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AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS* AND THE GRAMMAR OF SELFHOOD

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Ecce vox tua gaudium meum, vox tua  
super affluentiam voluptatem.

*Confessions*, XI, ii, 3

Autobiography, as is well known, is a neologism of modern culture that originated with romantic myths of expression at the turn of the last century. As an outgrowth of romanticism, autobiography seemingly rests on the assumption that language can and should serve man as a mode of subjective action. "Everything the poet touches," wrote Schlegel, "becomes poetry; in this poetization he naturally proceeds from himself, from the center."<sup>1</sup> These myths of expression were not simple, however, and from the beginning they were attended by an awareness of the dangers of solipsism. Already in Keats, for instance, there is the famous reaction against what he called "the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime," and there is his insistence that the poet has "no identity--he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's creatures." Not only did romanticism nurture a certain ideological strain that Geoffrey Hartman calls "romantic anti-self-consciousness," but it gave rise to countermyths of expression celebrating art as a drama of self-destruction and the labor of writing as the vitiation of identity: Shelley, Flaubert and Nietzsche provide, each in his own way, examples of this backlash. Moreover, such myths of alienation extended far beyond the province of poetics, assuming more or less exact analogues in social theory:

it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes when he creates over-against himself, the poorer he himself--his inner world--becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself. The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. Hence, the greater this activity, the

greater is the worker's lack of objects. Whatever the product of his labour is, he is not. Therefore the greater this product, the less is he himself. The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him . . . 2

Although autobiography (if one will concede that it exists) certainly involves all of the extreme paradoxes of the high romantic quest for identity, some notable tendencies in the esthetic of our own time have made autobiography as a category of writing difficult to perpetrate or defend--difficult, even, to define. These tendencies involve deepening doubts, first, about the ontology of the self and, second, about the role of language in intersubjective communication. They call into question the notion that literary discourse can serve as a medium for the individual consciousness (the "subject"), as well as the notion that the function of literary discourse is to signify or communicate--in short, the idea that literature is "expressive." Indices of such suspicions may be found, among other places, in the revival of interest in the theory of rhetoric (that is, in discourse without *persona*) and in the emphasis, among certain circles, upon seeing the production of literary discourse as a factor to be analyzed within the larger systems of society, including the technological. Strange as it may seem, the sharpening of our awareness that the very concept of autobiography is determined by history (and rather narrowly at that) has only made the category more intriguing than before.

One may very well prefer not to pursue the poetics of self-knowledge primarily as a problem of literary theory, but no one of good sense will decline to welcome its problematics into his reflections upon important texts of the past if to do so will allow him to observe and understand their inner mechanisms with more precision. It is with this goal in mind that I propose to discuss two related questions as they bear upon Augustine's *Confessions*: first, the special properties of the pronoun "I" as a sign with respect to that text, and second, the function of the last three books taken as a conclusion to the text as a whole.

Like all personal pronouns, "I" is deictic: that is

to say, rather than being a signifier (such as the word "book") designating a specific substance whose nature is more or less fixed, "I" is a special signifier whose referent necessarily varies with the circumstances of its enunciation. Thus, when "I" is proffered in an instance of discourse between two subjects, its referent is embodied in the substance of the speaker making the utterance. Moreover, even the identity of the speaker-as-referent will change depending upon the specific code of his discourse: the "I" declared by a politician before parliament is not the same "I" uttered in a party caucus or in a declaration to a companion later that evening--let alone the "I" who years later composes his memoirs. The referent of the word "I" modulates, then, with the conditions (speaker, code, audience) of its enunciation: for this reason it falls into that category of movable signifiers that linguists call "shifters."

The more a message becomes dissociated from the process of intersubjective communication--as it does, for example, when it assumes the form of a narrative that is "closed" upon an inner logic, upon a system of its own, or when it assumes the form of a text having its own, distinct mode of existence--the more the sign "I" loses the referentiality once bestowed upon it by the extrinsic circumstances of its production. Once cleft from the specific circumstances in which it is proffered, "I" becomes a vacant, wandering signifier that is at once the property of everyone and no one. In the absence of a referent, the signifier "I" can only point back to the message in which it is predicated: the code of its discourse confers identity, and the explicit structure of that message phenomenalizes the "I" in the sole materiality of language, in the opaqueness of the text.

The autobiographical act is to be defined neither as the enunciation of a subject who in all sincerity "sets himself down" on parchment or on paper, nor as the manipulation of a figment originating strictly within the system of language, but rather as a dialectic between the two. Each, to some degree, is fictitious, but each belongs to a different kind of statement. The "I" of the present derives its identity from the circumstances (whether true or false) surrounding its enunciation in discourse. The "I-as-object" belongs to historical statements that determine each other by virtue of their distribution within a network or system of past tenses where the first and third



"persons" coagulate as one. This discrepancy in referents of the pronoun "I" spreads to other areas of language as well, especially the semantic, where, for instance, writers such as Joyce and Leiris will delineate the sphere of subjective identity by differentiating between private and conventional "meanings" of specific words. Thanks to the ambivalent functions of the sign "I" as a shifter, discourse enters into a dialectic with narrative, with the language of "history,"<sup>3</sup> which is as much as to say that the self-as-subject oscillates with the self-as-object reified in the materiality of the text. Autobiography exists, then, primarily by virtue of structures that are thought to be universal structures of language, though as a characteristically romantic form it rests on the paradoxical assumption that language is capable at once of capturing subjectivity and of transmuting it, as art, back into a substance that is viable, into forms that are consciously sensible yet un-alien.

While it is apparent in autobiography that the "I" of enunciation calls for a co-axial "thou" with which it is interchangeable and with which it maintains an implied dialogue, this "thou" is frequently neither named nor specified, to a point where the presence of the interlocutor is so undifferentiated, so integral with the substance of the text that the two are ultimately to be perceived as partaking of a single process which is that of poetic language itself. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, for example is ostensibly a narrative motivated within a dialogue with another poet, Coleridge. Coleridge is dead, however, and if he partakes in a dialogue with Wordsworth, it is only because of "the animating faith/ That Poets, even as Prophets, each with other / Connected in a mighty scheme of truth, / Have each his own peculiar faculty . . ." The consubstantiality of the interlocutor with the text allows the poet to invoke, besides, any other person or thing that inspires him to write, any of the "speaking monuments" of nature or humanity that happen to quicken the flow of poetic language ("O Derwent," "Ye presences of nature," "Ye lowly cottages," "O temperate Bard," etc.). Hart Crane depersonalizes his interlocutor utterly, conflating the substance of the Brooklyn Bridge (Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced/ as though the sun took step of thee . . .") with the outburst of poetic inspiration itself: "Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge, / Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry . . ." Eliot, by contrast,

moves beyond the boundaries of romantic autobiography with his discovery that *both* the "I" and the "thou" are merely hypostatizations of a poetic logos belonging not to the individual but to tradition: "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."<sup>4</sup>

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St. Augustine's *Confessions* is commonly read as an autobiography. Superficially the *Confessions* indeed seems to lend itself rather elegantly to such a classification: as a "confession" it is both dialogue (in this case with God as interlocutor) and narrative reconstruction of a life now past. Moreover, Augustine himself amply proclaims the doctrine, as old as the Delphic Oracle, that true knowledge may not be gained by questing after the things of the external world, but rather by turning inward upon the self. A dialectic between the converted self and the self-as-other, the *vetus homo* of history, seems to be intact, then, giving rise to the implication that the principal obligation remaining for orthodox readers of autobiography is merely to demonstrate how this dialectic leads Augustine to select and shape the historical details of his life into a "literary" form in which fact and doctrine determine each other mutually. The consummation of that dialectic, so crucial to any project of autobiography, would seem to come at the moment (in this case the moment after Monica's death) when past and present are about to converge, when the "I" of the narrative past is about to join the "I" that is writing. Indeed, Augustine himself declares his intention to cease speaking of the past and to speak instead of the present.

The only trouble is that Augustine's *Confessions* does not close after the moment when he writes of his mother's burial at Ostia. This is only at the ninth of thirteen books of the *Confessions*: a full quarter of the text remains. Moreover, what follows is quite different from what the orthodox reader of autobiography is conditioned to expect. Augustine, having dramatized his turning inward, now suddenly embarks upon a minute analysis of man's faculty of memory, by whose operations man may establish contact with the divine that is latent in him. Then, instead of evoking his "present" state of mind, Augustine confesses his sins to the world: the language of self-