

ST. AUGUSTINE JESUS LOVES ME

Self-consciousness, whose literary expression is autobiography, is a middle class phenomenon. Intrinsicly, the nobility's temperament is not one of consciousness of a distinct and free self. The aristocratic individual sees himself as part of a family. What counts is the story of the family, not the individual, who achieves a life course through the instrument of the noble family and service to it. The church's hierarchic tradition is also hostile to self-consciousness. It is sinful arrogance. We must see ourselves, said the medieval church, as dependent on divine grace, not as individuals pursuing a private purpose. Furthermore; the church liked elaborate structures and immersion of the individual in these complex structures, whether episcopal or monastic organizations. Self-consciousness and its literary genre, autobiography, are therefore a middle class affect. The strong and ambitious middle class person has neither the nobility's great family nor the church's institutional means of grace to be absorbed within, and develops a sense of making it as a person, as an individual. Middle class people rise because they have lots of room to do so; they start at a modest level of achievement and security. The scion of the great family and the holder of high ecclesiastical office can only fulfill the prescribed opportunities of their order. The middle class person can see a long avenue of transformation open to him or her and develops a strong ego in challenge to the environment. Autobiographical egoism existed in ancient literature. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), by origin an obscure, dark North African who opened up a career for himself by his excellence in Latin rhetoric, drew upon this classical genre and the psychological tendencies of his class to write an account of his life up to his mid-30s, when he became a Christian and a priest. Formally, it is antiegoistic because all the time he was allegedly making choices and experiencing upheavals of one sort or another, his Christian God was, he maintained, leading him through an edifying obstacle course to his predestined conversion. The Confessions therefore accords with the hierarchic doctrine of the church, and St. Augustine in his maturity played an Important role in elaborating that doctrine. But in this book he manages to tell one of the great personal stories in literature while superficially at least giving full recognition to the ecclesiastical doctrine of salvation by divine grace (gift). It is an interesting question why Augustine felt justified in writing or at least publishing this book some ten years after his conversion. He has a ready answer: He is Everyman and his story is an anthropological case study in which his road to salvation represents mankind's. Yet more simply the book reads as though Augustine thought his life was an exciting experience to read about if it was artistically written, and it was. In Augustine, conversion means the capacity to become "continent," to suppress his sexual desires. He helped establish an antierotic tradition in the Catholic Church.

THE INNER CONFLICT

So sick was I and in agony of mind, accusing myself much more sharply than my habit was, writhing and twisting in my chain until that should be broken which bound me. It still held me though its grip was weakening. Yet, Lord, you pressed upon my inner person, in severe mercy doubling the lashes of fear and shame, lest I should slip back again, and that small, thin fetter which remained should not be snapped, but should gather strength again and bind me more firinly. And I was murmuring to myself: 'Look, let it be

done now, done now? As I said the word I almost did it—almost did it, yet did it not. Yet I did not quite go back to that which was, but stood nearer and gathered breath I tried again, and little by little got nearer and all but touched and laid hold of it. Yet I was not quite there to touch and hold, hesitating to die to death and to live to life, and the ingrained worse was more powerful in me than the unaccustomed better. And that very instant of time on which I was to be something different, the nearer it drew to me, the greater dread did it beat into me, though it did not beat e back nor turn me aside. It only held me in suspense.

The trifles of trifles, the worthless amid the worthless, past objects of my affections, were what was holding me, pulling at the garment of my flesh and whispering: 'Are you sending us away? From this moment we shall not be with you for eternity? And from this moment you will not be permitted to do this and that for ever?' And what did they suggest by my `this and that; my God? Let your mercy turn it away from your servant's soul.

What impurities, what acts of shame they suggested. But by now I was much less than half hearing them, and they were not so openly meeting me on the path and contradicting me, but rather muttering behind my back, and furtively tugging at my cloak to make me look back, as I made away from them. Yet they did hold me back from tearing myself away and shaking them off, and leaping over to the place to which I was called, while a violent habit cried: 'Do you think you can live without them?'

It was speaking very faintly by now. For on that side to which I had set my face and which I trembled to approach appeared clear the chaste of Continence. Serene was she, not carelessly merry, honourably alluring me to come and not to doubt, and stretching out to receive and to embrace me, holy hands, full of hosts of good examples. With her were so many boys and girls, a multitude of youth and every age, grave widows, aged virgins, and Continence herself in every one of them, by no means childless, but the fertile mother of children and of joys from you her husband, Lord. And she was smiling at me with an encouraging smile saying as it were: 'Will you not be able to do what these youths and

maidens have done? And are any of these or those able so to do save it be in the Lord, their God? The Lord their God gave me to them. Why do you stand in your own strength, and so fail to stand? Cast yourself fearlessly on him. He will not pull back and let you fall. Cast yourself on him without a care. He will receive and heal you: I was blushing the more for I still could hear the whisperings of those trifles, and I was hanging back. And again she seemed to say: 'Make yourself deaf to those unclean members of yours, and let them die. They tell you of delights but not according to the law of the Lord your God: Such was the controversy in my heart, nothing but myself against myself. Alypius, sitting by my side, was silently awaiting the outcome of my extraordinary agitation.

CLIMAX

A strong surge of thought dredged from my secret depths and cast up all my misery in a heap before my inner eye. A mighty tempest arose bearing a great storm of tears. To shed it with befitting speech, for to be alone seemed the better state for weeping, I rose from Alypius' side, and withdrew some distance, so that even his presence should not be an embarrassment to me. Thus I thought, and he was sensitive. I think I had earlier said

something in which the sound of my voice made it clear that I was heavy with tears. I thus arose, while he stayed where we had been sitting, greatly amazed. I flung myself carelessly down under some fig tree, and let the reins of weeping go. The streams of my eyes broke forth, a sacrifice acceptable to you. I said to you, in words something like these: `And you, O Lord, how long, how long? Will you be angry for ever? Remember not past iniquities: For I felt I was in their grip and I cried out in lamentation: 'How long, how long, tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why not an end to my vileness in this hour?'

Such were my words and I wept in the bitter contrition of my heart. And, see, I heard a voice from a neighbouring house chanting repeatedly, whether a boy's or a girl's voice I do not know: 'Pick it up and read it, pick it up and read it: My countenance changed, and with the utmost concentration I began to wonder whether there was any sort of game in which children commonly used such a chant, but I could not remember having heard one anywhere. Restraining a rush of tears, I got up, concluding that I was bidden of heaven to open the book and read the first chapter I should come upon. I had heard of Antonius that from a public reading of the gospel he had chanced upon, he had been commanded as if what was read was said especially to him- `Go, sell all that which you have, give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven, and come and follow me', and that by such a word from God, he had been immediately converted to you. Excitedly then I went back to the place where Alypius was sitting, for there I had put down the apostle's book when I got up. I seized it, opened it and immediately read in silence the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: . . . not in the ways of banqueting and drunkenness, in immoral living and sensualities, passion and rivalry, but clothe yourself in the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no plans to glut the body's lusts.. ; I did not want to read on. There was no need. Instantly at the end of this sentence, as if a light of confidence had been poured into my heart, all the darkness of my doubt fled away.

Putting my finger or some other mark in the page, I shut the book and with a calm face now I told Alypius, and he thus made known to me what had taken place in his heart unknown to me. He asked to see what I had read. I showed him. He read on, and I did not know what followed. It was this: 'Let the weak in faith receive; He took it to himself and showed it to me, and by such admonition he was given strength, and to that resolution and purpose without any stormy hesitation he applied himself along with me. This was most like him, for his was a character which had long been much, much better than mine. Then we went inside to my mother, and told her to her joy. We told her the course of events. She rejoiced triumphantly, and blessed your name, 'who are able to do above all that we ask or think; She saw that you had given her so much more concerning me than she had sought with her pitiful and tearful lamentations. You converted me to yourself, so that I no longer sought a wife nor any hope in this world, standing on that rule of faith in which so many years before you had shown me to her. You changed her grief to joy, more richly than she had desired of you, and a joy more cherished and chaster than she sought from grandchildren of my body.