AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS: 
THE SOCIAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT 

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ABSTRACT

Augustine's Confessions is to my mind one of the most misunderstood works from antiquity, perhaps chiefly because it seems to invite the present-day reader to identify with the author and his concerns, while, in the process, modern-day concerns are illegitimately superimposed onto the ancient work. The quest of my current research is to improve the level of comprehension for the Confessions through an examination of the world where it originated. This article takes a look at how certain aspects of the context of Late Antiquity in general and three texts from the third and the fourth centuries AD in particular should inform our reading of Augustine's Confessions.

Introduction

It has not always been taken for granted that the Confessions has literary antecedents (I say more about this below); that the works I discuss here influenced Augustine's writing was demonstrated already in the previous century by scholars like Georg Misch in his Geschichte der Autobiographie (first published early in the 20th century) and Pierre Courcelle in his Les "Confessions" de s. Augustin dans la tradition littéraire (1963). These scholars, however, focused only on how the autobiographical strategies in the antecedent works influenced the narrative of Augustine's life story in the Confessions. And, although many readers – and in the previous century even scholars of the Confessions – sometimes seem to ignore this, the Confessions does not consist only of Augustine's life story. It concludes with one book which is commonly

1 The tendency to disregard the last three or four books of the Confessions is manifested at its extreme in publications like the translation of the Confessions by Blaklock (1983), announced on the front page simply as 'a fresh translation with an introduction' which consists only of a translation of the first ten books. The only explanation deemed necessary for the publication of this abridged version is provided in the introduction: 'Book Ten seemed to provide a natural conclusion satisfying a modern reader ... The mystical ponderings of the last three books are, for all that, quite detachable, and it is even a little difficult to probe the writer's
labelled an excursion on memory, but still autobiographical in character (book 10), and three so-called exegetical books, on the creation story in Genesis 1 (books 11-13).

One of the reasons for the lack of attention to other similarities between the Confessions and the antecedents acknowledged to have influenced it is that there is to this day no consensus about the unity and aims of the former. Neither do I profess to have the final answer. I am, however, convinced that we should allow our reading of this work to be influenced more significantly by a study of the world where it originated than has been the case up to now.

In order to appraise the arguments presented in this article the reader has to keep in mind two of the issues that overshadowed scholarship on the Confessions in the previous century. First, scholars experienced great difficulty with the cohesion between, on the one hand, books 1-10, the autobiographical books, and, on the other, books 11-13, the so-called exegetical books— the infamous ‘problem of the unity of the Confessions’. It was postulated that the work was unfinished, that book 10 was interpolated at a later stage, and some of the great Augustinian scholars coined the phrase ‘Augustine compose mal’, which was quoted uncritically for decades. Today there is consensus that the work is a well-constructed literary whole, but the anomaly is that there is still no agreement as to what the genre or purpose of this whole is.

2 For a discussion of this issue see Kotzé 2004:13-18.
3 See, for example, above n. 1. For discussions of the cohesion between the two sections of the Confessions, see, for example, Knauer 1957: especially 244-46, Tavard 1988, Miles 1992: especially 126, Bochet 1993, O’Connell 1996 and Holzhausen 2000.
4 A scholar as eminent as Courcelle held the view that the Confessions was incomplete: e.g. ‘le livre XIII ne devait pas dépasser le récit de la Création, et l’ouvrage allait être publié tel quel, dépourvu de conclusion d’ensemble’ (1968:25).
5 In the 1961 Penguin edition Pine-Coffin still takes this interpolation (as well as the uncertainty about the purpose of the last three books of the work) for granted: ‘Though it is generally agreed that Book X was a later interpolation, inserted to satisfy readers who were naturally curious to know how the faith had changed Saint Augustine’s life, there is less agreement about the purpose of Books XI-XIII’ (15). Also Courcelle is partial to this theory (1968:25).
6 Marrou 1958:61 et passim is probably the most prominent among these. See also Courcelle’s remarks on this (1968:20 n. 5).
7 The remarks by Grotz 1970 and Holzhausen 30 years later provide an interesting perspective on this issue: ‘Es gibt zwar sehr viele Gelehrte, die der Meinung sind, daß den Confessiones von Anfang an eine einheitliche Konzeption zugrunde liegt,'
Secondly, there is the heated debate on the ‘problem of the historicity’ of the Confessions that started in the 1880’s and raged far into the previous century. For many readers of the Confessions – the scholars were of course also often Catholic priests – Augustine was a hallowed saint and the idea that his conversion story could be a highly conventional presentation of a general type was totally unthinkable. The view that the work was *sui generis* suited their image of Augustine and his aims in the Confessions much better.

My reading of the Confessions (Kotzé 2004) emphasizes that the work has a protreptic purpose as one of its main communicative aims and that it targets to an important extent its potential Manichaean audience. This constitutes a considerable deviation from traditional readings of the work that see Augustine’s fellow Catholics, especially those on the same spiritual level as himself, as the main intended audience and Manichaean concerns in the work as of only secondary importance. This view is summed up in Brown’s formulation (2000:153):

The *Confessions* was a book for the *servi Dei* ... it is a classic document of the tastes of a group of highly sophisticated men, the *spiritales* ... It told such men just what they wanted to know about – the course of a notable conversion ... It even contained moving appeals to the men who might join this new elite: to the austere Manichee and the pagan Platonist.

It is mainly the prominence and strategic placement of sections with very strong Manichaean echoes in the Confessions, but also other characteristics of the text, that make this position in my view untenable. I have become convinced that the intended audience of the work is in the first instance the potential Manichaean reader together with the pagan Platonist and the ‘less spiritual’ or less advanced Catholic congregation member (who was probably exposed on a daily basis to the pressure of Manichaean proselytizing) and only to a lesser extent the *spiritales*. Hans van Oort has published an article

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8 The argument for reading the *Confessions* as a protreptic was, as far as I can ascertain, first advanced by Feklmann 1994 and then followed up by Mayer 1998.

(1997) on Manichaean echoes in the very opening lines and in the first three books of the *Confessions* and his inaugural lecture at the University of Nijmegen (2002: esp. 23-37) deals, amongst other things, with the way in which the whole of book 10 is structured to correspond to Manichaean categories of thought. I have shown that reading the *Confessions* with an eye on the basic tenets of Manichaeanism and in close comparison to some of their documents, reveals a very important Manichaean subtext throughout the work, especially, and significantly, in the opening lines (2004:207-13), the middle section of the work (2001), the last section (2004:233-47, 2005) and the closing words (2004:245-47).

This view of the intended audience(s) of the *Confessions*, of course, goes hand-in-hand with the view that the text is one that aims to change the life of its readers, a protreptic text. A more encompassing description of the communicative aims of the text would refer also to its didactic and apologetic intentions, and its pursuance of polemical goals in its treatment of Manichaean and neo-Platonic terms and categories, but it is primarily protreptic and eminently suited to win over especially Manichaean readers, and paraenetic, i.e. it aims to encourage and bolster those inside the Catholic church against other claims in a world where philosophical and religious rivalry is the order of the day.

Thus, I am in agreement with Van Oort (2002:9) that readings that do not sufficiently take into account the Manichaean subtext throughout the *Confessions* can no longer be called responsible readings:

*Het is in het licht van de vele ontdekkingen op het gebied van die manichaica dat wij in staat (en zelfs verplicht) zijn Augustinus met nieuwe ogen te lezen … Merkwaardig is dan, dat er nog altijd Augustinus-specialisten zijn die menen die veruit belangrijkste kerkvader van het Westen … ook zonder kennis van die gnostiek [i.e. Manichaism] wel te begrijpen (my emphasis).*

When I examine the world of Late Antiquity and the literary antecedents of the *Confessions* in this article, I do so with chiefly three objectives in mind: 1) I try to supplement and support my description of the *Confessions* as a protreptic text; 2) I try to demonstrate the particular strength of Augustinian thought in the context of late ancient intellectual life; 3) I try to shed light on the nature of Augustinian apologetic writing as a whole.

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10 Frances Young 1999: especially 10, 13, 15 emphasizes the didactic and apologetic interest visible alongside the typological purpose she sees embodied in the *Confessions*.
12 I argue that especially the first section of the allegorical explanation of the creation story in Genesis 1 offered in book 13 has a strong paraenetical tone (2004:181-96).
tic text (based on internal evidence), by showing that many of the works that influenced the Confessions also pursue protreptic goals; 2) I try to show that the Confessions is—in many respects—not as unprecedented, as sui generis, as it was long held to be; and 3) I claim that insight into the Confessions and other similar works is greatly enhanced by an understanding of how these works reflect the pervasive concerns of Late Antiquity.

So far the background to the arguments presented in this article. In the next section I look at how the following aspects of Late Antiquity should inform our understanding of the Confessions: a competitiveness in many spheres; a preoccupation with explaining the Bible and especially the Book of Genesis; the prominence of famous conversions; the role of public confession; and the experience by many of a strong missionary burden.

Some general characteristics of Late Antiquity

Competitiveness

One of the general characteristics of Late Antiquity that supports my views on the nature of the Confessions is the fact that it is a period characterized by competitiveness. As Averil Cameron (1999:2) puts it: even the past was 'the subject of intense competition', and in the case of Christian writers 'had above all to be wrested from the grip of pagans.' To my mind, also Daniel Boyarin’s caveat (2000:133) about reading the Jewish writings of Late Antiquity underscores how an awareness of the religious rivalry of the period can illuminate important dimensions of its literary output:

One of the important issues to consider in reading these texts is how these expressions of religious life are related to the religious life-world of Late Antiquity with its enormous watershed of transformation ... These texts present the confrontation between Jews and other religious practitioners ... At each point the question of Jewish identity in the face of other religion emerges as central and that identity in turn, reverberates with the social lives of other people within their religious community and beyond it (my emphases).

I argue that the Confessions also 'present[s] the confrontation between' Catholic Christians and others, most notably Manichaean Christians. It is only when the reader takes proper cognizance of the need for different groups to constantly define themselves 'in the face of other religions' that the presence and function of the Manichaean subtext in the Confessions falls into place.

In general, the prevalence of polemical writings can be seen as a symptom of the competitiveness that characterized Late Antiquity. Robert Cregg (1980:18) speaks about an age in which advocates of Christianity had to possess needed skills of attack and defence — as much for their altercations with other Christians as for their encounters with pagan theologians and critics. Also the anti-heretical works that abound in the early Christian milieu could be described as part of the competition about the correct way of seeing the truth. One fascinating work in this genre is Epiphanius’ *Panarion* (376 AD), which is a catalogue of heresies. Cameron (1999:3) remarks on its strangeness, adding: ‘Epiphanius was a leading controversialist of his generation, and the work answered to burning contemporary concerns’ (my emphasis). This, once again, focuses our attention on the fact that there seemed to exist a need and a demand for works that could help people find their way amongst the bewildering number of opposing views in circulation in the wake of the slow demise of traditional pagan religion. While Augustine’s prowess as a polemical writer is widely acknowledged, it has not always sufficiently been taken into account that his *Confessions*, in its efforts to show up the errors and shortcomings of Manichaeism (and to a lesser extent Neo-Platonism), is also a manifestation of the competitiveness of its time.

*Focus on Genesis*

Another interesting feature of early Christianity is the feverish attempts to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation of the Bible, and then especially of the creation story in Genesis. This should be seen against the background of a heightened interest in cosmology visible in the renewed popularity of Plato’s account of creation in the *Timaeus*, the prominence of the Neo-Platonist contention that the world was uncreated, or the circulation of Manichaean creation myths, claiming that God, as the ruler of the kingdom of light, created the world in an endeavour to contain the kingdom of darkness. Many of the best thinkers of the era devoted themselves to the effort to show Christians and pagans alike how the Bible and the cosmology it implied could be interpreted to make sense. Augustine himself formulated five (or

14 For an overview indicative of the prevalence of polemical writings, see for example Ilona Opelt 1980.
15 The competitiveness and polemics are not limited to the sphere of early Christianity or religion. Groups like the Neo-Platonists, Neo-Platonic, Stoics, as well as the exponents of an effort to resurrect traditional paganism were players in the field.
16 See Cameron’s discussion of these issues (1999:3-4).
possibly six) attempts at an interpretation of Genesis, of which the last three books of the Confessions constitute one version.\textsuperscript{17}

The fourth century is, in fact, characterized by a `series of such efforts' that tried to `present a complete cosmology, which would give an account of humanity's place in the world, and of humanity's destiny' (Cameron 1999:3). Thus, representing or propagating a convincing cosmology was an integral part of the competition to attract members, not only into the Catholic fold, but also into other religious or philosophic groups. If one acknowledges the fact that arguments about the relative merits of Catholic and Manichaean cosmology (in Confessions 13)\textsuperscript{18} and about man's relation to creation (throughout the work),\textsuperscript{19} form an integral part of what the Confessions is about, it becomes clear that also in this respect it answers to the burning concerns of its day.

Further, knowledge of the central importance of efforts in Late Antiquity to explain Genesis 1, coupled with knowledge of Manichaean criticism of especially this book of the Old Testament (keeping in mind my arguments about the Manichaean intended audience of the Confessions) make the second part of the work (books 11-13) far less surprising. I could, in fact, hypothesize, at least with the same authority as earlier such efforts (that saw in the Confessions autobiography followed by exegesis), that what the ancient reader would see in the Confessions might be: an argument for the Catholic way of thinking, first focussing on the central issues, `what is God' and `whence is evil', bolstered by a compelling personal confession by the author (and primarily intended to counter Manichaean claims in this respect), then focussing on the Catholic way of seeing the Bible and creation (once again strongly influenced by Manichaean views on these subjects).\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Conversion stories}

Another aspect of Late Antiquity relevant to the arguments presented here is the prevalence of conversion stories that were famed for the conversions

\textsuperscript{17} For a thorough discussion of the various works on Genesis by Augustine, see Roland Teske 1999.

\textsuperscript{18} This is generally accepted in scholarship. See, for example, O'Donnell 1992:3.343; 407-10.

\textsuperscript{19} Young 1999:13 speaks about an `overall perspective' in the Confessions (providing a link between the autobiographical books and the exegetical books) that is a `reflection on human existence and God's providence.'

\textsuperscript{20} I argue (2004:246-47) that in certain respects books 11 to 13 of the Confessions are in fact the `meditation on the whole of scripture' seemingly planned by Augustine earlier in the work.
they in turn could produce (see also the discussion of confession below).\textsuperscript{21} Conversion, and the protreptic speech or text designed to bring about conversion, is of course not limited to early Christianity. The term conversion (ἐπιστροφή or conversio) also refers to a life-changing decision to adhere to a specific philosophy\textsuperscript{22} and the protreptic originated in the field of ancient philosophy (Plato's \textit{Euthydemus} contains an early example).\textsuperscript{23} The relevance here of the prevalence of both pagan and Christian conversion stories in Late Antiquity is twofold.

First, as far as the \textit{Confessions} is concerned, it is important to remember that books 1 to 9 are a clearly-focussed conversion story and not the story of a whole life, and that it would have been recognized as such by its first readers. That conversion and conversion stories were a common occurrence in Late Antiquity has obvious implications for the expectations with which readers would approach a text like the \textit{Confessions}. Secondly, especially in the early Christian context, conversion stories with the ulterior motive of making converts fit into the bigger framework much better than autobiography with a view simply to provide information about the course of the author's life or insight into the psyche of the individual.

These last two aims are modern concerns that are often unthinkingly projected onto ancient works. Fredouille (1993:172), for example, echoing Brown, states as axiomatic that the main function of the \textit{Confessions} is to provide its reader with information on the life of the author. I argue that an examination of the world of origin (the remarks about competitiveness and the prominence of famous conversion stories above apply, as well as those about the awareness of a missionary burden below) and antecedent literature (autobiographical and biographical narrations included in bigger works like the \textit{Dialogus cum Tryphon}, Hilary of Poitiers' \textit{De Trinitate}, Iamblichus' \textit{De Vita Pythagorica} and Plotinus' \textit{Enneads}) should warn us that this was probably not the primary function many readers of a work like the \textit{Confessions} would expect it to fulfil. This seems vindicated also by Cameron's caution (2000:83) regarding the nature of two famous biographical texts from the same era, the \textit{Vita Antonii} (see discussion below) and the \textit{Vita Constantini}: 'These \textit{Lives} are not innocent histories; they are didactic and apologetic works.'

\textsuperscript{21} Stories about famous conversions abounded and were avidly read. David Aune 1991:102 refers to the circulation of stories of philosophical conversions, celebrating 'the successes of philosophical propaganda', which were common at the time.

\textsuperscript{22} See Oroz Reta 1999 for a concise discussion of the meanings of the words ἐπιστροφή, ἐπιστροφή, convertere and conversio and of the specific contents of these terms for Christian and pagan writers respectively.

\textsuperscript{23} For a comprehensive discussion of the protreptic genre see Jordan 1986.
Next, I want to examine a few perspectives on confession in Late Antiquity, in order to show that even the title of Augustine’s *Confessions* points in the same direction as the other indicators. Confession was a high profile activity in Early Christianity. Prominent converts to Christianity, like Marius Victorinus, confessed their faith publicly when they were baptized, and attracted much attention. Public confessions by the martyrs, dying spectacularly in front of large crowds to be true to what they confessed, caught the imagination of pagan and Christian alike.

Confession must also have been widely acknowledged to be a powerful tool towards making converts, to which the eagerness of Christians to be martyred seems, amongst other things, to testify. Augustine, in fact, spells it out explicitly in the *Confessions* (8.4.9) where he comments on Victorinus’ public confession of faith:

> deinde quod multis noti, multis sunt auctoritati ad salutem et multis praecunctur secuturis, ideoque multum de illis et qui eos praecesserunt laetantur, quia non de solis laetantur.

Then those who are known to many are to many a personal influence towards salvation. Where they lead, many will follow. That is why on their account even those who have preceded them feel great joy, for their rejoicing is not only for them.

Thus, I argue that for most 20th century readers the title ‘*Confessions*’ raises the illegitimate expectation, strongly influenced by a prominent work like Rousseau’s *Confessions*, of a self-searching autobiography. For Augustine’s contemporaries, in the context of early Christianity, however, this title would have had connotations that are almost diametrically opposite to this notion, denoting a work not primarily designed to achieve the healing of the author, but rather the salvation of his audience.

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24 See, for example, in the *Vita Antonii* 46, Antony’s desire to be a martyr, as well as Gregg’s discussion (1980:139-40 n. 99) of measures to prevent Christians from giving themselves up for martyrdom.

25 The text used here for the *Confessions* is that by O’Donnell 1992.

26 All translations of passages from the *Confessions* are those by Chadwick 1991.
Lastly, within the climate I have already tried to recreate, men like Augustine were intensely aware of their missionary burden. Many other works, including three I have analysed elsewhere, Justin Martyr's *Dialogue cum Tryphone*, Cyprian's *Ad Donatum* and Hilary of Poitiers' *De Trinitate*, display the same urgent desire to effect the salvation of a wide audience of readers, and to share the benefits of their own conversion and accompanying illumination with this audience. It is useful to remember that, as Courcelle (1963:91-100) has pointed out, some of these works share the characteristic of presenting the search for truth as a quest proceeding through different destinations and that the author's acute frustration during the search is contrasted with an emotional final illumination. He experiences the salutary effect of this illumination so intensely that it is thereafter his heartfelt mission to liberate all others still caught in the grip of error. Cameron (2000:78) ascribes a similar awareness of his missionary burden to Constantine, who would 'preach to his court' and in works like his *Oratio to the Saints* appears 'motivated by a powerful sense of duty and mission, and in no doubt as to his responsibility to lead others in the same direction.'

Augustine must have felt this burden even more acutely as far as the Manichaean were concerned, because, besides the fact that he was so aware of the 'errors' of their way of thinking, he was personally responsible for having introduced many others (like Romanianus) into Manichaeism. Moreover, he comes from a milieu (Manichaeism) where proselytizing was paramount and now, as a bishop, fulfills a role where the salvation and exhortation of people is what much of his energy is constantly focused on. All this should make us pause and consider the possibility that, for Augustine, writing the kind of autobiography 20th century readers expected the *Confessions* to be, would have been unthinkable.

In the last part of the article I take a closer look at three specific works from the 3rd and 4th centuries. The three works I refer to above offer precedents for the inclusion of a (relatively short) conversion story in a long work with the aim to treat polemical and/or doctrinal issues, and with a protreptic-panaenetic communicative purpose as one of its overarching aims. Here I start by taking a closer look once again at one of these three, Cyprian's *Ad
Dona tum, followed by a quick survey of Athanasius' *Vita Antonii* and Gregory of Nazianzus' *περὶ τῶν καθ’ έαυτόν*.

**Three antecedents for the Confessions**

*Cyprian of Carthage's Ad Donatum*

Courcelle demonstrated, already in 1963 (119-125), that Cyprian's conversion story influenced Augustine's in the *Confessions*. But if we compare the whole of the *Ad Donatum* with the *Confessions*, we find that the similarities go much further than those pointed out by Courcelle. The following short summary of the contents of the *Ad Donatum* is meant to focus the attention on the paraenetic characteristics of the text and on the place of the conversion story within the whole:

- c. 1 Sets up an imaginary setting for a meeting between Cyprian and Donatus
- c. 2 About the simple style appropriate for this type of communication
- c. 3-4 Cyprian's conversion story
- c. 5 *Direct exhortation to Donatus (paraenesis)*, description of the world as the 'enemy'
- c. 6 Donatus is led to an imaginary mountain top to look down at the proliferation of vice in the world
- c. 7-13 Catalogue of vices
- c. 14 Solution: withdrawal from the world
- c. 15-16 *Direct exhortation to Donatus and conclusion (paraenesis)*

The *Ad Donatum* is a letter that expresses concern for the well-being of a personal friend who is already a Christian, but who (apparently) has to be encouraged to follow the chosen path even more diligently. It is thus a typical paraenetic text, containing direct exhortations to Donatus, in chapter 5:

> Ceterum si tu innocentiae, si iustitiae viam tenes inlapsa fimitate vestigiis tui, si in Deum viribus totis ac toto corde suspensus hoc sis tantum quod esse coepisti, tantum tibi ad licentiam datur, quantum gratiae spiritualis sugetur.  

28 For the purposes of this article I will simply, like Cameron 2000:84, regard Athanasius as 'the likely author of the *Life of Antony*'.

29 See also my remarks on other similarities between the works (2004:74-76).

30 I use the text of Morechini & Simonetti 1976.
But if you hold to the way of innocence, to the way of justice, with the firmness of your step unbroken, if depending upon God with all your strength and your whole heart you only be what you began to be, so much power is given you in the way of freedom to act as there is an increase in spiritual grace.\textsuperscript{31}

Also the closing chapters, capita 15 and 16, contain direct exhortation:

Tu tantum, quem iam spiritalibus castris caelestis militia signavit, tene incorruptam, tene sobriam religiosis virtutibus disciplinam. Sit tibi vel oratio adsidua vel lectio. Nunc cum Deo loquere, nunc Deus tecum. Ille te preceptis suis instruat, ille disponat (c. 15) ... Magis carissimos pascis, si sit nobis spiritalis auditis, prolectet aures religiosa mulcedo (c. 16).

Do you, whom already the heavenly warfare has designated for the spiritual camp, only keep uncorrupted and chastened in religious virtues. See that you observe either constant prayer or reading. Speak now with God; let God now speak with you. Let Him instruct in His precepts; let Him dispose you in them (c. 15) ... You sustain your dearest friends the more, if we listen to something spiritual, if the sweetness of religion delights our ears (c. 16).

The work includes a short narrative of Cyprian's own conversion in chapters 3-4 and it evidently aims at a wider audience than Donatus alone, especially through the conventional catalogue of vices-to-be-avoided that makes up the body of the work (c. 7-14). This means that Cyprian possibly also envisaged the work fulfilling a protreptic function (speaking to the not-yet-converted). The \textit{Ad Donatum} concludes with more direct exhortation to Donatus to work at his self-improvement and also implies – in the last lines quoted above – the constant care for the well-being of fellow Christians that was the duty of each individual, and forms part of a milieu where a responsibility to care for the souls of others (the missionary burden as I called it above) was taken for granted.

Thus, it is not only Augustine's conversion narrative that is influenced by Cyprian's story offered in the \textit{Ad Donatum}. More important for my current argument are the similarities that I postulate exist in the overall communicative purpose of the \textit{Ad Donatum} and the \textit{Confessions} and the relationship between the conversion story and the whole in each case. Of course, I do not claim that Augustine consciously decided to imitate the \textit{Ad

\textsuperscript{31} The translation used here is that by De Ferrari 1958.
Donatum in all these respects. What is important is the fact that the inclusion of a conversion story in a work with a protreptic or paraenetic overall communicative purpose, i.e. with a purpose far different from that of a present-day autobiographical narration, and one exceeding or complementing the purpose of the autobiographical section, would not have surprised Augustine's contemporaries.

The reader should also keep in mind two other famous life stories, biographical in this case and not autobiographical, that introduced larger works and where the biographical narration plays a role subordinate to that of the work as a whole. The first is Porphyry's Life of Pythagoras which occurs in the first book of the Philo sophic History in four books and of which Clark (2000:32) says: 'The survival of the life of Pythagoras, as a separate text, suggests that the rest of the History mattered less; but that does not mean it mattered less to Porphyry.' The second is Iamblichus' Life of Pythagoras, which is also 'not a freestanding biography' (Clark 2000:33). The point I want to make is that for ancient readers it was no strange idea to read a life story which is followed by a long philosophical, historical, or theoretical section and which aims at something beyond itself.

The Vita Antonii

What became clear implicitly in my discussion of Cyprian's Ad Donatum is the fact that one of the most obvious innovations in the case of Augustine's Confessions is the extraordinary length of the conversion story in relation to the rest of the work. In the three antecedents (referred to above) it is much easier to see that the relatively short autobiographical section is subordinate to the goals of the bigger whole. But there is an antecedent for the extended life story, with the dual purpose of encouraging the audience and gaining converts (i.e. a protreptic-paraenetic purpose) and of combating an influential heresy of its time, or then, pursuing a polemical and anti-heretical goal: the Vita Antonii by Athanasius.

It is important to realize at the outset of this discussion that Augustine's explicit mention of this work in book 8 of the Confessions makes it legitimate to assume that he may intend to indicate to his reader that he foresees a similar function for his Confessions. I once again provide a short summary of the contents of this work, with the sole purpose of indicating the place of the explicitly protreptic, paraenetic and polemical sections in relation to the whole:

32 Also in Justin Martyr's Dialogue cum Tryphone and in Hilary of Poitiers' De Trinitate the conversion story is much shorter in relation to the rest of the work.
Introduction

Establishes letter frame; expresses paraenetic purpose

C. 1-2

Antony’s youth and life-changing experience

C. 3-13

The start of his ascetic life, different temptations, 20 years of discipline

C. 14-15

Antony emerges, performs healings and miracles

C. 16-43

Paraenetic discourse delivered to the monks in the desert (how to withstand the demons)

C. 44-46

Antony withdraws, follows the discipline; his role in the persecution under Maximian;

C. 47-71

Withdrawal again but followed by crowds; withdrawal to the inner mountain; further temptations by demons; contact with monks and other visitors; miracles, healings, exhortations, visions;

C. 68-80

Polemical focus: short visit to Alexandria to renounce the Arians; victorious encounter with Greek philosophers; speech to philosophers demonstrating his superior wisdom

C. 81-94

Various anecdotes (Constantine writes to Antony, visions, ecstasy, prophesy) and Antony’s death

C. 93-94

Conclusion

Passages from the introduction and chapter 94 clearly express the double protreptic and paraenetic purpose of the Vita. Paraenetic purpose is clear in the opening lines addressed to the monks:

'Αγαθήν ἰμαλλαν ἐνεπτήσασθε πρὸς τοῖς ἐν Ἁγύπτῳ μοναχοῖς, ἢ καὶ ἐπεερχόλεσθαι τούτους προελέμενα τῇ κατ’ ἅπαντι ἕμων ἀνασκόπησα … ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἀπειθήσατε καὶ παρ’ ἑμοὶ περὶ τῆς πολεμείας τοῦ μακάρου Ἀντωνίου, ... ἐνα καὶ πρὸς τὸν ἐκείνου ζῆλον ἐκείνου ἀναγίγνετε μετὰ πολλῆς προθυμίας ἐνεξάμεν τὸ παρ’ ἕμων ἐπίταγμα … Οὐδὲ δὲ, ὅτι καὶ ἑμεῖς ἀκολούθηστες, μετὰ τοῦ διαμετα τοῦ ἄνθρωπον, θελῆσθε καὶ ζηλοῖσαι τὴν ἐκείνου πρόθεσιν ἐντα γὰρ μοναχοῖς ἕκαστος χαρακτήρ πρὸς ἀνασκόπησιν ὁ Ἀντωνίου μοί.

You have entered on a fine contest with the monks in Egypt, intending as you do to measure up to or even to surpass them in your discipline of virtue … since you have asked me about the career of the blessed Antony … so that you also might lead yourselves in imitation of him, I received your directive with ready good will … I know that even in hearing, along with marvelling at the man, you will want also to emulate

33 The text is that by Bartelink 1994.
his purpose, for Antony’s way of life provides monks with a sufficient picture for ascetic practice.\textsuperscript{34}

In chapters 93-94 protreptic purpose is explicitly envisaged:

For how is it that he was heard of, though concealed and sitting in a mountain, in Spain and Gaul, and in Rome and Africa … nevertheless the Lord shows them [i.e. people like Antony] like lamps to everyone, so that those who hear may know that the commandments have power for amendment of life, and may gain zeal for the way of virtue.

Therefore, read these things now to the other brothers … And if the need arises, read this to the pagans as well, so they may understand by this means that our Lord Jesus Christ is God and Son of God.

It is generally accepted, also, that the author designed the \textit{Vita} as a strong weapon against Arianism,\textsuperscript{35} i.e. with a polemical purpose, as is illustrated, for example in chapter 69:

On another occasion when the Arians falsely claimed that he held the same view as they … and entering into Alexandria he publicly denounced the Arians … He taught the people that the Son of God is not a creature, and that he did not come into existence from non-being, but

\textsuperscript{34} The translation used throughout is that by Robert Clegg 1980.

\textsuperscript{35} Speeches that strongly criticize Arianism are, for example, put into Antony’s mouth. But these speeches are more apt to address Athanasius’ audience than the monks Antony addresses in the \textit{Vita} (Clegg 1980:11). Hägg & Rosseau 2000:3 speak of the merging of the biographical subject with the ‘biographer’s own persona and agenda’.
Augustine's explicit reference to (probably a Latin version of) the *Vita Antonii* in the *Confessions* is exactly in terms of its power to bring about conversion. It is described in book 8 as the cause of the conversion of the *agentes in rebus* at Trier, as well as the final catalyst for Augustine's commitment to Catholicism. Thus, I argue that Augustine incorporated characteristics of an influential biography of his time with those of the autobiographical sections of works that served also in other respects as models for the *Confessions*. Moreover, the fame of the *Vita* for its power to bring about conversion\(^\text{36}\) makes the explicit reference to it in the *Confessions* significant for what this work implies about its own purpose.

Gregory of Nazianzus' *περὶ τῶν καθ’ ἐαυτόν*

The last work I want to refer to cursorily is Gregory of Nazianzus' *περὶ τῶν καθ’ ἐαυτόν* (circa 371 AD), a work that might have been written, incidentally, against the background of competition in so many areas of life, as part of an attempt to provide 'some sort of Christian poetic literature, possibly for schools' (Meehan 1986:20). The tone and texture of Gregory's poem do not approach anything like the tone and texture, the intimate atmosphere and the compelling quality of Augustine's *Confessions* and yet it does set a precedent for presenting autobiographical writing in the form of a prayer, or rather within the framework of a prayer. For – in spite of Bernardi's assertion that the poem is 'une longue prière' (see below) – in the case of the *περὶ τῶν καθ’ ἐαυτόν* the prayer stance is not maintained as rigorously as in the *Confessions* apart from the opening and closing sections, much of the narrative does not remind the reader that the narrator is speaking to God.

Jean Bernardi's characterization (1993:156) of the poem emphasizes Gregory's despondent state of mind: ‘περὶ τῶν καθ’ ἐαυτόν est le titre transmis par les manuscrits, formule dont le contenu du poème montre que la préposition κατά y a toute sa force et presque valeur d'image.’ The opening lines are addressed to God in a prayer that starts with an enumeration of instances where figures from the Old and the New Testament were rescued from grave dangers, like war (‘Ἀμαλήκ ὁλοκ θένως’, line 3), wild beasts (δεινὸ λευτῶν Χάσματα ... μεγάλου ἀπὸ κῆπος, lines 4-6), fire (ἐν

\(^{36}\) See, for example, Gregg 1980:2.
I quote only the first three lines:

Χριστε ἀναξ, ὃς ἀγνοῦς τοῦ ἀφρομένου πολέμου
Σταυροτύπως Μωσῆς ἐπὶ οὔρα στὶς θεράπους;
"Εκλαίγε Ἀμαλή ἄλοιο σθένος;

O Christ my King. You turned aside the dire might of Amelech, when your servant Moses raised his pure hands after the pattern of the cross in prayer upon the mountain ... 38

By line 17 Gregory invokes God’s help and begins to steer the narrative towards the circumstances of his own misfortunes by making the instances in the catalogue metaphorically apply to himself:

"Ωδε μάκαρ καὶ ἐμοὶ Θεός Ἰλαρ ἐλθὲ καλεῖντι:
"Εὰν εἰπὶ χείρα δέρειν Θεός Ἰλαρ, ὡς με σαβάς:
Τοῦ πολέμου, καὶ θυσί, καὶ τοῦ φλογο, καὶ ἀνοίμασιν
Τείρῳμενοι, καὶ μοίνου ἐς οὐρανοῦ ὅμα φέρωντα (my emphasis).

Thus, when I call on you, come as blessed and propitious God. Come to me with helping hand, O my propitious God. Save me, overwhelmed as I am amid war, and wild beasts, and fire, and storm. I have nowhere to turn my gaze except to God alone.

In lines 37 to 62 he offers a general introduction on the nature of mortals and of the devil and by line 63 the autobiographical narration is in full sway:

Οὐ με γάμος δὲ πέδησε, βίου ῥόδος, ὅν τε μέγαστον
Δεσπόνν ἐπὶ ἀνθρώποις ἐλπί βάλεν, ἄθεος ἀρχήν.
Οὐδ’ ἐλέειν σήμερα καλά νήματα, οὐδ’ ἱπτώσαν.
"Ηγέσθην λατρεία, πολεμανδ’ αὐτοῦρα βάσκων,
Μαχαιράτ’ μησείμαν ἀτάσθαλου.

Marriage, that channel of life, the greatest bond that matter has forged for human kind, never bound me. The soft weave of silk did not ensnare me. I took no pleasure in the luxuries of the table, in catering to an insatiable belly which is the wanton mother of lust.

This is interrupted only periodically by direct apostrophe of God up to the last section which is, now for the first time after the opening prayer, again a sustained prayer. In the body of the poem, as I have indicated, the prayer

37 I use the Migne text.
38 The translation used throughout is that by Meehan 1986.
stance seems to recede far into the background: Gregory often speaks of God in the third person (e.g. lines 297-303, 363-66, 520-25) and the direct address to God seems to be picked up only temporarily here and there (e.g. 106-16 and 411-39).

Did Augustine know this work? Jean Bernardi (1993:165) makes a strong argument that Gregory’s work may have circulated in Milan and was known to people like Ambrose and Augustine. And, even if he did not read them, it is at least a possibility that Augustine knew about Gregory’s autobiographical poems and their rhetorical strategies.

I have argued elsewhere that one of the most ingenious strategies in the Confessions to create a powerful protreptic effect is the dramatic situation constituted by the presentation of the whole in the form of a prayer: the intimate atmosphere of a man talking to a God whom he professes alone really knows his heart, is highly effective in convincing the reader of the truth and sincerity of the speaker’s words throughout the work. Augustine’s awareness of this is expressed in book 9.4.8:

\[
\text{quam vehementi et acri dolore indignabar manichaeis … vellem ut alicubi iuxta esset tunc et, me nesciente quod ibi essent, intuerentur faciem meam et audirent voces meas quando legi quantum psalmum in illo tunc oto. quid de me fecerit ille psalmus … audirent ignorantem me utrum audirent, ne me propter se illa dicere putarent quae inter haec verba dixerim, quia et re vera nec ea dicerem nec sic ea dicerem, si me ab eis audiri videirem et mei coram te de familiaris affectu animi mei.}
\]

What vehement and bitter anger I felt against the Manichees! … As I read the fourth Psalm during that period of contemplation, I would have liked them to be somewhere nearby without me knowing they were there, watching my face and hearing my cries, to see what that Psalm had done to me … without me knowing that they were listening, lest they would think I was saying things just for their sake, I wish they could have heard what comments I made on these words. But in truth I would not have said those things, nor said them in that kind of way, if I had felt myself to be heard or observed by them.

This section provides, to my mind, a significant clue to the function of the prayer stance used throughout the Confessions. It constitutes a brilliant innovation on what Gregory did in his poem. But the fact remains that even this essential aspect of the work could be seen as a creative innovation on a precedent, not as unprecedented procedure.

39 Kotč 2004:100-02.
Conclusion

In conclusion: there are literally scores of other works that could be studied in conjunction with the Confessions, and that will further enhance our understanding of Augustine's masterpiece. To name only a few examples: both Ephraem the Syrian and Cyprian of Antioch wrote a work with the title Confessio. How would this have shaped also the expectations of Augustine's readers? The Cologne Mani Codex is presented as an autobiographical and, amongst other things, a protreptic text. How much knowledge could Augustine have had of this text and does it also provide a subtext that may have influenced (Manichaean) readers' perceptions of the Confessions?

These are issues that still have to be addressed, but I hope to have shown that the more we learn about the world where the Confessions originated, the better we are able to understand its strategies. It is also clear that for many years the Confessions was subject to criticism that was in fact the result of illegitimate assumptions that the 20th century reader arrived at through a disregard for the social and literary context of Late Antiquity.

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41 See van Oort’s remarks (2002:8-9) about Augustine’s knowledge of Mani’s association with manna, which scholars could only verify once the Cologne Mani Codex had come to light.


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