Introduction

In the *Confessions*, Augustine lives, speaks, and thinks in terms of creation. Creation lies at the heart of the various struggles of his life, it informs the way he crafts his speech, and it makes up the fundamental rhythms of his thought. For Augustine, creation is not simply one doctrine among others; rather, it is, as Carol Harrison says, "the point at which he naturally begins, but it is also that which determines the way in which he subsequently expounds his entire understanding of the faith."[1] It is my contention, then, that if the *Confessions* is to be understood, it needs to be situated within Augustine's theology of creation.[2]

This approach is not immediately obvious, but consider the following: creation is the subject of the very first line of the work, which opens with a distinction between God, who is great (*magnus*), and man, who is "part of Your creation" (*portio creaturae tuae*).[3] The opening paragraph culminates in Augustine's most famous line, "You made us for Yourself" (*fecisti nos ad te*), wherein he situates our restless heart in the context of God's creating us as beings ordered

1. Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 114.
2. Frances Young argues, "The opening words of the *Confessions* suggest a re-reading of the first book in terms of a reflection on creatureliness" ("Creation and Human Being: The Forging of a Distinct Christian Discourse," *Studia Patristica* 44 [2010]: 336).
3. *conf*. 1.1.1.

toward himself. Augustine uses the phrase "he who made heaven and earth" (*qui fecit caelum et terram*) more frequently than any other verbal pattern in the *Confessions*[4] and, throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine invokes God primarily in terms of Creator.[5] Finally, and most difficult for modern interpreters, Augustine ends his *Confessions* with three books devoted to the creation story in Genesis. For Augustine, creation is decisive and, while its importance for his thought in general has been increasingly recognized, its fundamental role in the *Confessions* has, with few exceptions, been overlooked.[6]

The State of the Question

Every year sees a flood of books and articles on the *Confessions*, the cumulative effect being what one scholar has dubbed "boundless research."[7] Though most of these studies agree that the *Confessions*

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4. James O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), http://www.stoa.org/hippo, ad loc. 1.2.2.
5. In the *Confessions*, Augustine invokes God as *Creator* thirty times and addresses him with "You made" (*fecisti*) ninety times; the phrase "he who made" (*qui fecit*) or "God made" (*deus fecit*) occurs thirteen times.
6. For the importance of creation in Augustine's thought in general, see, for example, N. Joseph Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichean Polemic and Beyond* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999): "In a very real sense, this seminal Christian teaching constitutes a crucial, if not the pivotal element in his theological deliberations on a wide variety of topics. For this reason, it might serve as a useful point of departure for assessing the mainlines of Augustine's theology as a whole" (ix); Tarsicius van Bavel, "The Creator and the Integrity of Creation in the Fathers of the Church especially in Saint Augustine," *Augustinian Studies* 21 (1990): "Where did theological reflection begin? In all probability it began with the first article of faith: God as creator" (1); John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): "Augustine's extant writings are entirely Christian, and his theology from the first is based on the absolute supremacy of an immaterial God and on the unhellenic notion of the creation of all things by God from nothing" (9; though, whether Augustine thought creation was an "unhellenic" notion is a question that will be considered in Chapter Two). Also, see Marie-Anne Vannier, *"Creatio", "Conversio", "Formatio" chez S. Augustin* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1997); Scott Dunham, *Trinity and Creation in Augustine* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); and, for the importance of creation in Augustine's early thought, see Harrison, *Rethinking*, 74–114. The few exceptions which treat creation in the *Confessions* will be discussed in the course of the argument.
7. See Hubertus R. Drobner, "Saint Augustine: an overview of recent research," in *Augustine*

is important, there seems to be little consensus about what it means, what holds it together, or how one should approach reading it. Indeed, for nearly a century now there has even been something of a consensus that the *Confessions* does not have a singular meaning and that it does not hold together.

This consensus became generally settled with Henri Marrou who, despite subsequent contrition and retraction, will always be saddled with his fateful criticism—*Augustin compose mal*—which fixed its mark on Augustine scholarship down to the present.[8] Marrou seems to have been articulating a consensus view of the time (1938), a view very much intact twenty years later when echoed by John O'Meara (1965), and sixty years later when echoed by Serge Lancel (1999).[9] The consensus view, in its various forms, claims that Augustine was not concerned with the overall structure of his works because the ancients, it was thought, had a different understanding of composition. This is seemingly evident in the *Confessions* which Augustine composed in three disparate parts: the autobiographical

and His Critics, eds. R. Dodaro and G. Lawless (New York: Routledge, 2000), 20. See also Richard Severson, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine: An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism, 1888–1995* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996) as well as Marie-Anne Vannier, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Cerf, 2007) and Annemaré Kotzé, *Augustine's Confessions: Communicative Purpose and Audience* (Leiden: Brill, 2004) for recent surveys of *Confessions* scholarship.

8. Henri-Irénée Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (Paris: Bocard, 1938), 75. See for example, Frederick Crosson, "Structure and Meaning in St. Augustine's *Confessions*," in *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Gareth Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 29, and Kotzé, *Communicative Purpose*, 7, who cite Marrou's comment as setting its mark on Augustine scholarship. Marrou recanted ten years later in a revised edition of the same work (1949, 665–72). For equally critical judgments of the composition of the *Confessions*, see John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine* (New York: Alba House, 1965), 11–13, 44.

9. Marrou, *Saint Augustin*, 63. O'Meara, *Young Augustine*, states that it is "a commonplace of Augustinian scholarship to say that Augustine was not able to plan a book" (44). Serge Lancel, *St. Augustine* (London: SCM Press, 1999) says: "The error of this 'architectural' view (or any other similar inspiration) lies in striving at all costs to recognize in the *Confessions* a literary unity which they do not possess—and which Augustine did not try to impose on them" (209). Even Solignac, who strongly argues for the unity of the *Confessions*, shrugs his shoulders when it comes to its compositional structure (*BA*, 13, 19–26, with footnotes to Marrou).

books (1–9), the philosophical reflection on his present state (10), and the last three exegetical books (11–13). These three parts sit uncomfortably together, and their relation has eluded easy explanation. The younger Marrou concedes that "it remains possible to affirm that there exists a deep and hidden unity among the three parts of the *Confessions*. But . . . this is a unity of a psychological order, not a literary one."[10] There *may* be a "deep and hidden" unity in the *Confessions*, but not an intelligible literary structure.

Though there have been many efforts to account for the structure and unity of the *Confessions*,[11] the ghost of this consensus view still haunts Augustine scholarship. It arises today not so much in the blunt criticism of Augustine's compositional talents, but in a certain agnosticism toward the whole question. In his magisterial commentary on the *Confessions*, James O'Donnell, for example, criticizes recent attempts to find unity:

> One prevailing weakness of many of these efforts has been the assumption that there lies somewhere unnoticed about the *Confessions* a neglected key to unlock all mysteries. But for a text as multilayered and subtle as the *Confessions*, any attempt to find one, or even a few, keys is pointless. Augustine says himself that he meant to stir our souls, not test our ingenuity as lock-picks.[12]

10. Marrou, *Saint Augustin*, 64 (my translation).
11. See K. Grotz, *Warum bringt Augustin in den letzten Büchern seiner Confessiones eine Auslegung der Genesis?* (Diss. Tübingen, 1970), for a list of thirty-five attempts organized into nineteen categories of ways to account for the structure. See also Vannier, *Les Confessions*, 45–54 and Kotzé, *Communicative Purpose*, 7–43 for concise surveys of recent scholarship. Individual studies will be discussed in the course of this chapter.
12. O'Donnell, *Confessions*, Prolegomena. He goes on to say, "We may also mistrust readers who insist, or who insist on denying, that the work is perfect and beyond reproach," and then O'Donnell poetically shrugs his shoulders, "That form of idolatry, like the complementary iconoclasm with which it long disputed, has had its day. Better to heed an early reader of T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*: 'it seems to me that an attempted work of art may be so much more splendid for its very broken imperfection revealing the man so intimately.' If we can hope to read on those terms, expecting little, grateful for every fragmentary beauty, some further reflections may be in order" (ibid.). A similar attitude can be seen in Richard Severson's *The Confessions of Saint Augustine: An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism, 1888–1995*,

This attitude has become a commonplace, especially in English-language scholarship. One often comes across comments like, "It should go without saying that no single principle of interpretation is an adequate way of binding Augustine's text together,"[13] and, "the inclusion of the last three books remains a puzzle that apparently lies beyond complete solution."[14] There is a general agreement, it seems, that the *Confessions* is a mystery which cannot be solved.

Contemporaneous with the young Marrou, P.L. Landsberg put forth an argument for unity which has generated something of a parallel consensus and shown a way to understand the *Confessions* as a more integral work.[15] He suggests that the unity of the *Confessions* is in the title: *confessio*. This fundamental notion gives coherence to all the disparate topics, themes, and stories that Augustine writes about. "Whether Augustine interprets the first verse of the Bible (or any other), or whether he speaks about the gladiatorial games of the Romans or the desert of the anchorites—through all of these, the same

in his chapter on the "Structural Unity of the Text": "The first nine books of the *Confessions* are autobiographical . . . Books X—XIII, on the other hand, are something altogether different . . . How to explain this puzzling shift in style and purpose is one of the significant questions of modern *Confessions* criticism" (9). This is almost a translation of Marrou's comment (*Saint Augustin*, 63). Severson does go on to say that English language scholars are less inclined to argue that Augustine was a poor writer (thereby breaking from Marrou), though the sense of disjunctive parts loosely tied together remains (thereby displaying Marrou's influence).

13. Carl Vaught, *Access to God in Augustine's Confessions*: *Books X—XIII* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 23. This is the final part of his commentary trilogy. The first two volumes are *The Journey toward God in Augustine's Confessions*: *Books I—VI* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) and *Encounters with God in Augustine's Confessions*: *Books VII—IX* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

14. John Quinn, *A Companion to the Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 663. In another place he says, "Despite multiple and varied solutions the cognitive discontinuity between the last and the earlier books stays unresolved" (3). One can hear an echo of Marrou in his comment that the *Confessions* "is more of an informal exposition than a treatise," thus it has, "at best an informal unity, one that writers of late antiquity rated adequate" (ibid.).

15. This opinion was first put forth by P.L. Landsberg, "La conversion de saint Augustin," *Supplément de la Vie Spirituelle* (1936), 33–34 and affirmed by Solignac, *BA* 13, 21; Luc Verheijen, "The *Confessions* of Saint Augustine: Two Grids of Composition and Reading," in *Augustine: Second Founder of Faith*, eds. by Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph Schnaubelt (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 175; and most recently, Vannier, *Les Confessions*, 53.

purpose is accomplished: confession."[16] This suggestion goes a long way in responding to those who would exaggerate the disunity of the *Confessions* for, indeed, the *experience* of reading the *Confessions* all the way through is not disjunctive in the way its critics often describe. The younger Marrou and others exaggerate the problem of how disparate the "parts" of the *Confessions* are. Landsberg's argument for the unifying power of *confessio* confirms a common experience reading the work.[17]

Still, those who propose unity often do so at the expense of structure and here the abiding influence of the Marrou consensus can still be seen. Following Landsberg, Solignac proposes that the unity is "more *interior* than logical: a unity of spirit and intention, rather than a sequence of coherent and progressive developments."[18] With a footnote to Marrou, Solignac suggests that the ancients did not have plans when they wrote, but only rhetorical styles they imitated.[19] Landsberg, too, flattens out any structural elements in the *Confessions*, by subsuming them under his principle of unity. While arguing for *confessio* as the unifying element in the *Confessions*, these scholars are still working within the confines of the old consensus view.[20]

16. Landsberg, "La conversion de saint Augustin," 34 (my translation).
17. O'Donnell's comment seems to be a confirmation of this experience: "Rhetorical and stylistic unity and the intensity that runs through the book like an electric current make it easiest to read as a work written entirely in 397" (*Confessions*, Prolegomena). Indeed, he even canvasses the possibility—impossible to confirm or deny—that the *Confessions* was written in a fortnight. See also Garry Wills, *Confessions* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), who rather serenely makes the case that the *Confessions* was written in a brief span in 397 (13–15).
18. Solignac, *BA*, 13, 20 (my translation).
19. Ibid., 25.
20. But the problems go even deeper than this for, as we shall see, the notion of *confessio* is rooted in Augustine's understanding of creation and cannot be understood in its depths without it. Because of the intimate relation of confession and creation, it cannot simply be said, as Landsberg does, "Whether Augustine interprets the first verse of the Bible (or any other) … the same purpose is accomplished: confession" ("La conversion de saint Augustin," 34 [my translation]). The first verse of the Bible is a deliberate, and therefore significant, choice for Augustine; the *Confessions* would be a very different book if the last three books were devoted to, say, Paul's Letter to the Romans. The first verse of the Bible and the truth about creation it reveals are essential for understanding not only the structure, which Landsberg and Solignac

This generally accepted understanding of the *Confessions* has at least two unfortunate consequences. First, it often leads to reading the *Confessions* not as an integral whole, but as a work whose books can be isolated. This is commonly seen when philosophers read only Book 10 to think about memory or Book 11 to think about time; or when theologians only read the last three books to glean Augustine's thoughts on creation or exegesis; or when students are assigned only the first nine "autobiographical" books. This piecemeal reading of the *Confessions* leads to the second unfortunate consequence: because the parts are separated from the context of the whole work, Augustine's thought and the meaning of the *Confessions* is obscured.

Yet, the more one studies the *Confessions*, the more one realizes that there are layers of meaning, structure, and thematic relations which cry out for understanding. The rejection of the young Marrou, the agnosticism of O'Donnell, and the flattening of Landsberg cripple efforts to make progress on the question of the overall coherence of the work. There are, moreover, internal and external clues that structure, unity, and purpose are present in the text and it will bear fruit to highlight these and show how they aid our understanding of the *Confessions*. I want to argue that by reading the *Confessions* in the light of Augustine's theology of creation, we can move beyond the last century's scholarly impasse and be able to understand the *Confessions* as the coherently structured whole Augustine intended. To do this, though, we need to shake ourselves free of some of the common assumptions about the text.

Approaching the *Confessions*

The *Confessions* is often approached, as O'Donnell rightly notes, as

neglect, but also the intention and therefore deep unity of the work. Creation is also essential for understanding the very theme which they elevate as unifying, for confession is a response to the gift of creation and therefore prior and necessary for properly understanding it.

though it were a problem or a lock which is in need of some yet-to-be discovered solution or key. Even those who criticize the efforts to find a hidden key cannot avoid seeing the *Confessions* as a mysterious problem. This attitude is evident in O'Donnell's criticisms above, but also in the question he and many others think legitimate to ask about the text: "What are the last four books doing there?"[21] This question shows that O'Donnell thinks the *Confessions* is a problem even though he wants to remain agnostic about solutions. By posing the question this way, O'Donnell and others *presuppose* disunity, a rather glaring compositional weakness in the very structure of the work which, as Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle humorously notes, is "a rhetorical fault for which as a schoolboy Augustine would have been flogged."[22]

We need, then, another approach to the question of composition. In this study, I will assume that the problem is not Augustine's text but how it is often understood. Thus I will also assume unity and structural coherence unless it can be shown to be otherwise.[23] In the *Retractationes*, Augustine seems rather sanguine about the structure of the *Confessions*, and, as the literature on the composition of the *Confessions* accumulates, it should be clear that there are deliberate unifying and structural elements in the text. Instead of posing the question as O'Donnell and others have done, perhaps the inquiry

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21. O'Donnell, *Confessions*, Prolegomena. This question is stated, in a slightly different form (since there is even disagreement about what the "problem" is), in the title of K. Grotz's dissertation, *Warum bringt Augustin in den letzten Büchern seiner Confessiones eine Auslegung der Genesis?*, and the article by John Cooper, "Why Did Augustine Write Books XI—XIII of the *Confessions?*" *Augustinian Studies* 2 (1971): 37–46.

22. Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, "The Prudential Augustine: The Virtuous Structure and Sense of his *Confessions*," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 22 (1987): 129.

23. Colin Starnes, *Augustine's Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Confessions I—IX* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990), articulates this principle nicely. He argues that Augustine "had omitted nothing which was important to his purpose, whatever that was, nor included any irrelevant digressions . . . so that whenever I found what seemed to be a gap between one part and the next, or looked like a nodding digression, I supposed that *I* had not understood Augustine rather than that *he* was at fault" (12).

would yield more fruit by reversing their question: "How could Augustine *not* have included the last three (or four) books?" The question one asks determines the possibility and the kind of answers that can be found, so rather than assuming a flogging-worthy fault in Augustine's composition, it should be assumed that there is unity and structure in the work which can be laid bare.[24]

What if we pursued Marrou's suggestion in his retraction that "Saint Augustine proceeds as a skillful musician" and Robert O'Connell's idea that the *Confessions* has the quality of a symphony?[25] The *Confessions* need not be considered "perfect and beyond reproach,"[26] but, like any work of musical genius, the *Confessions* has unity, order, structural coherence, meaning, and an inexorable movement. If any element were removed the whole would be lacking in some way. The *Confessions* could not *not* be the way it is without being somehow incomplete. If the text is approached as though it were an integral whole, rather than presumed to be inherently problematic, then perhaps it will open up in surprising ways.[27]

Although the *Confessions* is, as O'Donnell rightly says, a "multilayered and subtle" work, we need not assume that all those

24. See Annemaré Kotzé's helpful discussion of this in "'The Puzzle of the Last Four Books': An Illegitimate Issue?," *Vigiliae Chnstianae* 60 (2006): 65–79.
25. Marrou, *Saint Augustin*, 667 (my translation). See Robert J. O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 91 and 101.
26. O'Donnell, *Confessions*, says that those who insist that the work is "perfect and beyond reproach" fall into "idolatry" (Prolegomena). While one could agree with the claim, his intention here is to discourage attempts to find structural unity and so the extreme formulation functions as something of a bogeyman.
27. This is also the approach of Hans Urs von Balthasar. See his *Augustinus: Die Bekenntnisse* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 2002), 214 and 288. Aidan Nichols comments on Balthasar's approach: "The 'biographical' books (I-IX) have to be seen *as on their way* to the theologically contemplative books (X—XIII)" (*Divine Fruitfulness: A Guide through Balthasar's Theology beyond the Trilogy* [London: T&T Clark, 1988], 51), emphasis added. For Balthasar, there is inexorable movement in the *Confessions* which is rooted in creation. It moves from the one creature to all of creation praising God.

layers are equal. Another assumption, then, which guides this study is that what Augustine holds as more fundamental should have more interpretive weight while less comprehensive interpretations should be integrated into higher and more comprehensive ones.[28] Because creation is, as we will see, the fundamental and comprehensive framework of Augustine's theology, this doctrine will be the primary hermeneutical lens through which we will read the *Confessions*. I do not offer creation as the "key" or "solution" to the *Confessions*—to do so would be to operate within the consensus view which sees the *Confessions* as a lock or a problem in need of solving. Instead, I want to show how Augustine's understanding of creation determines and can account for the composition of the *Confessions*.

Creation in the *Confessions*

For Augustine, the doctrine of creation is not conceived as a static set of dogmatic teachings (though it is this too), but rather as an encounter of the awake mind with the truth about reality. Creation is a whole, composed of parts, of which God is not a part. It is a limited whole, the very fact of which bespeaks a transcendent Creator.[29] This may seem like an unexceptional insight, but it is in fact a radical transformation in human understanding which, according to Augustine, only the Platonists and the Christians achieved. Everyone else who thought about God did so within the context of creation; that is, God was understood as a constituent part of the whole. But the great Platonist and Christian achievement was to see creation not as the ultimate reality within which all things were understood, but as a whole from which God is distinct. Recognizing this opens up a whole new horizon or dimension of understanding; the ontological

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28. See Robert McMahon, *Prayerful Ascent: An Essay on the Literary Form of the Confessions* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 39–40, for a brief confirmation of this principle.
29. *conf*. 10.6.8–10.

distinction between God and the world is a kind of light or epiphany which illumines all other things. Creation is a revelation. Following Paul, Augustine thinks that creation reveals who God is and who the human being is.[30] Creation, I will argue, is the light within which Augustine understands his own past experiences, as well as his present state and future hope. It is the light which inspires, even necessitates, *confessio*, the reflexive response of the heart which has encountered the truth about God and itself. It is, finally, the light within which Augustine composed the *Confessions* and which can illumine the whole work.

What emerges from reading the *Confessions* in this light is a vision of Augustine's rich understanding of creation as dynamically oriented toward God, of the church as the locus of creation's transformation into God, and of *confessio* as the liturgical response which conforms human beings to Christ and takes up all of creation into the church and offers it back to God in a thanksgiving offering of praise. This is the deep meaning of the *Confessions* which Augustine's understanding of creation brings to light. Approaching the *Confessions* in this way offers a solution not to the problem of the *Confessions*—for I do not think the work is a problem—but to the problematic interpretive constructions which have obscured our understanding of it. This approach also opens a way of reading the *Confessions* not only as an integral whole, but as a highly structured and ordered unity.

Approaching the *Confessions* in this way is not necessarily meant to be an alternative to other approaches; it is not offered here in competition to other *Confessions* studies or to other literary, historical, psychological, philosophical, or theological approaches. Yet, neither is it offered as an approach alongside these other approaches. Instead,

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30. See Rom. 1:20 and the discussion in Chapter One below.

it is an approach meant to enrich all other approaches by situating them within what Augustine would understand as their proper theological context. Thus, the approach adopted here aims to preserve the integrity of the insights of other approaches, while at the same time refining them and locating them within a vision of the whole.

The argument proceeds in five chapters. Chapter One will offer a systematic account of Augustine's understanding of creation at the time of writing the *Confessions*. This account serves as the foundation and a kind of grammar for the rest of the inquiry. Chapter Two will build on this understanding of creation in order to show how Augustine's life can be coherently interpreted as an intellectual and moral "coming to terms" with creation. This chapter treats two inseparable aspects of creation in Augustine's life: one, creation as the explicit or implicit content of his various intellectual and moral struggles; and two, creation as the light within which he interprets the events of his life. Chapter Three gives an account of the "new context" which creation establishes, in other words, it describes what changes after Augustine comes to terms with creation. Chapter Four completes this inquiry by exploring the relationship between creation and the church and concluding that creation is dynamically oriented toward fulfillment in the church, fulfillment which Augustine understands as deification. Finally, Chapter Five takes the understanding of creation established in the previous chapters and offers a coherent account of the meaning, structure, and unity of the *Confessions*.