

Writing as a Means of Grace

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In the beginning was the word. *En arche en ho logos*. Anybody who has taken a semester of Greek has learned that. Those are the opening words of the Gospel of John, and you will recall – that’s what a professor says when he’s not sure people will recall – that Goethe’s Faust struggled with the meaning of those words at the very beginning of the play: “*Im Anfang war das Wort...der Sinn...die Kraft...die Tat.*” “In the beginning was the word, the meaning, the power, the deed.”

In the beginning was the word. This is of course one of the most shattering metaphysical statements in the New Testament, and more than any other statement it provides the basis for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. But it’s not only a metaphysical statement. With its roots simultaneously in the Hebrew and the Greek tradition – in the Hebrew tradition, where the [86] very first act of God in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible is to speak, and in the Greek tradition, where the word for “word” and the word for “reason” are the same—this declaration affirms that the act of communication is at the very center not only of human existence and its origins but of the mystery of the Divine Being itself. And so the transmission of the word, the moving of the word from within to without, from the word that dwells within to the word that emerges, *logos endiathetos* to *logos prophorikos*—the mystery of that process is the mystery of divine communication and of divine self-communication, and therefore of the Divine Self.

Human beings, being created, according to that first chapter of the first book of the Bible, in the divine image, in the image of a God who has no face, participate through the divine image in the mystery of the Divine Being by reflecting those capacities of the Divine Being that lie at the center of self-revelation. And those capacities are two, but finally they are one: the capacity to love and the capacity to communicate. For in the beginning was the word.

I want to talk to you today about three sensitive, thoughtful, troubled writers in whose own lives the mystery of the word, of its communication through speech and especially through writing, played a decisive role.

[87] Within Western culture, more perhaps than any other non-Biblical book *The Confessions of St. Augustine* participates in that mystery. One has only to try to find antecedents for Augustine's confessions to realize that this is—to use an overworked word—a unique book. Its nearest analogy for centuries before it is *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, and if you read the two books side by side, as I did with a group of undergraduates a few years ago, you realize that they are altogether different in their outlook, method and style.

For *The Confessions of St. Augustine* are one single uninterrupted sentence. They could be punctuated with semicolons all the way to the end. This single sentence, moreover, is written in the second person singular. For *The Confessions*, as the very title suggests, are a prayer, addressed to God—addressed to Augustine's God, a God to whom it was not possible to lie. For that God already knew what Augustine was trying to dredge up out of his memory. But it was also a God to whom it was not necessary to lie. For the God who knew the deepest and darkest recesses of Augustine's soul was also a God of grace and forgiveness. And it is in the permissive atmosphere of grace, in the context of forgiveness, that Augustine lays bare his soul—for God and for anybody else who might look over his shoulder at the book.

So in its literary form *The Confessions* stand as a piece of introspection—in some sense or other an autobiography, [88] or, if you like, a spiritual autobiography. But perhaps the best term for it is term that was chosen as the title for this series of talks. It is a spiritual quest—a quest for meaning, for coherence, for integrity. It describes a quest as Augustine moved from one preoccupation to another, from preoccupation with self to a dozen years as a member of the murky Manichean sect, to various kinds of neo-Platonism, to orthodox Christianity, always questing.

Behind that quest he believed was a yet deeper quest—a quest *by* the Divine, by the Almighty; a quest for Augustine and for every other soul. *God in Search of Man* is the title of a book by my late friend Rabbi Abraham Heschel, and that's also the theme of Augustine's book. For Augustine, like a later English poet, Francis Thompson, fled the hound of heaven but was pursued down the corridors of his own life.

With that as his intent, Augustine undertakes in *The Confessions* a very special methodology. In the first Epistle to the Corinthians, in the thirteenth chapter, Paul says, "Now we see through a glass darkly," and many people think that means a window. Of course it doesn't; it means a mirror: "Now we see in a mirror, darkly" (*per speculum in aenigmate*). If you've ever seen mirrors from the Hellenistic and Roman period you know that people did indeed see in them very darkly, and one wonders how Cleopatra ended up as beautiful as she did with that kind of mirror.

[88] Augustine takes that statement – we see “*per speculum*,” in a mirror – and makes it the methodological key to his enterprise; namely, that if you want to look at the face of God, in whose presence all living things will shrivel and die, you must do what you do if you want to watch an eclipse of the sun. You must find some place where the light is reflected but where it is also tamped down.

And he finds that place not only in nature, and not only in human history—after all, he did write *The City of God*—but also, finally, within his own soul. And in this book he undertakes to study his own soul and to read off from his soul the data that will tell him what God is and what God does. And so in that sense the book is an account of Augustine's relations with God— of God's patience with him, of how God pushed him in one direction or another, of how he resisted ("Oh Lord, make me chaste, but not yet"), of how he moved from one place to another (T. S. Eliot paraphrased him, "To Carthage came I burning, burning"), and finally how that restlessness was a means of grace. "Thou hast made us for Thyself," he writes, "and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee." And it did.

Augustine writes from the perspective of someone who has found the goal and who now proceeds to describe the quest, attempting to relive the events of that quest and therefore probing as no one ever did before him and as, after him, no one did again until [90] Sigmund Freud probed, as Augustine put it, “the mystery of memory by which the sins of the pasts, their pleasure and gratification, can be present to me now, and if not in my conscious mind then in my dreams, in which I all but relive them.” Augustine proceeds to discern a direction and a pattern in all of that, for he believes that he is able to find the hand of God guiding and at the same time waiting. For this was a God who created humanity, but who created humanity free enough even to defy the divine will.

In the Middle Ages they used to ask—they had nothing much else to do, so they asked such questions— "Can God create a stone so heavy that God himself cannot lift it?" And if you say No, he cannot, then of course God is not almighty because he can't create such a stone. And if you say Yes, he can, then of course God is not almighty because he can't lift such a stone. Well, the answer to that question in Augustine, as indeed in the Hebrew Bible, is quite simple. Yes, there is such a stone: it is the human will, created by God, but created in such a way that God cannot lift it. For, as Augustine says, God does not rape; God woos, and therefore God will take his chances on winning or losing and will finally prefer to let someone be lost rather than to interfere with the sacredness of the human person.

So this process of "reading off" is what impels the writing of *The Confessions*. They are a rehearsal, a re-enactment, [91] but as seen “*per speculum*.” So convinced was Augustine of the validity of this method that already in *The Confessions*, and then especially in the most profound of his speculative works, the treatise on the Trinity, he was prepared to find

in the human soul an analogy for the Trinity itself: to see in the relation between intellect, will and love, and in similar kinds of connections, the working out of the image of the Trinity—the "footsteps" of the Trinity, as he calls them, *Vestigia Trinitatis*—in the human soul.

Writing *The Confessions*, then, was—and this isn't intended to be a pun—a confession. In Augustine and in the Hebrew Bible the word "confession" has a twofold meaning. On the one hand it's a confession of sin, a laying bare of one's self to one's confessor in order to be shriven, as, for example, in the 51st Psalm of David. And it's also a confession of faith, of faith in the God who created, who judges and who forgives. And all of that is put together into a book, one of the few books from antiquity that have never been out of style. Every century since Augustine's death in 430 has read his *Confessions* with delight. That's not true of Plato's *Republic*, of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, of Cicero's *Orations*, or even of Caesar's *Gallic War*. (Every generation did read Caesar's *Gallic War*, but under some constraint.)

But Augustine's *Confessions* have been read over and over again by the crazy mixed-up kids of every generation, regardless of their age. Because in this act of writing [92], the narrative of grace becomes itself a means of grace, and by following the steps through which God led him, we ourselves see where we are in the schema of divine grace and forgiveness, and we find there both the mystery of Augustine's personality, the mystery of our own personality, and, if you wish, the mystery of the Divine Being. *The Confessions* are a conversion narrative. They tell a story with a beginning and a middle and an end—or at least an end as of the writing of the book, with more still to come.

One of the most important conversion narratives of modern times also has a Latin title, though the treatise itself is in English. It's the *Apologia pro Vita Sua (Defense of His Own Life)* by John Henry Newman. Newman was an Oxford don, a promising young scholar in Greek who had edited various Greek writings and had also shown himself to be a master of English prose. In 1844-45 Newman wrote his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, a treatise that has been extremely important to me in my own scholarship. In it he sought to identify some of the patterns by which Christian doctrine had developed from one century to another. That research led him to the conclusion that what had kept Christian doctrine from developing wrongly was the guiding hand of the See of Rome, and therefore in 1845 John Henry Newman, on the basis of his own [93]scholarship, became a Roman Catholic and set the pattern for various English-speaking writers, notably G.K. Chesterton, to move in the same direction ever since.

Newman described his conversion at length in a *roman a clef* called *Loss and Gain*, published (anonymously) in 1848. In that novel a sensitive young man with an Oxford background and literary esthetic tastes finally comes to the conclusion that the only place

where he can find peace for his soul is within the bosom of Mother Church, and as a result he proceeds to realign his relations with his family and his friends. Some of them try to understand, and do; some of them try to understand, and don't; some of them don't even want to understand.

The young man's relationship to each of them becomes the stuff of that novel. It's also, though in a much more substantial and scholarly way, the stuff of the later *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. For Newman became very much a *cause celebre* in the 1850s and '60s when he was vigorously attacked from both right and left. Many of the attacks came from old-line Roman Catholics, who weren't at all sure that his conversion was genuine, who were quite sure that what he had been converted to was not the Catholicism they had grown up with. For the Catholicism of John Henry Newman comes much closer to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council than the First. Indeed, it was said in Rome in [94] the 1960s that at last Cardinal Newman has his council. For at Vatican II, unlike Vatican I, what prevailed was the organic sense of the total growth of the Christian community, rather than the juridical sense of a church that legislated doctrine for its believers. In Newman's time it was that juridical sense which dominated the first Vatican Council of 1869 and 1870. That was the party line. Therefore many Roman Catholics weren't convinced by Newman's conversion.

On the other hand, his Anglican friends—his liberal and secular friends—couldn't understand why anybody who obviously had as many brains as John Henry Newman did could let himself in for anything as obscurantist as becoming a Roman Catholic. The attacks on him therefore came from all directions—for instance, from Charles Kingsley, author of *Westward Ho!*, who, in a series of articles, raised questions about the fundamental moral integrity of Newman and of his belief about truth. Kingsley accused Newman of having said that in the interests of achieving a religious goal it was permissible to fudge on the truth. Augustine had once said, "Remember that God never needs our lies." Think about that, if you've been parents, and think about what such a principle would amount to in the course of the twenty years you spend answering children's questions. It's a shattering imperative.

In response to all those attacks, Newman was obliged not only to clarify what he meant by his own [95] view of truth and falsehood, but to tell the story of his conversion. He subtitled his *Apologia* "A History of My Religious Opinions." In many ways it is patterned after Augustine's *Confessions*. It's written in the kind of English that Augustine would have written if he had gone to Oxford. But, more profoundly, it is in the tradition of the *Confessions* as a subjective document, describing what Newman believes to be an objective reality. Therefore it adopts Augustine's method of "reading off" the story of his childhood and youth, and looks by hindsight for indications, all along the road, of the process

that had brought him to 1845 and beyond.

The *Apologia* is therefore a remarkable exercise for the writer, but also for the reader. For inevitably in such a process, as was already true of Augustine, there's a selectivity in the events that are "important"—the events that in one way or another anticipate or sometimes by contrast highlight the way the story came out, now that we know how it did come out.

There's a certain age at which people write such books. They have become to some extent public figures; their persona is largely determined and fixed, and now as writers they begin to sift the story for those objective-subjective data that will make sense out of the higgledy-piggledy events of a life. One man who did that earlier in the nineteenth century when he had become a persona, if not an icon, was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. He subtitled his autobiography *Dichtung [96] und Wahrheit* (Fiction and Truth). For he knew and candidly admitted that the very process of selecting makes such a work a work of fiction.

The *Apologia* of Newman, therefore, is an attempt, made at what might be called the other end of the Christian era, to do what Augustine had done at the beginning of the Christian era of European history. For if that era begins in the fourth century with the conversion of Constantine (and that, after all, was only a few years before Augustine's birth), and if it ends somewhere at the beginning of the nineteenth century with Napoleon or Goethe or Darwin, Newman's *Apologia* comes at that ending point and attempts to re-enact in his own life the forces by which his generation had been alienated from the Christian tradition and the processes by which the tradition could be recovered. So that, too, is a spiritual quest—a quest for meaning, integrity, memory; a quest to understand the mystery of his conversion and to communicate it in a way that others, like his friends in *Loss and Gain*, will, if not understand, at least respect or forgive.

Almost exactly a century after Augustine died—in 430, as you will recall—Boethius, the last of the Romans, a consul of the Roman Republic, was imprisoned for treason to the emperor. He was a scholar, one of the last major figures in the West who moved with equal ease in both Latin and Greek. Knowing Greek was a [97] rare accomplishment in early Western scholarship. Dante, for example, didn't know *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and throughout the Middle Ages the only dialogue of Plato that was known was the *Timaeus* because it was available in Latin. For a thousand years most scholars in the West didn't know any Greek.

What they did know of the Greek tradition they knew through a couple of figures, primarily Boethius. For Boethius as a young man dreamed big dreams. He would, he hoped, translate all of Aristotle from Greek into Latin, translate all of Plato from Greek

into Latin, and then write a system that would harmonize the differences between the two, and do all this in the spirit of the Christian gospel.

He didn't quite make it. What he did translate were the logical writings of Aristotle, what we now call the "*Organon*," and that was why through the Middle Ages Aristotle was remembered in the West as a logician. It was only when the Arabs translated Aristotle from Greek into Arabic and some Christians then rendered that Arabic into Latin, thereby reintroducing the metaphysical writings of Aristotle in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that the real Aristotle came through. Eventually he was translated from Greek directly into Latin, in a form that made it possible for Saint Thomas Aquinas to write the *Summa Theologica*. But until then Boethius's translation of the Greek logical writings of Aristotle into Latin was all that was known of his work.

A scholar and public figure, Boethius, for a variety of reasons—primarily palace intrigue—got into trouble, was arrested, imprisoned and threatened with execution. And it was while he was in prison that he wrote his best-known book, the only one that anybody except specialists reads today—*The Consolation of Philosophy*. The plot of the book is that while languishing in prison in despair he is visited by Lady Philosophy, who, alternating prose and poetry, explains to him the meaning of faith, providence and free will and thus gives him reassurance even as he faces the prospect of death. One of my students in a seminar we had on Boethius a few years ago kept referring to this vision of the lady, Boethius's imaginary friend, as "sort of like Harvey." So I can't read Boethius now without thinking of that rabbit in Mary Chase's play.

This vision gives Boethius an opportunity to explore within himself the resources of insight, faith and hope that will prepare him for he knows not what. *The Consolation of Philosophy* had an unbelievable influence on European thought and literature. Dante knew it by heart. I've just finished teaching a seminar on Dante's *Paradiso*, along with a colleague who is chairman of the Italian department at Yale, and it was my job to provide the footnotes, since Dante doesn't provide footnotes, and to look for echoes of Dante's reading, including above all *The Consolation* of Boethius [99]. This influence is everywhere. It's also everywhere in Thomas Aquinas.

The Consolation was translated into Anglo-Saxon by King Alfred and translated into English by Geoffrey Chaucer. Then it was translated into English again, by Queen Elizabeth—the First, that is. As far as I know, it has never been out of print in five centuries, and it still bears careful reading. But there's no way to tell from the book that the author was a Christian. There's not a single reference to the person of Jesus, no allusion to the Cross, no clear quotation from either the New Testament or the Old. Not the Book of Job, which you might think would come to his mind, or the Psalms, which do after all

deal with the question of why must the pious suffer, or Saint Paul sitting in prison writing his captivity letters. None of that. Instead the book proceeds completely on the basis of our common human experience and destiny and seeks to make sense of it. It's monotheistic, but in its monotheism it talks about *fatum* (fate) and *providentia* (providence) and seeks to show *that fatum* is subordinate to *providentia* and that therefore we must have hope and that we can do something about our condition, regardless of the restrictions that fate may place upon it.

That problem of the non-Christian character of *The Consolation* doesn't appear to have troubled anybody in the Middle Ages, or at least I haven't found any medieval [100] scholars who wondered about it. In modern times, however, it has been a major historical and literary puzzle. For a long time German scholars—who tend to do that sort of thing—were sure that the author of *The Consolation* was different from the author of all the other theological treatises attributed to Boethius. Then at the beginning of the twentieth century a dissertation by an American professor, E. K. Rand, demonstrated on purely literary grounds that it was indeed the same person. Thus the problem of the authorship and the nature of this spiritual quest came dead center.

Today, if you read *The Consolation of Philosophy*, knowing who and what the author was and remembering the title, you see that it's almost a pun. For in one sense the consolation is the consolation that Philosophy provides. "Harvey," this imaginary friend whose name is Philosophia, consoles and comforts; that's the consolation. And note that it's philosophy, not theology, that is the consolation. Boethius undoubtedly prayed while he was in prison; he says some things about that, and he may well have used the Psalms when he prayed. But here he's trying to answer the question of whether, even apart from divine revelation, simply by probing the nature of the human spirit in relation to the Divine Spirit, it's possible to find a philosophy that consoles. And he comes to the conclusion that it is possible—that the very structure of the world and the structure of the [101] mind would require us to have a sense of direction and providence.

But the title is even more of a pun than that, for it is not only capital *P* "Philosophy" and lower case *p* "philosophy." It is "Consolation." And when you finish the book you suddenly realize where the consolation came from. It came from writing the book. The very act of writing, the kind of dredging up of these questions and these tentative answers out of the past and out of the inner self—that very process, putting it down, trying to say it right, is the consolation. And so it is in the work of writing the work that the consolation comes, as it is in the quest that the finding comes. For a spiritual quest means precisely that: not starting in a vacuum at square one, but starting where we are with what we have and with what we have found, to quest for it again. In Augustine's beautiful term, it is *fides quaerens intellectum*—faith in search of understanding—so that, having found

understanding, faith can search yet again. Over and over.

"Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling doom; lead thou me on" was Cardinal Newman's best-known prayer. For it is in the quest that we find; it is in the finding that we seek, not only because in the beginning was the word, but because the same word is also there at the end. *Devar Adonai leolam*: "The word of the Lord abideth forever."

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Bibliography (pp. 173-177)

[editor's note: It was decided that though this list of references could be updated, there is nevertheless an enjoyable charm in Professor Pelikan's style and his recommendations are worthy of consideration, some of them still in print or available online.]

I have selected Augustine, Boethius and Cardinal Newman as exemplars of "writing as a means of grace" because each of them in his most widely read book made himself the object of his own study, in a literary genre that has been called, perhaps a bit inappropriately, "spiritual autobiography": Augustine in *The Confessions*, Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Newman in the *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. Even more than most authors, therefore, these three deserve a chance to speak in their own accents, before other, later accounts of what they "really meant" are given their opportunity. Fortunately, there are adequate and readily available editions and translations of all three books.

Of the three, Newman is by far the most recent: we will be commemorating the centenary of his death two from now, in 1990. As it happens, his "autobiography" is also the one for which we possess the most useful and complete editions: one by Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford, 1967), more than half of which consists of supplementary material and notes; the other, in the "Norton Critical Editions" series, by David J. DeLaura (New York, 1968), with some of the same additional texts but with an eminently helpful collection of critical essays by literary, historical and theological scholars. Like many of the volumes in that series, DeLaura's edition provides a good introduction for the first-time reader, yet remains an inexhaustible resource even after many readings.

I am preparing a similar volume of Augustine's *Confessions* for the "Norton Critical Editions." (My late father, a parish pastor, used to tell the story of a theologian who, when asked, after a lecture on the virtue of humility, for the title of the most brilliant and learned book on the subject, replied, "I haven't finished writing it yet." - editor's note: It also appears the Professor Pelikan was never able to finish writing this book.) There are, as everybody knows, many English translations of Augustine's work. E.B. Pusey's of

1838 an important monument of the Oxford Movement, manifests a grace of language that often suggests the sort of English that Augustine might have written – if he had gone to Oxford. My own favorite among translations, and the one I plan to include in my Norton volume, is by F.J. Sheed (New York, 1943).

Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* can boast the most distinguished succession of translators into English. King Alfred the Great rendered it into Anglo-Saxon in the ninth century; Geoffrey Chaucer produced a prose version, which Caxton published at Westminster a century later, in 1480; and Queen Elizabeth (the First!) is also given credit for an English translation, turned out with amazing speed.

The most readily available English translation is by one "I.T.," published originally in 1609 but – with the observation that "there was, indeed, not much to do" to correct it – incorporated into the "Loeb Classical Library" edition, with the Latin text on the opposite page, by one of the greatest of modern Boethius scholars, Edward Kennard Rand (Cambridge, Mass, 1968). The Penguin edition by V.E. Watts (Harmondsworth, 1969) has achieved wide circulation.

After these texts themselves (or, at any rate, alongside them) a reader may want to consult present-day studies. Of the three writers, Augustine has undoubtedly received the most attention. Some of the most discerning essays on his personality and thought have been collected in *St. Augustine: His Age, Life and Thought* by Martin C. D'Arcy, S.J., and others (New York, 1957) and in *Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by R.A. Markus (New York, 1972).

But the first book I would recommend for any thoughtful consideration of Augustine's "spiritual quest" is the thoroughly delightful *Augustine of Hippo*, by my friend Peter Brown (London, 1967, note: new edition, 2000). It must be daunting to second-guess the author of the best-known set of confessions ever written, and to do so more than fifteen centuries after his death. But Peter Brown has carried out the task in a book that is decently respectful yet never stuffy.

The most profound book I know on Augustine, at least in English, is Charles N. Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford, 1944). I like to say that I wish I had written it, but that if I had I would have given equal time to the Greeks, both classical and Christian.

Because 1986 was the 1600th anniversary of Augustine's conversion to Catholic Christianity, there have been several volumes published on him recently, including my

own *The Mystery of Continuity: Time and History, Memory and Eternity in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Charlottesville, Va, 1986).

For all his eminent translators, Boethius receives far less attention than he deserves – maybe because he is too late for the classicists, too early for the medievalists, and too “secular” for the theologians. In addition to his edition for the “Loeb Classical Library” and his erudite philological works proving that the Boethius of *The Consolation* was indeed also the author of the works of orthodox theology attributed to him, E.K. Rand in his *Founders of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1928) provided the kind of introduction that only a master of the material could take the risk of writing.

Two books on Boethius appeared at Oxford in 1981: M.T. Gibson edited a volume of studies entitled *Boethius: His Life, Thought, and Influence*, which brings together much of the present state of the art; and Henry Chadwick, with his special blend of urbanity and sympathy, produced a lovely little study, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology and Philosophy*, which, despite its formidable title, is largely biographical in its approach.

Perhaps because John Henry Newman himself could write so well – as even his gainsayers admitted, though it only them suspect and resent him the more – writing books about him has become something of a cottage industry, particularly among English-speaking Roman Catholics. Very few scholars in Newman’s time or in ours knew the primary source materials as well as the late Charles Stephen Dessain; his *John Henry Newman* (London, 1966) is authoritative but completely accessible. Louis Bouyer’s *Newman: His Life and Spirituality* (London, 1958) is not only charming but provocative.

But I suppose that if I had to recommend only one book as a supplement to the Apologia it would have to be Newman’s own roman a clef, *Loss and Gain*, which Geoffrey Tillotson has incorporated into the Newman volume of “The Reynard Library” published by Harvard University Press (Cambridge, Mass., 1970).

