



SAINT AUGUSTINE

the
Confessions
(Second Edition)

“It is no exaggeration to say that Sister Maria Boulding’s translation is of a different level of excellence from practically anything else on the market.”

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The
Confessions

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THE WORKS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

A Translation for the 21st Century

Part I – Books

Volume 1:

The Confessions

THE WORKS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

A Translation for the 21st Century

*The
Confessions*

(Second Edition)

I/1

translation, notes and introduction by
Maria Boulding, O.S.B.

edited by
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Introduction

If the Bishop of Hippo looked out of his window as he picked up his pen, he saw a brilliant, colorful world, its hot details vivid in the fierce African sun. Augustine loved light, “the queen of colors” (X,34,51). He looked out at a prosperous Mediterranean country, at well-maintained roads gleaming white in the sun, at olive groves, orchards and vineyards, at municipal buildings and public baths. And everywhere was the stamp of Rome.

Augustine’s “Africa” was wholly different from the vast and varied continent suggested by that name today. To the south, beyond the Aures Mountains, it was cut off from the rest of the continent by the impassable Sahara. It was equally different from any North African country of medieval or modern times. The birth of Islam was more than two hundred years in the future, and the spread of Arab culture and language nearly three centuries away. Augustine’s Africa (the eastern part of Algeria and Tunisia today) was ancient Carthaginian country. Legend dated the foundation of Carthage to the ninth century B.C., and in succeeding centuries Phoenician sea-power and commerce had established trading ports along the Mediterranean coast. The Berber peasant farmers of the hinterland and the fishermen in the ports still spoke Punic, a Semitic tongue, in Augustine’s day. But after a disastrous series of clashes with Rome, Carthage had been subjugated in the second century B.C., and upon the ethnic substrate Rome had imposed the rule of law, Latin culture, and the amenities of civilized life. Augustine’s Africa faced north, across the tideless sea toward Italy.

Augustine picked up his pen, prayed to his God to enable him to say what he had to say, and began.

The Confessions are one long prayer, a poetic, passionate, intimate prayer. It is paradoxical, but exact, to say that he prayed for the grace to pray: “Allow me to speak in your merciful presence” (I,6,7); “Let me not weary as I confess to you those acts of mercy by which you plucked me

from all my evil ways” (I,15,24); “Let me love you, Lord, and give thanks to you and confess to your name” (II,7,15); “Let me confess my disgraceful deeds to you, and in confessing praise you. Allow me this, I beg you” (IV,1,1); “Accept the sacrifice of my confessions, offered to you by the power of this tongue of mine which you have fashioned and aroused to confess to your name” (V,1,1).

He undertook this, his greatest piece of writing, in the conviction that God wanted him to make this confession: “You first willed that I should confess to you, my Lord and my God” (XI,1,1). In his heart, in his “inner ear,” he heard God asking it of him; but there were practical and human promptings as well. In 397, the most probable date for *The Confessions*, or at least for his beginning to write them, Augustine was forty-three. He had been a baptized Catholic for ten years, a priest for six, and a bishop for only about two. There were probably many in the church at Hippo, and more widely in the church throughout Numidia, who were less than convinced of their good fortune in acquiring so brilliant and distinguished a man for their bishop. Cleverness was, perhaps, not highly prized. His pre-baptismal life raised questions, especially his nine years’ adherence to the Manichean sect, and his polemical attitude toward the Catholic Church in earlier days. Was his conversion genuine? Finally, his elevation to the episcopate had itself been controversial, since the aged Bishop of Hippo, Valerius, had been in a hurry to snap Augustine up before any other church staked a claim, and had persuaded the Primate of Numidia to consecrate him coadjutor bishop with right of succession in canonically dubious fashion. Some kind of *apologia pro vita sua* from Augustine’s pen was therefore timely, and might disarm his critics. Insofar as *The Confessions* are polemical at all (which is not very far), the Manichees are in Augustine’s sights.

Beyond the critics was a wider circle of potential readers who would listen far more sympathetically. Augustine was not the only cultured and intelligent man to embrace Christianity at a mature age, after a long intellectual search. Paulinus of Nola was a kindred spirit; he and many others would be very interested in anything Augustine might have to say about his understanding of his faith and its relation to philosophy and the humanities. Many another had perhaps found in Neo-Platonism the highest and most spiritual achievement of the human mind in search of union with God, yet turned away disappointed, as Augustine had, because something was missing.

Finally there was the great company of Augustine's fellow Christians who were neither critics nor philosophers, those who would overhear his confessions and judge in charity, whose charity would itself be the medium for understanding whatever he had to say: "All whose ears are open to me by love will believe me" (X,3,3); "The charity that makes them good assures them that I am not lying" (X,3,4). These would be encouraged and praise God, for "it is cheering to good people to hear about the past evil deeds of those who are now freed from them" (ibid.).

For all these he wrote his "confessions in thirteen books" (*Revisions* II, 6,1). There was no printing, no mass-production, only laborious writing and copying by hand. It is likely that the first "readers" were groups of interested persons who gathered for reading sessions. Each of the thirteen books is an episode in the story, although the length varies.

Augustine had, therefore, both private and public inducement. He had also superb fluency and an addiction to talking about himself. Yet these facts should not blind us to what it must have cost him. It is something remarkable, even daring, for a man to write a book addressed to God which is principally about himself. For all his magnificent egoism and genius for communication, he was a highly sensitive man, and afraid of mockery. As an orator he had been professionally attuned to his audience's reaction; as a bishop he had not become indifferent to it. His desire for praise, his need to please people, were not just the weaknesses of a young man, now left behind; even as a bishop he needed to watch his motives, as he admits (X,36,59).

Clearly the first hearers were captivated, as many thousands have been over the following sixteen centuries. His own way to God had been the way of deep and searing self-knowledge, yet his confession of it could speak to others: the prefix *con-* already implies communication. Through the particular and personal experiences of his own life, time, place, and culture, Augustine searches the human heart and exposes the predicament of weak, sinful, sensual, vacillating, hopeful, graced human beings, evoking their valiant and passionate search for truth, their fascination with beauty, their disintegration when they yield to temptation and sink back to their native darkness, their longing for a happiness that will be found only in the satisfaction of the questioning mind and restless heart in God, and their unquenchable thirst for that peace and rest which may be found partially and temporarily in this life (as Augustine himself had found them for a time at Thagaste after returning from Italy to Africa as a Christian), but are finally

attainable only in the vision of God, in the enjoyment of God, in the Sabbath of eternal life.

He spoke with an honesty to which Everyman and Everywoman could instinctively respond, and in powerful language. The Latin classics had been ruthlessly dinned into him in boyhood, and the phrases of Virgil, Cicero, Sallust, and Terence came readily. The verbal abilities of a promising boy had been honed and refined in the hard school of rhetoric until Augustine, always fascinated by words, was a master of vivid late Latin, with an ear for its music and a delight in its puns and paradoxes. But then had come his immersion in the scriptures, known to him in the Old Latin version which preceded the Vulgate; and by the time he came to write *The Confessions* scriptural thought and language were so thoroughly his own that nearly every page contains echoes and allusions.

So much for the setting. Now to the story Augustine had to tell.

The Two Journeys

Augustine's Africa was intensely Roman, but an intelligent lad from the provinces needed to travel. Much of the earlier part of his story is concerned with changes of place. There were geographical journeys, but also a corresponding inner journey. These two may be considered in turn.

Augustine was born at Thagaste (modern Souk Ahras in Algeria), some forty-five miles south of the coast, on 13 November 354, and went to school first at Thagaste, then at Madaura or Madaurus (modern Mdaourouch). After a year at home at Thagaste, during which his father, Patricius, saved up to send him away for higher study, Augustine became a student at Carthage. During his time there, at seventeen or so, he began to live with the loved but unnamed woman who bore him a son, Adeodatus ("God-given"), in about 372, when Augustine was perhaps eighteen. He also joined the Manichees.

In 375 he returned to Thagaste and taught there for about a year; to this period belongs the death of a friend, which afflicted him deeply, as he recounts in IV,4,7-9. He then returned to Carthage and opened a school of rhetoric there in 376. Hooliganism among his students goaded him beyond endurance, and in 383 he sailed for Rome, where the students were reputed to be better behaved, and where Manichean contacts would ensure him a welcome. Hooliganism was, however, replaced by fee-dodging, and when

a professorship of rhetoric at Milan fell vacant, Augustine competed, won, and removed thither in 384. "And so I came to Milan, and to Bishop Ambrose," he says (V,13,23). This was the most momentous geographical move of his life.

After his conversion at Milan in August 386, Augustine, Monica, Adeodatus, and a company of friends left to spend the winter on a country estate at Cassiciacum, returning in the following March to Milan, where Augustine, Alypius, and Adeodatus prepared for baptism at Easter 387. Later that year they left for Ostia, to await their sailing for Africa; there Augustine and Monica together were granted the mystical experience he so famously describes in IX,10,23-25. Monica died soon after this, and with her death at the end of Book IX Augustine concludes the narrative part of his *Confessions*. He returned to Rome, and thence in 388 to Africa, where he lived a quasi-monastic life with his companions until 391. In that year he was ordained priest and founded a monastery at Hippo. In 395 he was consecrated coadjutor bishop to Valerius, whom he succeeded on the latter's death the following year.

At every stage of the journey God had led him, sometimes using even bad people like boorish students or superstitious Manichees to move him on. These journeys, so short by modern standards, but long, exhausting, and often dangerous in the fourth century, were the outer face of an inner journey, to which we must now turn.

The prodigal son, he says, "did not hire horses or carriages, nor did he board ships, nor take wing in any visible sense, nor put one foot before the other when he journeyed to that far country"; and later, on the brink of conversion, he reflects that the journey back to God "was not to be undertaken by ship or carriage or on foot . . . for to travel—and more, to reach journey's end—was nothing else but to want to go there" (I,18,28; VIII,8,19). In boyhood Augustine had been enthralled by the wanderings of Aeneas (I, 13, 20); his own intellectual and moral wanderings took him, like the prodigal son in whom he recognized himself, to a "far country," to "the land of unlikeness." He was running away, yet all the time the Pursuer was near, never despairing of him, calling, waiting, chiding, forcing him to face himself when Augustine tried to "put himself out of sight behind his back" (VIII, 7, 16), summoning him to confront the God within (X,27,38).

Whatever the sins, whatever the flirtations with unreality in the shape of maudlin theatrical shows or sycophancy toward the great, the spark of truth in him never entirely petered out (IV,2,2). At least in theory he

acknowledged its claims: “O Truth, Truth, how the deepest marrow of my mind ached for you!” (III,6,10) At certain stages he seemed, provisionally, to find it. The nominal status of catechumen, into which he had been initiated in infancy, played little part in the search. Despite Monica’s faith, Augustine seems to have received no effective Christian instruction as he grew up, though he revered the name of Christ and had some notion of a powerful and provident God (I,9,14).

An important moment was his reading of a now lost work by Cicero, the *Hortensius*, at the age of nineteen. Through it Augustine heard the call to philosophy in a pure form, not that of adherence to any particular school, but a dedication to the love and pursuit of wisdom wherever it might be found. The ideal he glimpsed was at odds with his disordered life at the time, but the experience was important in suggesting the possibility of breaking away from the rhetorical tradition which had thus far dominated his education, where imitation of classical models was the order of the day, into a genuine liberation of the mind to pursue wisdom beyond a set of time-bound and culturally-conditioned forms. He records, however, that he missed the name of Christ in this book (III,4,8).

Then came Manicheanism. Mani or Manes had founded a hybrid religion, or rather a theosophy, in Persia in the third century, in which elements of Christianity were mingled with Gnostic beliefs and bizarre speculation. The mixture of good and evil in the world was accounted for by the aboriginal existence of two kingdoms at war with each other: the kingdom of light, ruled by the good God, and the kingdom of darkness, ruled by Satan. These two shared a common frontier, and so limited each other, but in other respects they were infinite. The kingdom of darkness had attacked the kingdom of light, and though unable to conquer it had swallowed certain particles of the light kingdom which had offered resistance to the invaders. These light-particles were thereafter imprisoned in the universe, bound within the dominant forces of darkness or evil. Some were imprisoned in the heavenly bodies, some in trees and plants, and some in men and women. Their presence explained the tension between good and evil in human beings. The material world was evil, and the story of its creation by the good God untrue; Genesis was therefore to be rejected, along with the rest of the Old Testament. Parts of the New Testament were accepted, but the doctrine of God-made-flesh was, of course, an impossibility. Jesus was an envoy from the kingdom of light, sent to teach truth and help in the liberating work, but he had no real body, and was not truly crucified.

The inherent dualism of Manichean theory was most highly developed in the doctrine of man, who was held to be animated by two souls: a dark, evil soul which animated his body, and the light soul, really a particle of divinity, which was his true but imprisoned self. This light-soul was itself sinless, but suffered from the oppressive evil soul. Moral life consisted in the effort to liberate it, and to avoid any action which might increase the dominance of the powers of darkness over any particles of light. The corollary of this was matter-hating asceticism, including avoidance of procreation and of the plucking of fruit from trees (III, 10, 18). Consequent practical difficulties were solved by the division of the sect into the elect, revered for their asceticism, and the hearers, who aspired to lesser grades of sanctity and engaged in the proscribed activities, but hoped to gain merit by serving the elect.

It may surprise us that a man of Augustine's intellectual caliber could have been seduced even for a moment, let alone for nine years, by what we might consider nowadays to be a farrago of nonsense. That he was may be partly explained by the fact that Manicheanism made a serious, if bizarre, attempt to grapple with the problem of evil and its origins, a problem that preoccupied Augustine and has baffled many a brilliant mind since: if God is good and omnipotent, how can evil exist? There is horror in the notion of a universe where evil powers do their worst because the good God is helpless, yet Manichean teachings may have had a certain terrible attraction for Augustine, as a mythological projection of the fierce tensions within himself. He may also have found plenty in their hymns and ceremonies that appealed to his sense of beauty, for the Gnostics tended to specialize in these things. He was, moreover, impressed for a time by the ostensible asceticism of the elect. Though he caricatured the Manichees later, he always felt the strength of their appeal. It is likely that he never fully accepted the speculative side of their theories, and certain that he became progressively disillusioned, but drifted along for want of anything better.

Something better was, however, awaiting him at Milan. First, there was Ambrose, bishop of the city, a thoroughly cultured and intelligent man with a distinguished civic career behind him. His reputation for wisdom and eloquence attracted Augustine, who fell into the habit of listening to Ambrose's sermons, at first for their style, but imperceptibly for their content. Two aspects in particular were important. By exploring the "spiritual meaning" Ambrose made sense of various Old Testament passages which had baffled and repelled Augustine. And Ambrose was well versed in

Neo-Platonism, which informed his preaching and was integrated with his understanding of Christianity.

Augustine states that certain “books of the Platonists” were put into his hands at Milan. The Neo-Platonist philosophers whose thought and writings played the most influential part in Augustine’s story were Plotinus (c. 204-270) and his disciple Porphyry (c. 232-303). Plotinus had studied for years at Alexandria under Ammonius Saccas, who was also Origen’s master; but in about 244 he moved to Rome, where his subtle, penetrating thought, his genius as a teacher, and his attractive personality made him the focus of a group of disciples. In about 263 Porphyry joined him there. Many years after the master’s death Porphyry wrote a *Life* of Plotinus, and systematized his teaching, somewhat artificially, into six sets of nine treatises (hence the name *Enneads*).

Plotinus drew much inspiration from a handful of Plato’s treatises, notably the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium* and the *Timaeus*. Central to his thought was the One, or the Good, the primary, transcendent, unchanging reality. The One cannot be described, because it is beyond all definition or limitation, but it is the source of all determinate being.

From the One, said Plotinus, sprang a second hypostasis, Intellect. Some kind of rebellious self-assertion, or *tolma*, a desire for separate existence, was involved in Intellect’s procession from the One, yet the One was unaffected by it. Intellect is the timeless divine mind, thinking itself, and in it are contained the Platonic “Forms” or “Ideas.” Though Intellect immediately turned back toward the One in contemplation, Intellect is not pure unity, but unity in multiplicity.

A third hypostasis, which Plotinus called Soul, separated itself from Intellect by a further act of *tolma*, and thus originated time, which is a restlessness born of desire for succession in preference to simultaneous, eternal being. Discursive thought therefore became its mode of understanding; but the higher levels of soul were in immediate contact with Intellect, by which it was illumined, and through contemplation Soul could transcend itself and rise with Intellect to union with the One. The lower levels of Soul cast upon formless, primordial matter an image of the Forms contained in Intellect, thereby giving rise to the material cosmos. Soul orders the cosmos from within: Plotinus used the comparison of physical reality floating in Soul like a net in the sea, a picture which Augustine also invoked in his efforts to imagine what God could be like (VII,5,7). According to Plotinus the

ordered cosmos sprang spontaneously from Soul as Soul returned to Intellect in contemplation, and similarly in human beings right action springs spontaneously and immediately from contemplation.

Human beings exist on the lowest divine level, that of Soul, but the highest part of our soul is immune to suffering and emotion, according to Plotinus; it must strive upward by purification of thought and moral behavior, and so awaken to its divine reality. The goal of philosophy must be to attain to union with the One, or the Good, by becoming what we truly are.

Plotinus was no cold theorist. Something very like love impelled him toward this sublime goal. According to Porphyry, Plotinus experienced union with the One only four times during the six years of their association in Rome, and Porphyry himself attained it only once, in old age. The love that impels the seeker must, like every other reality, have its origin in the One, and it persists in the final union where we are conformed to the One; yet the One does not love us. Nor is there any real question of sin, or any need for redemption or grace, because our origin has already endowed us with all the dynamism necessary for return to the One. Ritual activities are unnecessary, Plotinus considered, though he allowed the philosopher to engage in them if they seemed helpful.

Plotinus appears to have had little, if any, contact with orthodox Christianity, but he hated the Gnostics. Porphyry was more explicitly, and bitterly, anti-Christian; yet it was through Porphyrian spectacles that Augustine read Plotinus. He seems to have known some at least of the *Enneads*, and may have imbibed much of their substance from listening to Ambrose and in discussion with educated friends. This discovery at a critical moment in his search for truth was providential in Augustine's eyes.

Most immediately, Neo-Platonism provided him with a less inadequate, less unworthy, notion of God. His own reflections, described at length in the early part of Book VII, were leading him toward an immutable, inviolable, incorruptible reality, of necessity transcending whatever was subject to change and decay; now the Neo-Platonic books provided him with a forceful and clear-cut doctrine of such a Being, a God utterly real, purely spiritual, undivided, eternal, the One who is the source of all multiple beings. Part of Augustine's hostility toward what he had imagined to be Catholic teaching was seriously undermined by the new insight: he had hitherto been incapable of conceiving the notion of purely spiritual substance, and hence supposed that God was some huge extended body, however ethe-

real. This had led him to caricature as absurd Catholic belief in the creation of men and women in God's image. But now a door opened in his mind.

Similarly, he had been vividly conscious of the difference between the fleeting succession to which all creatures are subject as their existence constantly slips away from them, and the eternity which must characterize the being of God. In Book XI he pursues the mystery of time to its last, vanishing refuge in the pathetic efforts of human beings to hold onto their elusive existence and pretend to some illusory permanence; and he arrives at a "subjectivist" view of time as the tension within human consciousness. The eternal present of God's being and knowledge was perhaps already a certainty for Augustine before he encountered Neo-Platonism, but Plotinus provided him with a doctrine of processions and of the origin of time as a decline from the eternity of the One and Intellect. Neo-Platonism's final statement on the mystery of eternity was to be made more than a century later by Boethius and bequeathed to the Scholastics: eternity is "the total, simultaneous and perfect possession of endless life" (Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* V,6).

It is, however, simplistic to assimilate Plotinus' theory of the procession of three hypostases to Christian faith in the Trinity, and Augustine does not do so. The resemblance is more apparent than real. Plotinus' three hypostases are not only unequal; they represent a progressive decline from the primordial unity. Most significantly, Augustine emphasizes that only through Christ the Mediator, who is also the Way, is faith in the Trinity possible. Neo-Platonism had no doctrine of an incarnation of the Logos, no idea of the humility of God, no need for revelation, for redemption, or for grace to empower a response from humankind. "I read in [the Neo-Platonist books] that God, the Word, was born not of blood nor man's desire nor lust of the flesh, but of God; but that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, I did not read there. I certainly observed that in these writings it was often stated that the Son, being in the form of God the Father, deemed it no robbery to be equal to God ... but that he emptied himself and took on the form of a slave ... of this no mention was made in these books" (VII,9,14). He continues to spell out the contrast in the concluding paragraphs of Book VII.

What Neo-Platonism seemed immediately to offer was an invitation to self-transcendence and ecstasy, to a union of the human soul with the divine, to the flight of the alone to the Alone. This spoke to Augustine's

longings as nothing else had ever done, though his attempts at mounting through created things and through his own mind to communion with the One were for the time being unsatisfactory. His initial failure, and then partial success, are related in VII,10,16 and VII,17,23. Neo-Platonism provided him with a vocabulary, and stirred in him a desire, for mystical union. Yet the One to whom Augustine aspired was not the remote, indifferent reality of Plotinus, but the God who constantly seeks, attracts, guides, heals, stoops toward us, forgives and loves us. He is the humble God of the incarnation. The Neo-Platonists had glimpsed the country Augustine sought, but could not show him the way there (VII,20,26; 21,27).

The God revealed in the Old and New Testaments is, moreover, the God who forms a people. He is the God encountered in the Church. The contrast with Neo-Platonism at this point could hardly be greater. Paradoxically, it was Neo-Platonism that helped to free Augustine's mind from the constricting misapprehensions that had held him back from the Catholic Church, but in the Church he was to find a fullness of life and an approach to God which Neo-Platonism did not offer. The flight of the alone to the Alone did not make for community. His account of the experience at Ostia, which forms a high point in his story, begins (whether consciously or not) in Neo-Platonist terms, but concludes in powerfully biblical language; and the experience, significantly, is shared with one who had no pretensions to philosophy. The "little ones," he reflected later, have a safe place in the nest of the Church, where they can grow and be nourished in the faith that gives them access to the mystery (IV,16,31).

He would certainly have found in Plotinus a robust doctrine of the goodness of the material creation as derived from the good creator. The teaching of Genesis on this point is so unambiguous that Augustine would perhaps have needed no confirmation, but it is worth noting that on embracing biblical faith he was in this respect much nearer to the positive teaching of Neo-Platonism than to Manichean dualism. The conviction that the beauty and order of the non-human world bore eloquent witness to its maker was an important element in Augustine's struggle with the problem of evil, which must be, he concluded, in some sense a negation of being.

Before his arrival in Milan, Augustine had had three major intellectual difficulties which blocked his progress toward the Christian faith. The

first was a distorted notion of Catholic belief in God's creation of man in his own image, the second a revulsion from the moral crudities to be found in the Old Testament, the third his perplexity about the origin of evil. All three of these blocks were now tending to dissolve. Neo-Platonism had helped him toward a conception of spiritual substance and hence to a less inadequate idea of God. Difficulties about the Old Testament were largely resolved by the doctrine of the "spiritual sense" of some narratives, imbibed from Ambrose, together with Augustine's own reflections on development in revelation, and the differing requirements of time, place, and culture. The problem of evil still exercised his mind, but in the light of Neo-Platonic views of the universe he thought deeply about evil as a lack of being, and about the misuse of free will by rational creatures. He was almost convinced, intellectually, but not free to follow where his intelligence was leading.

Moral Struggles, Conversion

Hand in hand with this long, passionate search for truth went an equally passionate need for sexual relationships. We need to be cautious here, because popular imagination has tended to represent Augustine as extremely profligate in his youth; but for this view there is inadequate evidence. His language about his adolescent sexual behavior is lurid, but largely metaphorical, and he makes the revealing admission that he sometimes bragged to his friends about excesses he had not really committed, feeling it shameful to be thought innocent (II,3,7). This statement has the ring of truth. As a student at Carthage he began to cohabit with the woman he loved. To call her a "concubine" is too harsh, and also inaccurate. Such unions were taken for granted, and would have appeared innocent in the eyes of both. They were exclusively faithful to each other for about fourteen years, and they had a son whom Augustine dearly loved. It was a marriage in all but name. Far more questionable was Augustine's acquiescence when Monica, possibly supported by Ambrose, insisted on the dismissal of his common-law wife to clear the way for marriage to an heiress of good family, a match likely to further his career and solve his financial problems (VI,15,25). The separation was intensely painful to both parties, and Augustine does not come well out of this. His grief was dulled, though scarcely assuaged, by a temporary liaison with someone