

DRST 001: Directed Studies, Literature  
Professor Riley Soles

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Aiden Zhou

Reading Without Pride: Augustine's Childlike Conversion  
by Aiden Zhou '28

Augustine's story of conversion inverts the structure of a typical *bildungsroman*. The framework that guides most coming-of-age journeys is chronological: as years pass, an imprudent child matures into a wiser adult. At first sight, the *Confessions* appears to follow this archetype. Its adolescent protagonist "[burns] to find satisfaction in hellish pleasures" (2.1), and only after years of experience through suffering is his deafness "shattered" and his blindness "put to flight" (10.38). However, examining the evolution of Augustine's reading of the Bible reveals an opposing interpretation. In Book 3, Augustine is a celebrated orator and "mature adult" (3.9), but is unable to appreciate the holy texts precisely because of his existing education. On the contrary, it is by deciding to "make the leap without anxiety" (8.27) — to rely on faith over knowledge — that he finally comes to know God. Scripture, and literature in general, is to be approached without preconceived notions; reading requires a mindset of childlike wonder and trust. This juxtaposition subverts the conventional notion of maturity, presenting a reversion from experience to innocence as the surprising culmination of one's spiritual and intellectual journey.

In his early days as a student at Carthage, Augustine rejects the Bible due to his inflated sense of self. The holy scriptures are restrained in style and strike him as "lowly to the beginner," incomparable to "the dignity of Cicero" (3.9). Chadwick's choice of the word "dignity" captures how Augustine is taken in by outward sophistication. He is attracted to the "appearance" and

“language” of Cicero’s *Hortensius* while dismissing the Word of God.<sup>1</sup> What Augustine fails to recognize is that the Bible’s beauty is characterized by “inwardness”; its profound meaning is not “laid bare,” but can only be discovered with patient resolve (3.9). It is “composed in such a way that as beginners mature, its meaning grows with them” (3.9). To understand scripture, one must let go of intellectual conceit and return to the starting point of a “beginner.” Reinforcing this idea, he frames the quest for divine connection as a summit to be climbed. The task at hand is of “mountainous” difficulty, and the only way forward is to “climb its steps” (3.9). More than simply emphasizing the adversity one faces on the path of faith, Augustine reveals its nature as a gradual ascent. Just as a mountaineer must start at base camp, any reader of the Bible has to undergo a rebirth to become a “beginner” again. Those who lack the humility to “bow [their heads]” (3.9) in this way do not have “clean hands and a pure heart.”<sup>2</sup> As a result, they are unable to “climb [the] steps” (3.9) of “the mountain of the Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

This metaphor elucidates Augustine’s inability to form a relationship with God: his pridefulness makes him unable to acknowledge his own insufficiencies. To expose the flaws in his worldview, the text juxtaposes Augustine’s self-conception with that of a pious seeker of the Lord. He is depicted as “puffed up with pride” (3.9) as a balloon is “puffed up” with air, apparently substantial but containing little substance within. This implicit parallel between “pride” and “air” underscores the immateriality of human vanity. Furthermore, pride places focus on one’s exterior image, thus making it difficult to appreciate the Bible’s interiority. As an inflatable object is “puffed up,” it expands in size but is distanced from its center. In the same sense, a person inflated with pride is displaced from the inner world of God; indeed, the secret

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<sup>1</sup> “Dignity” is defined as “formal reserve or seriousness of manner, appearance, or language” by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

<sup>2</sup> Psalms 24:4.

<sup>3</sup> Psalms 24:3.

knowledge hidden in the scriptures is not “open to the proud” (3.9).<sup>4</sup> Interpreting the passage in this way explains why Augustine’s “gaze never penetrated to [the Bible’s] inwardness” (3.9). He has prioritized the “earthly-minded” (3.10) realm at the expense of his connection with the Lord.

A good reader of the Bible, however, “[bows his] head” (3.9) to God. Contrary to Augustine’s “puffed up” state of mind, “bowing down” is a gesture of reverence. Its purpose is not to augment or elevate — as the words “puff” and “up” suggest — but to reduce one’s sense of self. This becomes evident when observing what the movement entails: shrinking one’s body and lowering one’s head to the ground. Augustine conveys that performing a metaphorical “bow” deflates our pride while simultaneously bringing us closer to understanding God’s “inwardness” through a physical and spiritual withdrawal into the center of our being. In addition, this display of deference denotes an acceptance of one’s status as a “beginner.” As in the metaphor of the mountain, only through humility — “climbing its steps” from the proper starting point — can one hope to reach the summit. These contrasting images of defiance and obedience thus serve to juxtapose Augustine’s improper and prideful mindset with an exemplar of how one should approach the Word of God.

Moreover, this passage introduces the dialectical relationship between adult and child further explored in Book 8, showcasing how the self-imposed restrictions of maturity can prevent a person from sincerely seeking knowledge. Augustine considers himself a “mature adult,” and disdains returning to the state of “a little beginner” (3.9). However, the price of upholding his adulthood is that he is no longer open to new perspectives, as he is burdened with preconceptions of what “good” knowledge is. This is what causes Augustine to refuse the Bible, which he deems “unworthy” due to its undignified style. He retreats to the “slick talk” of the Manichees, who

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<sup>4</sup> This idea of God existing *inside* us rather than in the *outside* world is restated in Book 10, with Augustine reflecting “you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there” (10.38).

affirm his intelligence with “loquacious” arguments (3.10). These, while polished and attractive, are “no more than sound and noise,” “birdlime” that traps the listener (3.10). It is ironic that the maturity Augustine is proud of is what leads him astray. He reflects on this: “The blindness of humanity is so great that people are actually proud of their blindness” (3.6). As he too is a follower of “splendid hallucinations” (3.10), Augustine’s “maturity” seems to be similarly misguided and illusory. Perhaps truly reaching intellectual “adulthood” involves first renouncing all of what one knows; that is, to embrace the radical openness possessed by a child.

This unexpected stance is supported by Augustine’s reading of Romans 13, a scene in which both content and form metamorphose to emphasize his “childish” clarity of faith. It is “a boy or a girl” that answers Augustine’s cry for help with a repeated chant: “Pick up and read, pick up and read” (8.29). This little song, which sounds as if it comes from a “children’s game” (8.29), beckons its listener back into his own youth. The Latin phrase “tolle lege” is even shorter than its English counterpart, and by repeating this rhythmic chant, the text evokes a simple and playful mood. Augustine is visibly enchanted; his “countenance [changes],” and he “[checks] the flood of tears” (8.29). Having undergone this “ritual” of regression, he is untangled from the complex and clashing streams of inquiry that characterized his previous “adult” self. He interprets the mysterious sign “solely as a divine command...to read the first chapter [he] might find” (8.29). No longer does Augustine let his intellect get in the way; he does not seek to problematize, but accepts what he hears as “solely” the Word. The lucidity of Augustine’s thought is seen through the “silence” (8.29) that accompanies his reading. This lack of “sound and noise” (3.10) indicates not only a literal absence, but also the freedom that Augustine has discovered through his leap of faith. “All the shadows of doubt” (8.29) created by his pride are now dispelled by an unqualified conviction in God.

The effect of this change extends even to Augustine's prose, which transforms to take on an unadorned style free of artifice. The preceding paragraph is filled with metaphor: throwing himself under a fig tree,<sup>5</sup> he lets "rivers [stream] from [his] eyes." His misery precipitates "a vast storm bearing a massive downpour of tears" (8.28). There is a noticeable lack of such figurative language here, as Augustine speaks in short declarative sentences that express only what is necessary. He adopts the "inward" and undignified diction of the Bible that he previously mocked as suitable for "mere children" (3.9), thereby completing the process of reverting from pride to open-mindedness. This observation underscores the importance of Augustine's transformation. Only by clearing away his false intellectual conceit can he now "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (8.29) and be reborn in God's grace.

Our interpretation of the *Confessions* reverses the typical notion of maturity, casting the child's perspective as natural and closer to God. This conclusion extends beyond sacred texts to the act of reading in general: it is best to approach any piece of literature with an open-minded worldview. By eradicating our pride and preconceptions, we can understand the author to a greater extent. And yet, it is difficult to completely turn this dialectical relationship on its head. Only after years of frustration is Augustine able to conduct the "profound self-examination" (8.28) that sparks his reversion to innocence. It may be desirable to exist in a prelapsarian world of childlike joy, but how can we cherish this state of being without having first experienced a flawed adulthood? Is it truly good to be a child, when this appears to contradict the human goal of acquiring knowledge? We can try to reconcile the two sides of this seeming dichotomy. At the end of Book 8, Augustine reaches a state of "redeemed innocence." By tempering our wonder

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<sup>5</sup> This "fig tree" may in itself be an allusion to the tree that Adam and Eve used to clothe themselves after consuming the fruit of knowledge, thus symbolizing Augustine's guilt. He is remorseful of his sinful deeds and seeks shelter, just as the first man and woman were ashamed by and sought to remedy their nakedness.

and curiosity with experience, perhaps we can hope for a similar result: to see the world through the eyes of a child, while retaining the essential wisdom that can only be accumulated through time and lived experience.

#### Works Cited

Augustine, Saint. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick, Oxford University Press, 2008.