, take unto you.* He applied this to himself and told [*aperuit*] me so.

This scene of reading deserves close attention. One notices that the act of opening the book is not the intentional action of a solitary, autonomous self: the command ‘Take and read’ comes in fact from God, at least according to the eavesdropper’s interpretation, and Augustine’s reading in turn prompts Alypius to do the same. As Cary Howie writes, opening the book entails a gesture of inclusion:

Augustine’s book, newly marked, is opened to include Alypius, to speak to him just as Augustine has been spoken to. In fact, it is a contiguous sentence that will address itself to Augustine’s friend, just as the two men are contiguous to one another within the garden where they have now closed and opened and closed and reopened the Epistles. Their proximity to one another outside the book is, from this moment on, unthinkable outside of their proximity inside the book, the extent to which two adjacent Pauline sentences have not just reproduced but reinforced the fact of these friends’ being together.⁸

Yet another interesting phenomenon occurs in this scene. Augustine comes to understand that those words could be a command from God by associating what is happening to him with a story that he was told about Antony: happening upon a reading of the Gospel, Antony had felt that he was being urged to respond to Jesus’s call, ‘as though what was being read was being spoken directly to himself’ (*tamquam sibi diceretur quod legebatur; VIII. 12. 29*).⁹ He had been immediately

8 Cary Howie, *Claustrophilia: The Erotics of Enclosure in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 1.

9 Augustine refers back to the story of Antony’s conversion that Ponticianus told him in VIII. 6; the passage quoted comes from Matthew 19. 21. It is the advice given by Jesus to the rich young man who had asked him what he lacked to reach a more perfect state: ‘Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”’

converted to God by this divine message. Something similar befalls Augustine and Alypius in their reading together a passage from Paul's Epistles. After having read the sentence that he applies to his own case, Augustine closes the book and serenely informs Alypius of what is going on in himself. Alypius similarly discloses to Augustine what is happening in himself. Alypius asks to see the passage Augustine has just read, and he looks at the following sentence, applies it to his own case ('quod ille ad se rettulit'), and reveals ('aperuit') this to Augustine. In its third occurrence, the verb 'to open' acquires the meaning of 'to disclose, to tell, to reveal'. The shared experience of reading induces a moment of openness in Alypius. The admonition found in Paul leads to a confirmation of his intent: after this experience, he gives himself over to God's will, ready to support the weaker Augustine.

This scene presents a case of double identification that could be called, more properly, triangulated substitution: as Antony had done, Augustine takes the random passage in Paul's Epistle as addressed to him; as Augustine just did, Alypius places himself in the position of the addressee of the next sentence. Paul's Epistles appear to be considered as transtemporal and transcontextual words that can be made one's own by different readers. Through the opening of the book as a (shared) material object and the openness of the words contained in it to the reception of each individual, Augustine and Alypius are also prompted to open themselves to each other in a moment of unexpected intimacy. To acknowledge his surprise, Augustine even admits that he did not know anything about what was going on in Alypius before this reciprocal self-disclosure, which also seems to confirm their respective experiences of the text.¹⁰ Brian Stock comments:

10 Brian Stock examines the relationship between the process of conversion and the experience of reading in the sequence of three interrelated stories of conversion, each told by a different person, in book VIII: Simplicianus tells Augustine of the conversion of Marius Victorinus; Ponticianus tells Augustine and Alypius of the conversion of two state agents; and finally, Augustine describes his and Alypius's conversions in the garden in Milan. See Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 75–111. Here Stock identifies Alypius's role as that of a witness. See also Brian Stock, *After Augustine: The Meditative Reader and the Text* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 45: 'Alypius, whose stories are related in book 6, is the appropriate witness to Augustine's conversion in book 8. However, he is a witness on the outside. He tells the story of the internal changes in his friend as a narrative that is understood only through what he observes taking place in his body.'

A significant moment in Augustine's account occurs when he says that he does not know what was in Alypius' heart: it had to be revealed to him (8.12.41). This is a cumulative statement of his position on 'other minds.' In his view, we can never *really* penetrate another person's thoughts. We know them only through language, that is, through the linguistic conventions by which what is private is made public. If we do not know ourselves (that is, if we cannot express what it is about ourselves that we know), then we cannot know others or express anything about them. Moreover, to this revision of an ancient paradox, Augustine makes a unique contribution: his is the earliest analysis of the potential part played by reading in the creation of intersubjective thinking. Stated formally, the mediator between the private experience of two persons can be a single text. In the case of Ponticianus and Augustine, the recognition is based on a prereading. In the case of Augustine and Alypius, where different texts are involved, the common experience is reading itself.¹¹

Paul's book not only mediates a double conversion to God; it also mediates the strengthening of an old friendship as a turning towards each other in a closer proximity.

When Alypius reads Romans 14. 1, 'Welcome those who are weak in faith', he seems to position himself as the addressee of that exhortation, much as Augustine positions himself among the 'us' of Romans 13. 13–14:

Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Stock concludes that, for Augustine:

Our understanding of our lives is inseparable from the stories by which we represent our thoughts in words. Every understanding, therefore, is a reading of ourselves, every genuine insight, a rereading, until, progressing upwards by revisions,

He does not penetrate Augustine's thoughts. In the end, Augustine has to tell him that he has decided to take up the religious life. When Alypius does the same, he too has to relate what has transpired within himself by means of words. One would expect the anecdotes about Alypius in book 6 to prepare the way for this situation. This is what they do.'

11 Stock, *Augustine the Reader*, pp. 110–11.

we have inwardly in view the essential source of knowledge, which is God. Reading, though not an end in itself, is a means of gaining higher understanding; the contents of the mind can in turn be conceptualized through the sensory relations of reading — listening and seeing. Augustine is the first to present a consistent analysis of the manner in which we organize the intentional structure of thought through this activity: he suggests that through reading a ‘language game’ can become a ‘form of life.’¹²

However, in contrast to the episode of Paolo and Francesca in Dante’s *Inferno* v, where the reader finds a case of mimetic identification of the two lovers with the narrated characters (Lancelot and Guinevere) of the romance they are reading, here the two friends, and now fellow-believers, are also brought together by their response to the act of address to them that they perceive in the text. In the open referentiality of their pronominal deixis, these isolated sentences point to them as the referents of their exhortative speech acts. There is no doubt that the stories of conversion previously told by Simplicianus and Ponticianus have prepared Augustine and Alypius for this decisive moment, but now they are fully receptive to the openness of the text which calls upon them.

A similar operation, after all, is what initiated the entire episode. When the utterance ‘Tolle lege, tolle lege’ randomly reaches his ears, Augustine ponders and eventually renounces the option of considering it as an overheard verbal exchange between others: ‘I ceased weeping and immediately began to search my mind most carefully as to whether children were accustomed to chant these words in any kind of game, and I could not remember that I had ever heard any such thing’ (VIII. 12. 29). Not finding a possible explanation in his own knowledge, he embraces the interpretation that it is a divine command directly addressed to him. This turn from a possible imitation of someone else’s story towards a repositioning of oneself as the addressee of God’s words marks the moment of conversion.¹³ Now, in fact, Augustine is able to recall and understand the relevant event in

12 Ibid., p. 111.

13 ‘Up to this point he has been in volitional lockdown. Now he can will one thing: his willingness to be addressed’ (James Wetzel, *Augustine: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 103).

the example provided by Antony's conversion: 'For it was part of what I had been told about Antony, that from the Gospel which he happened upon he had felt that he was being admonished, as though what was being read was being spoken directly to himself' (VIII. 12. 29).¹⁴ Antony's story is not to be taken simply as a conversion narrative to be imitated, but rather it is recognized as a preceding case of opening oneself to an act of address coming from the other.¹⁵

WHAT THE AUTHOR KNOWS

It is interesting to consider the phenomenology of reading delineated in the scene of conversion in the garden in Milan in the context of what Augustine writes in XII. 31. 42 about the multiplicity of meaning, another passage in which openness occurs:

Thus when one man says to me, 'Moses meant what I think,' and another 'Not at all, he meant what I think,' it seems to me the truly religious thing to say, 'Why should he not have meant both, if both are true; and if in the same words some should see a third and a fourth and any other number of true meanings, why should we not believe that Moses saw them all, since by him the one God tempered Sacred Scripture to the minds of many who should see truths in it yet not all the same truths?'

14 According to Elena Lombardi, 'for a moment the soon-to-be converted character and the reader witness the suspension of the naked sign. "Tolle! Lege!" as an imperative from God finds its first reference in the story of Anthony, a *signum translatum* that points to Augustine's own story' (*The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 45–47 (p. 46)).

15 Michael Keevak analyses the complex system of exemplarity involved in Augustine's conversion, but he maintains a model of imitation and prioritizes the 'hermeneutic' moment over the 'performative': 'There are two sorts of reading that the text invites: hermeneutic and performative. The story of the conversion in book 7 and 8, however, suggests that although the goal is undoubtedly the latter, it is only through the former that it is achieved and even facilitated'; for him, 'the thrust of the text is that there is really no difference between being a reader and being a witness, since "reading" Augustine's conversion is a performative act that is not properly understood until the hermeneutic experience of reading is translated into the reader's *own* experience (or act) of conversion via the actions that are represented in that text' (Michael Keevak, 'Reading (and Conversion in) Augustine's *Confessions*', *Orbis litterarum*, 50 (1995), pp. 257–71 (pp. 267, 261)). Augustine, however, properly associates himself with Antony (or acknowledges the possible imitation of the model) only when he manages to assume, with respect to 'Tolle lege, tolle lege', the position that Antony assumed with respect to Matthew 19. 21.

For Augustine, the proper approach to Scripture entails that the text can have diverse meanings for different readers and that its writer — Moses in this case — saw them all. God, in fact, inspired him and adjusted Scripture to the minds of all possible readers. The human writer, divinely inspired, wholly sees and realizes whatever truth readers have been and will ever be able to find in it. All those truths are there to be found. Philip Burton connects these observations with the events seen in the scene of conversion and with Augustine's response to the exhortation 'Tolle lege, tolle lege':

Though recognizing that it might be part of some children's game, Augustine chooses to interpret it as a divine command to pick up his codex of Paul. In short, he interpreted the words as *he* meant them, the meaning he put on them being not that of the child. Claiming direct communication from God is, of course, dangerous for one's reputation for sanity; Augustine avoids this (perhaps) by claiming responsibility for his own interpretation of the words he has heard. Again, the notion of *voluntas* is not far off. Augustine 'did not mean' (or 'meant not') to read (*nec ultra volui legere*) further than he did. 'Interpreting as one means' is, then, not simply what one does to books, but potentially to any form of sign.¹⁶

Then Augustine continues his reflections on the writing of Scripture with a peculiar conditional sentence, admittedly quite bold, in which he presents himself as a possible example (XII. 31. 42):

Certainly — and I say this fearlessly and from my heart — if I had to write with such vast authority I should prefer so to write that my words should mean whatever truth anyone could find upon these matters, rather than express one true meaning so clearly [*apertius*] as to exclude all others, though these contain no falsehood to offend me. This being so, I would not be so rash, O my God, as to believe that so great a man did not merit this gift at Your hands. When he was writing these words he wholly saw and realised whatever truth we have been able to find in them — and much beside that we have not been able to find, or have not yet been able to find, though it is there in them to be found.

16 Philip Burton, *Language in the Confessions of Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 107.

If Augustine were in Moses' position, and such an enormous authority were bestowed upon his own writing, he would choose a kind of writing in which words are open to readers' interpretation, rather than express too clearly (*apertius*) one single truth to the exclusion of all other possible truths. God grants the vision of the truth to the human writer invested with such an authority, but this does not restrict the reader's possibility of finding multiple meanings in those words. Augustine, here, seems to use *apertius* (clear, manifest, evident) in a negative sense. When words are too 'open', readers are prevented from pursuing their own interpretation. The openness to a variety of meanings is predicated upon the fact that those words do not express clearly one single meaning that would rule out all other possible meanings. However, although there can be multiple interpretations of a text, interpretation seems to be endless, but not unlimited.¹⁷

Augustine had used the adjective 'open' in relation to Scripture in VI. 5. 8, this time in a positive sense:

Now that I heard them expounded so convincingly, I saw that many passages in these books, which had at one time struck me as absurdities, must be referred to the profundity of mystery. Indeed the authority of Scripture seemed to be more to be revered and more worthy of devoted faith in that it was at once a book that all could read and read easily, and yet preserved the majesty of its mystery in the deepest part of its meaning: for it offers itself to all in the plainest words [*verbis apertissimis*] and the simplest expressions, yet demands the closest attention of the most serious minds. Thus it receives all within its welcoming arms, and at the same time brings a few direct to You by narrow ways: yet these few would be fewer still but for this twofold quality by which it stands so lofty in authority yet draws the multitude to its bosom by its holy lowliness.

17 According to Johanna Schumm, '[i]n spite of his critique of language, Augustine does not abandon faith and the search for an absolute truth. For him, the simultaneous existence of differing interpretations points to an unclear, but in no way uncertain truth, to the divine "spiritu[s] ueritatis" (Augustine, *Confessiones*, XII, xx, 29) ("spirit of truth"). Truth still exists, even though it can never be found with the means of human language. In Derrida's concept of *différance*, on the other hand, the place of truth is vacant. Derrida made this particularly clear when he distinguished his own concept from negative theology, saying that *différance* did not point to a "supraessentialité," and when he declared the differential "principe postal" to be neither "principe, ni une catégorie transcendente" (Derrida, *La Carte Postale*, 206)' (Johanna Schumm, 'Quoted Confessions: Augustine's *Confessiones* and Derrida's "Circonfession"', trans. by Jan Schönherr, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 52.4 (2015), pp. 729–56 (pp. 737–38)).

Now that Augustine has heard Scripture persuasively illustrated by Ambrose, he sees that many passages, which in the past struck him as absurd because indemonstrable and even erroneous if taken literally, must be interpreted spiritually and therefore referred to the profundity of sacred truth. Scripture offers itself to all readers in the plainest words ('*verbis apertissimis*') and the simplest style of expression ('*humillimo genere loquendi*'), yet invites profound reflection in those who do not have 'a shallow mind' (Sirach 19. 4). In this way, it welcomes all readers to its open bosom, but also offers more demanding paths towards God to others. Those few others, however, are much more numerous than they would be if Scripture did not possess this twofold quality: on the one hand it reaches such high peaks of authority, on the other hand it welcomes crowds to the womb of a holy humility. Vocabulary and style must be open, but the truth must not be expressed too clearly. In order to be spiritually open, words must preserve their mystery behind the veil of their simplicity. Scripture does not convey truths that can be rationally demonstrated; rather, it asks the reader to have faith and love.¹⁸

Without pushing the association too far, one could venture that Augustine's approach to Scripture bears similarities with certain trends in contemporary literary theory. Not so much, I think, with Umberto Eco's 'open work', which is predicated on the ambiguity of signs in modern literature and art,¹⁹ or with Roland Barthes's textual openness based on the 'death of the author' and therefore on the possibility of a purely synchronic reading of the text. For Barthes, 'a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash'; '[i]n the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*.'²⁰ For

18 For a brief account of Augustine's progress in reading Scripture, see Catherine Conybeare, *The Routledge Guidebook to Augustine's Confessions* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 51–57.

19 Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta: Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962). English version: Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni, intro. by David Robey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

20 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 146–47.

Augustine, human interpretation is an endless operation, both because one reader can never exhaust the signification of the (sacred) text and because there can be as many interpretations as individual readers, but it is not unlimited.

The reader has to acknowledge the ‘authoredness’ of the work, to use Derek Attridge’s apt coinage: not the author as an individuated being, who may remain just as much unknown as their intentions, but the fact that the work has been authored, that there are intentions in it, even though the reader will never know them with certainty.²¹ This authoredness limits interpretation in principle, but does not impose on the work one single meaning. It only ensures that there is a meaning to be found and makes the act of interpretation worth pursuing. Otherwise, the text would dissolve into a series of unrelated and unintended signs, and interpretation would be directionless and maybe even futile. In other words, to posit that the specific arrangement of signs in a text is intended and potentially meaningful allows for its openness. Its words must be plain enough, but their meaning must not be too clear and explicit, otherwise they would not make room for their reader. The *Confessions* are meant to be similarly open if, as Catherine Conybeare remarks, ‘[w]e, as readers, are crucial to the meaning of the *Confessions*. We do not complete its meaning, for the whole point is that we — any person, any people — cannot. But we continue its meaning.’²²

AN ACT OF LOVE

Granting the text its authoredness without knowing the author and their intentions is, to a certain extent, part of the act of faith and love

21 ‘This underlying sense of purposiveness is manifested as what we may term “authoredness,” the presupposition that the words we are reading are the product of a mental event or a number of such events whereby the processes of linguistic meaning are engaged. We may know nothing about the author of a particular text, not even his or her name, but we read the text on the assumption that it is authored, that it is the work, however mediated, of at least one, almost certainly human, mind. Authoredness arises not from communion with the creator but, like all aspects of the work’s meaning, from the social and cultural context within which art is received’ (Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, p. 101; see also Attridge, *Work of Literature*, pp. 27–28).

22 Conybeare, ‘Reading the *Confessions*’, in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. by Vessey with Reid, pp. 99–110 (p. 100).

that Augustine requires from readers, both from the readers of Scripture and the readers of his *Confessions*. Indeed, he writes in x. 3. 3:

But because charity believes all things — that is, all things spoken by those whom it binds to itself and makes one — I, O Lord, confess to You that men may hear, for though I cannot prove to them that my confession is true, yet those will believe me whose ears charity has opened [*aperit*] to me.

The *Confessions*, which are also a tentative act of interpretation of Scripture, ask for *caritas* from their readers.²³ As Augustine has faith in Scripture, so readers must have faith in his work, in which he is not so much expressing the truth he has achieved, as he is performatively seeking it (XI. 22. 28):

My mind burns to solve this complicated enigma. O Lord my God, O good Father, for Christ's sake I beseech Thee, do not shut off these obscure familiar problems from my longing, do not shut them off and leave them impenetrable but let them shine clear for me in the light of Thy mercy, O Lord. Yet whom shall I question about them? And to whom more fruitfully than to Thee shall I confess my ignorance: for Thou art not displeased at the zeal with which I am on fire for Thy Scriptures. Grant me what I love: for it is by Your gift that I love. Grant me this gift, Father, *who dost know how to give good gifts to Thy children*. Grant it because *I have studied that I might know and it is a labour in my sight* until Thou shalt open [*aperias*] it to me.

However active and zealous Augustine's exploration of the conundrum of time might be, the ultimate unknowable author, the authority able to disclose the secret, is God. His investigation is a fruitful confession of ignorance. Only God can grant knowledge; even Augustine's love for knowledge is a gift from God. Augustine both empowers and weakens

23 Referring to *Confessions*, ix. 12. 33, and to the passage on Moses discussed in the previous section, Burton, *Language*, p. 105, writes: 'What matters is not that their reading of Augustine should be the same as his own, but that it should be informed by Christian charity towards him. A similar theory is advanced in Book 12, where Augustine declines to reject any interpretation of the opening words of the Book of Genesis ("In the beginning God made heaven and earth"), "except the carnal ones", while denying any exegete's claims to authoritative interpretation of Moses' meaning (the verb used here is *sentire* rather than *velle*, but there is little if any practical distinction). In this case, however, Augustine turns aside at the last minute from the possibility that Genesis might contain a true meaning *not* meant by Moses, in favour of the belief that Moses meant *all* the possible true interpretations (*Confessions* 12. 31. 42).'

the human author. The human author is not just God's mouthpiece, the mere scribe of his words, as some previous oriental traditions considered prophets to be;²⁴ at the same time, in order to write, to perform his research, ultimate authorship must be displaced onto God. The *Confessions* themselves are an act of writing in which believing in God comes to coincide with the quest for him enacted in them. For this reason, they become an interminable work that can bring together prayer directly addressed to God and the highest philosophical investigation, performance, and reflection. Truth-seeking, as much as truth-telling, is a matter of direction; it is a path that leads to God.

In fact, the hope for an eventual opening up of what remains secret for the human being in this world finds its ideal formulation in the quotation from Matthew 7. 7–8 (also in Luke 11. 9):

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

References to these verses recur with variations throughout the *Confessions* and become emblematic of how the words of Scripture can be applied to the individual case, to Augustine as part of that 'you', of that 'everyone':

A great hope has dawned: the Catholic faith does not teach the things I thought and vainly accused it of. Catholic scholars hold it blasphemy to believe God limited within the shape of a human body. Do I hesitate to knock, that other truths may be opened [*aperiantur*]? (VI. 11. 18)

See, Father: gaze and see and approve: and may it be pleasing in the sight of Thy mercy that I should find grace before Thee, that the inner secret of Thy words may be laid open [*aperiantur*] at my knock. (XI. 2. 4)

My heart is deeply wrought upon, Lord, when in the neediness of this my life the words of Your Holy Scripture strike upon it. Thus it is that so often the poverty of the human intellect uses an abundance of words: for seeking uses more words than finding, petitions take longer to utter than to obtain, and

24 Raymond F. Collins, 'Inspiration', in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (London: Chapman, 1989), pp. 1023–33.

knocking means more work for the hand than receiving. But we have the promise: who shall destroy it? *If God be for us, who is against us? Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you. For everyone that asks, receives: and he that seeks, finds: and to him that knocks, it shall be opened [aperietur].* These are Your promises, and who need fear to be deceived when Truth gives the promise? (XII. 1. 1)

I consider all these things as far as You give me the power, O my God, as far as You incite me to knock and open [*aperis*] to my knocking. (XII. 12. 15)

The verses from Matthew underlie Augustine's engagement with openness up to the very last words of the *Confessions*. That promise both legitimizes the long enquiry and attests the close dialogue that is being established with the beloved Scripture.²⁵ The intertwining of the problem of the disclosure of the word's meaning and the continuous effort at opening one's heart to God can be traced throughout the book. In book v, Augustine first realizes that even the famous Manichean orator Faustus does not open or clarify (*aperire*) the questions that trouble him (v. 7. 12):

For when I realised that he was unlearned in those matters in which I had thought he excelled, I began to despair of his being able to clarify [*aperire*] and solve for me the questions that troubled me — though as I now realise he might have been able to hold the truth of piety even though he was a man of no learning, if he had not been a Manichean.

Then he recounts some advancements towards the final openness of which only God is capable. Those advancements depend on God's words slowly penetrating into his mind — which, back then, was still susceptible to the pleasures of rhetoric — through its exposure to Ambrose's words in Milan (v. 14. 24):

Thus I did not take great heed to learn what he was saying but only to hear how he said it: that empty interest was all I now had since I despaired of man's finding the way to You. Yet along with the words, which I admired, there also came into my mind the subject-matter, to which I attached no importance. I could not separate them. And while I was opening [*aperirem*] my heart

25 For a discussion of the *Confessions* as conversation, prayer, and praise, see Conybeare, *Guidebook*, pp. 32–36 (and, on the 'restless motion of questioning', pp. 36–39).

to learn how eloquently he spoke, I came to feel, though only gradually, how truly he spoke.

In VI. 4. 6, Ambrose is acknowledged as able to open the veils of the mystery, but Augustine is not yet ready to see the truth in those words, to assent to that truth:

And it was a joy to hear Ambrose who often repeated to his congregation, as if it were a rule he was most strongly urging upon them, the text: *the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life*. And he would go on to draw aside the veil of mystery and lay open [*aperiret*] the spiritual meaning of things which taken literally would have seemed to teach falsehood. Nothing of what he said struck me as false, although I did not as yet know whether what he said was true. I held back my heart from accepting anything, fearing that I might fall once more, whereas in fact the hanging in suspense was more deadly.

If taken literally, words can teach perverse doctrines. Even when confronted with someone who can open them spiritually, however, one needs to be open to their spiritual meanings in order to receive the life they can give. What is required, here, is not rational or sensory certainty, to which Augustine is still attached, but an act of assent.

A WORK ALWAYS IN THE MAKING

At the very end of the *Confessions*, the passionate request addressed to God in I. 5. 5 —

So speak that I may hear, Lord, my heart is listening [the ears of my heart are before thee]; open [*aperi*] it that it may hear Thee say to my soul *I am Thy salvation*. Hearing that word, let me come in haste to lay hold upon Thee. Hide not Thy face from me. Let me see Thy face even if I die, lest I die with longing to see it²⁶

— has not been entirely fulfilled yet. Augustine has undoubtedly been running ‘after that voice’ for quite a long time now, but the full disclosure of the divine is not to be experienced in this life. The book,

26 Augustine is referring to and applying to himself Psalm 35. 3: ‘Draw the spear and javelin against my pursuers; say to my soul, “I am your salvation.”’

indeed, ends with a sequence of verbs in the passive voice and in the future tense that culminates with the desired manifestation of the divine.²⁷ The entire endeavour of opening oneself up actively, or more precisely co-actively, undertaken in the *Confessions* aims at this final passive openness, which is (always) yet to come, just as much as human *opera* are (always) yet to come to completion (XIII. 38. 53):

We see the things You have made, because they are; and they are, because You see them. Looking outside ourselves we see that they are, and looking into our own mind we see that they are good: but You saw them as made when You saw that they were to be made.

At the present time we move towards doing good, since our heart has so conceived by Your Spirit; but at an earlier time we moved towards doing ill, for we had gone away from You. But You, God, who alone are good, have never ceased to do good. Some indeed of our works are good through Your grace, but they are not eternal: after them we hope that we shall find rest in the greatness of Your sanctification. But You, the Good, who need no good beside, are ever in repose, because You are Your own repose.

What man will give another man the understanding of this, or what angel will give another angel, or what angel will give a man? Of You we must ask, in You we must seek, at You we must knock. Thus only shall we receive, thus shall we find, thus will it be opened [*aperietur*] to us. Amen.

As Augustine had written in the discussion on will in VIII. 10. 24, any number of possible courses of action can open up for the will at the same time, but this does not mean that there is an equal number of diverse substances: there is only one soul.²⁸ In VIII. 11. 27, the possibility of the chaste dignity of continence was opening itself up (*aperiebatur*) for him, but he trembled to go.²⁹ Augustine has come

27 "The last word of the *Confessions* is a verb in the future tense and the passive voice: "it will be opened". Thirteen books have passed at a passionate stretch. The reader has placed herself in readiness. And everything is yet to come' (Conybeare, *Guidebook*, p. 135; see pp. 131–35 on these final paragraphs).

28 The question of will in Augustine is complex and much debated; for a particular interpretation, see James Wetzel, 'Augustine on the Will', in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. by Vessey with Reid, pp. 339–52.

29 This is the irresoluteness of the will that will find an answer in Romans 13. 13–14, when Augustine picks up and reads Paul's Epistles in VIII. 12. 29. It is the personal question he brings to the text.

a long way from that timorous trepidation, which Alypius witnessed in silence; yet, at the very end of his *Confessions*, he is still longing for the opening up of the mysteries of God. He is now aware that this is the ultimate destination of his efforts and his full intention is directed towards that destination, but the final opening has not happened yet. The quote from Matthew emphasizes, in an exhortative mode, the activity and passivity of this endless search. The human being can only keep knocking on that door, waiting for the door to be opened by God, and God alone. Comparing Augustine's *Confessions* with Derrida's 'Circumfession', Johanna Shumm points out:

These similarities [between the two thinkers] can be seen in their confessional texts and mainly consist in an orientation towards the future and in a valorization of linguistic form. First, confessions are always future-oriented speech acts, as they always expect the reaction of an addressee. In their Christian version, this expected reaction is forgiveness. The speaker in Augustine's *Confessiones* expects the future unification with God (still pending after the conversion); that is the object of writing the text and also influences Augustine's hermeneutic work. The *Confessiones* end with a prospect of future understanding [...].³⁰

Augustine seems to be suggesting a specific philosophical and theological reflection on human works (*opera nostra*) in this last section, including what he has been doing in the *Confessions*, the act of confession itself. Bound to the world of time, human beings can see things created by God: externally, they can see that they exist through the senses, and internally, they can see that they are good through reflection. But they cannot see their maker and his intentions behind them: God alone 'saw them as made' when he 'saw that they were to be made'. Human beings change over time, Augustine added: 'we' are now moving towards doing good, but at an earlier time 'we' moved towards doing evil and away from him. God, instead, has always done good. Some human works are good thanks to divine grace, but they are not eternal: rest can be found only in God. God alone, who is not in need of any additional good because he is the Good, is always in repose, because he is his own repose. Until human beings finally join God's

30 Schumm, 'Quoted Confessions', p. 738.

rest beyond this life subjugated to time, they can only put all their effort into directing their intention to the right destination, into doing good in an interminable work.³¹

It seems that Augustine, here, is providing an ontological ground for what he has been saying in epistemological terms about the multiplicity of human interpretations and the openness of human works. While intention and created work immediately coincide in God, they do not coincide for human beings. While God experiences his own works as the full realization of his intentions for them, there is always a discrepancy between work and intention for the human being. Therefore, the latter is bound to endless interpretation and the work itself, literary or otherwise, is necessarily open from a human perspective. The entire endeavour of the *Confessions*, after all, can be seen as a tireless attempt to bring together work and intention in the form of a prolonged performance of love, rather than an accomplished task, a finished *work*.³² For Conybeare,

[t]he *Confessions* is a song of unlikeness. Augustine is not concerned just with incompleteness and imperfection and with trying again and again to put words to that endless open-endedness; he is trying, through the incompleteness, to gesture toward something utterly other, which is God.³³

In confession, ‘truly’ or ‘verily’ speaking, for the confessant, does not seem to be primarily a matter of referential truth — that is, the content of the speech is unmistakably true — but a quality of the performance, which needs to perform a good intention. Augustine, as any other medieval author, is perfectly aware of intertextuality, of the fact that a text is always, as Barthes points out, a ‘woven fabric’ made of quata-

31 ‘At the beginning, we are reading the words of David’s psalmody, not Augustine’s own. At the end, we are only at the beginning. And the *Confessions* is, quite simply, a song’ (Conybeare, ‘Reading the *Confessions*’, p. 99).

32 Conybeare sees the ‘incompleteness’ of the *Confessions* reflected in the use of the imperfect as the ‘incomplete’ tense and of the ‘technique of instant negation’. ‘If we are truly “singing with” Augustine, we must acknowledge the incompleteness of our own interpretations too. We are “anyone,” but we cannot be “everyone,” and so, although we may propose a multiplicity of meanings, there may always be more’ (ibid., pp. 104–05).

33 Ibid., p. 106.

tions,³⁴ but he admits that there is an intention in the text. When the 'text' is the life of an individual seen in retrospect, as the life narrated in the *Confessions* is, the intention behind it is not his or her own, but God's.³⁵ The question is: how can readers respond to an intention they do not (yet) know? Augustine's answer seems to be: not by understanding, but by love, by being open to the text, by being ready to be reoriented and transformed by its words. The performance embodied in the *Confessions* appears as a double process never fully completed: on the one hand, a gradual accord or attunement of the reader's intention with the intention of the text that is being read, on the other hand, a gradual accord or attunement of the intention of the text that is being written with the author's intention.³⁶

34 'The plural of the Text depends, that is, not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called the *stereographic plurality* of its weave of signifiers (etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric)' (Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, pp. 155–64 (p. 159)).

35 For a brief discussion of the *Confessions* as autobiography and of meaning as 'always a retrospective achievement' for humans, see Paula Fredriksen, 'The Confessions as Autobiography', in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. by Vessey with Reid, pp. 87–98 (p. 96).

36 'It is the emotional sympathy generated by singing that Augustine so loves and fears'; '[t]he *Confessions*, for all that it is promulgated in writing, is a social work — conceived as one to be shared, one that expects the aspiring imitative involvement of its hearers. If they lay their ear to Augustine's heart — if they expect to hear him confessing "what I am like inside" (*quid ipse intus sim*) — then they must lay themselves open to being changed within as well' (Conybeare, 'Reading the *Confessions*', p. 102). Augustine's example, and especially his use of, and remarks on, song and singing may lead to interesting reformulations of the notion of the reader's 'attunement' to a text, as opposed to interpretation. See Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

Francesco Giusti, 'An Interminable Work? The Openness of Augustine's *Confessions*', in *Openness in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, *Cultural Inquiry*, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 23–43 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23_02>

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