

## St. Augustine's Confessions: A Prelude to Psychoanalytic Theory

Some years ago, Jean Guitton, in a study entitled "The Interior Man in History" attempted to compare St. Augustine's insights on the theme with those of modern thinkers<sup>1</sup>). Not surprisingly, the first to be considered was Sigmund Freud. Guitton indicated that in Augustine are already found the notion of libido, the idea of the "actual perversion" of infancy, and the existence of the unconscious<sup>2</sup>). Albeit his judgement is in need of abundant clarification, Guitton is certainly on the right track. The more one reads Augustine with Freud in mind the more intimations of psychoanalytic theory come to the surface, insights which lead to Freudian themes, though they are encountered within a complex of radically different presuppositions.

Freud, in the *Standard Edition* of his psychological works, cites Augustine only twice, on curiosities rather than speculative themes<sup>3</sup>). Nevertheless, in spite of this absence of substantive references, it is possible to expand on Guitton. A good case can be made that many of Freud's themes are anticipated by Augustine and that the *Confessions* proves the point. Some themes are not found in his speculations but are acted out, performed, in the unfolding of a life which is so vividly depicted in nine of the thirteen books. It dovetails with the meaning of the verb '*confiteri*' which, as Guardini suggested "signifies a stepping forth from the inmost reserve to the open, the public ... here ... it is taken Godwards"<sup>4</sup>). Augustine tells us as much<sup>5</sup>).

<sup>1</sup>) *The Modernity of St. Augustine*, trans. by A.V. Littledale (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1959), pp. 19-24.

<sup>2</sup>) *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>) *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1971-1974), 24 Volumes, the Standard Edition (S.E.). Augustine is mentioned in the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, SE, 6, p. 10 as an example in free association and the *The Psychology of Love*, SE, 11, p. 104 with regard to a Roman Marriage custom.

<sup>4</sup>) *The Conversion of Augustine*, trans. by Elinor Briefs (Westminster (Maryland): The Newman Press, 1960), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>) *Confessions*, 10, 1-2, Translation used is R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1985).



In the *Confessions* we are faced by incisive remarks on a multiplicity of psychological topics: infancy, adolescence, the affects, concupiscence, laughter, dreams, and memory, all of which point in the general direction of the Freudian notions of libido, the stages of psychic development, the unconscious, narcissism, and the splitting of the personality. Moreover, we find hints of what Freud would later call the "oceanic feeling" (of intra-uterine existence), as well as relevant observations concerning body-language, aggression, play, ambivalence, over-determination, and other Freudian ports-of-call. All while portraying what a Freudian would doubtless interpret as a slow and painful resolution of the Oedipal conflict, possibly only resolved by the death of the indomitable Monica.

A brief study can scarcely cover all of these points. The most that can be done is to cover those themes which can be discussed with a modicum of clarity and precision in spite of the complexity of the subject matter. Three principal themes will be addressed: infancy, concupiscence, and memory, Augustine's analogue to Freud's unconscious. Of course, the spiritual dimension of Augustine's thought cannot be sacrificed. As Gilson has indicated, "Augustine's metaphysical analysis of the inner life has shown us a mind whose awareness of God's hidden presence within moves it to try to see Him more clearly"<sup>6</sup>). His psychology begins with original sin and its two principal effects, concupiscence and ignorance<sup>7</sup>). Freud's position is opposed to Augustine. He secularizes psychic life while remaining sensitive to the exigencies of the spirit viewed solely as phenomena. His aspiration to extend the domain of the Ego over regions of the Id, to reduce the irrational factor in man, fails to take the trans-psychic, [in which the believer finds his fulfillment], into account. Freud seems to be left with Augustine's Devil while losing Augustine's Angel on the way. That the former has been so speculatively fruitful is a tribute to both thinkers.

### *Infancy*

The reader of the *Confessions* is usually unsettled by Augustine's portrait of himself as an infant, a portrait derived from observation and

<sup>6</sup>) *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, Trans. L.E.M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 116.

<sup>7</sup>) *Ibid.*, p. 151.



personal experience. The infant is seen as dominated by desire for immediate gratification:

I began to realize where I was and to make my wishes known to others, who might satisfy them ... if they were not carried out ... I would get cross with my elders ... and take my revenge by bursting into tears<sup>8</sup>).

Infants try to hurt, to strike, others. Although they desire to do harm, as they are physically unable to carry out their will they are considered to be innocent<sup>9</sup>). Augustine was troubled by the Scriptural injunction that "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19,14). As infants are neither virtuous nor truly innocent, he concluded that Jesus used children to symbolize humility simply because they are small<sup>10</sup>).

Augustine provides a vivid description of his adolescence, moving from his dislike for studies, beatings, the first urges of lust, petty lies and evasions, and, not least, the pervasive influence of his mother Monica. Looking back after many years he views these early years as the seedbed of both his misfortunes and his conversion to Christianity. In the midst of his account, Augustine veers away to discuss such psychologically interesting topics as body language and intra-uterine existence<sup>11</sup>). Body language, with Freud, will become incorporated into psychoanalytic technique, while intra-uterine existence becomes the origin of that "oceanic feeling" which Freud thought was intimately connected with the genesis of religion<sup>12</sup>).

Freud was no less realistic than Augustine in his assessment of infancy. He adopted the ponderous term "polymorphous perversity" to characterize the stage. But this frequently misunderstood term (perhaps even by Guitton) simply means that the infant's constitution contains the 'germs' of all perversions, not that the infant is in fact morally perverse. In some persons these 'germs' develop into what Freud calls "the actual vehicules of sexual activity", which is to say perversions. In other persons, submitted to insufficient repression, they develop as neurotic symptoms, and in yet others, through effective

<sup>8</sup>) *Conf.*, 1, 6, 7.

<sup>9</sup>) *Ibid.*, 1, 7.

<sup>10</sup>) *Ibid.*, 1, 19.

<sup>11</sup>) *Ibid.*, 1, 6.

<sup>12</sup>) *Ibid.*, 1, 19.



restriction, they bring about relative normality<sup>13</sup>). There is a radical difference between the child and the adult in who these 'germs' have developed. Although Freud was considered liberal in his day, he considered homosexuality to be a perversion, a judgement which has been set to one side by many of his followers.

Infancy is crucial in other ways. Freud believed that the unconscious was, in a way, the infantile, a part of the self which had detached itself in infancy and consequently had not participated in the later stages of the self's development<sup>14</sup>). He agreed with Rank that the child's attachment to the mother can be traced back to the "pre-historic intra-uterine period" and that this provided the biological foundation of the Oedipus complex, of such central importance in his speculations, which he once described as "unconscious love relations marked by abnormal consequences"<sup>15</sup>). Moreover, Freud believed that the religious *Weltschauung* is determined in childhood, that the adult exalts the childhood image of his father. In this way, the child transforms this image into something contemporary and real, which is to say, into a god<sup>16</sup>).

Augustine's remarks on education, observations on corporal punishment and the relation of learning to smut have Freudian intimations. He indicated that "the words (of a poem) are certainly not learnt any the more easily by reason of the filthy moral ... (the words) ... are like choice and costly glasses which contain the wine of error"<sup>17</sup>). Yet he knew his Terrence well, wept over the fate of Dido, enjoyed the theatre, but never learnt Greek adequately. Freud believed that children have a sexual life (not to be equated with genital), and that education is society's way of taming and restricting their sexuality. This, Freud insisted, is an important task since if it were left undone civilization itself would be in jeopardy<sup>18</sup>). The child enjoys playing with words. Sexually stimulating words are memorized more easily because of his natural interest in sexual matters. Augustine's complaint that "grownup games are known as business, and even though boy's games are much

<sup>13</sup>) *Three Essays on Sexuality*, SE, 7, pp. 171-172.

<sup>14</sup>) *A Case of Obsessional Neurosis*, SE 10, pp. 177-178.

<sup>15</sup>) *A Case of Hysteria*, SE, 7, p. 56; *Three Essays in Sexuality*, SE, 7, p. 226, note 1 (added in 1924).

<sup>16</sup>) *New Introductory Lectures*, SE, 23, p. 163.

<sup>17</sup>) *Conf.*, 1, 16.

<sup>18</sup>) *General Theory of Neurosis*, SE, 16, pp. 311-312.



the same, they are punished for them by their elders"<sup>19</sup>) is echoed centuries later by Freud's observation that children are made to feel that everyone except themselves fulfills ethical demands. He adds that preparing children for life under this misapprehension is like equipping people going on a polar expedition with summer clothing and maps of the Italian lakes<sup>20</sup>).

### Concupiscence

The theme of concupiscence is possibly found on more pages of the *Confessions* than any other theme except the love of God. The "*carnales corruptiones animae meae*" is a constant refrain. Towards the end of the book, perhaps recalling Plato's image of the soul as a many-headed beast<sup>21</sup>), Augustine indicates that if the soul follows in the steps of Christ, the "beasts within" will become good, gentle, and tame<sup>22</sup>). This did not occur until a relatively late date in his own case. Throughout the *Confessions* his outrage at the effects of concupiscence makes itself heard ... loudly, berating himself continuously. He lived in "a hissing cauldron of lust"<sup>23</sup>) chained to a habit which would never be sated<sup>24</sup>), "a prisoner of lust"<sup>25</sup>), a person who muddied the stream of friendship with the filth of lewdness<sup>26</sup>). And so on. In point of fact, Augustine's own friendships could be painfully intense. His youthful reaction to the death of a friend was more anguished than his later reaction to the death of Monica<sup>27</sup>), a relationship which he realized was overly intense on both sides<sup>28</sup>). Augustine learned that concupiscence in all its forms diminishes in man only to the extent that charity grows<sup>29</sup>).

Here again it is the side remark, the isolated insight, the occasional but profound analysis, which merit attention: the pear-tree incident<sup>30</sup>),

<sup>19</sup>) *Conf.*, 1, 9.

<sup>20</sup>) *Civilization and its Discontents*, SE, 21, p. 134, note 1.

<sup>21</sup>) The soul is a fantastic compound of a man, a lion surrounded by snakes, and a many-headed beast having tame and wild animal heads which it can produce and change by itself.. *Republic*, 588b.

<sup>22</sup>) *Conf.*, 13, 21.

<sup>23</sup>) *Ibid.*, 3, 1-2.

<sup>24</sup>) *Ibid.*, 6, 12.

<sup>25</sup>) *Ibid.*, 6, 15.

<sup>26</sup>) *Ibid.*, 3, 1-2.

<sup>27</sup>) *Ibid.*, 4, 14.

<sup>28</sup>) *Ibid.*, 5, 8, 9, 13.

<sup>29</sup>) *Ibid.*, 13, 7 et al.

<sup>30</sup>) *Ibid.*, 2, 4.



exploited but still worthy of mention, remarks on the relation of friendship of lust<sup>31</sup>), glimpses of sadism at the arena with Alypius as the counter-Augustine<sup>32</sup>). The noxious attraction of Manichaean dualism in which Freudian mechanisms of defense move under the surface<sup>33</sup>), and his magisterial analysis of the senses, come together in an impressive collage. Augustine indicates that the sense of smell hardly interested him<sup>34</sup>) — rather odd in a self-proclaimed sensualist! — but that sounds did. Before and after his conversion he enjoyed religious hymns and, as a good Platonist, noted the affinity between music and the emotions: certain modes in song and voice correspond to emotions and are able to stimulate them<sup>35</sup>). Augustine is primarily a visual man. The eye delights in beautiful shapes and bright colors; “for light, the Queen of colors, pervades all I see ... and by the everchanging pattern of its rays it entices me even when I am occupied with something else”<sup>36</sup>). Sight remained a temptation, especially as its “sensuality” can be displaced from the bodily to the mental ‘eye’ in the form of *curiositas*, the vain desire for useless knowledge<sup>37</sup>).

Augustine's frenetic life led him to God, that abode of peace where he was meant to be: “*amor meus, pondus meum*”<sup>38</sup>). At the end he found himself “whole and entire”, in God, rescued from a world which had, through its structures, disfigured and polluted him<sup>39</sup>). The increase of charity brought about a muting of the four fundamental passions (desire, joy, fear, and sorrow) and a loosening of their grasp on the soul. Following a Platonic principle, now made Christian, he advises man to turn away from the love of perishable, material things (which make him perishable) to the love of God which prods him towards God and ultimate deification. The divine initiative working

<sup>31</sup>) *Ibid.*, 3, 2.

<sup>32</sup>) *Ibid.*, 3, 8; 10, 35; 6, 8.

<sup>33</sup>) *Ibid.*, 5, 10: “I still thought that it is not we who sin but some other nature that sins within us ... I preferred to excuse myself and blame this unknown thing which was in me but no part of me”. This later developed into the notion of two wills “one servant of the flesh, the other of the spirit”. *Conf.*, 8, 5.

<sup>34</sup>) *Ibid.*, 10, 32.

<sup>35</sup>) *Ibid.*, 10, 33.

<sup>36</sup>) *Ibid.*, 10, 34.

<sup>37</sup>) *Ibid.*, 13, 21.

<sup>38</sup>) *Ibid.*, 13, 9.

<sup>39</sup>) *Ibid.*, 12, 16.



through his life secured Augustine's release from the fetters of lust binding him to the things of the world<sup>40</sup>).

In Freud the spiritual dimension has been emptied and is present only as a mere phenomenon. Religion is reduced to an illusion which fixates the believer in a state of psychic infantilism. He held several rather fanciful explanations regarding the origins of the God-notion<sup>41</sup>). Lacking a metaphysical explanation of reality did not prevent Freud from elaborating an explanation of the genesis of Deity in the domain of psychic activity. It derives from the economics of the libido, the energy of the instinctual forces of sexual life<sup>42</sup>).

In a poetic mood, Freud once compared libido to the *Eros* of the poets and philosophers which holds all living things together, citing Empedocles with approval in his last major and least optimistic work, because he anticipated the psychoanalytic theory of instincts<sup>43</sup>). In any case, to attach too much libido to the things of the external world or to retain it avariciously in the Ego can lead to painful variations on the spectrum of neurosis. Unlike Augustine's concupiscence, libido is not the result of an original fault. There is no original fault! Libido is part of the structure of man as he is.

It has a direct connection with the religious. In the draft of an early letter to Fliess, Freud states that holiness is the product of the sacrifice of libido for the benefit of the larger community<sup>44</sup>). At this point he begins to elaborate the important notion of sublimation, a developmental process which is able to channel and utilize the sources of energy which neurotics sacrifice to their neuroses. The libido remains at hand while the "unserviceable aim" is replaced by a higher aim which need not be sexual<sup>45</sup>). If Freud was correct in assuming that premature repression makes sublimation of the repressed instinct impossible, we all may be very much in debt to Augustine's 'wild years' and his consequent laborious, painful, and anguished transformation. In any case, the energy expended by him in these early years, was, in

<sup>40</sup>) *Ibid.*, 8, 6.

<sup>41</sup>) *Civilization and its Discontents*, SE, 21, pp. 84-85; *The Future of an Illusion*, SE, 22; *An Infantile Neurosis*, SE, 17, p. 114, et al.

<sup>42</sup>) *General Theory of Neurosis*, SE, 16, p. 413; *New Introductory Lectures*, SE, 22, p. 96.

<sup>43</sup>) *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, SE, 23, pp. 245-246.

<sup>44</sup>) Draft N, Note 3 (May 31, 1987), SE, 1, pp. 255-257.

<sup>45</sup>) *Five Lectures in Psychoanalysis*, SE, 11, pp. 53-54.



retrospect, far less impressive in outcome than that expended during his lengthy and prolific career as Bishop and scholar.

A further note on the senses. Freud was more attuned to olfactory phenomena than Augustine. At one time he sympathized with Fliess' rather bizarre theories concerning the intimate connection between the nose and sexuality, urging that the sense of smell has particular importance in obsessional neuroses<sup>46</sup>). The auditory sense was not his forte. Music was a closed book to him. He admitted that "some rationalistic turn of mind in me rebels against being moved by a thing without knowing why I am thus affected"<sup>47</sup>). He regarded speech as the connecting link between material in the Ego and the residues of visual and auditory perception in the unconscious<sup>48</sup>). Freud enjoyed works of art, especially sculpture, and accorded sight a privileged role in the development of civilization. None the less, Freud's rather drab collection of artifacts would probably not have impressed a man in love with brilliant colors such as Augustine.

### Memory

Although the discovery of the unconscious has often been attributed to Freud by the uninformed, even his biographer-disciple, Ernest Jones, cites two obscure, nineteenth century predecessors<sup>49</sup>). More illustrative antecedents can be unearthed: the notion of the unconscious is already found, not fully articulated, in Plato's speculations on the tyrannical man in the Ninth Book of the *Republic*<sup>50</sup>). Closer at hand, Eduard von Hartmann's monumental *Die Philosophie des Unbewussten* was published in 1869.

In Augustine's thought there is no exact equivalent to Freud's unconscious though his notion of memory (*memoria*) comes closest. Memory contains past and present, the objects both of sense and intellect, ideas and things, mathematical principles and feelings, all that is known regardless of the mind's consciousness<sup>51</sup>). No wonder Augus-

<sup>46</sup>) *A Case of Obsessional Neurosis*, SE, 10, pp. 247-248.

<sup>47</sup>) *The Moses of Michelangelo*, SE, 13, p. 211.

<sup>48</sup>) *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, SE, 23, pp. 162-163.

<sup>49</sup>) According to Jones these two predecessors were Sir Samuel Wilkes and Theodor Lipps. *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work*, Vol. I (London: The Hogarth Press, 1972), pp. 435-436.

<sup>50</sup>) *Republic*, 9, 571e.

<sup>51</sup>) *Conf.*, 10, 14; 16.



tine exclaims: "although it is part of my nature, I cannot understand all that I am ... the mind is too narrow to contain itself entirely"<sup>52</sup>). The memory may even be said to contain God Himself as He is present as giver of life and light. Because of this, the soul is able to recollect God, be attentive to His continuous presence<sup>53</sup>). The memory is truly awe-inspiring in its profundity and incalculable complexity<sup>54</sup>).

Augustine, unlike Freud, makes no direct connection between dreams and the unconscious even though when he does speculate on dreams his observations are to the psychological point. Inhibitions are less weighty in dreams than in the waking state, so that lewd dreams not only generate pleasure but are acquiesced to by the dreamer. The "illusory images" of the dream seem to be more powerful than waking vision. But this is subject to modification. Augustine believes that God will deliver him, that more abundant grace will make it possible for him not to embrace these images, even in sleep<sup>55</sup>). In any case, the *Confessions* says little of his dreams while stressing those of Monica. As Peter Brown suggests, Monica clung to the traditional practices of the African Church, in which dreams were given privileged status<sup>56</sup>). Augustine recounts several of these dreams and though it is difficult for a post-freudian not to think of them as wish-fulfillments, at least on a human level, Monica was hardly credulous and claimed to be able to discern between ordinary dreams and revelations<sup>57</sup>).

Augustine's inner pilgrimage has very little in common with Freud's self-analysis. He enters himself, not to understand the workings of the human psyche, or cure a neurosis, but to find God:

You were there before my eyes, but I had deserted even my own self. I could not find myself, much less find you<sup>58</sup>).

Through a movement of transcendence Augustine arrives at the vision of the light which never fails. Above the frenetic activity of the soul described with such verve, he encounters the stable, permanent, never

<sup>52</sup>) *Ibid.*, 10, 10.

<sup>53</sup>) The most notable passages are found in *De Trinitate*. 14, 7-9; 15-21.

<sup>54</sup>) *Conf.*, 10, 17.

<sup>55</sup>) *Ibid.*, 10, 30.

<sup>56</sup>) Peter BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 29; 32-33.

<sup>57</sup>) *Conf.*, 6, 13.

<sup>58</sup>) *Ibid.*, 5, 2.



changing eternity of God<sup>59</sup>). The delightful account of Augustine and Monica's experience at Ostia, perhaps best described as an elevation in tandem, illustrates this spiritual ascent:

While we spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting moment we reached out and touched it<sup>60</sup>).

In contrast to Augustine, Freud viewed the unconscious as hermetically sealed off from transcendence. If Augustine's theory can be said to be, with only some exaggeration, Platonic recollection baptized, Freud's theory could be considered Platonic recollection turned on its head. In the unconscious the laws of the "conscious system" do not apply. The unconscious does not contain negation, doubt, degrees of certainty, contradiction, time, or change<sup>61</sup>). Freud warned against the analyst's temptation to treat unconscious processes as if they were conscious ones, as they are bound to seem preposterous from the vantage-point of consciousness<sup>62</sup>). The dividing line between conscious and unconscious processes fluctuates in children but is clearly drawn in adults. Freud once made a crude illustration comparing the unconscious to a large entrance hall where mental impulses jostle one another, attempting to enter a drawing room while passing the inspection of a watchman-censor<sup>63</sup>).

In a phrase since become notorious, Freud called the interpretation of dreams the royal road to the unconscious. But there are other, less exalted paths: parapraxes of all sorts, forgetting, slips of the tongue and pen, bungled actions, and so forth<sup>64</sup>). In all of these instances the true instigator is the unconscious impulse. The higher elaborations of the human mind are excluded. There is no exit! To probe into the unconscious is always to probe ... below! From Freud's viewpoint the danger at hand consists in projecting these unconscious impulses outwards to generate an illusory world. Very much the sceptic, he believed that the most venerable beliefs of mankind, such as God, paradise, the Fall, and immortality, came into being in precisely this way, through

<sup>59</sup>) *Ibid.*, 8, 10-16.

<sup>60</sup>) *Ibid.*, 9, 10.

<sup>61</sup>) *The Unconscious*, SE, 14, esp. pp. 186-189.

<sup>62</sup>) *An Infantile Neurosis*, SE, 17, p. 79; *New Introductory Lecture*, SE, 22, pp. 16-22.

<sup>63</sup>) *General Theory of the Neurosis*, SE 16, pp. 295-296.

<sup>64</sup>) *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, SE, 6.



the transformation of Metaphysics into Metapsychology<sup>65</sup>). The mythical in its most primitive form still exists in the underbelly of modern religion and is, to a great extent, responsible in charting its course.

### Conclusion

In this brief study we have attempted to indicate points of resemblance and contrast, similarities of tone, and theme, between Augustine and Freud. None the less, perhaps the two most fascinating themes have been carefully avoided because of their complexity and ambiguity. These are the relation between Augustine's Manichaean background and the splitting of the personality, and the possible resolution of his Oedipal conflict. Many precious texts refer to these themes. The first is a task of major proportions which falls outside the scope of the present modest study. The second is blatantly irreverent, an exercise in superficial psycho-history. To resuscitate this tremendous personality so as to subject him to psychoanalytic scrutiny is inane. In any case, the themes here presented in a fragmentary and arbitrary manner, can become points of departure for future exploration.

Doubtless, there is a vast field to which the present speculations can lead, albeit tangential to the theme under direct consideration. One of these, perhaps the most important, is the structure of society, at which point the *City of God* is not lacking points of contact with *Civilization and its Discontents*. For Augustine, social life, like man, is fallen and subject to sin. The role of government is to secure the fabric of society against the forces of chaos and disintegration. Freud has an equally realistic not to say pessimistic view of society where the ever increasing weight of repression provides the impetus for civilization.

But where Freud views mankind as basically uniform, subject to multiple variations only on the individual level, Augustine distinguishes a social duality, the "two cities" constituted by different loves. Only the *civitas terrena*, having abandoned God as its center and ultimate allegiance by accepting a perverse and selfish love, is fully subject to the vicissitudes described by Freud. More could be said about Augustine's notion of "*libido dominandi*", and other related themes<sup>66</sup>), but here we

<sup>65</sup>) *Ibid.*, pp. 258-259.

<sup>66</sup>) Refer to R.A. MARKUS, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988).



cross the border into new, interesting, and promising investigations, but also, at the moment, to the end of the present study.

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