St. Augustine’s Confessions

Augustine’s work is different from what its title suggests—confessions, not so much. I had only ever translated a small part of his work for a Latin class and had never read it in its entirety, so I was surprised to read how little confessing actually takes place. It comes across as a rationalization for believing in the existence of God, rather than an admission of sins and bad deeds. I cannot help but find it odd that he spends so much time trying to work out the truth about man’s nature when attempting to write his own confessions. It would seem that the why is irrelevant to the act in itself and the disclosure is all that matters. I suppose it reads more like a philosophical treatise than an intimate self-portrait. The conversational tone of the work struck me immediately. The rhetorical questions, never to be answered, evoke an empty echo that reverberates throughout the exchange he is so obviously attempting with God. His confessions remind me of a dramatic monologue, in which the listener is clearly present but does not speak himself.

The structure of the whole takes on an autobiographical nature because of the span of time, as well as subject of personal experience, that Augustine traces throughout the text. Yet, the whole comes across as a well-reasoned argument, as he attempts (il essaie comme Montaigne) to understand things we are not intended to comprehend. I wonder if the work’s synthesis of philosophical and biblical citations does not inject it with a less intimate tone, rather than reinforce it overall, although his use of scripture
conflates his words with the Word of God, giving the illusion of greater authority to his own writing. I found the more captivating moments to be those where he personalizes, rather than universalizes, his sinful nature; for instance, his details about the pear theft and the explicit admission of his having a child out of wedlock, or his experiences with learning and teaching. These outweigh the universal moralizing about man’s sinful nature because they seem further away from the preachy nature that so often results from universal moralizing.

He aptly observes society’s concern with the proper pronunciation of the initial aspirate of the word ‘human’ as being more important than one’s actual treatment of his fellow human beings. This is an observation that speaks volumes to his surroundings at the time, while appropriately reflecting our existence today. Human nature has been corrupted by the very nature of society since the first property claim. Not to sound pessimistic, but I think Rousseau’s ideal of the uncivilized man is not such a bad idea. Augustine’s time, just as ours today, reflects a humanity that leaves little to be desired, one where man thinks little of his fellow man.

I see why this work is apropos to the nature of autobiography, but I wonder if it stands up as a work of Christian witness. Augustine’s use of Plotinus and other philosophical doctrine seem almost paradoxical to the notion of Christianity, although I know Plotinus influenced many Christian and non-Christian metaphysicians with his writings. Though I suppose what makes Augustine’s writing so unique as a document of faith is his intellectual quest for God being set out from a Manichean universe and a world without a God.
His prose is beautiful. Many of his passages are poetic. For instance, I loved this one: “So my soul was rotten in health. In an ulcerous condition it thrust itself to outward things, miserably avid to be scratched by contact with the world of the senses.” A materiality of the soul is wrought with the cankerous image he draws. Moreover, I found his discussion of his early years amusing and keen, as he posits, “infancy did not ‘depart,’ for it has nowhere to go.” I look forward to reading Books 8, 9, and 10.