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## Augustine and America: Five Contemporary Autobiographical Works

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AUGUSTINE AND AMERICA:  
FIVE CONTEMPORARY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORKS

by  
Dennis Patrick Gillespie

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

April

1988



In Memory of My Parents,  
Fine Writers and Lovers of Language

John Paul Gillespie  
1900 - 1979

Agnes McCarty Gillespie  
1904 - 1964

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When my wife, Joan Floberg Gillespie, and I came to Chicago in 1979, the possibility of my obtaining a doctorate in English remained for me an unrealized dream. More than anyone else, Joan has helped me realize this dream. I cannot convey my gratitude.

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## VITA

The author, Dennis Patrick Gillespie, was born on August 20, 1944, in Youngstown, Ohio. He attended Saint Edward's School and graduated from Ursuline High School in Youngstown, where he was active in forensics and was president of the student council.

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At Harvard, his honors essay, "The Figure of Christ in Paradise Regained," received High Honors. At the University of Hawaii his major writing concerned the themes of death and dying in American nonfiction. At Youngstown University, his principal essay focused on religious issues in modern fiction.

From 1966 until 1969 Mr. Gillespie was a Peace Corps teacher in Sabah, Malaysia, and in 1969 taught adults preparing for high school equivalency examinations in Boston. From 1970 to 1971 he was an assistant editor for Houghton Mifflin Publishers, Boston. Since 1972, he has worked as an advertising writer and creative director for advertising agencies in Honolulu and Chicago. Currently he is creative director of BBDM Advertising, Inc., Chicago, and is a member of the agency's executive committee.

Mr. Gillespie began part-time graduate studies at Loyola University of Chicago in 1980. He is married to Joan Floberg Gillespie and is the father of Ian, Colin, Caitlin, Frances and Charles Gillespie.

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## INTRODUCTION

### AUGUSTINE AND AMERICA

"Our life looks trivial and we shun to record it."  
Emerson

#### I.

This study had its inception in my desire to write about autobiography, accompanied by the more sobering thought that there might be little of importance to say. Paul de Man remarks that "autobiography always looks slightly disreputable and self indulgent in a way that may be symptomatic of its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of aesthetic values" (919). I now confront a similar predicament of potential silence, not because autobiography seems "disreputable" or undignified, but because it appears enormously complex.

The traditional definition of autobiography, "the story of a person's life written by himself,"<sup>1</sup> implied a relatively objective retrospective. But Roy Pascal, in one of the first modern reevaluations of the definition, illustrated autobiography's subjectiveness, selectivity, ordering process and attention to present time. To Pascal, autobiography's "center of interest is the self, not the outside world, though necessarily the outside world must appear so that, in the give and take with it, the personality finds its peculiar



shape" (9). Pascal read autobiography as "an interplay or collision, between past and present; its significance is indeed more the revelation of the present situation than the uncovering of the past" (11). Recently, virtually every term defining autobiography -- story, written, person, life, self -- has become problematic for autobiographers and critics.

Paul de Man's essay, "Autobiography and De-facement," reflects many of the issues raised by contemporary studies of autobiographical texts. He defines three important issues. First, he asks whether autobiography can properly be regarded as a genre, observing that "each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves seem to shade off into neighboring or incompatible genres" (920). De Man also wonders whether the autobiographer's "life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences," or whether we can "suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of the medium" (920). Third, he asks, "is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but simply more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity?" (921). These observations of genre, fiction and referent create an environment for reader and autobiographer which can be liberating, but also, perhaps, less satisfying, since expectations based on the classic

definition remain unfulfilled.

In addition to the work by literary critics, new insights into autobiography have come from studies of psychoanalysis. The goal of psychoanalysis, of course, is the fashioning of a narrative "so that the patient can accept and live comfortably with a resultant story" (Wallace 77). The psychoanalytic model suggests that autobiographical fictions are often born of necessity: "a crucial experience in the patient's life...may not have even occurred, but this does not alter its crucial importance. In view of the retrospective character of all narrative and the inseparability of the self from its story, the event is a necessary hypothesis for understanding, regardless of whether it is factual or fictional" (Martin 78). As partial revision of this characterization, however, Meredith Skura's reading of psychoanalysis asserts that "the self lies not in locatable scenes with characters, however wishfulfillingly fictional, but in a nontemporal, nonspatial, temporal play between scenes, and even in a changing narrative stance" (57). The impression we gain is that autobiography is a process more fluid than that conveyed by a traditional definition. Composition involves present time, current needs and a self more malleable than we might suppose.

The complexity of autobiographical texts, as well as the history of autobiography, are not always reflected in analyses. This seems particularly the case in explications of works by contemporary American poets characterized as "autobiographical," "personal," or "confessional." For example, David Kalstone in his book Five

Temperaments discusses several writers I consider in the following study, but confines himself to relating autobiographical aspects of the works to the history of American poetry. He sets aside problems of composition directly related to autobiographical process, as well as consideration of their relationship to the history of American autobiography. Thus, to cite one example, he passes over the fact that when Robert Lowell first began experiments in autobiography he consciously and deliberately imitated the opening of The Education of Henry Adams. It appears that a great deal can be gained by considering such works in the context of the history and criticism of autobiography.

In the course of my examination of autobiographical texts by modern American poets, and in reflecting upon issues of genre, fiction and referent, I became convinced that an escape from the problem of definition was simply to accept one classic text, the Confessions of Saint Augustine, as model autobiographical work. The Confessions anticipates many issues raised by modern critics. Its comprehensiveness and historical importance are indisputable, and its relevance is demonstrable.

In his multi-volume history of autobiography in antiquity, Georg Misch portrays the Confessions as the culmination of the development of ancient autobiography. The subsequent influence of the Confessions upon European literature has been noted by a number of critics, most thoroughly by Pierre Courcelle. Avron Fleishman considers "Augustinian Figures" in his readings of nineteenth and early twentieth century British writers. Paul Jay's Being In The Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes makes frequent reference to the

Confessions. His analysis includes two Americans, Henry Adams and T.S. Eliot. In some sense, my study begins where Jay's book ends. I focus upon five American autobiographical works written after the Age of Eliot.

To take full advantage of the Confessions as paradigm when reading contemporary American works requires an understanding of the model itself and a consideration of other interpretations by American autobiographers in the past. Most readings of the Confessions are selective, and mine is no exception. Augustine's conversion seems less significant than the form of the work as a whole. His extraordinary intellectual probing of self and world in the final four books of the Confessions is more intriguing and relevant than the wanderings of the first nine books. As the modern autobiographers I consider testify, the categories of autobiographical experience Augustine identifies -- including memory, grace, self-effacement, indeterminacy, and epiphany -- resonate for autobiographers who do not share Augustine's ultimate vision of union with God.

Overall, Augustine's autobiographical stance, a yielding or submission to areas of experience perceived as larger than the self, or more significant than the self, seems quite in accord with the autobiographies I examine. The Confessions challenges assumptions that consider autobiography an assertion of self, memory and language. Augustine's final objective is just the opposite: self-dissolution, forgetfulness and silence. This goal, albeit in quite different context, is consonant with the autobiographical works I discuss.

## II.

It is hardly fortuitous that contemporary American autobiography can be read in an Augustinian autobiographical context. From the time of the first-generation Puritans, Saint Augustine has had an important presence in American thought. Augustine's significance in America can be illustrated by reference to autobiographical works of Thomas Shepard, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Adams.

In The Puritan Mind: The Seventeenth Century, Perry Miller said Augustine "exerted the greatest single influence upon Puritan thought next to that of the Bible itself, and in reality a greater one than did John Calvin" (4). When Miller detailed "The Augustinian Strain of Piety," he concluded, "even when they were not directly borrowing Augustine's phrases, the Puritans were speaking out of the same spirit" (22).

For American Puritanism, the Confessions offered a model conversion narrative. In the Puritan redaction, an essential autobiography expressed the conviction of sin and acknowledged the coming of Christ to the individual. The narrative was of crucial importance, since such a confession was required for church membership. According to Daniel Shea, who surveyed a number of Puritan autobiographies, "the spiritual autobiography is primarily concerned with the question of grace: whether or not the individual has been accepted into divine life, an acceptance signified by psychological and moral changes which the autobiographer comes to discern in his past experience" (xi). The Confessions presented a narrative of youthful error, wandering and confusion; it was climaxed when Augustine, in a Milan garden, heard

a voice commanding him to take and read scripture. For the Puritan, creating spiritual autobiography was a process charged with anxiety. Not only could one never be certain of conversion; two seemingly contradictory demands, for intense self-examination as well as for self-abnegation, had to be satisfied. Sacvan Bercovitch has described this Puritan mental trauma, and the important role of the Confessions: "hysteria, breakdowns, and suicides were not uncommon. Nonetheless, the Puritans continued with increased energy to regiment selfhood by recourse to the exemplum fidei. The applications are manifold. They appear in the sudden ascendancy during this period of Augustine's Confessions as a model of self-portraiture" (23).

The difficulty was compounded, since the experience to be described was fundamentally inexpressible. When Augustine described conversion and reception of grace in Book Eight of the Confessions, he had to refer to allegory, as well as the testimony of others, particularly Saint Paul. In a sermon to his parishoners of the First Church of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Thomas Shepard outlined the accepted conversion process:

such [things] as may be of special use unto the people of God, such things as tend to show, Thus was I humbled, then thus I was called, then thus I have walked, though with many weaknesses since; and such special providences of God I have seen, temptations gone through; and thus the Lord hath delivered me, blessed by his name, etc.

(Caldwell 147)

Because of the presence of such formulas, Puritan autobiography seems narrowly confined when compared to the rich texture of the Confessions. Shepard's own autobiography, as well as his journal, "each the only document of its kind that is known to have survived from the early

pioneer period in New England" (McGiffert 3), illustrate the Puritan perspective.

Born in Towcaster in Northamptonshire, Shepard recounts the sufferings of his youth, the death of both parents before he was a teenager, his training at Cambridge, religious disputes, rejection by Archbishop Laud, and finally his journey to New England with his wife and son in 1634. Recalling the voyage to America in his autobiography, Shepard reflected his perception that God was intimately involved in his life: "But we had not been two days on the sea, but that the wind arose and drave our ship almost upon the sands where the Lord did most apparently stretch forth his hands in saving us from them when we were within a very little ready to be dashed in pieces upon them" (Gods Plot 33). Shepard's wonder at God's providence is sustained throughout the work.

In Shepard's autobiography, four aspects of the Augustinian autobiographical paradigm seem to be abstracted: Augustine's analysis of his own sinfulness; his description of conversion; his attitude toward the self; and intimation of mystical vision.

Shepard echoed Augustine when he told his congregation that "the saving knowledge of Christ is dependent upon the sensible knowledge of man's self" (10). In his autobiography he writes of sin with the detail of Augustine. A portrayal of drunkenness during his time at Cambridge quickly turns to consideration of potential, irrevocable separation and feelings of remorse: "I was dead drunk, and that upon a Saturday night, and so was carried from the place I had drink at and did feast at unto a scholar's chamber, one Basset of Christ's College,

and knew not where I was until I awakened late on the Sabbath and sick with my beastly carriage. And when I awakened I went from him in shame and confusion, and went out into the fields and there spent the Sabbath lying in the cornfields" (41).

Eventually, Shepard is able to recount a Sabbath conversion scene, awakening faith and confronting doubt in a context of prayer. The pattern of unworthiness, prayer, discovery, subjection, comfort and rest is realized:

it came to my mind that I should do as Christ: when he was in agony he prayed earnestly. And so I fell down to prayer, and being in prayer I saw myself so unholy and God so holy that my spirits began to sink, yet the Lord recovered me and poured out a spirit of prayer upon me and free mercy and pity, and in the conclusion of the prayer I found the Lord helping me to see my unworthiness of any mercy and that I was worthy to be cast out of his sight and to leave myself with him to do with me what he would, and there and never until then I found rest. (44)

For Shepard, an influential preacher, Doctor John Preston, the Master of Emmanuel College, mirrors the guiding role of Saint Ambrose in Augustine's Confessions: "And when he had opened all the good I had, it was from Jesus Christ, I did then begin to prize him and he became very sweet to unto me" (45).

A more mystical quality of Shepard's religious thought reflects the attitude, if not the experience, of Augustine. However, true to Shepard's temperament, these intimations are reserved for his journal, not his autobiography. In one entry he writes, "I have seen a God by reason and never been amazed at God. I have seen God himself and have been ravished to behold him." Shepard's meditations suggest Augustine's vision of ultimate fulfillment in the transcendence of self. Shepard



writes, "I saw the Lord had caused me to trust not my own self, because I had a heart given me to bless him dearly, and to see that he had let me see Christ, who once saw him not." In one journal entry, Shepard even duplicated the Augustinian garden setting and allusion to Saint Paul: "Walking through my garden suddenly when I began to think that it would be a blessed estate if I could glory in Christ as my greatest good and feel sin as my greatest evil....I began then to see the reason Paul had to delight so much in faith, and that I should be abundant in the work of believing and take delight in it" (136, 229, 159-60).

Puritans like Shepard could thus find the demands of self-scrutiny and the longing for self-transcendence reflected in Augustine's Confessions. According to Bercovitch, such testimonies helped fashion an "American self as embodiment of a prophetic universal design" (136). Shea points out, however, that other aspects of Shepard's autobiography, like the description of his wife's death, religious disputes with the Familists and conflict with the Pequot Indians, illustrate that the conversionist framework could become too confining for the autobiographer. The writer who "makes rational use of his experience is filling out the large dimensions of an exemplary figure" is then "assaulted by emotions too painful to surrender unconditionally to formula" (149). This is especially true, of course, in the Confessions, from Augustine's portrayal of a boyhood friend's death to his disillusionment with the Manichees. The Puritan reading of the Confessions, then, emphasizes self-examination, change and transformation, confession and grace, an important though not exhaustive characterization of the Augustinian autobiographical paradigm.

When critics and historians explore continuities between this Puritan model and American romanticism, many of the same qualities are discussed. Ralph Waldo Emerson is often seen as the crucial figure in this exploration. Perry Miller associates the mystical strain in Puritanism with its Emersonian variant: "The ecstasy and the vision which Calvinists knew only in the moment of vocation...could become the permanent joy of those who had put aside the conception of depravity" (Errand 198). For Shea, Emerson speaks as the recipient of grace and the embodiment of conversion. He concludes, "By raising again the question of grace, Emerson gave extended life to the seventeenth century spiritual autobiography. By precept and example he challenged the American writer to deliver up out of his experience a transformed language and imaginative structures more nearly organic with an American conception of man as endlessly capable of regeneration" ("Emerson" 31).

Emerson obviously differed from Augustine, particularly in his attitude toward nature. In the Confessions, Augustine wrote that he "asked the whole mass of the universe about my God, and it replied, 'I am not God. God is he who made me'" (212)<sup>2</sup>. From my perspective, Emerson seems most Augustinian, as well as Puritan, when in the 1840s his self-affirmations and enthusiasms were modulated, and he gave greater thought to human limitations and the distance between the immanent and the transcendent. This attitude is represented by Emerson's partly autobiographical work, "Experience," which David Van Leer has characterized as Emerson's "most self-allusive" essay (150).

Emerson knew the Confessions. During the period when "Experience" was written, following the death of his young son Waldo from scarlet fever, he copied into his notebooks a famous passage from Book Seven, an admixture of Augustinian hope and frustration. In the translation Emerson copied, the passage concludes, "I even trembled between love & horror; and I found myself to be far off, and even in the very region of dissimilitude from thee" (Journals 383). In an earlier essay, Emerson cited Augustine to lend support to Emerson's development of the symbol of the circle: "The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest cipher of the world. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere and its circumference nowhere. We are all our lifetime reading the copious sense of the first of forms" ("Circles" 225).

"Experience" and the Confessions share the same starting point: a sense of constricted belief and knowledge. Augustine begins the Confessions wondering about the efficacy of prayer: "are men to pray to you and learn to know you through their prayers? Only how are they to call upon the Lord until they have learned to believe in him?" (21) Emerson begins, "Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight" (285). Augustine proceeds to pray, but Emerson is enervated and immobilized, for "we cannot shake off the lethargy now at noonday" (286).

Emerson's essay subsumes autobiography within a skeptical posture. His path through time is marked by a systematic analysis of existential categories: "Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, Subjectiveness -- these are the threads on the loom of time, there are the lords of life. I dare not assume to give their order, but I name them as I find them in my way" (309). In fact, he analyzes these elements in exactly the order he has named, implying chronology. Together, they define a "system of illusions" which "shut us in a prison of glass which we cannot see," but one that demands the "necessity of a succession of moods and objects" (290, 292).

His harshest portrayal and veiled contempt are reserved for the characterization of "Surface." In a seeming self reference, he writes, "In the morning I wake and find the old world, wife, babes and mother, Concord and Boston, the dear old spiritual world and even the dear old devil not far off. If we will take the good we find, asking no questions, we shall have heaping measure. The great gifts are not got by analysis. Everything good is on the highway" (296). He writes this in a context in which we know he did not wake to find his babe alive; his contempt for the "highway" of commerce was well known; he does not value the "old" orthodoxy, nor does he refrain from questioning or analysis.

As Emerson proceeds with the portrayal of man, references often carry an autobiographical echo, reminiscent of the final book of the Confessions in which Augustine's autobiographical presence appears indirectly within his interpretation of Genesis. Most directly, Emerson

relates his lack of feeling even to expressions of grief: "In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate -- no more. I cannot get it near me" (288). The essay never loses sight of youth, or projected experiences of children. Young men are drawn upon to define various human attitudes. "We see young men who owe us a new world, so readily and lavishly they promise," says Emerson, "but they never acquit the debt; they die young and dodge the account; or if they live they lose themselves in the crowds" (290).

A child's refrain defines the quality of transient pleasure: "'Mama, why don't I like the story as well as when you told it me yesterday?' Alas! child, it is even so with the oldest cherubim of knowledge" (292). The space between reform and reality is dramatized by reference to the young people of Brook Farm: "At Education Farm the noblest theory of life sat on the noblest figures of young men and maidens, quite powerless and melancholy. It would not rake or pitch a ton of hay; it would not rub down a horse; and the men and maidens it left pale and hungry" (294). In the end, a child is the image of the soul which is "not twin-born, but the only begotten, and though revealing itself as a child in time, child in appearance, is of a fatal and universal power, admitting no co-life" (306).

Besides portraying himself as unmoved in grief, Emerson appears within the essay, like Augustine in the early books of the Confessions, casting off one world view after another. "Once I took such delight in Montaigne that I thought I should not need any other book," he writes, "before that, in Shakespeare; then in Plutarch; then in Plotinus; at

one time in Bacon; afterwards in Goethe; even in Bettine; but now I turn the pages of either of them languidly, whilst I cherish their genius" (292). Later, he acknowledges change, subjectivism and privacy, but still identifies with youthful goals: "I am not the novice I was fourteen, nor yet seven years ago. Let who will ask, Where is the fruit? I find a private fruit sufficient" (309).

While Emerson's profile of illusion, temperament, succession, surface and subjectiveness define his limits, his discussion of surprise and reality suggest possibility. Reinterpreting religious imagery and hearkening to the Pre-Socratics, the "Fall of Man" represents a "fall" into subjectiveness in which God is simply "one of its ideas" (305). His enervation and immobility following the death of his son are aspects of the fallen state of subjectivity. Beyond is a permanent reality, though unreachable and unknowable when confined within subjective existence. He characterizes this ultimate reality variously as the First Cause, Unbounded Substance, Being, and the Mighty Ideal. Ultimately, Emerson, like Augustine, speaks of grace, illumination, and spiritual rebirth. Thinking of his own craft, he suggests that "all writing comes by the grace of God, and all doing and having" (300).

In the process of illumination, "I am at first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life. By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of its profound beauty and repose....I am ready to die out of nature and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West" (301-302).

The sense of process and the image of light were contained in the passage Emerson had copied from the Confessions: "I entered and discerned with the eye of my soul (such as it was) even beyond my soul & mind itself the unchangeable light of our Lord. Not this vulgar light which is subject to the sense of flesh & blood nor is it of the same kind" (Journals 383).

In an earlier intimation of illumination, Emerson evoked the image of a door: "Into every intelligence there is a door which is never closed, through which the creator passes" (291). The image is the same one which concludes the Confessions; "We must ask it of you, seek it in you; we must knock at your door" (347).

Stephen Whicher characterizes "Experience" as possessing a "duality of mood," but also says that "when the debate is closed, and the roll called, Emerson continues to cast his vote with the believers" (Whicher 120, 114). Emerson as autobiographer said, "our life looks trivial, and we shun to record it" (286), but he went on to do so, carrying forward Augustinian categories acknowledged by the Puritan, adding a more problematic analysis of human limitation and subjectivity, reflective of Augustine's own questioning.

If Emerson was skeptical of the subject's ability to know, Henry Adams, who saw himself as reacting to the Augustinian tradition, questioned the object of spiritual autobiography. Adams often referred to his special regard for Augustine, as well as the relationship between his own autobiography and the Confessions. For example, in a letter to Henry Osborne Taylor in 1909 he wrote, "I have written you before --

have I not? -- that I aspire to be bound up with St. Augustine. Or rather, I would have aspired to it, if it were artistically possible to build another fourth-century church. It cannot be. The Leit motif is flat. One can get one's artistic effects only by flattening everything to a level. Perhaps that is why I so love flattery" (Education 514).

The rhetorical energy of The Education of Henry Adams derives in part from a radical revision of Christian symbolism and the Augustinian autobiographical paradigm. In Adams' autobiography, the famous break after the twentieth chapter, excising two decades of personal history, parallels by contrast the break between the ninth and tenth books of the Confessions. Augustine's ninth book climaxes with a victory, a visionary moment confirming his conversion. Adams' twentieth chapter is titled "Failure." It follows his recollection of the death of his sister, Louisa Adams Kuhn, the reelection of Grant, whom Adams regarded as ineffectual, and the limitations Adams sees for himself as a Harvard professor; he regarded education as the articulation of order; he could discern none.

Augustine proceeds in the remainder of the Confessions to examine what he knows. When Adams takes up his narrative with the chapter called "Twenty Years After (1892)," he feels he has nothing to teach or learn, for "Education had ended in 1871; life was complete in 1890; the rest mattered so little!" (316) Augustine proceeds to locate autobiography within universal pattern; Adams continues his work by cataloguing signs of chaos. Adams had criticized Augustine's two-part autobiographical structure. "St. Augustine's narrative," he wrote in a



letter, "subsides at last into the dry sands of metaphysical theology" (514). Yet Adams duplicated Augustine with concluding chapters of historical theory.

Augustine's ninth book ends with the death of his mother. As Monica was dying she felt that, with the conversion of her son, she need not live any longer: "All she wanted was that we should remember her at your altar, when she had been your servant day after day, without fail" (204). The Education of Henry Adams concludes with the death of Adams' longtime friend John Hay. Adams exhibits a similar passivity from quite a different perspective: "It was not even the suddenness of the shock, or the sense of the void....it was the quiet summons to follow -- the assent of dismissal. It was time to go" (505). Augustine had experienced a sense of self-dissolution in a brief mystical vision; Adams saw only the dissolution of death. In fact, from the beginning of The Education of Henry Adams, the autobiographer had imagined himself living a kind of posthumous existence, a parody of religious rebirth. In 1841, at the age of three, he developed scarlet fever and briefly "was as good as dead, reviving only under the careful nursing of his family," but "in after life he retained not the faintest recollection of his illness" (5).

The Education of Henry Adams is poignant and capacious in its portraiture and scope. But it is carefully governed by Adams' metaphor of education. What Adams had learned through his life, from his youth in the contrasting environments of Quincy and Boston, from his Harvard years, his time as secretary to his father, Charles Francis Adams, to his later teaching, writing and travels, was the Augustinian sense of

the indeterminacy of human existence, but without any overarching unity to embrace it. Like Augustine, Adams plots a series of enthusiasms subsequently rejected. Augustine conceived of his autobiography as prayer. Adams mocks the process. Poised before an electric dynamo at the Great Exposition of 1900 in Paris, "he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the cross....Before the end, one began to pray to it; inherited instinct taught the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force" (380).

One governing symbol in The Education of Henry Adams, subject to frequent reevaluation, is the Church of Santa Maria de Ara Coeli in Rome. Adams visited the church in 1860, when he was twenty-two years old. The handbook describing Ara Coeli quoted a passage from Gibbon's Autobiography; Gibbon had visited the church in 1764. As a result of his reading of Gibbon, Adams was led "more than once to sit at sunset on the steps of the Church...wondering that not an inch had been gained by Gibbon -- or all historians since -- toward explaining the Fall" (91). No doubt Adams had in mind both the Fall of the Roman Empire and the Fall of man. When Adams returned in 1865, after the assassination of Lincoln, the imagery of the Fall persists in his description: "Nothing happened. The travellers changed no plan or movement. The Minister did not recall them to London. The scene was over before they returned; and when the private secretary sat down at his desk in Portland Place before a mass of copy in arrears, he saw before him a world so changed as to be beyond connection with the past" (209).

The images of Fall and discontinuity remained. When Adams visited the Chicago exposition in 1893, with all its symbols of a newer industrial America, he "sat down to ponder on the steps beneath Richard Hunt's dome almost as deeply as on the steps of Ara Coeli, and much to the same purpose" (340). In 1904, having read of the assassination of Russia's minister of the interior, he comments, "Had one sat all one's life on the steps of Ara Coeli for this? Was assassination to be the last word of Progress?" (471-72).

In Adams reinterpretation of Christian symbols, the dynamo became "a symbol of infinity" and Ara Coeli represented a coherence long since passed. In 1902, Theodore Roosevelt seemed a new kind of god: "Roosevelt more than any other man living with the range of notoriety, showed the singular primitive quality that belongs to ultimate matter -- the quality medieval theology assigned to God -- he was pure act" (417). In the historical dynamic between politics and religion, Augustine had played his part. To Adams, Martin Luther and John Calvin tried "like Augustine to substitute the Civitas Dei for the Civitas Romae" (483).

From the beginning of The Education of Henry Adams, the autobiographer had associated Saint Augustine exclusively with the image of a unified cosmos, clearly a very partial reading of the Confessions, robbing Augustine of his personal struggle. In his "Editor's Preface", Adams wrote that "his [Adams'] great ambition was to complete St. Augustine's 'Confessions,' but that St. Augustine, like a great artist, had worked from multiplicity to unity, while he, like a small one, had

to reverse the method and work back from unity to multiplicity" (xxvii-xxviii). Actually, Augustine had worked toward mystical union, not simply unity, a concept even more foreign to one who declared early in his autobiography that the "religious instinct had vanished and could not be revived" (34). To Augustine unity was impossible on earth. For God remains "one alone immutably, in the vastness of its unity (319).

In his description of a "Dynamic Theory of History" in the closing chapters of his work, Adams could conceive of man simply as one force, interacting with other forces, forever. Yet, while Adams seemingly rejected Augustine's vision, it remained with him. Seven years after completing his autobiography, Adams offered a gift to his friend Elizabeth Cameron and wrote, "I will send you St. Augustine -- that is, Bernard's Life of him. It will illuminate our path....life is that of the fourth century, without St. Augustine. We each hope for ourselves to escape in time, but no one looks for more than one generation" (Lyon 222-23). While Adams reinterpreted Christian symbols and contrasted his efforts with Augustine, his critique is often colored by a mood of nostalgia, evident in other American autobiographers who followed him.

The late twentieth century American autobiographer, therefore, is the recipient of a heritage in which the Augustinian autobiographical paradigm, codified by Puritanism, was subsequently scrutinized. In the nineteenth century, Emerson spoke of human limitation and the illusions of subjectivity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Henry Adams emphasized multiplicity opposing unity, the confrontation of various forces, chaos and death. To Daniel Shea, "Adams is arguing his defeat,

his damnation and the eventual defeat of the universe through the ever-increasing dissipation of its energies" (Shea 265). Both the Augustinian autobiographical subject and transcendental object have become problematic. Paul Jay notes that Adams' "interest in multiplicity, coupled with the disparate forms of his autobiographical text, looks forward to twentieth-century self-reflexive strategies that thematize the literary and psychological problems and seek non-narrative, discursive forms with which to do so" (Jay 159). While this is certainly the setting in which late twentieth-century American autobiographers function, I believe it is also the case that the Augustinian paradigm remains critical to ongoing revaluations.

Today's autobiographical writers, at least ones considered in this study, often resemble their Puritan forbears. If we accept Shea's basic criterion for spiritual autobiography as a "quest for grace," they more than exemplify such a pilgrimage. Frequently, they return to Puritan and Augustinian categories of confession and epiphany and write as intensely as any Puritan penitent. Their range, however, can also embrace wit, casualness and bemusement, conspicuously absent from Puritanism and Augustine. One of the autobiographers considered in this study, James Merrill, stated the issue best. When he evaluated innovations of Dante, he said that "they refigure rather than refute the thought that preceded them" (Recitative 9). Similarly, the autobiographers I consider often refigure rather than refute the Augustinian paradigm.

## III.

In this study, I have selected modern American autobiographical texts which, in the first instance, foreground current problems and processes of autobiographical composition and definition. Non-narrative strategies include the combining of lyric and prose in John Ashbery's Three Poems, a reliance on dialogues and sporadic inclusion of the scenario from a novel in James Merrill's "The Book of Ephraim," the fracturing of chronology by Robert Lowell in Day by Day, a randomness of relationship among sentences in Lyn Hejinian's My Life, and the attempt to replicate psychotherapeutic sessions in Frank Bidart's "Confessional." These autobiographies confront current concerns with fragmentation, indeterminacy and "multiplicity." Augustine examined these issues and took comfort in his faith. Autobiographers today adopt variant strategies represented here by the fashioning of personal myth, an emphasis on consciousness viewed phenomenologically, a probing of the paradigm offered by psychopathology, an exploration of language as principal determinant of self, and a modest acceptance of the quotidian. Augustine occasionally appropriated allegory in his self-representation. In the play of "fictionality" today, James Merrill invents a nephew, Robert Lowell changes the dates of his son's birth, and John Ashbery records a love affair which may not have had a specific referent: his "you" may be consciousness, part of the self, language, or the reader. ✓

More specifically, I sought autobiographies for analysis which engaged specific issues raised by Augustine: the functions of time, memory and language, and the nature of origin and destiny. Augustine

cast his autobiography in the form of prayer; similarly, we would expect an autobiographer today to make some acknowledgment or accommodation to presence and process. I was interested in determining whether Augustinian religious imagery, vocabulary or pattern still carried significant meaning. In the autobiographies I discuss, the Augustinian paradigm often exists as barely discernible subtext; on the other hand, it can establish coherence where little is apparent. This is especially true in the work of John Ashbery, in which contours are obscure, and in Robert Lowell, where the Augustinian model gives shape to the experience of mental illness.

The obverse is also true. Having read contemporary American autobiographies, qualities of the Confessions which seemed less critical to me have become more important. Those aspects include the relationship of Augustine to his family, his use of a guide for pilgrimage, his turning to various mentors, and the pattern of acceptance, then subsequent rejection of various philosophical and theological positions.

Even more narrowly, I sought to include major American figures, as well as younger writers who, nevertheless, confronted essential Augustinian issues. It also occurred to me that the age of the writer at the time of composing an autobiography could be relevant. John Ashbery, like Saint Augustine, was in his late thirties and early forties when he composed his autobiography. It was a time in his life, he said, when "enough of what had made it up had taken on that look of worn familiarity" (Ashbery 117). Robert Lowell composed his work as he approached the age of sixty and felt that his life was completing

itself. In Helen Vendler's view, we find in "Lowell's casualness, his waywardness, his gnomic summaries, his fragmentary reflections, . . . authentic representations of a sixty-year-old memory" (Vendler 168).

Works were chosen which I regarded as substantial enough to satisfy more traditional definitions of autobiography like that of Pascal, when he specifies the "reconstruction of the movement of a life or a part of a life" (Pascal 9). This study's chapters are arranged in sequence of the autobiographical texts' publication dates, from 1972 to 1983.

Of the autobiographers discussed, Robert Lowell probably knew Augustine best. The title of his first book, Land of Unlikeness, derived from a passage in the Confessions. He had read Etienne Gilson's analyses of Augustine and no doubt absorbed Augustinian ideas as he prepared for his conversion to Catholicism. Equally important, he gave considerable attention to his New England Puritan heritage. In an early poem he prayed for both himself and his culture: "Mother, run to the chalice, and bring back/Blood on your finger-tip for Lazarus who was poor" (Lord Weary's Castle 28) In his subsequent rejection of this heritage, he wrote that he left Saint Augustine's "City of God where it belongs" (Life Studies 3).

According to Ian Hamilton, Lowell is "perhaps more than any other twentieth century poet now thought of as 'autobiographical'" (Hamilton 105). My analysis of his final work, Day by Day, which reviews the last four years of his life with frequent reference to his earlier career, substantiates Lowell's own description of the work as a "journey of the soul" (Letter quoted in Hamilton 455). I reconstruct



the chronology of some of Lowell's non-chronologically-arranged sequences in the work, identify probable figures and events at issue, and note in particular Lowell's attitudes toward writing, memory and language. He speaks of being "caged in fiction's iron bars" and pleads that "the memorable must be forgotten; / it never matters,/ except in front of our eyes" (Day by Day 105, 85). I give special emphasis to Lowell's sequence of poems describing an episode of manic-depressive illness, and suggest a relationship between the description and the Augustinian autobiographical paradigm. Augustine can view pilgrimage as progressive; for the suffering Lowell, it is merely one more cyclic experience, recovery without redemption.

James Merrill's "The Book of Ephraim" draws upon a number of resources, including the Augustinian paradigm, Western mythology, primitive religion, and twentieth century psychotherapy. It is based in part on two decades of transcriptions made during sessions using a Ouija board, and involving conversations with a "familiar spirit" named Ephraim. At one point Merrill suggests that Ephraim "was the revelation/ (Or if we had created him, then we were)" ("Book of Ephraim" 76). Merrill's understanding of Augustine came partly from his reading of Dante. What Merrill said of Dante may be said of himself: "He is not after all our only mystic, just more literary and more fortunate than many" (Recitative 87).

The arbitrary nature of the work's structure is indicated by its division into twenty-six sections; they simply parallel the sequence of letters in the alphabet. The texture is made more complicated by the insertion of a plot outline from a novel whose characters parallel

figures in Merrill's life. The mythic character of the autobiography is heightened by reference to Jungian archetypes and the Voudoun religion of Haiti, championed by Merrill's friend, Maya Deren. Merrill's wit and nonchalance, and extraordinary subtlety of language, create a work which makes the 'other world' seem down to earth.

In my analysis I attempt to make more coherent Merrill's very difficult structure and give particular attention to characterization. Merrill's figure of Ephraim, I point out, fulfills the traditional role of guide, like Beatrice for Dante and Monica for Augustine. Merrill speaks of grace and prayer. Augustine's journey was an ascent; Merrill's pilgrimage moves toward an acceptance of the earth. He places his faith in art and a perception of the sacred.

No writer today conveys a greater sense of autobiography as process occurring within present time than does John Ashbery. Ashbery has said that he is "attempting to reproduce in poetry the actions of the mind at work or at rest" (Packard 118). Three Poems integrates prose and poetry to describe Ashbery's life, the experience of a love affair, and to offer a critique of contemporary society. In its complex form, paragraphs vary in length from a single line to fourteen pages. In foregrounding present consciousness, descriptions of concrete events often become oblique.

I suggest that Ashbery's sense of Augustine derives, like Merrill's, partly from Dante, in particular Dante's autobiographical Vita Nuova. My analysis focuses on ways the Augustinian pattern and vocabulary inform sequences of events. By doing so, I believe Three Poems becomes more accessible. Ashbery speaks of the "general pattern

of living of the disabused intellect, whose nature is to travel from illusion to reality and on to some seemingly superior vision" (112). His "seemingly superior" represents a typical semi-detached Ashbery attitude and qualification.

In his autobiography, Ashbery alludes to "a penitential time of drawing in" and proceeds to the "obscure workings of grace" (21, 72). In his version of the Christian metaphor of rebirth, "what is merely pleasant had to die to be born again as pleasure" (32). In what I consider a statement of Ashbery's mature belief, he may be compared to Augustine. Augustine spoke of a fixed pattern of the cosmos. Ashbery embraces a "perfect irregular order" (21). But in Three Poems I will suggest that avant-garde theory is often harmonized with traditional concerns.

In the context of this study, Frank Bidart and Lyn Hejinian, born in 1939 and 1941 respectively, represent extreme reinterpretations of the Augustinian paradigm. Hejinian's My Life consists of thirty-seven paragraphs which often seem interchangeable. To Hejinian, "only fragments are accurate" (7). In my analysis I sift through these fragments to define the general contours of the autobiography.

In Book Eleven of the Confessions Augustine spoke of the "Word Co-eternal." In Augustine's vision, "Your Word, the Beginning, made himself audible to the bodily ears of men, so that they should believe in him and by looking for him within themselves should find him in the eternal Truth" (259). In Hejinian's thinking, such an inward search is misdirected, because autobiography is linguistically determined. My Life attempts to describe a pattern of linguistic acculturation,

beginning with Hejinian's youth in California. In her language-centered cosmology, God is neither center nor circumference. The autobiography represents a consideration of surface and depth in which depth is not assumed. Since religious experience, if relevant at all, is beyond human speech, Hejinian argues that one should simply accept that fact. Religion is a "vague lowing." Epiphany is an "astonishment," and she is astonished by a remarkably wide range of phenomena.

Frank Bidart was a student of Robert Lowell, and his autobiography reflects his mentor in its psychological probing and the affecting of candor. "Confessional" attempts to mirror psychotherapeutic sessions in which the therapist is placed in the role of religious confessor. Bidart examines his early life in a flat, blunt style, but, like all autobiographers, withholds a great deal.

In the development of a remarkable psychological displacement, Bidart explores in some detail a comparison between himself and his mother, with Saint Augustine and Monica. He focuses on the mystical vision shared by Augustine and Monica, retold in Book Nine of the Confessions. Ultimately, the effect is to heighten the pathos expressed in this autobiography which details emotional child abuse, delusion and manipulation. "Confessional" presents an analysis of guilt without grace. In the words he gives to his therapist, "Man needs a metaphysics/ he cannot have one" (The Sacrifice 55).

To my reading of "Confessional" I append an analysis of the final poem of The Sacrifice, the volume containing "Confessional." Bidart interprets, through rewriting, the opening verses of Genesis, the

subject of the Confessions' final book. Ultimately, Bidart describes a God who has withdrawn from his creation.

For Robert Lowell, John Ashbery and James Merrill, the Augustinian paradigm holds significant meaning. Their reinterpretations accommodate the model to their own autobiographies. Lyn Hejinian and Frank Bidart remain discomfited and remind us to be apprehensive of any conclusion which would suggest that the Augustinian vision has simply been secularized.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Augustinian autobiographical paradigm, my study begins with a detailed reading of the critical, final book of the Confessions. In Book Thirteen, Augustine shapes an allegory; his life is measured against the life of Christ and Saint Paul, the history of the Church, and the origins of the world. He defines what may be called a theology of indeterminacy and evaluates issues of freedom and faith. His vision seems contemporary in its portrayal of human limitation. Knowledge, self and language are ultimately fictions because, as Augustine declares, "Even when we know things by God's Spirit, none but his Spirit truly knows them. For it is right that those who speak by the spirit of God should be told: It is not you who speak, it is equally right to say to those who know by the Spirit of God 'It is not you who know.'...If, therefore, by the Spirit of God, men see that a thing is good, it is God, not they, who sees that it is good" (342). In his theory of interpretation, "there are many ways in which the mind can understand an idea that is outwardly expressed in one way" (335). Thus he is free to detail the meaning of

Genesis in which the earth represents "souls that thirst for you," sea beasts stand for miracles and winged things represent God's Word.

In my analysis I reemphasize that, as prayer, the Confessions in its complete form is a quest for discovery and knowledge. But in his final vision Augustine seeks mystical union. Augustine prays, "unless you are with me, and not only beside me but in my very self, for me there is nothing but evil" (316). The efforts of the autobiographers I examine, whatever perspective they adopt, share one desire with Augustine: "I wish to act in truth, making my confession both in my heart before you, and in this book before all who read it." They exhibit the same hope that "although I cannot prove...that my confessions are true, at least I shall be believed by those whose ears are opened to me by charity" (206, 208).

## CHAPTER I

### THE GENESIS OF MODERN AUTOBIOGRAPHY:

#### SAINT AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS: BOOK THIRTEEN

Give yourself to me, my God, restore yourself to me.  
I show you my love, but if it is too little, give me  
strength to love you more.

Confessions, 13.8

#### I.

Saint Augustine wrote his Confessions around the year 397, shortly after his appointment as bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Augustine "greeted the elevation with something less than unalloyed glee. He knew his own unworthiness for the position, he felt the bitterness of some of his colleagues and enemies in the North African Church, and he was struggling to explain to himself how he could go about doing his job as bishop while still a sinner himself" (O'Donnell 280). Augustine's principal modern biographer has described the Confessions as "a masterpiece of strictly intellectual autobiography. Augustine communicates such a sense of intense personal involvement in the ideas he is handling, that we are made to forget that it is an exceptionally difficult book" (Brown 167). A more recent biography characterizes the Confessions as "the most famous and influential of all ancient autobiographies" in which "the reader feels himself addressed at a level of extraordinary depth and confronted by a coherent system of

thought large parts of which still make potent claims to attention and respect" (Chadwick 1,3).

In an important essay on autobiography, Georges Gusdorf placed the Confessions in its relation to the modern world: "At the edge of modern times, the physical and material appeal of the reflection in the mirror bolsters and strengthens the tradition of self-examination of Christian asceticism. Augustine's Confessions answer to this new spiritual orientation by contrast to the great philosophic systems of classical antiquity -- Epicurean, for example, or Stoic -- that contented themselves with a disciplinary notion of individual being and argued that one should seek salvation by adhering to a universal and transcendent law without any regard for the mysteries (which anyway were unsuspected) of interior life. Christianity brings a new anthropology to the fore: every destiny, however humble it may be, assumes a kind of supernatural stake. Christian destiny unfolds a dialogue of the soul with God" (Gusdorf 33). While anticipating a modern temper, the Confessions also represents the culmination of a written tradition dating back to the fourth century before Christ: "Wandering, temptations, sad thoughts of mortality and the search for truth: these had always been the stuff of autobiography for fine souls, who refused to accept superficial security. Pagan philosophers had already created a tradition of 'religious autobiography' in this vein; it will be continued by Christians in the fourth century, and will reach its climax in the Confessions of S. Augustine" (Brown 159).

The historical importance of the Confessions seems beyond dispute. Contemporary criticism, however, would question the manner in which the



work and its contents are described. One prominent critic, considering "the question of the autobiographical element in Augustine's Confessions," regards the matter as "a question which, despite some valiant recent efforts, is far from resolved" (de Man 919-20). There is skepticism also concerning the final part of the book: "Are we to call the last four books of Augustine's Confessions (which offer a commentary on the account of creation in Genesis) philosophy, theology, hermeneutics, exegesis -- or autobiography?" (Olney 5) Discussion of the Confessions, then, quickly becomes part of a larger debate concerning the definition of autobiography and other relevant critical terms.

What seems most important to note about the Confessions is that Augustine himself portrayed his work in its entirety as a prayer. One book of the Confessions, for example, begins, Invoco te, deus meus, misericordia mea, "I call upon you, O God, my Mercy," and continues, "who made me and did not forget me when I forgot you. I call upon you to come into my soul, for by inspiring it to long for you you prepared it to receive you" (13.1).<sup>3</sup> Another book begins, "You are the power of my soul; come into it and make it fit for yourself, so that you may have it and hold it without stain or wrinkle. This is my hope; this is why I speak as I do" (10.1).

In the Confessions we 'overhear' Augustine at prayer. The kind of prayer varies, from simple praise or profession, petition or thanksgiving, to mystical rapture, as in "O Love ever burning, never quenched! O Charity, my God, set me on fire with your love! You command me to be continent. Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do your will!" (10.29) Augustine is concerned

throughout with the process of prayer and its efficacy. At the very beginning of the Confessions he prays, "Grant me, Lord, to know and understand whether a man is first to pray to you for help or to praise you, and whether he must know you before he can call you to his aid. If he does not know you, how can he pray to you: For he may call for some other help, mistaking it for yours. Or are men to pray to you and learn to know you through their prayers. Only how are they to call upon the Lord until they have learned to believe in him?" (1.1).

Augustine concludes that he will pray in the spirit of belief. What is important to note, however, is Augustine's sense that through this prayer, this work of Confessions, he may come to know God. In addition, even beyond such transforming knowledge, he believes his prayer may bring other changes within himself, as well. A little later he prays, "Do not hide your face away from me, for I would gladly meet my death to see it, since not to see it would be death indeed. My soul is like a house, small for you to enter, but I pray you to enlarge it" (1.5). Augustine would welcome change within himself which represented response to a directive from God: "You are Truth, and you are everywhere present where all seek counsel of you. You reply to all at once, though the counsel each seeks is different. The answer you give is clear, but not all hear it clearly. All ask you whatever they wish to ask, but the answer they receive is not always what they want to hear. The man who serves you best is one who is less intent on hearing from you what he wills to hear than on shaping his will according to what he hears from you" (10.26).

Augustine is aware of prayer's limitations. Self understanding,

sometime subject of prayer, and language, prayer's medium, are often elusive. Augustine prays, "O Lord, I am working hard in this field and the field of my labors is my own self. I have become a problem to myself, like land which a farmer works only with difficulty and at the cost of much sweat" (10.16). He asks God "to reveal me to my own eyes, so that I may confess to my brothers in Christ what wounds I find in myself, for they will pray for me....Or is the truth of the matter that I deceive myself and that in heart and tongue alike I am guilty of falsehood in your presence? O Lord, keep such folly from me, for fear that my lips should sin, sleeking my head with the oil of their flattery" (10.37). In an analysis of Augustine's attitudes toward prayer, Henry Chadwick calls attention to Augustine's Soliloquia written a decade before the Confessions. In it Augustine argued that "when we pray, often we can hardly know the meaning of the words we are using (Sol. 1.9). This inadequacy is partly inherent in the fact that our terms and categories belong to discourse taken from this world of space, time and successiveness. They therefore blur and distort the truth about the immutable and the eternal" (Chadwick 48).

Augustine, then, views this prayer, the Confessions, partly as a quest for greater understanding, aware that he possesses limited knowledge. The result of prayer can be dramatic change, but the process of prayer must confront the dangers of self-deception and the limitations of language. The essence of prayers like Augustine's, suggests theologian D.Z. Phillips, is paradox: "In a prayer of confession, part of what the believer confesses is that he does not understand; that the remedy is not in himself, but in God. The problem

of the nature of understanding in this context seems paradoxical because of the desire to say on the one hand that man does not understand, and the desire to say on the other hand that he comes to some understanding in confessing to God. What needs to be taken into account is the fact that the confession of man's radical insufficiency and inadequacy ('I do not know'), is a precondition for receiving the understanding or grace that comes from God ('I understand'). Or as the Christian would put it: 'Not I, but Christ who dwelleth in me' (62).

Augustine's prayer may also be regarded as a pragmatic statement. ✓ Pragmatic statements have been defined as those occurring when "someone makes a statement, which he wants to induce himself or others to believe, but which he does not at the time know to be true or could not possibly know to be true, in order to bring about its truth....He makes the statement, not because he knows the outcome, but because he wishes to influence the outcome (Spence 271). Augustine's prayer, incorporating subtle theological argument and his projection of the future, conforms to this definition. Augustine knows the dynamics of this quality of prayer: "When we pray we ask for what we need, yet the Truth himself has told us: Your heavenly Father knows well what your needs are before you ask him. So by confessing our own miserable state and acknowledging your mercy towards us we open our hearts to you, so that you may free us wholly, as you have already begun to do. Then we shall no longer be miserable in ourselves, but will find our true happiness in you" (11.1).

These observations by Augustine on the prayer he called Confessions, both his reservations and ambitions, sound very reminiscent

of contemporary discussions of autobiography. For example, Gusdorf stresses the fact that the making of autobiography takes place in the present time of the author, and that autobiography is actually a process of discovery contributing to the writer's present and future:

"Confession of the past realizes itself as a work in the present: it effects a true creation of self by the self. Under the guise of presenting myself as I was, I exercise a sort of right to recover possession of my existence now and later" (Gusdorf 44). Augustine's discussion of the Confessions certainly defines his project as one sensitive to present time; and he views his entire effort as one of discovery. He describes this long prayer as an act concerned with the shaping of the will, and he asks God to "reveal me to my own eyes" (10.37).

A second aspect of current thinking involves the narrative quality of the self: "The self lies not in a locatable scene with characters, however wish-fulfillingly fictional, but in nonspatial, temporal play between scenes, and even in a changing narrative stance" (Skura 57). We can simply recall the many evocations of Augustine about just this kind of change and his actual desire to change. Even more particularly, in Book Ten Augustine writes, "The power of memory is great, O Lord. It is awe-inspiring in its profound and incalculable complexity. Yet it is my mind: it is my self. What, then, am I, my God? What is my nature? A life that is ever varying, full of change, and of immense power" (10.17).

Third, Paul de Man gives a conventional definition of autobiography, "a text in which the author declares himself the subject

of his own understanding" (921), but goes on to say, "We assume the life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of the medium? (920). This statement could provoke consternation. But from the point of view of Augustine in the Confessions, the observation is accurate, acceptable and acknowledged. Augustine wants the Confessions to determine his life. He wants to accede to the demands of self-portraiture -- God's demand for self-portraiture in prayer. And he wants to yield to the resources of the medium. Augustine will argue in Book Thirteen that ultimately the self, the referent, is indeed an illusion.

"The interest of autobiography, then," de Man continues, "is not that it reveal reliable self-knowledge -- it does not -- but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions" (922).

Augustine would surely agree. In his prayer, expression of doubts about self-knowledge and language are numerous, and he, too, sees the impossibility of closure, at least in this life: "I shall therefore confess both what I know of myself and what I do not know. For even what I know about myself I know only because your light shines upon me, and what I do not know about myself I shall continue not to know until I see you face to face and my dusk is noonday" (10.5).

The issues raised by Gusdorf, Skura and de Man were not intended to be understood in the context of Christian prayer. Nevertheless, these comparisons suggest that Augustine's identification of his Confessions as prayer creates an autobiographical text more contemporary than we might first assume.

## II.

In a recent examination of autobiography, Paul Eakin poses a central question and offers advice: "How does making something up -- a self, a text -- answer to the search for self-knowledge? In such an inquiry we do well to begin with the author's own account of the autobiographical act, accepting the text as the model for the self and its interpretation" (27). With this in mind, I would like to focus on an Augustinian text, the final and most ambitious book within the Confessions. In it Augustine completes his autobiographical act in a dramatic and summary way.

The first nine books of the Confessions end with Augustine's conversion in 386, and the death of his mother the year following. Book Ten examines his soul ten years later, at the present time of writing, and also explores the phenomenon of memory. Books Eleven and Twelve begin an analysis of the first chapter of Genesis but cover only the first two verses, discussing topics important to autobiography, namely, time and knowledge. But in Book Thirteen, through a verse-by-verse analysis of the rest of the Genesis chapter, Augustine attempts far more than anywhere else in the whole book.

As in other parts of the Confessions Augustine addresses a dual

audience, both God and men; and his rhetorical strategy modulates from intimate prayer to oratory. Lengthy discussions of theological matters give way in the conclusion to short chapters of quiet intensity. Tensions are developed through an almost endless series of oppositions: God and man, time and eternity, sin and salvation, ignorance and knowledge, form and the formless, speech and silence, movement and stasis, self and other. Augustine explores major underlying themes of family, separation, order and process. But more significantly, Augustine relates the origins of the world with the life of Christ, the life and teachings of Paul, the founding and order of the Christian church, and his own personal narrative. He pares away details of his life to locate his essential autobiography within the biography and pattern of all creation.

A Theology of Indeterminacy: Book Thirteen, Chapters One through Eight.

It seems fitting that the governing images opening the first chapter of Book Thirteen are drawn from economics. The young bishop is now charged with communal and institutional responsibilities, some no doubt financial, reaching beyond his own particular salvation. The whole book, in fact, moves back and forth from the isolated first person singular referent of the opening, Invoco te, "I call upon you" (1), to the plural pronoun of the concluding chapter, Nos itaque ista quae fecisti videmus, "We therefore see those things which you made" (38).

In this divine economy Augustine believes God "blotted out" his evil deeds, as from a ledger. God "takes into account" Augustine's meritorious actions. But while the currency of "good deeds" seems to



offer "recompense" to God for "the work of your hands which made me", Augustine is not like a peasant who tills land for a master, "a creature good in such a way as to be helpful" (1).

Augustine records his sense that God watched over him before he himself turned to God, and that ultimately God forgave his transgressions and took note of his good deeds. But his understanding of the economics of salvation makes clear to him that he did not 'earn' salvation any more than he earned existence itself. Neither man nor nature bears any necessary relationship to God. Existence is simply an unmerited gift, as is salvation. For the autobiographical act the implication is clear. The significance of an event is not determined finally by the autobiographer at prayer. All interpretations are always hypotheses; statements are acts of faith. In this light, Augustine's is a theology of indeterminacy.

Yet, in the spirit of faith Augustine affirms the experience of his conversion: "You came to my aid....You coaxed me to listen...you blotted out all my evil deeds...you provided" (1). Throughout Book Thirteen the personal narrative of the Confessions' first nine books will become referent for the interpretation of Genesis. This clearly reverses the process of the earlier books in which the Bible was the interpretive instrument for understanding Augustine's life. Augustine's own story of conversion is never fully set aside. His opening prayer to God in Book Thirteen is that his newfound Father "not desert me" (1). Augustine himself, of course, had abandoned both his mother, Monica, and his common law wife; he had been abandoned by his

father, Patricus, and son, Adeodatus, through death; he had abandoned the Manichees and Neoplatonists of his youth, and in some sense had even abandoned his sexuality. In Book Thirteen, by placing himself within the divine pattern of creation, he embraces the stability of a family, the divine Trinity, as he completes his adult separation from his human family. God is both father and mother, appreciative of both his oratory and poetry. Separation is ultimately beneficial; it was after all the basis of all creation, as God separated land from sea.

Augustine turns from the theme of dependency to themes of spiritual order and the Word of God as he invokes a first reference to Genesis, the closing epithet of the first chapter in which God declared creation "very good". In this way Augustine foreshadows the climax of Book Thirteen. Before there was form, material and spiritual existence was "prone to fall away from you into confusion". When form originates there is a "turning" (2) toward the creator, and form achieves clarity by the "light" cast upon it by the divine Word. The light is lost when the Spirit turns away. Augustine's later discussion of Biblical interpretation will illustrate his feeling that 'form' and 'word' are to be understood in a wide range of contexts, from God's being to man's writing. All senses, implicitly and explicitly, are shown to be important to the shaping of his Confessions. "Turning," conversione, is an act integral to confession, as well as creation; the first books of the Confessions had recorded a turning toward the self, and then to God; this movement prevented a personal drift toward the formless. (Within the opening chapters of Book Thirteen, "turning" in several Latin variants, is repeated at least a dozen times.)

In salvation history, Augustine comments, the redemptive act of the Word, God's Son, challenged the formless "remnants of darkness" (2). This is a first example of the integration of thoughts on personal narrative, redemption history, and the story of creation. This mode of articulation, occurring within almost every chapter, gives the book its texture and structure. By so doing, Augustine suggests that the autobiographical act mirrors the process of both creation and salvation, for "in our souls we too are a spiritual creation" (2).

The more systematic analysis of Genesis begins with the third chapter of Book Thirteen: "At the beginning of creation you said, Let there be light; and the light began" (3). Augustine argues that before events taken up in Genesis there existed a material world without form: "I think these words are properly to be understood to refer to the spiritual creation, because it was already life of a certain kind" (3); thus Augustine begins a whole series of discriminations. The most important difference Augustine wishes to distinguish is that between God and creation. God is immutable, but all else is subject to change. The emergence of light was an act of the will of creation and God's grace. Anthropomorphized creation "became light, not simply by existing, but by fixing its gaze upon you and clinging to you, the Light which shone upon it". But creation "owes to your grace, and your grace alone, both the gift of its very existence and the gift of a life that is lived in happiness". It was by "undergoing a change, which bettered it, it was turned toward that which cannot change" (3). Augustine's interpolation sets forth a pattern -- incorporating will, grace, a turning, and change -- appropriate to conversion, redemption, and all

creation. Without difference and change there could not be autobiography as Augustine presents it. The will of the writer gives autobiography as prayer its plot. But the grace of God gives the drama its climax.

Men are granted existence, but a happy existence is problematic. For God, on the other hand, "to live is the same as to live in blessed happiness, since you are your own beatitude" (3). God is "absolute simplicity," perfect and incorruptible. Creation exists in the "reflection of his glory" (5).

Noting the previous verse of Genesis in which the Spirit is said to have "moved over the waters" (5), Augustine seizes the opportunity to meditate on Trinitarian doctrine, a topic seemingly far removed from an autobiographic project. Its relevance becomes clearer when two aspects of the discussion are isolated: the relationship between the human and the divine; and the limits of language. In Book Eleven, Augustine had interpreted the Genesis phrase, "In the beginning God created," to refer to both Father and Son: "I took the word 'God,' who made them, to mean the Father and the 'Beginning,' in which he made them, to mean the Son" (5). The Son had also been expressed as 'Wisdom,' as well as 'Word.' The Son was said to recall the spirit to unity. In Book Eleven Augustine had explicated 'Beginning' when he analyzed aspects of time. But the phrase seemed to have excluded the Spirit. Augustine's belief in the Trinity led him to seek confirmation. (The acknowledgment that belief directed attention is exemplary of Augustine's candor as well as autobiographic strategy.) He found "where it says that your Spirit moved over the waters" (5). So the Spirit was present. Augustine is

still puzzled by the lateness of the reference to the Holy Spirit in the Biblical narrative. He offers a rather complex explanation and seeks support from Saint Paul's letters, and concludes that the Spirit receives mention in the Bible later because "it was first necessary to tell us what it was over which he moved" (6).

Augustine is sensitive to the difficulties of the Trinity. A few chapters later he remarks, "Who can understand the omnipotent Trinity? We all speak of it, though we may not speak of it as it truly is, for rarely does a soul know what it is saying when it speaks of the Trinity" (11). Trinitarian explanations represent, in part, the limits of language, characterized by Augustine as a constrained and confusing medium. He questions the categories he uses, and even the audience he addresses. He asks, "To whom am I to speak of this. How shall I find words to explain how the weight of concupiscence drags us down into the sheer depths" (7). To emphasize his discomfort, he repeats himself: "To whom am I to speak? How can I explain what this means? The depths to which we sink, and from which we are raised are not places in space. We can speak of them in this way by analogy, but how different they are in reality!" (7)

Language can capture neither the turmoil of the human spirit, nor can it articulate "how the love of God raises us up through your Spirit, who moved over the waters" (7). The nature of the Trinity cannot be expressed. What appear as spatial relations -- "downward," "raises," "high above all" -- are merely weak metaphors or analogies for stating the relationship between God and man. The limits of language constrict

both speaker and listener. And without audience, man is left to his own silence.

When Augustine can advance his thinking no further, he creates a brief summary conclusion, then becomes prayerful. In chapter eight, with a single opening sentence, he anticipates the rest of Genesis and makes the Genesis reference to light relate to the redemption of Christ: "The angels fell; man's soul fell; and their fall shows us what a deep chasm of darkness would still have engulfed the whole spiritual creation if you had not said at the beginning 'Let there be Light'; and the Light began". In the corruption of Adam, Eve and the angels men received a glimpse of the dark world before spiritual creation, but redemption restored the original light. Paradoxically, the fall was revelatory; darkness, once made manifest, is purposeful: it clarifies "how noble a being is your rational creation," so that "our dusk shall be noonday". The paradox of illuminating darkness is developed further when Augustine says he will never "turn away" until he is "hidden in the sanctuary of your presence." The chapter encapsulates change in the context of overall movement. Angels and men "fell," but life must "hasten;" the ultimate delight will be to "rest in your Spirit," and be "free from restlessness" (8). Through movement and change the self is shaped. But the final reward for the faithful is beyond change.

For the first time in Book Thirteen, Augustine prays for a mystical union. The prayer recalls the kind of mystical experience he had felt so briefly in Milan at his conversion and in Ostia at prayer with his mother. He prays, "All I know is this, that unless you are

with me, and not only beside me but in my very self, for me there is nothing but evil, and whatever riches I have, unless they are my God, they are only poverty" (8). Thus he returns to the imagery of economy and the tone of dependency with which he began his final book.

Nature and the Self: Chapters Nine through Eleven.

In his prayer Augustine had said, "Give yourself to me, my God" (8). The gift God gives is the Holy Spirit. In the next three chapters Augustine meditates again upon the Holy Spirit and the Trinity and considers the relationship between the Trinity and his own understanding of nature and the self. Augustine remains troubled, it seems, by the isolated characteristics of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He continues speculation upon granting the Holy Spirit the quality of motion. Motion cannot, in his view, be a quality of divinity; therefore, motion, as well as the description of the Holy Spirit as a being in motion, must be understood symbolically. As the depths of personal corruption can not be "places in space" (7), the Holy Spirit can not be seen as possessed of "movement in space" (9). Augustine seeks analogies in the natural and the human. In the created world, a body spared of aimless drift has weight and "when things are displaced, they are always on the move until they come to rest where they are meant to be" (9). Motion carries meaning. It is in the gift of the Holy Spirit that "we find our rest" (9). Like a good fire, the Holy Spirit sets a body aflame and the flame carries upward toward God. The action is of both grace and will, for "It is in goodness of will that we find our peace", and "if our will is good, you will find room for us" (9).

Augustine's symbolic interpretation blurs distinctions. The Holy Spirit appears as both the instrument of sanctification, as well as the destination. Love is both the substance or "weight" of a person, and the Holy Spirit. The analogy of bodies in motion drawn from natural science distinguishes the human from the divine, but the question of the motion of the Holy Spirit is not fully resolved. Augustine acknowledges the difficulties. Indeed, the discussion of the Trinity is a demonstration of limits; in an attitude of humility Augustine quotes the gospel of John: "Let all who are able understand this truth. They must ask you for the gift of understanding and not appeal to me as if it were I who enlightened every soul born in the world" (10). Understanding will not come as a conclusion arrived at logically. It will come only to those of a particular disposition and transcend the rules of grammar: "Men wrangle and dispute about it, but it is a vision that is given to none unless they are at peace" (11).

Augustine's own mind is in motion. What he perceives in his autobiography and the lives of others he relates to God. What he understands of God he applies to men. "There are three things, all found in man himself, which I should like men to consider" (11), he says. They are existence, knowledge and will. In this analysis he asks his reader to "examine himself closely and take stock, and tell me what he finds" (11). Augustine discovers that these three qualities are held within "one inseparable life, one life, one mind, one essence" (11). Having defined man, he wonders whether the analysis is analogous to the Trinity, whether each member of the Trinity possesses all three qualities, or whether "both these suppositions are true and in some



wonderful way, in which the simple and the multiple are one" (11). In any case, the differences between men and God are obvious. Man's unity is not realized, and he is mutable. God remains "one alone immutably, in the vastness of its unity" (11); the Trinity, for the writer of the Confessions, is "a mystery that none can explain, and which of us would presume to assert that he can?" (11). His discussion of the images of light and motion in Genesis afforded Augustine the opportunity to examine qualities of men and mysteries of God.

Allegories of Faith and Freedom: Chapters Twelve through Twenty-One.

Chapter Twelve begins Augustine's extended allegorical reading of Genesis verses and exploration of the nature of the church. Having concluded an intellectual discussion of the Trinity, Augustine says, "Beyond this let my faith speak to me" (12), and reiterates, "But as yet we are light with faith, only not with a clear view" (13). Biblical references, especially to Paul and to the Psalms, become more frequent; for those with faith inspired words constitute validation.

Augustine seems to become freer in rhetorical strategy. Faith itself becomes a character and speaks: dic domino tuo, "Let it say to its Lord" (12). Faith prays, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord, my God, it is in your name that we are baptized" (12). Faith continues to be the voice of the chapter. Since the point of view does not shift substantially, Faith may be regarded as the overriding persona of the rest of the book. Also indicative of new freedom, Augustine does not even bother to quote the next verse of Genesis to be discussed, when God divided light from darkness, but simply begins Faith's meditation. Augustine

conflates Old Testament and New Testament in several ways. In conventional early Christian practice, Old Testament passages were given allegorical meaning relating them to the New Testament and to present time. Augustine seems particularly adept at giving this practice its fullest amplitude.

In chapter twelve Augustine says "heaven and earth" of Genesis stand for "members of his Church, spiritual and carnal." The "form" of the earth stands for "the form of doctrine." Being in sin is like "being in the land of Jordan." Memory serves to preserve an image of God "in Christ, in the mountain high as yourself." Since the New Testament can bear such close relationship to the Old Testament, it appears that Augustine feels no compunction to restrain himself from the most violent of enjambments. He writes, "You said: Let there be light. Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (12). This statement enjambes Genesis, "You said: let there be light," with a quote from Saint Matthew, "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," making the two statements appear as continuous citation. In the spirit of faith the practice is acceptable to Augustine.

This intimacy creates a continuity between Old and New Testament important to his autobiographical project, suggesting that Augustine compared the relationship of his past and present life with the relationship of the Old and New Testament. The first nine books of the Confessions were Augustine's Old Testament; the final four books are his New Testament. He had written of his personal conversion, "it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled (8.12). In this final book he uses the

same imagery of darkness and light to refer to Old and New Testament: "We turned to you and light was made. And so it is that once we were all darkness, but now, in the Lord, we are all daylight" (12).

To be even more specific, Augustine wants these final books of the Confessions to be compared to the highly autobiographical New Testament letters of Paul. It is no accident that the next chapter of Augustine's book quotes Paul nearly a dozen times. Paul, convert and preacher, receives the descriptive name from the gospel of John, "friend of the Bridegroom" (13). Many of the citations from Paul, Augustine knows, are relevant to his own personal narrative. While memory is important to the autobiographic effort, Paul "tells us that he does not claim to have mastery already, but forgetting what he has left behind and intent on what lies before him, he goes sighing and heavy-hearted" (13). In his adulthood, Augustine must separate himself from memories of family and earthly home. From Paul comes an image of home: "He longs for the shelter of that home which heaven will give him" (12). Earlier, Augustine had closed chapter nine with "we shall wish for nothing else but to remain in your house forever" (9).

Like Augustine in his prayer, Paul had called for an inward change in men: "He calls upon those who are sunk deeper than himself in this abyss and tells them, You must not fall in with the manners of this world; there must be an inward change, a remaking of your minds" (12). As his meditation on Paul continues, Augustine's relationship to Paul becomes even clearer. Paul, Augustine notes, distinguishes adult from child: "Do not be content to think childish thoughts; keep the innocence of children, with the thoughts of grown men" (12). Augustine

in his Confessions is attempting the same kind of distinction. Like Paul he can appropriate a feminine principle, associated with Monica in his past and now with the Church. Paul, he observes, "longs for Christ, for he is a member of the Church, the Bride of Christ" (13). Augustine is often self-effacing; here he remarks twice that somehow the words of Paul the preacher were not even Paul's own words: "But now it is not Paul's voice that speaks these words. It is your voice that calls to us" (12), and again, "It is not in his own voice but amid the roar of the floods you send that he calls upon those who are sunk deeper than himself" (13). The true end of the autobiographic conversion narrative appears to be the dissolution of the autobiographer. Beyond is a love transcending and transforming the self: "He longs for Christ. His love for Christ is great, for he is the Bridegroom's friend, and his great love is for Christ, not for himself" (13). Freed of self, and possessed with a kind of Keatsian negative capability, the final goal will be realized when we "see Christ as he is" (13).

God divided light from darkness, then called "the light day and the darkness night" (14). While the actions of God creating difference seem clear, they do not inspire certainty for Augustine, who sees the text as referring to men. Whether an individual has been chosen to share in eternal light or eternal darkness is part of everyone's existential dilemma. Augustine quotes a Psalm, "Daily I listen to the taunt: Where is your God now?" (13), and responds, "I, too, ask 'Where are you, my God?'" (14). In the pattern of his life, he occasionally feels in harmony with God, "My soul melts within me" (14), but the experience is all too brief and "it falls back again" (14). The persona

of Faith speaks to encourage hope, despite uncertainty and failure. The autobiographical project is an act of hope and never completed in life; Faith declares, "For ever I shall confess to him." Life on earth is a "pilgrimage" of hope, and only God "can tell us apart" (14).

The world of uncertainty is compounded by confusion. The firmament of the Genesis narrative, dividing the waters, represents the Bible for Augustine. His allegory transforms nature into text. The Bible mirrors God, was created by God, and tells us the Word of God. But through the Bible, and through all language, we do not see Christ, or anything, clearly. We see "your Word, not as he is, but dimly, through the clouds." The phrase "as he is" is repeated twice, holding out the redemptive vision beyond the opaque universe: "It will be ours to see him as he is." Angels fare far better. They are represented by the waters above the firmament; they can exist in a world of direct perception without need of text: "They read your will...without cease ...for you yourself are their book." Man's world is delimited, bound by the text God provides. Textuality is integral to temporality. The Bible "proclaims you in time, you who are the Maker of time." Yet within time, language does have power. Augustine says, "I know no other book so destructive of pride, so potent a weapon to crush your enemies." Augustine again refers to his autobiography, praising the scripture "that induced me so firmly to make my confession to you" (15).

Following a brief chapter acting as a coda to the previous five, Augustine interprets the next act of God, "You who ordained that the waters should collect in one place to make the dry land appear." The

sea represents "the wicked desires of men's souls" kept within bounds by God "so that their waves break upon themselves." But the earth represents "souls that thirst for you." The land bearing fruit represents the action of souls which "bear fruit in works of mercy proper to their kind." God is seen now in his capacity as ruler, one who "sets limits" and "commands" (17).

The "luminaries in the vault of the sky" represent "those who have the gift of your Spirit." The power of wisdom, given to some, shines like the sun. The power of knowledge, given to others, is like the moon. Other powers -- prophecy, miracle-working, healing, performing miracles, speaking in tongues -- are like stars. As Augustine expands upon these gifts, his tone is more confident. Though "still subject to signs and seasons," he quotes Paul's message to the Romans: "Our salvation is closer to us now than when we first learned to believe" (18).

Within Book Thirteen, Augustine discovers a sense of place within God's creation for a convert, intellectual and bishop. Extending his allegorical interpretation he recalls the New Testament story of the rich young man who asked Jesus what to do to gain eternal life. Augustine catalogues the commandments, good works and sacrifices required, rejected by the rich man because he was "barren earth" (19) whose "treasure-house" (19) was bound to the earth. In contrast, Augustine articulates the mission for the "chosen race" (19). The transformation of Augustine himself is suggested by his reference here to children. Augustine, the prodigal son, can now accept a role as parent; he knows that "man with his natural gifts alone is like a mere

infant in Christ's nursery. He must be fed on milk until he is strong enough to eat solid food" (18); some "are infants in God's nursery but are not without hope" (19).

Verse twenty of the first chapter of Genesis says, "Let the waters produce moving things that have life in them and winged things that fly above the earth." The moving creatures represent the sacraments, the sea beasts stand for miracles, and winged things are the words of God's messengers. Further, "if Adam had not fallen away from you the seed that flowed from him would not have been this bitter sea, this human race." The imagery of generativity is sustained; the sea "conceived," and when the sacraments and signs were created the waters "gave them birth in your word" (20). Though Augustine evokes nature, his allegory continues to separate his vision from the natural world.

In some sense Augustine's allegory makes the sea a more feminine principle, while the land is a more masculine one. The "dry land, which has faith" (21), is source of "the living soul" (21). Those in this land of the faithful still need God's messengers "living among them and rousing them to imitation" (21). The soul must also avoid the Biblical deadly sins. Not unexpectedly, the three sins Augustine chooses to single out evoke his earlier life: "the arrogance of pride, the pleasures of lust, and the poison of vain curiosity" (21); for the faithful, "the beast within" can be tamed. On the other hand, "this bitter sea, this human race" (20) needs much more help. What is especially exemplary of Augustine's effort in this final book to separate himself now from his past is his treatment of the helps he suggests, namely, miracles and signs. Monica had believed in both, yet

they are, says Augustine, what are needed by the ignorant "waters of the sea" (21). He questions these phenomena: "Only mysteries and portents, of which they stand in awe, can draw the attention of the faithless, for ignorance is the mother of amazement and when the sons of Adam forget you, when they hide away from your sight and become a deep sea, this is the door that opens the way to faith" (21). In a sentence, Augustine devalues the sensibilities of his mother and some of the experiences of his youth. Further, this reformed rhetorician argues, "The gift of talking with a strange tongue is a sign given to unbelievers, not to the faithful" (21). His long attachment to his desires does receive an apologia of sorts, because "only those who already have faith can profit by detaching themselves from earthly loves " (21).

Vision and Rebirth: Chapters Twenty-Two through Thirty-Eight.

For Augustine, "Let us make men wearing our own image and likeness" does not refer to physical birth, but to spiritual rebirth. The process begins with "living good lives so that the living soul may come to life in us." Against this precondition, Augustine again quotes Paul: "There must be an inward change a remaking of your minds" (22). Man is not to be imitative of other men in this unfolding. But "when he is able to do so you teach him to see the Trinity in Unity or the Unity of Trinity" (22) in some way. The outline is that of Augustine's own process, represented by his exploration of the Trinity.

In chapter twenty-two, Paul is cast in the role of parent. He "begot children in the Gospel" (22), figuratively speaking, but "He did not wish the children who he had begotten to be for ever infants whom



he would have to feed on milk and cherish like a nursing mother" (22). Augustine, of course, was once an infant who was then able to separate from parents and now stands independent of other men to serve God. He can "scrutinize everything -- everything, that is, which is right to judge -- without being subject, ourselves, to any other man's scrutiny" (23). By implication Augustine's new role appears to be that of parent himself, both father of the Church and "nursing mother" to those in need. He can be both because "in your spiritual grace they are as one" (23).

The powers of the "man who has spiritual gifts" are extensive, as Genesis suggests to Augustine when the text says, "he has been given rule" over "the fishes in the sea, and all that flies in the air, and the cattle, and the whole earth and all the creeping things that move on earth." Those with "the gifts of your spirit" have the powers of intelligence and spiritual judgment, can make judgments about "the faithful," and can minister through sacraments, signs, words and praise. Their power is circumscribed, however; they cannot "pass judgment upon spiritual truths," they must "obey the law," and cannot judge or determine "those who are spiritual and those who are worldly-minded." No man can know who will "remain for ever in the bitter exile where you are not loved." Augustine is part of a church whose "spiritual judgment" is given "both to those who have spiritual charge of others and to those who are in their spiritual care." Throughout, Augustine expresses his evolving perception of order and structure. God created man "in his pattern" and "we are your design, pledged to good actions" (23). In an autobiographic text, as in the world, pattern defines

man's possibilities and restraints.

Given Augustine's commitment to celibacy, one would imagine that the next verse of Genesis presented particular difficulty: "increase and multiply and fill the earth" (24). Augustine takes the opportunity to justify the entire interpretive process.

He grounds his discussion of interpretation in common human experience: "Take the single concept of love of God and our neighbor. How many different symbols are used to give it outward expression! How many different languages have words for it." Truth understood in one way, therefore, "can be materially expressed by many different means." Similarly, a single text "may be understood in several different ways without falsification or error." In this "case of signs," he says, "there are many different ways in which the mind can understand an idea that is outwardly expressed in one way." He catalogues the reading of "words in a figurative sense" which he himself has explicated within the book: for example, "the zeal of pious souls, described as 'the dry land,'" and "works of mercy which help our neighbor in this life, described as grasses that seeded and trees that bore fruit." An interpreter is like a parent, Augustine implies, because "the offspring of men increase and multiply in this way" (24).

Concerning the specific passage on reproduction, Augustine says the text supports a distinction between men and fish and other species; only with reference to men and fish does the phrase "increase and multiply" occur. Therefore, since it is obvious other species propagate, something very specific to men and fish must have been intended. (Other explanations, such as the poetic value of the phrase

as closure, or that the phrase applied to all, are not considered.) Augustine concludes that "reproduction and multiplication of marine creatures" refers to "physical signs and manifestations" given to support understanding, "because the flesh which envelops us is like a deep sea" (24). The reproduction of men refers to "the thoughts our minds conceive, because reason is fertile and productive. I am convinced that this is what you meant, O Lord, when you commanded man and the creatures of the sea to increase and multiply" (24). The world becomes a universe of signs awaiting interpretation that makes clear the glory and order of God, a worthy vocation for the young bishop. He demonstrates his ability to fulfill the requirement within his own autobiographical project.

The next three chapters of Book Thirteen examine the passage in which "we read that you have given us for our food all the herbs that seed on earth, and all the trees, that carry in them the seeds of their own life" (25). The food was given to all but fish and sea beasts. Augustine must rely on God for the truth of his interpretation, for "if you inspire me to give the meaning which you have willed me to see in these words, what I say will be the truth" (25). A truthful interpretation attests to the inspiration of God, the will of man, and the relationship between God and the interpreter. Augustine wishes to qualify the gifts in question, separating gesture from meaning, object from interpretation: "the fruit is not the service or the gift they bring, but the spirit in which they give it" (26). When the gift reflects the right intention of the giver, the result is joy within the receiver. In a gift appropriately given, "the fruit consists in doing

this just because the one for whom it is done is a prophet or a just man or a disciple" (26).

The motifs in Book Thirteen I have been tracing -- including abandonment, generation, inwardness, and the quest for pattern -- recur when Augustine recalls that for Paul "the image of God who created him was his pattern" (26). Augustine cites Paul's plea: "At my first trial, he says, no one stood by me. I was deserted by everybody. May it be forgiven them" (25). When the Bible says that a raven brought food to Elias, "it was not the inner, spiritual man that this food nourished, but only the outer man, his body" (26). Those without faith simply do not "understand the true purpose" (27) for which gifts are given. Ordinary men desert good men; good men separate themselves from all who do not support their relationship to God.

Finally, reading the summary statement of the first chapter of Genesis, "And you saw all that you had made, O God, and found it very good" (28), Augustine defines the wholeness and intimacy of creation. When Genesis named the elements within creation, the text called each one "good", not "very good." The adverb is important. It suggests a gestalt phenomenon: "you saw all at once and as one whole" (28). Like material objects, "a thing which consists of several parts, each one beautiful in itself, is far more beautiful than the individual parts which, properly combined and arranged, compose the whole" (28). As a principle of Augustine's own composition we can imagine him considering this phenomenon and desiring to give his own prayer of the Confessions a similar sense of wholeness.

Augustine had created a persona out of Faith. Now, even more boldly, he creates words for God to speak. Augustine knows God's vision "is not subject to time" (29). God speaks to Augustine, dicis mihi, "you answered me" (29). The Bible is a work in time, but that does not deny its validity. God declares, "'What my scripture says, I say. But the Scripture speaks in time, whereas time does not affect my Word, which stands for ever, equal with me in eternity'" (29). At the end of his lengthy autobiographical project, the intrusion of the voice of God surely is reminiscent of God's appearance at the conclusion of Job, challenging any further presumptive questioning of God's action in and out of time. Autobiography traces man through time, but God is outside autobiography.

Augustine's self-progress is climaxed in the realization that ultimately the self is a fiction. Knowledge, speech and vision are not ours at all. They are merely the Spirit playing through us: "Even when we know things by God's Spirit, none but his Spirit truly knows them. For it is right that those who speak by the spirit of God should be told: It is not you who speak, it is equally right to say to those who know by the Spirit of God 'It is not you who know,' and it is no less right to say to those who see by the Spirit of God 'It is not you who see.' If, therefore, by the Spirit of God, men see that a thing is good, it is God, not they, who sees that it is good" (31). The proper attitude of men is one of humility and love: "Your works proclaim your glory, and because of this we love you" (33).

As the first chapter of Genesis concludes, God "resteth on the seventh day," and in the conclusion of his autobiographic project this

rest symbolizes Augustine's ultimate liberation from time itself: "we read this as a presage that when our work in this life is done, we too shall rest in you in the Sabbath of eternal life" (36).

### III.

Augustine's allegorical reading of Genesis often seems strained, a complicated pattern of correspondences forced to the breaking point. Yet it would be difficult to imagine a more comprehensive reading of self and world, embodiment of a total mental landscape, in so brief a text. One effect of Book Thirteen is to transform the person Augustine wrote about in the earlier books of the Confessions into an allegorical figure placed among other allegorical figures in a mosaic of intertextuality.

The inclusion of the Christian church within the allegory deserves special emphasis. Augustine discovered parallels in Genesis enabling him to detail the form of the Church, its sacraments, miracles, preaching, devotion to the Bible, and its understanding of the commandments, virtues, sins, and even almsgiving. At the close of Book Nine Augustine was a convert, but without real mission or identity within the faith. In Book Thirteen, Augustine uncovers the order of the Church and his place within it. Thus the autobiographical project enabled him to locate himself within a larger cultural context.

While the Confessions describes a break with the past, the work also comes to recognize continuities. The intellectual curiosity and enormous vitality of mind in the young Augustine is sustained in the young bishop. Less helpful, many animating passions also remain with

him: "in my memory, of which I have said much, the images of things imprinted upon it by former habits still linger on. When I am awake they obtrude themselves upon me, though with little strength. But when I dream, they not only give me pleasure but are very much like acquiescence in the act" (10.30). In many respects, imagery suggests Augustine's posture toward the past is not so much abandonment as it is a more mature separation and integration. He is taking on more adult roles, like that of a parent caring for the "infants in God's nursery" (13.19).

Through his identification with Paul, Augustine inherits a rhetorical strategy and escapes solipsism and isolation. He can see himself within a process and tradition in which others have shared experiences like his. At the same time he can articulate the vast space between the human and the divine. He is neither immutable, incorruptible, nor fully unified.

Genesis told of birth, and for the Christian allegorist told of rebirth. Augustine could discern in the pattern his own, personal Old and New Testaments. He could personalize images of economy, light, motion and turning, as well as themes of dependency, family, word and order. Through the exploitation of contrast and difference, the repetition of motifs, and the development of personae within an overall allegorical framework, Augustine was able to exploit his medium.

Yet Augustine's understanding of prayer and the theology of indeterminacy made him wary of categorical statements about the self and the possibilities of language. He prayed and asked God to be the determiner of both. He would agree with contemporary thinkers who

argue that "struggling to express the meaning of a phenomenon is at the same time struggling to disclose or 'know' it" (Brockelman 49). His prayer and his life were coterminous: "we must confess forever" (23). The Confessions, especially Book Thirteen, is modern in its themes and rhetorical strategy, including allegory, and in its inwardness and indeterminacy. It anticipates and is thus the genesis of modern autobiographical acts, with their own equivalent of tensions between the will of man and the grace of God. But there is an important discrimination to be made. For Augustine an issue like "the ontological question of the priority of self or language" (Eakin 190) is unimportant. Ultimately, both self and language are fictions. Transcending the fiction of autobiography is the fact of God.



## CHAPTER II

### THE CONFESSIONS OF JOHN ASHBERY:

#### THREE POEMS

So, somewhat stimulated at the idea of not turning back but going forward, making virtue of necessity, no doubt, we proceeded to actually examine what there was left for us.

#### Three Poems

##### I.

In the sixteen centuries since Saint Augustine wrote the Confessions, the ordered universe in which he placed himself has been questioned, ignored, dismissed and, on occasion, resurrected. Nevertheless, his autobiography persists in being an extraordinary influence upon autobiographers, directly or indirectly. In this chapter I will examine what at first might seem an unlikely representative of Augustinian influence, John Ashbery's Three Poems. Ashbery's position as a member of the contemporary American avant-garde is well established. His writing bears the marks of twentieth century notions of indeterminacy, fragmentation and discontinuity. Yet to a remarkable degree his autobiographical work shares a number of important attitudes and strategies with the Confessions. At the same time Ashbery brings nuances to the effort that modify and expand the Augustinian paradigm. In particular, Ashbery's work emphasizes the belief that the

past can only be grasped, if at all, in terms of the present; his achievement is to make this belief an experienced reality. While remaining within the tradition of the Confessions, Ashbery's Three Poems relentlessly foregrounds the twists and turns of present consciousness. Both Ashbery and Augustine wrote their autobiographies at about the same time in life, their late thirties and early forties when, As Ashbery says, "enough of what made it up had taken on that look of worn familiarity" (117)<sup>1</sup>. Informed by the autobiographical process, both men complete their works poised for future action.

Born in 1927, Ashbery was brought up on a fruit farm in Sodus, near Rochester, New York. As a teen-ager his intelligence was acknowledged by national radio audiences; he appeared on a network radio program as a "Quiz-Kid." Ashbery received his B.A. from Harvard and M.A. from Columbia. At Harvard he met the two poets later associated with him in New York, Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara, and he wrote his senior honor's essay on W.H. Auden. His first book of poetry, Turandot and Other Poems, appeared in 1953; his second, Some Trees, was selected by Auden for publication in the Yale Younger Poets series. His third book, The Tennis Court Oath, was published in 1962 (Bloom 251; Perkins 616).

From 1955 until 1965 Ashbery lived in France, first as a Fulbright scholar, then as a translator, art critic and poet. When he returned to the United States he worked for the magazine Art News and became its executive editor. When the magazine was sold in 1972, Ashbery joined the faculty of Brooklyn College and continued his writing and art criticism. Rivers and Mountains was published in 1967, The Double Dream

of Spring in 1970 and Three Poems in 1972. In contrast to his more experimental earlier poetry, reflecting surrealist influences, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, published in 1975, is generally regarded as more accessible. It was honored with both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Subsequent volumes have varied in degree of their novelty.

The list of influences upon his work, acknowledged by Ashbery in interviews or suggested by critics, is an exceptionally long one and includes a number of Continental writers, as well as contemporary artists and composers. Among modern American and English literary influences, Ashbery has cited Auden, Wallace Stevens, Laura Riding and Ann Sexton. His poetry has been championed by prominent American critics, including Harold Bloom, Helen Vendler, Marjorie Perloff and David Perkins. Bloom, who sees Ashbery as successor poet in the tradition of Emerson, Whitman and Stevens, calls "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" the "best longer poem of my generation" (Bloom 133). In the most judicious brief discussion of Ashbery's contribution, David Perkins describes Ashbery, along with A.R. Ammons, as "our most important contemporary poets in the meditative mode," and concludes, "when Ashbery writes well, no living poet in English can rival him in fresh, apt, surprising phrases. His attitudes and emotions are indescribably gallant as he mingles humor with pathos, resignation and elegy with hope, and maintains his relaxed, equable, fluent, wonderfully imaginative speech despite premises that might have led to despair" (Perkins 614, 632). Ashbery's autobiography, therefore, seems worthy of analysis, not only because of his importance, but also because of

the great resources he brings to the task.

Some of Ashbery's poems, especially those written in his twenties and early thirties, have been faulted for incoherence and lack of form. For example, the poem "Europe" begins:

To employ her  
 construction ball  
 Morning fed on the  
 light blue wood  
 of the mouth  
                                 cannot understand  
 feels deeply)

A wave of nausea--  
 numerals

a few berries

the unseen claw  
 Babe asked today  
 The background of poles roped over  
 into star jolted them

filthy or into backward drenched flung heaviness  
 lemons asleep pattern crying

The month of elephant--  
 embroidery over where  
 ill pages sees. (The Tennis Court Oath 64)

This is Ashbery under more extreme surrealist influence. Harold Bloom called "Europe" a "long spiel," chastised its ellipses and considered the poem "a fearful disaster" (Bloom 51). But much of his later work is more easily understood. In an interview conducted while he was completing Three Poems Ashbery offered his own critique of "Europe;" he described it as "one that's no longer very close to me. At the time I wrote it I was baffled as to what to do in poetry; I wasn't satisfied with the way my work was going and I felt it was time to just clear my head by writing whatever came into it and that's very

much the case with that poem; and I think it helped me along but I don't value it as much as ones I've written since (Packard 116). In the same interview Ashbery made two other points relevant to Three Poems. He was becoming more interested in the potential of prose. In prose "the arbitrary divisions of poetry into lines would get abolished. One wouldn't have to have these interfering and scanning the processes of one's thought as one was writing; the poetic form would be dissolved, in solution, and therefore create a much more -- I hate to say environmental because it's a bad word -- but more of a surrounding thing like the way one's consciousness is surrounded by one's thoughts" (Packard 126). While Three Poems contains several passages marked as lyrics, it is composed mainly of prose paragraphs; Ashbery described the work as "prose poems." He also qualified his interest in the unconscious. He said, "I think in fact that the conscious element in my poetry is more important than the unconscious element, if only because our conscious thoughts are what occupy us most of the day....I would say that my poetry is really consciously trying to explore consciousness more than unconsciousness, although with elements of the unconscious to give it perspective" (Packard 118).

Despite this movement toward greater accessibility, Three Poems itself can be disconcerting. Forms are hard to define, themes difficult to isolate, and passages resist precis. Consider the following single sentence describing an historical period:

Thus, in a half-baked kind of way, this cosmic welter of attractions was coming to stand for the real thing, which has to be colorless and featureless if it is to be the true reflection of the primeval energy from which it issued forth, once a salient force capable of assuming the shape of any of

the great impulses struggling to accomplish the universal task, but now bogged down in a single aspect of these to the detriment of the others, which begin to dwindle, jejune, etiolated, as though not really essential, as though someone had devised them for the mere pleasure of complicating the already complicated texture of the byways and torments through which we have to stray, plagued by thorns, chased by wild beasts, as though it were not commonly known from the beginning that not one of the tendrils of the tree of humanity could be bruised without endangering the whole vast waving mass; that the gorgeous, motley organism would tumble or die out unless each particle of its well-being were conserved as preciously as the idea of the whole. (58)

The sentence is egregiously long, an extravagant parody of effusive rhetoric that simply goes too far. It is charged with specious definitions; nothing dictates, for example, that reality must be without color or feature to satisfy some precondition. Abstractions, like "universal task" and "the idea of the whole" are left dangling. The tone swings wildly among diverse vocabularies, from the relaxed "half-baked" and the fussy "jejune, etiolated" to the Old Testament "plagued by thorns, chased by wild beasts." It's a challenge to identify antecedents and therefore understand distinctions like "these to the detriment of the others." The sentence advances by posing unclarified oppositions and is burdened by woefully heightened language. Ashbery's critique is undercut, the satire seems founded on no meaningful moral stance.

The following passage describing a shift in attitude during a particular period illustrates several other difficulties of Three Poems in which paragraphs are as brief as a line and as long as fourteen pages:

The aftermath of sunny days was a period so much like the first, newly joined-together one that one might have mistaken it for part of an alternating pattern of planned growth if

the signal hadn't been given right away in the form of a kind of fanfare of lucky accidents that drained the succeeding weeks of suspense. There could be no doubt now that this continuing was merely another stone added to the haphazard masonry of assorted beliefs that was far from threatening to shut out the sun. And afterward as the calm illumination persisted one could even go back to believing that this was the miracle, just as it had been in the past. Oh, nothing so very miraculous, just a feeling of being installed, as in a ship while it still rides at anchor on the bay, of having been led to the starting point and then proceeding a short distance, enough to erase any serious doubts about the nature of the rest of the trajectory. And yet it wasn't the same, since I was a very different person by now and even recognized it. For starting out, even just a very few steps, completely changes the nature of the journey as it was when it lay intact and folded. That first step ignites the endless cycle of rising and falling; it is born; and one is aware of the still-invisible future as of a sudden pause in the conversation that one could have predicted but didn't: sure enough, it's twenty minutes to the hour or twenty minutes past, you say, and they all smile, thinking obscurely of how this pause might have been scheduled and where it has brought us. (34-5)

Ashbery had said he was "attempting to reproduce in poetry the actions of a mind at work or at rest" (Packard 118). This passage illustrates some of the problems in the endeavor. One metaphor leads furiously to another, from signal to stone to fanfare, on to a journey and then back to a homely observation. Thought becomes an almost endless series of assertions followed by qualification; what at first is a miracle is then "nothing so very miraculous." What could have "no doubt" about it is suddenly changed, "yet it wasn't the same." Metaphors are mixed; a "signal" is referred to as having "drained the succeeding weeks." Finally, there is an aspect most often noted by critics, the difficulty in identifying pronouns. In this passage we wonder whether "one," "I," and "you" are the same person. What is "it" and who are "they"? On this question Ashbery is interesting, if not edifying. He has said, "I'm notorious for my confusing use of pronouns which, again, is not

something I consciously aim at. There are questions as to whether one character is actually the character he's supposed to be. I feel not too sure of who I am and that I might be somebody else, in a sense, at this very moment that I am saying 'I'" (Jackson 72). In reading Three Poems we can assert that the "you" in the work is a specific other person; you may also refer to a part of Ashbery's self on occasion or to consciousness, or to language; later in the work, "you" seems most easily understood as Ashbery and the reader who shares certain beliefs or attitudes with him. What seems remarkable, given the challenges to comprehension, is that the style is so compelling; we become persuaded that the writing does mirror consciousness, and we adjust to the abrupt shifts. As a work of art what is most fascinating is the juxtaposition of lyrical and discursive modes; this inclusiveness is a significant element in Ashbery's vision.

## II.

It would be impossible to explicate all the convolutions of thought and argument in Three Poems. My aim is to trace the major themes which define the autobiographical project. In doing so I will make certain assumptions about pronoun referents and the nature of events implied in the text. I am well aware that many readings may be made of Three Poems. As Ashbery once somewhat puckishly observed, "A book is going to be interpreted or misinterpreted in as many ways as there are readers, so why not give them the maximum number of options to misinterpret you, for there are only misinterpretations. This seems part of the nature of any kind of interpretation" (Jackson 72). I am particularly



interested in the ways Three Poems is structured and the way it relates to Augustine's Confessions. Like Book Ten through Book Thirteen of the Confessions the major movements of Three Poems place characterization, chronology and event in the background of meditation upon present time. Like Augustine, Ashbery addresses a number of distinct audiences. And like Augustine, Ashbery attempts to use the autobiographical project to situate himself within some larger order. Augustine integrates lyrical prayer within analytical discourse; similarly Ashbery shifts, often rather abruptly, from lyric to argument. The Confessions followed a journey motif, and Ashbery draws upon this motif as well, and he does so employing religious imagery; he refers to the "shining perspectives we can feel and hold, clenching the journey to us like the bread and meat left by the wayside for the fatigued traveler by an anonymous Good Samaritan -- ourselves, perhaps..." (81). Typically, the religious imagery is qualified, but I believe Ashbery is quite serious in its use. No other diction available to him could capture the tone and feeling he wished to convey.

More generally, Ashbery is like Augustine in his meditation upon inner conflict and desire for self definition. Most significantly, while David Perkins has said that Ashbery "shuns epiphanies, catastrophies, or other peaks of intensity" (Perkins 628). This description is not the case in Three Poems. The work replicates Augustine's autobiography in a movement from confession to epiphany, and closing contemplation of the present. Finally, we may note that the Confessions has long been regarded "among the foundations of Dante's Vita Nuova" (Misch 692), and several critics have suggested

echoes of Vita Nuova in Three Poems (Fredman 116). A figure of love and inspiration, like Beatrice in the Vita Nuova and Monica in the Confessions, appears in the opening movement of Three Poems. And all three works concern the acceptance of grace. In a study of Augustine and Dante, Jerome Mazzaro notes that "For both Dante and Augustine, final acceptance of grace is, as it was for Paul, entirely unexpected" (Mazzaro 33). In Ashbery's contemporary understanding, "This is what we are all hoping for, yet we know that very few among us will ever achieve it; those who do will succeed less through their own efforts than through the obscure working of grace as chance, so that although we would be very glad to have the experience of this sudden opening up, this inundation which shall last an eternity, we do not bother our heads too much about it, so distant and far away it seems..." (72).

The pattern of Augustinian spiritual autobiography, I believe, is one structuring element in Three Poems. A second is the rhythm of the seasons. Ashbery began "The New Spirit," the first part of Three Poems, in November 1969, but most of it was written between January and April of 1970. Ashbery wrote the second part, "The System," between January and the end of March, 1971. The last, much briefer section, "The Recital," was completed the following month (Bloom, 1985, p. 73). This pattern of composition is reflected as Ashbery marks the changes in weather and season, consonant or dissonant with his mental attitude. Written in the same season a year apart, "The New spirit" and "The System" parallel each other and replay major themes.

Early in "The New Spirit" Ashbery sees the weather of the day as

part of his life's complex mosaic: "Today is cooler or warmer than yesterday, and it all works itself out into a map, projects, placed over the other real like a sheet of tracing paper, and these two simultaneously become what is going on" (18). Later, subsequent to a lengthy meditation, the weather of blank, late winter mirrors his attitude: "Behind this weather of indifference is of course a concern for the real qualities that inform our continuing to see each other about a lot of things" (38). Finally he dates a change having taken place through the months of writing, for "all this happened in April as the sun was entering the house of Aries, the Ram, the agent of Mars and fire and the first of the twelve signs of the Zodiac, bringing a spirit of reconciliation and amnesty amid the wars and horror that choked the earth" (43).

The next movement, "The System," begins by defining the quiet of winter as part of the meditative stance, since "at this time of life whatever there is is doing a lot of listening, as though to the feeling of the wind before it starts, as it slides down the anticipation of itself..." (53). Then Ashbery clearly dates his position at the close of the month: "On this Sunday which is also the last day of January, let us pause for a moment to take note of where we are" (65). One effect of these references to time is to give the work, often ethereal and abstract, a grounding in the world of time. Early spring becomes an emblem for a changing perspective. Identifying with his reader, Ashbery writes, "We all know those periods of balmy weather in early spring, sometimes even before spring has officially begun: days of even a few hours when the air seems suffused with an unearthly

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tenderness..." (73). A winter blizzard indicates a setback, but progress continues to be marked, since "for many weeks you have been exploring what seemed to be a profitable way of doing. You discovered that there was a fork in the road, so first you followed what seemed to be the less promising, or at any rate the more obvious of the two branches until you felt you had a good idea of where it led" (90). And then "your miserable premature spring has finally turned into the real thing..." (93). Writing within a particular time frame permits a process to be recorded, including reevaluation of assertions made within the work. Thus, "'Whatever was, is, and must be' -- these words occur again to you now, though in a different register, transposed from a major into a minor key" (93). At the close of "The System" Ashbery concludes, "Today your wanderings have come full circle (100).

"The Recital," written in a briefer period and partly a recapitulation of the first two movements, observes shorter units of time; the emphasis is not on the month or season, but upon the day. Confronting present life "is like the beginning of a beautiful day, with all the birds singing in the trees, reading their joy and excitement into its record as it progresses, and yet the progress of any day, good or bad, brings with it all kinds of difficulties that should have been foreseen but never are..." (107). In this compression of time, "the days fly by; they do not cease. By night rain pelted the dark planet; in the morning all was wreathed in false smiles and admiration, but the daylight had gone out of the day and it knew it. All the pine trees seemed to be dying of a mysterious blight" (113). In the movement's conclusion, "something like a different light began

to dawn, to make itself felt: just as the first glimmers of day are often mistaken for a 'false dawn,' and one waits a long time to see whether they will go away before gradually becoming convinced of their authority..." (117). Time itself, then, as it is for Augustine in book eleven of the Confessions, is an important concern for the autobiographer. For Ashbery, though the recording of time often appears casual or oblique, its rhythm is a significant organizing element in Three Poems.

The passage of the seasons is, of course, a longstanding motif of romanticism. Another is a concern for childhood. Childhood is not a principal focus for Ashbery in Three Poems, but references to childhood are worth noting. (Augustine himself cites few actual events of his own childhood and devotes far more effort to lengthy interpretation of the few events he records.)

Part of the opening to "The New Spirit" sounds like a recollection of a backyard baseball game, the young Ashbery striking out: "The people who are there -- few, against this side of the air. They made a sign, were making a sign. Turning on yourself as a leaf, you miss the third and last chance. They don't suffer the way people do. True. But it is your last chance, this time, the last chance to escape the ball / of contradictions..." (4). Ashbery's attitude toward childhood often emphasizes negative aspects. An early lyric in "The New Spirit" suggests that childhood is without real fulfillment: "They told this tale long ago / The legend of the children, in which they get closer / To the darkness, but go on living. / The motion of the story is moving though not / getting nearer" (12). The sense of a child's anticipation

of events can be restimulated in adult life; to suggest the relationship Ashbery offers the image of a circus coming to town, and uses the language of a nineteenth century storybook as "everything is being lifted or locked into place all over the vast plain, without fuss or worry it slowly nears completion thanks to exceptional teamwork on the part of the crew of roustabouts and saltimbanques" (43). Childhood in upper New York state, its outward appearance of order and completeness, is expressed in another lyric:

Yet it was almost enough to be growing up in that city.  
 The taste of it, rationed through a medicine dropper,  
 Filled up the day.  
 In the evening the newspaper was delivered, ready to be  
 read.  
 Darkness glossed over the imbalances  
 And the last irregularities dissolved in sleep.  
 That metropolis was like the kitchen of the world  
 And we were like servants, setting out on the task of life  
 As on a tour of duty.

In "The System" Ashbery examines the classic issue of being born with a mind carrying no impressions; he believes "we begin our lives as mere babes with the imprint of nothing in our heads, except lingering traces of a previous existence which grow fainter as we progress until we have forgotten them entirely" (79). The impression is of a mind, even in childhood, under attack by conflicting impressions and ideas; we can imagine Ashbery as the teen-aged "Quiz kid" under pressure to absorb a barrage of information.

In "The Recital", like many modern psychologists, Ashbery suggests that childhood is actually troublesome and that "childishness" is a phrase of limitation for very good reason; childhood is a place like the enclosure of the womb, a "long suffocating tunnel"(108). In adulthood

sometimes "we are like children sulking because they cannot have the moon; and very soon the unreasonableness of these demands is forgotten and overwhelmed in a wave of melancholy of which it is the sole cause. Finally we know only that we are unhappy but we cannot tell why. We forget that it is our own childishness that is to blame" (108). His impression of childhood is far from innocent.

### III.

Ashbery's references to childhood give a first glimpse of his approach to autobiography; it is specifically impressionistic, ruminative, and wary of fixed generalization. He cautions against the kind of all-encompassing vision we associate with the final books of the Confessions. He refers to the "diminished strength from paying too close attention to the curve of events, / Trying to imagine in advance what we were never intended to know / Even as children, when knowledge was free" (40). But Augustine, too, understood limits. After he had gone as far as he could he prayed to God and said, "We must ask it of you, seek it in you; we must knock at your door" (347). Nevertheless, later in Three Poems Ashbery remarks that it is the "ebbing and flowing motion rather than the relevance of any of its isolated component moments that infuses a life with its special character" (112). Therefore I will turn to the three parts of Three Poems and attempt to isolate the major "ebbing and flowing motion" within each movement.

### "The New Spirit"

Ashbery said that "The New Spirit" concerned "a spiritual awakening to earthly things that also involves drawing the author's dilemma over selectivity in his work into a metaphor of man's ability to act either with or upon his destiny" (Three Poems, cover note). "Destiny" and "earthly things" translate, in part, to the history of a loving relationship, interwoven throughout the narrative. This thread is most worth following because it is the one most fully developed and gives the work some overall definition.

"The New Spirit" begins with a dozen fragmentary statements, ideas to be expanded later, then offers a description of Ashbery's early personal reticence; he sees some of the same characteristics within his present self:

You were a living  
 But a secret person  
 As much into life  
 Yet not wanting to "presume"  
 Was the insurance  
 That life churned thick in the after-feeling  
 And so, even more, a sign of what happens today,  
 The glad mess, the idea of striking out.(10)

The expression "striking out" is ambiguous; several meanings seem appropriate. It refers to loss, like the child Ashbery striking out in baseball; it evokes the idea of eliminating words from a text, or a person from a relationship; it suggests rejection and harm, striking out against a lover; and there is the sense of activity, striking out upon a course which Ashbery is reluctant to undertake. His apprehensions are intellectual as well as visceral. It becomes clearer that he could not define the quality of his love, would not concede that love could be an



abstract reality and still maintain its immediacy and sensuality. He wanted a love that preserved fluidity and resisted any temptation toward becoming a fixed, fully determined entity. Describing the relationship he says, "we never knew, never knew what joined us together. Perhaps only a congealing of closeness, deserving of no special notice....Is this something to be guessed at, though? Can it be identified with some area of someone's mind? The answer is yes, if it is experienced, and it has only to be expected to be lived, suspended in the air all around us" (10).

Besides resisting closure, Ashbery sought to restrain himself from idolization, converting the lover into a god, a form of distortion as well as possession. Moreover, he was conscious of seeing the lover falsely through self-projection; he was, after all, confined by his language and subjectivity. Trying to step back from the relationship he imagines himself and his love held within some larger, unknowable category: "in getting to know you I renounce any right to ulterior commemoration even in the unconscious dreams of those mythical and probably nonexistent beings of whose creation I shall never be aware....I hold you. But life holds us, and is unknowable" (11).

He then records estrangement, hinted in the "striking out." The mutual understanding, sensuality and shared experience give way to formalism, distraction and withdrawal of sympathy. In one of his many uses of film for metaphor, Ashbery says the lover's eyes, which previously "lived into their material"(10), are now diverted, part of someone else's movie reel. Compressing the sensual and the withdrawn, he writes, "Everything drops in before getting sorted out. This is

our going now. I as I seem to you, you as you are to me, an endless game in which the abraded memories are replaced progressively by the new empty-headed forms of greeting. Even as I say this I seem to hear you and see you wishing me well, your eyes taking in some rapid lateral development / reading without comprehension / and always taken up on the reel of what is happening in the wings" (13). Changed circumstance erodes memory, as does present anxiety.

The relationship in decline becomes a source of fragmentation and self-misunderstanding, but Ashbery believed that if he simply chose to live in isolation he could not arrive at genuine self-definition; to do so demanded interaction: "In you I fall apart, and outwardly am a single fragment, a puzzle to itself. But we must learn to live in others, no matter how abortive or unfriendly their cold, piecemeal renderings of us: they create us" (13). The opening is reminiscent of Augustine's famous declaration, "O lord, I am working hard in this field and the field of my labors is my own self. I have become a problem to myself" (223).

Ashbery then considers a number of attitudes toward reconciliation as he also tries to define the conflict between himself and his lover; with the lovers separated from each other, however, the differences cannot be resolved, even if known. The painful realization of estrangement occurs within the perfunctory movements of ordinary life. "Each of us," he says, "has more of the vital elements than the other needs, or less: to sort them out would be almost impossible inasmuch as we are kept, each from the other: only the thawing nerve reveals it

is time when one has broken out of some stupor or afternoon dream, and by then one is picking up for the evening, far from the famous task, close to the meaningless but real snippets that are today's doing" (13). Ashbery is able to deflate the scene and also sustain a certain pathos through the shift in language to "picking up for the evening" and "snippets." The commonplace becomes magnified as "snippets" joins the earlier notion of being a "single fragment" (13). The use of the phrase "thawing nerve" is one of many images woven through Three Poems relating a response of internal physical systems to a mental state, an effort to link inside and outside in a substantive way; for example, he later speaks of a sensation "backing up along the primal vein that led to his center" (53).

By nature ruminative, Ashbery simply won't let go. The relationship is like a river; in a variation upon Heraclitis, Ashbery says he knows time flows onward, but he will remain attached to the relationship, the river itself. Like so many autobiographers, he cannot resist becoming a moralist, even as he comes to understand differences between the beloved, who is sensitive to particular moments, and himself, a perceiver of possible patterns. His efforts "are really directed toward keeping myself attached, however dimly, to it as it rolls from view, like a river which is never really there because of moving on someplace. And so the denser moments of awareness are yours, not the firm outline I believe to be mine and which is probably a hoax as well: it contains nothing, after all, only a few notions of how life should be lived that are unusable because too general" (14). He limits his vision with phrases like "probably a

hoax" and "few notions," but presents the potentiality nevertheless. As a rhetorical strategy, this can be effective; used with the frequency employed by Ashbery, it places almost all assertions in doubt, even when not qualified by him.

Then directing his moralism toward himself, Ashbery wonders whether he has not been exploiting the relationship in his thought and writing, and whether he has used the beloved merely to clarify his own self-perceptions. He asks, "Is it correct for me to use you to demonstrate all this?" (15). Here, "correct" carries the meaning of appropriate as well as accurate. He continues, "Perhaps what I am saying is that it is I the subject recoiling from you at ever-increasing speed just so as to be able to say I exist in that safe vacuum I had managed to define from my friends' disinterested turning away" (15). "Ever-increasing speed" suggests the associations made by Augustine in the Confessions between motion and time; later, Ashbery will make further reference to kinetic theory.

When Ashbery distances himself from personal conflict or from a scene, he often calls himself the "spectator." Even in this pose he seeks a relationship grounded in his own particular perception of reality. He also knows that establishing such a relationship is in effect granting reality to another; it is reciprocal, useful in the same way for the perceiver and the perceived: "I am the spectator, you what is apprehended, and as such we both have our own satisfying reality, even each to the other, though in the end it falls apart, falls to the ground and sinks in" (15). Ashbery and his lover shared a receptivity to the world, but neither was so overwhelmed as to abandon

personal vision. While qualifying their understanding, they also were sensitive to a kind of dialogue with the world: "For I care nothing about apparitions, neither do you, scrutinizing the air only to ask, 'Is it giving?' but not so dependent on the answer as not to have our hopes and dreams, our very personal idea of how to live and go on living. It does not matter, then, / but there always comes a time when the spectator needs reassurance, to be touched on the arm so / he can be sure he is not dreaming" (16). In failure, the giving air becomes the setting of confinement and stultification. Ashbery notes, "these attitudes which were merely sketched on the air of the room have hardened into the official likeness of what we were doing there, the life has gone out of our acts and into our attitudes" (16). Then, always willing to imagine an object from various points of view, out of a questing and, we might add, a defensive, and protective attitude, Ashbery adds, "Is there something intrinsically satisfying about not having the object on one's wishes, about having miscalculated?" (16)

Ashbery could imagine pattern where others could see only particulars. But in his confusion and with the numbness of estrangement, the pattern itself fades, to be replaced by another. The shift is expressed in a delicate simile: "I can only say that the wind of the change as it has happened has numbed me, the point where the false way and the true way are confounded, where there is no way or rather everything is a way, none more suitable nor more accurate than the last, oblivion rapidly absorbing their outline like snow filling footprints" (17). As a result, "the outlines of a somewhat less perfunctory maturity have been laid down" (18). Part of the coming

change is willful, a refusal to look backward. His own autobiographical consciousness persuades him that a return would be impossible. In his own adaptation of stoicism, "there must be nothing resembling nostalgia for a past which in any case never existed. It is like standing up because you've been sitting all day and are tired of it" (19).

It is at this point that many such autobiographical narratives turn toward religious ideas. So it is precisely here that Ashbery, while taking over the language of religious process, separates the value of the process from the object of the religious quest. It is an important aspect of his character and thought. The word wanted in the following statement refers both to what seems desirable and to what is lacking: "what is wanted is some secret feeling of an administrator beyond the bounds of satisfying intimacy, a sort of intendant to whom the important tasks may be entrusted so as to leave you free for the very necessary task of idleness that is a condition, the condition, of your being, being together....but since there is nothing to confide..." (19). The process he identifies and then qualifies is the familiar one of withdrawal, penance, renewal, sanctification and celebration. He senses that he is "cut off from the forces of renewal," and so is "obliged to spend a certain penitential time of drawing in..." (21). Therefore, "In this scheme of things what is merely pleasant has to die to be born again as pleasure....And so a new you takes shape. You can stand it at first. If the beloved were an angel, then this you would be the nameless spirit that watches from afar, halfway between the heaven's celestial light and dull Acheron. But it is not necessary to sanctify the gods in order to live in the suddenly vast surroundings

...no more disappointing orgasms, intentional symbols, gestures a time's stand away, no more of the group's reluctance to fully celebrate anything new" (21). In a reference to the reading of an epistle in a church service, as well as echoing the first great Christian autobiographer, Saint Paul, Ashbery concludes, "So ends the first lesson..." (20).

He continues to reenact the actions and turns of mind as the relationship proceeds to dissolve. He begs his love to stay, recalls the harshness of a loveless world, then turns in resignation. It is a touching plea: "I urge you one last time to reconsider. You can feel the wind in the room, the curtains are moving in the draft and a door slowly closes. Think of what it must be outside....But I know that my reasoning falls on the ears like 'special pleasing.'....we are to travel abreast, twin riders dazzled and disintegrating under the kaleidoscopic performance of the night sky..." (23). Through the narrative he has used the equation of language and relationship in phrases like "the only alphabet one knows" (11) and "reading without comprehension" (13). He now makes the association explicit. It has "come through to us as romantic episodes or chapters" (25). They have included "the one in which I fell away gradually, without even realizing it until we were already far apart, separated by new habits and preoccupations that had arisen even as we sat close to each other, talking about the weather and so on" (25).

Almost drained of feeling, the relationship continues almost exclusively at the level of language. The lovers were spared a

"melodramatic end," says Ashbery: "you merely restored the dimension of the exploratory dialogue, conducted in the general interest, and we resumed our roles of progressive thinkers and builders of the art of love" (25). Art becomes a pejorative term as does language itself: "the time of action was past and the time for making speeches had come" (26). There is some effort to salvage something, "some kind of rational beauty within the limits of possibility," in which "the way is narrow but it is not hard, it seems to propel or push one along... (26). Just as there could be no religious celebration of renewal "there is no celebration of sensuality -- there never could be, now -- only its counterpart, a temporary dignity of the mind, and waiting..." (28). These statements most clearly join the love theme with what Ashbery identified as a principal concern, "man's ability to act either with or upon his destiny" (Ashbery, 1972, cover note). Through the narrative, two words have been recurrent, feeling and falling. The whole experience has been one of feeling and falling -- "after feeling" (10), "to be touched" (16), "numbed" (16), "secret feeling" (19), "feel the wind" (23), "In you I fall apart" (13), "fall to the ground" (16), "falls on the ear" (23), "fell away gradually" (25). The movement has been of completing a fall and processing a feeling.

Within Ashbery's evolving perspective, the beloved has become part of his autobiography, though he still upon occasion desires a return. The parallel between relationship and language is sustained: "What was it we said to each other? We must have spoken to each other many times, but of these only the trace of the words remain, and the expressions of your face and your body / as you spoke or listened. Perhaps they are



the most important after all, like a writer's style" (32). His sensibilities have become memorialized, generalized and intellectualized.

In this new way of being, however, Ashbery declares that he senses the energy of a "new spirit" (28). The result is that "I alone know that you were here before, even though nothing here any longer bears your imprint," and he feels "safe, out in the open, and ready to start again, / only this time toward no special goal, its sense having become generalized in the environment..." (29). Through the experience, Ashbery has come to appreciate "the voice of the soul" (32). And though he brackets any theology, he can imagine an experience, envisioning a day when "the look of the beloved flashes on you with its intensity of fixed lightning. That day you will realize that just having a soul was not enough: you must yield it up, vanish into the oblivion prepared for you by your years of waiting that all your practice of stoicism was not enough to seal off" (32). But that will remain a possibility. Appropriate here is an observation made by Ashbery in a 1981 interview: "The imminence of a revelation not yet produced is very important and hard to define in poetry and probably is the source of some of the difficulty with my own poems. But I don't think it would serve any useful purpose to spare myself or the reader the difficulty of that imminence, of always being on the edge of things" (Jackson 70).

Deprived of his beloved and moving through a period when "action pursues its peaceful advance on the lethargic, malarial badlands of the day" (36), Ashbery marks the most important event of Three Poems. It is similar to epiphanies recorded in countless spiritual autobiographies,

a vision dissolving time, conflict and all oppositions. The exact nature of the event for Ashbery is indescribable, recounted only in metaphors, the language of "as though" and "could be compared." Even the precise time within Ashbery's chronology is uncertain. "It was only much later that the qualities of the incandescent period became apparent, and by then it had been dead for many years," he said (38):

At this point an event of such glamor and such radiance occurred that you forgot the name all over again. It could be compared to arriving in an unknown city at night, intoxicated by the strange lighting and the ambiguities of the streets. The person sitting next to you turned to you, her voice broke and a kind of golden exuberance flooded over you just as you were lifting your arm to the luggage rack....You found yourself not wanting to care. Everything was guaranteed, it always had been, there would be no future, no end, no development except this steady wavering like a breeze that gently lifted the tired curtains day had let fall. And all the possibilities of civilization, such as travel, study, gastronomy, sexual fulfillment -- these no longer lay around on the cankered earth like reproaches, hideous in their reminder of what never could be, but were possibilities that had always existed, had been created just for both of us to bring to the summit of the dark way we had been traveling without ever expecting to find it ending. Indeed, without them nothing could have happened. Which is why the intervening space now came to advance toward us separately, a wave of music which we were, unable to grasp it as it unfolded but living it. That space was transfigured as though by hundreds and hundreds of tiny points of light like flares seen from a distance, gradually merging into one wall of even radiance like the sum of all possible positions, plotted by coordinates, yet open to the movements and suggestions of this new life of action without development, a fixed flame. (37)

In book nine of the Confessions two similarly devoted people, Augustine and Monica his mother, share a like vision:

As the flame of love burned stronger in us and raised us higher towards the eternal God, our thoughts ranged over the whole compass of material things in their various degrees, up to the heavens themselves, from which the sun and the moon

and the stars shine down upon the earth. Higher still we climbed, thinking and speaking all the while in wonder at all that you have made. At length we came to our own souls and passed beyond them to that place of everlasting plenty, where you feed Israel for ever with the food of truth. There life is that Wisdom by which all these things that we know are made, all things that ever have been and all that are yet to be. But that Wisdom is not made; it is as it has always been and as it will be for ever -- or rather, I should not say that it has been or will be, for it simply is, because eternity is not in the past or in the future. And while we spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it. (197)

In both instances a journey motif controls the action; Ashbery feels himself "arriving in an unknown city," while Augustine and Monica "came to our own souls." Ashbery senses "strange lighting" while "stars shine down upon the earth" in the Confessions. There is conversation. In the climactic moments Ashbery senses "possibilities that had always existed," while Augustine sees "everlasting plenty." Ashbery envisions a "fixed flame" like Augustine's "flame of love." Most important, for Ashbery there is "no future, no end, no development," and Augustine is aware of what "has always been and as it will be for ever." Thus, in Three Poems a vision is transformative. The movement downward, of falling, is reversed; a breeze "lifted the curtains day had let fall" (37); darkness, "the dark way," is transformed by the "points of light"; life is felt as an eternal present.

In the Confessions, shortly following this experience Monica becomes ill and "on the ninth day of her illness, when she was fifty-six and I was thirty-three, her pious and devoted soul was set free from the body" (200). With almost equal abruptness, Ashbery's vision fades "leaving you pleasantly dazed and sleepy -- that feeling that

comes after all great periods in history, whose isolation is such that they seem to promise more than even possibilities can give" (38). Like Augustine, Ashbery returns to the scene years later in his autobiography, written at approximately the same age. A few pages later he writes, "When one is in one's late thirties, ordinary things -- like a pebble or a glass of water -- take on an expressive sheen. One wants to know more about them, and one is in turn lived by them. Young people might not envy this kind of situation, perhaps rightly, yet there is now interleaving the pages of suffering and indifference to suffering a prismatic space that cannot be seen...One is aware of it as an open field of narrative possibilities" (41). Autobiography, movement in life, language, and the art of narrative coalesce.

What follows is an extremely relaxed appraisal of the rhythm of Ashberry's life following the rupture of his relationship. The lovers continue to see each other, and for both there is acceptance. They are possessed of "a concern for the real qualities that inform our continuing to see each other about a lot of things...they offer a pretext for looking into ourselves, examining the achievements of that easy time when an invisible agency caused the meals to appear smoking hot on the table..." (38). Now, each "has to go his own separate way, comforted only by the thought that it could never have been otherwise..." (39). The relationship is post-romantic and post-religious, for "holy thoughts no longer exist and one can speak one's mind freely" (41). Ashbery is now able to couple sensitivity with curiosity. Rather than seek some ultimate category, he finds

satisfaction in the process of narration itself in which closure, though experienced only within a confined illusion, carries a special satisfaction. The "open field of narrative possibilities" creates valuable stories "not in the edifying sense of the tales of the past that we are still (however) chained to, but as stories that tell only of themselves, so that one realized one's self has dwindled and now at last vanished in the diamond light of pure speculation. Collar up, you are lighter than air" (41).

The circumscribed life has its merits. But its limitations are also apparent. Ashbery asks himself in a direct way, "What happens after that?" (45) His own universalism and expansive vision finally make him wonder and "he felt sickened at the wholeness" (46).

In a turning point for Augustine in the Confessions, he heard the voice of a child urging him to take up a book and read it. Augustine chose the epistles of Paul and read at random, "spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites" (178). In Ashbery's late twentieth century version of confession, a similar incident occurs. He finds himself in meditation, urging himself to focus upon what is essential: "'You born today,' he could not resist murmuring although there was no one within earshot, 'a life of incredulity and magnanimity opens around you...the planets have congregated to haruspicate at your birth; they can no longer disentangle themselves but are fixed over you, showering down material and immaterial advantages on whoever has the patience to remain immobile for awhile, mindless of the efforts of his coevals to better themselves at the expense of humankind in general'" (49).

The voice comes not from a child but from within, yet like the child's voice it is irresistible. While the life he is to lead is one of "incredulity," not belief in the traditional sense, it will be one of generosity and inspiration if he remains patient. Like Augustine, he can feel anointed in a special way. This is what was meant when Ashbery said "The New Spirit" concerned "a spiritual awakening to earthly things." He is clearly urged to consider himself and his gifts. In an interview, Ashbery once said, "It seems to me that poetry has to be self-referential in order to refer to something else.... Self-referentiality is not a sign of narcissism, but actually is a further stage of objectivity" (Jackson 71).

"The New Spirit" concludes in a quiet optimism. This is, after all, an autobiography written in midlife. The full realization of self still seems possible: "One day the thought occurred to him that it was still early, if you were to judge by how few events had actually taken place and how many others seem to be waiting around half-prepared to come into existence if the demand arose... (50). Typically, the statement is self-effacing, a bit ironic, but open to the future. Perhaps just as critical, the pressures he acknowledged from his environment can find a response which is both assertion and rejection. He invokes the image from the Old Testament of the Tower of Babel, symbol of linguistic confusion and attempted dominance. This vision of chaos, narrowness and division could be challenged. The Tower of Babel might also symbolize the restriction and confinement of all language, the limit and boundary we have come to appreciate in the argument of

contemporary critical thought. Ashbery's response is that the Tower of Babel can be avoided "simply by turning one's back on it. As soon as it was not looked at it ceased to exist....It was obvious that a new journey would have to be undertaken, perhaps not the last but certainly an unavoidable one, into an area of an easier life, 'where the lemons bloom,' so that the last trials could be administered in an ambience of relaxed understanding" (51). This vision of repose is similar to the conclusion of the Confessions. Augustine's apocalyptic idea is that "in the eternal Sabbath you will rest in us....You are for ever at rest, because you are your own repose" (Pine-Coffin 346-7).

Ashbery identifies the main focus of "The New Spirit;" it is being itself. He feels nothing can "go wrong, including the major question that revolves around you, your being here" (51). Elsewhere Ashbery related being to poetry and effectively summarized the rhythm of this movement: "In my case, the purpose would be to draw attention to the continuing nature of poetry which has to come into being, pass from being, in order to return to a further state of being" (Jackson 72). The final paragraphs of "The New Spirit" are unhurried, thoughtful and positive. The vision "is again affirmed in the stars: just their presence, mild and unquestioning, is proof that you have got to begin in the way of choosing..." (51). The remaining movements of Three Poems advance the discussion of choice.

### "The System"

Autobiography often becomes a discussion of particular decisions. Individual choice occurs within an array of structures -- psychic,

temporal, linguistic and political. These structures constitute "The System," title and subject of the second movement in Three Poems. In the Confessions Augustine wrote to place himself within a sacred order by interpreting Genesis in a particular way. Ashbery, in his autobiographical work, embarks on a similar endeavor; his 'test' for interpretation includes himself and the social and political order he sees about him.

The time frame Ashbery scrutinizes is the late nineteen-sixties. He records the nature of that time and his own participation and reaction to it. In this aspect Three Poems is particularly reminiscent of the classic early twentieth century American autobiography, The Education of Henry Adams.

In the late nineteen-sixties in Europe and America, advocates of radical change, especially among young people on university campuses, were vocal and demonstrative. One interpreter of the period has noted its intellectual character, relating it to a heritage of which Ashbery was well aware, twentieth century surrealism:

The spark of the rebellion flared in May 1968 among a small group of students at the University of Nanterre, near Paris, and shortly afterward the whole Latin Quarter and other sections of the French capital were ablaze with demonstrations. The Sorbonne was occupied by the rioting students. Young workers in their turn went on strike, rebelling against their Communist leaders, who were bent on keeping the working class from uniting with student organizations....Within a few days, strikes spread over the whole country. University work and economic life came practically to a standstill....May '68 was essentially an intellectual revolution, using means that were not always violent but also poetic, that is to say, creative and imaginative. The workers' strike at that time were, so to speak, grafted to a movement originating in the motto that



appeared on the cover of the first issue of La Revolution surrealiste in 1925: "We must attain a new declaration of the rights of man." (Jean 440-41)

Typical inscriptions on the walls of the Sorbonne and elsewhere included, "Any view of things that is not strange is false....Never work, never take a holiday....Dream is truth," and "You work better when sleeping, form dream committees" (Jean 442). Ashbery, who had lived a decade in France and was attuned to the intellectual climate of America, was no doubt sensitive to these currents. His reaction is complex.

Looking back from the vantage point of 1971, Ashbery first attempts to define the attitudes and responses of people at the time. His diction is political and combative: "It was different in those days, though. Men felt things differently and their reactions were different. It was all life, this truth, you forgot about it and it was there. No need to collect your thoughts at every moment before putting forth a hesitant feeler into the rank and file of their sensations: the truth was obstinately itself, so much so that it always seemed to harden and shrink, to grow hard and dark and vanish into itself anxiously and stubbornly, but this was just the other side of the coin of its intense conviction..." (55). Truth had a presence and intensity about it, but Ashbery also observes the period's anxiety and rigidity, expressed in the qualifiers -- "obstinately," "anxiously," "stubbornly." Within this historical movement, Ashbery chooses to meditate not upon the facts and public drama acted out in the streets of Paris or on American campuses, but upon the "inside":

"This was the outside reality. Inside there was like a bare room, or an alphabet, an alphabet of clemency" (55). There were significant ramifications within the minds of the participants. He calls this the "other tradition" and views it as "a sequence of fantastic reflections as they succeed each other at a pace and according to an inner necessity of their own" (56).

Throughout the discussion Ashbery appears as a participant-observer or a "fellow traveller" in this new communal anarchy: "even in the darkest night this sense of advancement came to whisper at one's side like a fellow traveller pointing the way" (62). He is responsive to an energy within the movement but offended by its thoughtlessness and lack of perspective.

The new political vision held out a concept of universal affiliation: "From the outset it was apparent that someone had played a colossal trick on something. The switches had been tripped as it were; the entire world or one's limited but accurate idea of it was bathed in glowing love, a sort that need never have come into being but was now indispensable as air is to living creatures" (56). More to the point, the universalist attitude had a very specific agenda, "bent on self-discovery in the guise of an attractive partner who is the heaven-sent one, the convex one with whom he has had the urge to mate all these seasons without realizing it" (56). Ashbery criticizes the movement because of hypocrisy and distraction: "For universal love is as special an aspect as carnal love or any of the other kinds: all forms of mental and spiritual activity must be practiced and encouraged

equally if the whole affair is to prosper" (58). Given Ashbery's satiric thrust, it becomes a question whether this critique is actually a form of personal confession, Ashbery's suspicion that the social environment affected his own relationships, like those described in "The New Spirit." In this sense "The System" continues the concern with the ability to "act either with or upon" one's destiny.

The critique of this apocalyptic anarchism is harsh. For Augustine evil was a lack of good. Ashbery offers a satiric justification of evil in the contemporary political movement: "indeed a certain amount of evil is necessary to set it in the proper relief; how could we know the good without some experience of its opposite? As so these souls took over and dictated to the obscurer masses that follow in the wake of such discoveries..." (59). He is contemptuous of the egoism of this new politics. Ashbery calls participants "spectators," the word he had applied to himself in "The New Spirit," supporting the idea that he sees some of himself in the movement. Here "certain young spectators felt that all had already come to an end, that the progress toward infinity had crystallized in them, that they were the other they had been awaiting and that any look outward over the mild shoals of possibilities that lay strewn about as far as the eye could see was as gazing into a mirror reflecting the innermost depths of the soul" (61). The diction he draws upon for his description is religious and political -- "rank and file," "inner necessity," "many fronts," "anarchy," "dictated," "obscure masses," "fellow traveller," "holiness," "soul." Through this conflation he captures two strains

of influence. But the harshness of his juxtapositions suggests that part of the difficulty in the period was a fundamental incompatibility between the existential and the eschatological: "Who has seen the wind? Yet it was precisely this that these enterprising but deluded young people were asking themselves. They were correct in assuming that the whole question of behavior in life has to be rethought each second....But this condition of eternal vigilance had been accepted with the understanding that somehow it would also mirror the peace that all awaited so impatiently..." (61).

Ashbery's presentation of the movement can be read as his vision of a metaphor within political life embracing the tensions he had articulated in "The New Spirit." These included tension between presence and pattern, a single moment and a larger history, simplicity and complexity, freedom and restraint. He says, "a permanent now had taken over and was free to recast the old forms, riddles that had been expected to last until the Day of Judgment, as it saw fit, in whatever shape seemed expedient for living the next few crucial moments into the future without controls" (62). He criticizes a solipsism in which "each man was both an idol and the humblest of idolators, in other words the antipodes of his own universe, his own redemption or his own damnation, with the rest of the world as a painted backdrop to his own monodrama of becoming of which he was the only spectator" (64).

Ashbery's is not a parody of religious language. It is the condemnation of a heresy. One suspects that he was attracted by the politics of the late sixties, that he saw some of his slightly younger self in the movement's ideals. His own response is undefined, except in the

following lines which suggest an almost ascetic withdrawal: "We ate little, for it seemed that in this way we could produce the inner emptiness from which alone understanding can spring up, the tree of contradictions, joyous and living, investing that hollow void with its complicated material self" (63). From this position he seems to identify with "the few who want order in their lives and a sense of growing and progression toward a fixed end...reconciling their own ends with those of the cosmos" (65).

As in "The New Spirit," at approximately the same point in the development of argument, Ashbery alludes to "putting our faith in some superior power which will carry us beyond into a region of light and timelessness" (65). But that resolution is once again bracketed. He proceeds to work his way through a lengthy number of paired oppositional concepts of living. In part his examination is a satire upon just such casuistry. His 'analysis' includes specious reasoning, simplistic categorization, mixed and misleading metaphors. He posits two kinds of growth, "careerist" and the "life-as-ritual concept." He examines two kinds of happiness, "frontal" and "latent." At the end of this enterprise the distinctions inevitably blur. Basically he seeks to contrast those who live historically, accounting for the past and future in their lives, and those who do not. He describes those who question everything and those who question little or nothing. He chastises blind acceptance of faith, yet mocks his own doubt as he recalls the very real experience recounted in "The New Spirit." In a marvelous evocation of that event, a resolution of intellectual and emotional selves, of time and the timeless, he writes, "we can be

brought to doubt that any of this, which we know in our heart of hearts to be a real thing, an event of highest spiritual magnitude, ever happened. Here it is that our sensuality can save us in extremis: the atmosphere of the day that event took place, the way the trees and building looked, what we said to the person who was both the bearer and fellow recipient of that message and what the person replied, words that were not words but sounds out of time....these facts have entered our consciousness once and for all" (76). Memory is validated and the trace remains. Autobiography -- its tools of language, thought, feeling and memory -- are given support.

As in "The New Spirit," a relaxation of vision follows: "Gazing out at the distraught but inanimate world you feel that you have lapsed back into the normal way things are, that what you were feeling just now was a novelty and hence destined to disappear quickly, its sole purpose if any being to light up the gloom around you sufficiently for you to become aware of its awesome extent, more than the eye and mind can take in" (83). The beloved of "The New Spirit" is recalled, perhaps in a dream, in an image of reconciliation through the dynamics of vision: "You become aware of an invisible web that connects those eyes to you and both of you to the atmosphere of this room which is leading up to you after the vagaries of the space outside....everything in the room has fallen into its familiar place, only this time organized according to the invisible guidelines that radiate out from both of you like the laws that govern a kingdom" (95).

There follow two other evocations of "The New Spirit." As in the

Augustinian tolle lege episode, a voice is heard whose message is one of free grace: "one day the unmistakable dry but deep accent is heard: ....'Make no mistake: it will probably seem to you as though nothing has changed; nothing will show in the outward details of your life and each night you will creep tired and enraged into bed. Know however that I am listening. From now on the invisible bounty of my concern will be there to keep you company, and as you mature it will unlock more of the same space for you so that eventually all your territory will have become rightfully yours again'" (99). Suggesting the Tower of Babel scene, Ashbery defines the "almost haphazard way of life that is to be mine permanently and the monolithic sameness of the world that exists to be shut out" (103).

In closing, Ashbery returns to ideas of memory traces and to death, echoing the biblical, 'remember, man, thou art dust and to dust thou shall return': "It is the time we have now, and all our wasted time sinks into the sea and is swallowed up without a trace. The past is dust and ashes, and this incommensurably wide way leads to the pragmatic and kinetic future" (106). A few pages earlier he had defined this pragmatism and kinesis: "But if it was indeed as real as all that, then it was real, and therefore it is real. Just as matter cannot be added or subtracted from the universe, or energy destroyed, so with something real, that is, real in the sense you understood it and understand it" (85). Ashbery calls this a "new arrangement" (85). Emerging from this autobiographical process, therefore, through the haze of romanticism and surrealist stylistics, is a very twentieth century American resolution, pragmatic and scientific.

"The Recital"

"The Recital," the brief final movement of Three Poems, recapitulates several main themes of the work and offers a number of important observations on the autobiographical process. Ashbery said "The Recital" balances earlier themes "with the sometimes harsh facts of his autobiography" (Ashbery, cover note). As in the earlier movements, an extravagant voice competes with a voice that is depressed and apathetic. Every day, every life offers countless possibilities. Yet the reality of the day's rhythm, or history's movement, is that a glorious vision becomes weighed down by less pleasant events: "It is like the beginning of a beautiful day, with all the birds singing in the trees, reading their joy and excitement into its record as it progresses, and yet the progress of any day, good or bad, brings with it all kinds of difficulties that should have been foreseen but never are, so that it finally seems as though they are what stifles it, in the majesty of a sunset or merely in gradual dullness that gets dimmer and dimmer until it finally sinks into flat, sour darkness" (107). Events limit vision. And the necessity of interpretation, of choice, limits expression. This point recalls Ashbery's initial observation of the focus in "The New Spirit," the "dilemma over selectivity." Here he summarizes, "It becomes plain that we cannot interpret everything, we must be selective, and so the tale we are telling begins little by little to leave reality behind. It is no longer so much our description of the way things happen to us as our private song, sung in the wilderness, nor can we leave off singing, for that would be to retreat



to the death of childhood, to the mere acceptance and dull living of all that is thrust upon us, a living death in a word" (109). The final phrases suggest the other part of Ashbery's description, the concern with acting or reacting to destiny. The process of fashioning an autobiography is like the making of a life; difficulties inevitably rob us of insight, and any one action excludes others not taken. There is also the problem of inertia; like a too well-rehearsed recital, continuous performance can create apathy; Ashbery couples this idea with his own particular vestigial romanticism, harkening back to a privileged moment: "our apathy can always renew itself, drawing energy from the circumstances that fill our lives, but emotional happiness blooms just once, like an annual, leaving not even roots or foliage behind when its flower withers and dies" (110).

Self-writing, if skillful and insightful, can record the broad contours of a life. As if recapitulating Three Poems, Ashbery writes, "Youth and happiness, the glory of first love -- all are viewed naturally now, with all their blemishes and imperfections. Even the wonderful poetry of growing a little older and realizing the important role fantasy played in the Sturm und Drang of our earlier maturity, is placed in its proper perspective so as not to exaggerate the importance in the general pattern of living of the disabused intellect, whose nature it is to travel from illusion to reality and on to some seemingly superior vision.... (112). As he had before, Ashbery raises the possibility of "superior vision" only to back away. In both movements he draws upon the diction of religious and sensual experience.

He questions autobiography's objectivity, as well as its ability to fulfill often stated goals of representation and justification: "Perhaps no art, however gifted and well-intentioned, can supply what we were demanding of it: not only the figured representation of our days but the justification of them, the reckoning and its application, so close to reality being lived that it vanishes suddenly in a thunderclap, with a loud cry" (113). In place of insight, Ashbery finds blindness within himself. He says, "our real and imaginary selves coincided" but this "fusion" was "merely the reverse side of an event of cosmic beauty for all except us, who were blind to it because it took place inside us." For such a blind man "its beauty cannot be said to have universal validity but must remain fundamentally in doubt" (114).

Ashbery again addresses himself as spectator. He returns to the setting of a familiar room, turning, as he had done several times before, to the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. This time he captures the particular rhythm that can be abstracted from "The New Spirit" and "The System." In the room, "I continued to think along well rehearsed lines like something out of the past. Was there really nothing new under the sun? Or was this novelty -- the ability to take up these tattered enigmas again and play with them until something like a solution emerged from them, only to grow dim at once and fade like an ignis fatuus, a specter mocking the very reality it had so convincingly assumed?" (116) Once more there is a tender epiphany, this time particularly colored by the autobiographical process: "something like a different light began to dawn, to make itself felt....The point was

the synthesis of very simple elements in a new and strong, as opposed to old and weak relation to one another. Why hadn't this been possible in the earlier days of experimentation....Probably because not enough of what made it had taken on the air of worn familiarity" (117).

Like a true virtuoso, he will see new tonalities, new relationships in the familiar repertoire of the past, as well as the present moment. A list of those "simple elements" had grown through his personal history and through the autobiography: inside/outside, dark/light, one/many, self/other, imagination/reality, presence/ absence, speech/silence, assertion/withdrawal, past/present/future, system/chaos, nature/art, individual/community, and probably many more. Any synthesis, he maintains, can only be perceived through time. In a final vision, he resolves still more opposing images: "A vast wetness of sea and air combined, a single, smooth, anonymous matrix without surface or depth was the product of these new changes. It no longer mattered very much whether prayers were answered with concrete events or the oracle gave a convincing reply, for there was no longer anyone to care in the old sense of caring...(118). Like Augustine, he acknowledges in the end that the process has been one of prayer, and like Augustine he would not presume to dictate or demand a particular response. The meaning of care is no longer worry or concern, but comforting embrace. In the end he says of this recital, "the audience streamed out; the applause still echoed in the empty hall. But the idea of the spectacle as something to be acted out and absorbed still hung in the air long after the last spectator had gone home to sleep" (118). The spectator is Ashbery. The spectacle is life. In sleep would come, undoubtedly, dream and renewal.

## IV.

Three Poems no doubt reflects a number of traditions. I have focused almost exclusively upon the autobiographical. In closing this reading, however, it seems remiss not to acknowledge in some way avant-garde influences at work in Three Poems. I will briefly cite three: Charles Olson, Guillaume Apollinaire and Elliott Carter.

In 1960 Donald M. Allen edited an influential anthology published by Grove Press, The New American Poetry: 1945-1960, later republished under the title The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised. The poets included, Allen said, shared "one common characteristic: a total rejection of all the qualities typical of academic verse" (xi). Ashbery was represented by three poems, grouped with "the New York Poets" (xiii). The anthology also included some statements on poetics, the most noteworthy being Charles Olson's "Projective Verse." In it he outlined three principles of "projective or OPEN verse" (386). One was that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT." Another was "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION." The third most resembles Ashbery's closing to "The System" in Three Poems. Olson refers to "the kinetics of the thing. A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge." Olson called this "COMPOSITION BY FIELD" (387). It seems likely, therefore, that Ashbery's reference to the "kinetic future" conflates a vision of time with a vision of language and craft.

The title of "The New Spirit" may have come from Apollinaire. In a collection of important documents under the title The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature, Richard Kostelanetz includes as an opening essay Apollinaire's "The New Spirit and the Poets." Apollinaire places "the new spirit" in the context, partly of classical works. He says, "The new spirit which is making itself heard strives above all to inherit from the classics a sound good sense, a sure critical spirit, perspectives on the universe and the soul of man, and the sense of duty which lays bare our feelings and limits or rather contains their manifestations" (7). He refers to a dissolution of distinctions between prose and poetry: "Up to now the literary field has been kept within narrow limits. One wrote in prose or one wrote in verse." Like Ashbery he refers to Ecclesiastes and writes, "Even if it is true that there is nothing new under the sun, the new spirit does not refrain from discovering new profundities in all this that is not new under the sun....there are a thousand natural combinations which have not yet been composed." He concludes, "Poets will be charged finally with giving by means of lyric teleologies and arch-lyric alchemies a constantly purer meaning to the idea of divinity" (11, 13). It is the spirit of this natural theology to which Ashbery seems responsive.

Ashbery has often acknowledged the important role listening to music has upon his work. Early in his career he was particularly impressed with the work of the modern composer, John Cage. "The thing about music," Ashbery said, "is that it's always going on and reaching

a conclusion and it helps me to be surrounded by this moving climate that it produces -- moving I mean in the sense of going on" (Packard 114). While writing "The New Spirit" he said he often listened to Elliott Carter's Concerto for Orchestra (Packard 114). The opening few pages of "The New Spirit" are particularly difficult to follow. Carter's Concerto for Orchestra gives a clue to its structure. In the concerto the orchestra is divided into four groups -- soprano, alto, tenor, bass -- with "a constant interweaving of colors within each group..." (cover note, Music of Elliott Carter, 1982). Further "all four movements are heard throughout the piece in changing juxtapositions. The concerto is thus a rapidly paced, cinematic series of fragmented episodes, each one a variation of the material of one of the four groups." Concerning the beginning of the concerto, "Harmonically, the music begins with a twelve-tone chord in which each group plays a three-note segment. These three-note harmonies are expanded to encompass all 38 possible five note chords" (cover notes). The opening of "The New Spirit," then, can be read as a brief introductory statement of the many ideas to be developed throughout the work. It is only in retrospect that the meanings can be seen in their full significance. In brief, the opening dozen or so statements introduce the array of oppositions amplified in Three Poems: inclusion and exclusion, sleeping and waking, action and inaction, the present and the past, form and the formless, expansion and narrowing, and so on. These statements are interweaved with religious diction. "And nothing be undone" (4), for example, echoes the Lord's Prayer. In Dante's Vita Nuova some critics see an association between Beatrice and Christ.

In this opening Ashbery says, "We have broken through into the meaning of the tomb. But the act is still proposed..." (5). There are references to penance, pilgrimage, creation, judgment and imperfection. I believe it is the example of Carter which gives license to the brevity and form of this opening collage.

In Three Poems avant-garde theory is harmonized with traditional concerns. Following Ashbery through this autobiographical process, however, we might still be in a quandry, wondering what attitude Ashbery carries with him into the future. This is especially true because of his penchant for seeing almost any idea from every conceivable perspective. Because I have concentrated on his religious language, I will simply note five beliefs that seem to hold throughout the work. Ashbery believes that hell is "growth without change" (26), that "what is merely pleasant has to die to be born again as pleasure" (21), that we dwell in a place of "provocative but baffling commonplace events" (31), that one can imagine a "perfect irregular order" (21), and hold out for oneself the "invisible goal of concrete diversity" (101). One great accomplishment of Three Poems as autobiography is that Ashbery manifests his sensibility in an indissoluble integration of content and form.

## CHAPTER III

### TRANSFORMING LIFE:

#### JAMES MERRILL'S "THE BOOK OF EPHRAIM"

Heaven was fraught with tantrums, cloudy thinking,  
Blind spots. A certain frail tenacity  
All too human throve behind the Veil.  
"The Book of Ephraim"

#### I.

In the final books of Saint Augustine's Confessions, the newly appointed bishop of Hippo began his task as Father of the Church offering an explication of Genesis. He demonstrated his authority and confirmed the wisdom of his selection as bishop. The exegesis also represented a climax to his autobiographical project. The Confessions had been a personal story of spiritual rebirth, a pilgrimage from darkness to light. Genesis was the primordial exemplum of new birth; it was God's purpose, Augustine said, "to reveal what had been hidden and to introduce order where disorder reigned (344)." Augustine disclosed the relationship between personal and universal order and illustrated the way dialogue with a text can become a powerful form of self-representation.

Fifteen hundred years later the American poet James Merrill undertook a similar project of textual interpretation with a similar rhetorical strategy. But the text grounding his autobiography was



considerably different. It was a box full of transcriptions, notes and a notebook accumulated over twenty years focused on a single recurrent event. Beginning on August 23, 1955, Merrill and the writer David Jackson used a Ouija board to generate extraordinary documents.

Ouija boards, often sold commercially in the games sections of department stores, include a planchette with pointer. The board is marked with individual letters of the alphabet, the numerals zero to nine, and the words yes and no. When two people together touch the planchette on the board it is thought to move "in such a way as to spell out spiritualistic or telepathic messages" (OED). Instead of a planchette, Merrill and Jackson used an overturned teacup, made their own board, and wrote down the messages. Merrill, then, was both present scribe and future exegete. Somewhat casually, and perhaps bored by having to answer questions about it, Merrill remarked in an interview, "Of course there are disciplines with grander pedigrees and similar goals. The board happens to be ours. I've stopped, by the way, recommending it to inquisitive friends" (Recitative 66). He had in mind the more mystical practices of Saint Paul and Milton, Yeats and Blake.

In 1974 Merrill decided to make his transcriptions the basis for his verse autobiography, "The Book of Ephraim." Running more than ninety pages and twenty-five hundred lines, it was published as the major part of Divine Comedies, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1976. In addition to being grounded in a predetermined text, Merrill's work is related to the Augustinian paradigm in a number of other significant ways. In this chapter I will explore these relationships as well as

identify Merrill's distinctive contribution to the history of autobiography.

When he began "The Book of Ephraim," Merrill was exceptionally well prepared, by training and experience, to undertake a major autobiographical work. Born in New York in 1926, he began writing poetry with intensity at the age of fourteen: "When I went away to school in Lawrenceville, I wrote my poems out of envy of my friend Freddy Buechner, who was already writing lovely poems. This soon became a habit, and before long I worked up to a poem a day," (Recitative 40). Of his early efforts Merrill wrote, "Gerrish Thurber, the mild and merciful librarian who 'advised' the young editors of the Lawrenceville Lit, read through my first submission and nodded, saying only, 'We can always use a well-made sonnet.' It took me a while to fathom what he hadn't said" (Merrill 5). When he was a senior at Lawrenceville his father, a founder of the brokerage firm of Merrill, Lynch, Pierce, Fenner and Smith, had a small edition of Merrill's juvenilia printed: "Jim's Book, as he titled it, thrilled me for days, then mortified me for a quarter-century. I wouldn't put it past my father to have foreseen the furthest consequences of his brilliant, unsettling gesture which, like the pat on a sleepwalker's back, looked like approbation but was aimed at waking me up (6).

Merrill went on to Amherst College. From the perspective of tracing the preparation of an autobiographer, it's worth noting that his study included two of the most critical autobiographers in European literature, Dante and Proust, as well as the theoretician of development, Charles Darwin. He also encountered careful readers:

"Kimon Friar put before me the living poets and gave the nine-day wonders that shot up like beanstalks from this richest of mulches their first and only detailed criticism" (6). Merrill wrote his B.A. thesis on Proust and, after graduation, served a year in the army. Four years after leaving Amherst, his First Poems was published when he was "living alone and unhappy in Rome and going to a psychiatrist for writer's block" (6).

Among twentieth century writers, Merrill has acknowledged the early influence of Wallace Stevens and W.H. Auden. In Stevens, "a world of painterly particulars -- interiors, necklaces, elephants in Ceylon -- became, upon little more than a single leafing-through of pages, charged with novel meanings; or potentially charged with them; or alternately charged with thought and (by enchantment of language) absolved from thought as well" (117). Merrill cited "The Green Eye" from his First Poems as reflecting the influence of Stevens. It begins:

Come, child, and with your sunbeams assign  
 Green to the orchard as a metaphor  
 For contemplation, seeking to declare  
 Whether by green you specify the green  
 Of orchard sunlight, blossom, bark, or leaf,  
 Or green of the imaginary life.

A mosaic of all possible greens becomes  
 A premise in your eye, whereby the limes  
 Are green as limes faintly by midnight known,  
 As foliage in a thunderstorm, as dreams  
 Of fruit in barren countries; claims  
 The orchard as a metaphor of green.

Aware of change as no barometer  
 You may determine climates at your will;  
 Spectrums of feeling are accessible  
 If orchards in the mind will preserve  
 On their hillsides original with joy.  
 Enter the orchard differently today:

Merrill's admiration for Stevens' union of the particular and the abstract is apparent. But thirty years later, when he republished the poem in From The First Nine, he made more than a dozen changes. Some revisions make the poem more consistent with the intended meaning and more fully nuanced: "specify" in the first stanza is altered to "have in mind"; "mosaic" in the second stanza becomes "patchwork." The language of philosophy becomes less argumentative and more intuitive: "premise" becomes "ground," "claim" becomes "proclaim," and "will" is changed to "whim." More importantly, the metaphor's meaning becomes more overtly sexual, generative and self-reflexive. The third stanza now reads:

Attuned to change as no barometer  
 You may determine climates at your whim.  
 Spectrums of the citrus, each a womb  
 Of sweet and bitter, ripen in the sphere,  
 the self you bring, original with joy.  
 Enter the orchard differently today. (6)

Merrill wrote that Stevens' "manner came to seem wonderfully civilized. With the vivid parison of language to balance the reader, there was less risk of falling, as in Eliot, off any high tightrope of argument" (118). While early critics found a similar 'enchantment of language' in Merrill's work, they found a paucity of content. Viewed retrospectively, Helen Vendler observed that "the 'intellectuality' for which the poems were sometimes praised was more a matter of labyrinthine syntax than of penetrating thought." Nevertheless, "a beautiful and radiant cadence rippled its way through Merrill's pages" (Vendler 206).

In the 1950s Merrill's poetry appeared in a variety of literary

magazines. He wrote a play, The Immortal Husband, performed off Broadway in 1955, and a novel, The Seraglio, published in 1957. In "The Book of Ephraim" Merrill discloses that his father served as "model for 'Benjamin Tanning'" (57) in the novel. Merrill collected forty of his poems in The Country Of A Thousand Years of Peace in 1959. He taught for a year at Amherst, a year at Bard, and from 1954 on he made his home in Stonington, Connecticut, while spending part of each year until the late 1970s in Athens (Recitative passim).

Beginning with the publication of Water Street in 1962, whose title reflected the address of Merrill's Stonington home, critics recognized a more openly personal and self-referential voice in some of his work. Many poems were narrative and drew upon colloquial language. Thus, leading up to "The Book of Ephraim" was more than a decade of experimentation in autobiographical writing. Nights And Days, which received the National Book Award for 1966, included "The Broken Home," evoking the divorce of his parents when Merrill was twelve years old; The Fire Screen of 1969 concerned, in part, a critical love affair; and Braving The Elements, the Bollingen Prize Winner for 1973, drew upon a number of personal events including a fire at his home in Greece. "The Broken Home" is representative of the shift. It consists of seven sonnets in various patterns. The most straightforward is a pointed condemnation of his father:

My father, who had flown in World War I,  
Might have continued to invest his life  
In cloud banks well above Wall Street and wife.  
But the race was run below, and the point was to win.

Too late now, I make out in his blue gaze  
 (Through the smoked glass of being thirty-six)  
 The soul eclipsed by twin black pupils, sex  
 And business; time was money in those days.

Each thirteenth year he married. When he died  
 There were already several chilled wives  
 In sable orbit--rings, cars, permanent waves.  
 We'd felt him warming up for a green bride.

He could afford it. He was "in his prime"  
 At three score ten. But money was not time.

A later verse reads, "Always that same old story--/Father Time and  
 Mother Earth./A marriage on the rocks" (From The First Nine 140-141).  
 In Merrill's later autobiography, he would reclaim both earth and time.

When Helen Vendler reviewed Braving The Elements in the New York Times, she said, "His surreptitious fondness for narrative...has now found a clear medium in his wonderful short lyrics; his almost unnaturally exquisite gift for euphony has become unobtrusive but no less exquisite, in fact more so; his ironic and wayward humor has been allowed to appear in poetry and swell as in prose; his single best subject--love--has found a way of expressing itself masked and unmasked at once, instead of hiding almost mummified in swathings of secrecy" (Vendler 206). Somewhat prophetically, at the end of her review Vendler tried to look ahead: "It is hard to know where Merrill will go from here--whether he will set himself to a Proustian remembering and give us more vignettes of the past, or whether some new convulsion of life will wreck the fine equilibrium by which, in this book, the four racing winds are held and viewed" (210).

It appears that Merrill wondered himself. In the following year he prepared The Yellow Pages, but it was simply a collection of poems

written over the previous twenty-five years. As he was approaching the age of fifty, he was not moving forward. A more generous view of the period is that of Judith Moffett: "in the context of what follows and precedes it, The Yellow Pages gives the impression that corners are being swept and drawers emptied out..." (Moffett 126).

Instead of poetry, Merrill turned to a new novel, and that was not going well, either. But the Ouija board transcripts were on Merrill's mind; the novel was to deal with them. He had not done so previously, he said, because he felt "it would be like cheating, or plagiarizing from some unidentifiable source" (Recitative 67).

Like Wordsworth before him, a constellation of events formed to lead Merrill in the direction of autobiography. Working on the novel, "I'd got about fifty pages done, hating every bit of it. I'm not a novelist, and never was. No accident, then, that I simply 'forgot' the manuscript in a taxi in Atlanta, and never recovered it....But I went on, I didn't take the hint. I put together all the drafts and notes for those lost pages and proceeded to forget these in a hotel room in Frankfurt! By now I was down to just two pages of opening draft. As I sat glaring at them, the prose began to dissolve into verse. I marked the line breaks with a pencil, fiddled a bit, typed it up, and showed the two versions to a friend who said quite firmly, 'You must never write prose again.' At that point 'The Book of Ephraim' crystallized, and got written without any particular trouble" (67). Merrill is a scavenger, however; he used the novel scenario within "The Book of Ephraim."

Perhaps just as significant, given Merrill's sensibility and the elegiac quality of much of his verse, earlier in the interview just quoted, Merrill discussed a Greek friend, Maria Mitsotaki, who makes a brief appearance in "The Book of Ephraim". He acknowledges, "I began 'Ephraim' within days of hearing that she died--and felt, I suppose, enough of a coincidence to list her among the characters" (Recitative 64). Like Saint Augustine, Merrill would find consolation in the process of creating his autobiography, his "Book of a Thousand and One Evenings Spent/With David Jackson at the Ouija Board".<sup>5</sup>

"The Book of Ephraim", like many other autobiographies, preserves a tension between concealment and disclosure. In approaching the work, I believe there are two basic challenges. The first is to gain some sense of its structure. As David Perkins has said, "Compared with 'The Book of Ephraim,' other long poems of our time are structurally primitive" (Perkins 652). That structure also needs to be understood in relation to the meaning Merrill may have attached to it. Second, if we are to read "The Book of Ephraim" in the context of the Confessions, a close analysis should respond to the assertion of Judith Moffett that "neither deep religious sensibility, nor political savvy, nor philosophical inquiringness are at work in Merrill's poem" (Moffett 171). We need to uncover what Merrill meant when he said, "A lot of the talk sounds like badinage, casual if not frivolous, but something serious is usually going on under the surface" (Recitative 54).



## II.

In the Confessions Augustine allowed himself little room to recount events unsupportive of his design, a driving movement toward new life within God's celestial order. In the process, "when we learn to know God, we become new men in the image of our Creator" (332). In contrast, James Merrill's ordering principles in "The Book of Ephraim" appear fragmented or arbitrary, and the goal far less circumscribed. Yet beneath the casual tone and prism-like surface is a pattern, complex and cohesive.

As an overall structure, Merrill divides "The Book of Ephraim" into twenty-six sections, one for each letter of the alphabet; each section begins with the appropriate letter, in sequence. This design associates the pattern with the printed alphabet on the Ouija board. The division is, of course, an arbitrary one, seemingly unrelated to any aesthetic or philosophic principle. But it does suggest that the alphabet, the basic written symbol system of English, language and instrument of the poet, is itself an arbitrary but defining boundary. The alphabet dictates to Merrill as much as he dictates the language. In "The Book of Ephraim" he puts the matter this way:

We were not tough-  
Or literal-minded, or unduly patient  
With those who were. Hadn't--from books, from living--  
The profusion dawned on us, of "languages"  
Any one of which, to who could read it,  
Lit up the system it conceived?--bird-flight,  
Hallucinogen, chorale and horoscope.... (75)

Merrill conceived multiple orders in which the perceiving subject is the arbiter or meaning. The remark applies to Merrill as scribe at the

Ouija board, as well as Merrill the fashioner of an autobiographical text.

The second ordering principle, equally arbitrary, is the Gregorian calendar. References throughout "The Book of Ephraim" support the notion that it was written progressively in the course of a single year, 1974. The first section, for example, says, "January draws this bright/line down the new page I take to write" (48); section F begins, "Flash-forward: April 1st in Purgatory, Oklahoma" (62); the final section says it is "Zero week/ Of the year's end" (134). There is no logic in having the calendar govern the shape of an autobiography. Even this design is casually disregarded; of the quotations given in Section Q, Merrill says they "may as well go here as anywhere" (102); events of 1974 recounted in Section U actually precede events in Section O. The real meaning and effect of this strategy is to give prominence to the present time of writing, and to support the realization that rendering the past is governed by the present. As Augustine put it in book eleven of the Confessions: "If the future and the past do exist, I want to know where they are. I may not yet be capable of such knowledge, but at least I know that wherever they are, they are not there as future or past, but as present. For if, wherever they are, they are future, they do not exist; if past, they no longer exist. So wherever they are and whatever they are, it is only by being present that they are" (267).

Another time boundary governing the work is a chronology from 1955 to the present time of writing, 1974, with occasional excursions to

memories of childhood. In the beginning, Section B says, "1955 this would have been" (49); Section O refers to the Greek "Strato's qualities/ All are virtues back in '64" (94); Section P alludes to 1970, and the year of composition is mentioned in describing a friend whose birth and death dates are given: "1907-74...Dead in these last months of the dictatorship" (57). This framework is also manipulated. According to other chronologies of Merrill's life, a year-long trip recounted in Section K was taken a year before the summer of 1958, discussed in Section J; the death of a friend portrayed in Section R occurred three years before events recounted in Section O. This kind of change asserts that even in autobiography chronology must yield when necessary to the shaping role of the artist, or to some overriding mythic structure.

A more complex structural element is the scenario of the aborted novel Merrill had been working on before he turned to "The Book of Ephraim." Sections A, J, N, S, T and X give emphasis to it, recounting character and plot development. This might be considered analogous to an architect including in an autobiography plans for a building never completed, to illustrate the development of his thought at a particular time. In "The Book of Ephraim" the relationship goes beyond that. Some characters in the novel were to be modeled after particular individuals in Merrill's life. Merrill says that the "Model/ For 'Lucy Prentiss'" (56) in the proposed novel was to be David Jackson's mother; Merrill's niece was to be "Model/ For 'Ellen Prentiss Cade' in the lost novel" (57).

He implies that other parallels existed. The references to the novel, then, create another way of seeing people in Merrill's life; in most cases it is a darker view, projected, fantasized, or barely believed. For autobiography, it represents a distinctive but difficult rhetorical strategy.

This doubling of characters is just one aspect of a bewildering network of associations Merrill creates throughout the book. Consider the following three couplets closing section O. Merrill and Jackson ("DJ") are about to leave Greece after an extended visit:

Upstairs, DJ's already at the simmer  
Phoning the company. He gets one pair  
Of words wrong-- means to say "kalorifer"  
(Furnace) but out comes "kalokeri" (summer):  
Our summer doesn't work, he keeps complaining  
While outside, cats and dogs just keep on raining.

Previously, the section had included references to a person as a "stray bitch," to a cat named Maisie, to evolution, and to "selves in animal disguise." The summer of Jackson and Merrill really had not worked, and Jackson is shown to have several reasons for simmering. But all the action becomes compressed in this comic confusion of language and translation. Augustine's display of expertise in biblical typology, relating Old Testament prophecy to New Testament fulfillment, appears unsophisticated compared to the array of associations Merrill is able to perceive in myth and everyday life. It is even more complex as he sees parts of himself in others. Associations create another aspect to the contours of the work's structure.

I believe that, viewed as a whole, "The Book of Ephraim" can be divided into five large movements. The beginning of each movement is

signaled by an extended reference to Merrill's lost novel. In the opening movement (Sections A-I), like Augustine beginning the Confessions, Merrill defends his autobiographical project. He introduces principal characters, including "voices from the other world," and portrays David Jackson submitting to hypnosis, followed by Merrill's session with a psychiatrist to assess the whole matter. The second movement (Sections J-M) details an around-the-world excursion by Merrill and Jackson in the late fifties and closes with their friend Maya Deren relating a dream. The third movement (Sections N-R) is more meditative, concerned with issues of power, memory and time, traditional Augustinian concerns; it includes a section of quotations from various sources, and closes with the death of Deren in 1961. The fourth movement (Sections S-W) develops the scenario of the novel more fully and then shifts scenes to contemplate themes of destruction and decay, symbolized by modern Venice. In the concluding movement (Sections X-Z) there is an effort to bring together major images as the scenario of the novel is complete, Merrill leaves Venice, and he and Jackson are back home in Stonington.

To be more specific, I suggest that the movements may be related to the Augustinian paradigm. The first includes a confession and image of forgiveness. The second reports a vision of "the other world." The third focuses on a death and rebirth. The fourth evokes a more personal image of rebirth. In the fifth, Merrill contemplates present time, as Augustine did in the Confessions' final books.

What separates Merrill's pilgrimage from Augustine's, however, is its more dialogic character. When Augustine prayed to God, the distance

was palpable. Response was not readily forthcoming. Merrill, on the other hand, engages the other world in a long, continuous conversation. The gods are positively garrulous. Beyond and within this dialogue, the book's essential unity comes from the voice of Merrill, alternately witty, questioning, mournful, oracular, or distanced.

Finally, what often gives an autobiography its shape is the presence of characters who continue to be reprised. This is true of "The Book of Ephraim." To plot the movement of Ephraim and Eros, Maya Deren and David Jackson, is one way to gain a sense of the book's structural complexity.

#### Ephraim and Eros

Merrill's sense of the Augustinian paradigm was probably derived, in part, from his study of Dante. In an essay on Dante written after "The Book of Ephraim," Merrill exhibited his sensitivity to Dante's power and remarked, "He is not after all our only mystic, just more literary and more fortunate than many" (Recitative 87). One quality the Confessions, the Divine Comedy and "The Book of Ephraim" share is the presence of a guide to direct the pilgrim on his journey.

For Augustine the proximate guide was Monica. At one point he said, "I was a catechumen living at leisure in that country house with Alypius, a catechumen like myself, and my mother, who never left us. She had the weak body of a woman but the strong faith of a man, the composure of her years, a mother's love for her son, and the devotion of a Christian" (186). Ultimately, the guide is God, to whom Augustine prayed, "I thought that you were silent and that she was speaking, but

all the while you were speaking to me through her, your handmaid. I was disregarding you though I was both her son and your servant.... Under your guidance I entered into the depths of my soul, and this I was able to do because you befriended me" (46, 146). Augustine did not fully appreciate Monica's significance, but she remained with her son, was among the first to hear of his conversion, and later shared a timeless moment of mystical vision with him.

The presence and importance of such a guiding figure marks one parallel Italian scholar John Freccero sees between the Confessions and the Divine Comedy. For Dante, of course, the figure is Beatrice. Freccero calls attention to passages like this:

E Beatrice quella si scorge  
di bene in meglio, si subitamente  
che l'atto suo per tempo non si sporge  
(Paradiso, X, 37-39)

It is Beatrice who thus conducts from good to better, so swiftly that her act does not extend through time.

Dante had discussed Augustine in the Convivio, and in the Divine Comedy, Freccero says, "Beatrice is virtually defined here as the guide for the second stage of spiritual progress in terms that the Convivio had used for the second stage of Augustine's conversion from sinner to saint" (Freccero 3). The necessity of a guide separated both Augustine and Dante from Neoplatonists. The followers of Plotinus believed transformation could be accomplished through purely intellectual effort. For Augustine and Dante a person's limitations demanded assistance. Change was finally accomplished by an infusion of grace and submission of the will.

Freccero observes similarities between the "dark wood" of the prologue to the Divine Comedy and the "region of unlikeness" in Book Seven of the Confessions. As he compares the climax of each work, overall imagery, and the autobiographical identification of author and protagonist, he concludes, "If the point of departure, as well as the goal of Dante's spiritual itinerary deliberately recalls the experience of Augustine in the Confessions, then it may be that we are to regard Dante's entire spiritual autobiography as essentially Augustinian in structure" (Freccero 2, 6, 7). In a slightly different study of Augustine and Dante, Shirley J. Paolini summarized: "Clearly there is a striking similarity in the use of symbolic-mythical structure in the Confessions and in the Commedia. The Prodigal Son, Exodus, the sea-voyage figures, the lost regions of the soul -- the dark wood and region of dissemblance -- all fit into this mythic world. Furthermore, the movements and countermovements from innocence to sinful experience to rebirth reinforce the archetypal return to the Father" (Paolini, 79).

Much of "The Book of Ephraim" appears to function within this tradition. To cite one striking reference, when Merrill comments on a dream of his friend Maya Deren, he reports the attitude of Ephraim, the "familiar spirit" he and Jackson contacted through the Ouija board experience. Merrill begins with what appears as a weak joke:

This dream, he blandly adds, is a low-budget  
 Remake -- imagine--of the Paradiso.  
 Not otherwise its poet toured the spheres  
 While Someone very highly placed up there  
 Donning his bonnet, in and out through that  
 Now famous nose haied the cool Tuscan night.  
 The resulting masterpiece takes years to write;



More, since the dogma of its day  
 Calls for a Purgatory, for a Hell,  
 Both of which Dante thereupon, from footage  
 Too dim or private to expose, invents.  
 His Heaven, though, as one cannot but sense,  
 Tercet by tercet, is pure Show and Tell.

(89)

The metaphor of film, "remake...footage," yields finally to a child's transparent vision, a game of "Show and Tell." Merrill may deflate, but he does not deny or desecrate the essential vision of Augustine and Dante. In his Dante essay, Merrill wrote, "Dante's conceptual innovation -- as when he lifts purgatory to the surface of the earth, or reveals his lady as agent from highest heaven -- refigure rather than refute the thought that preceded them" (Recitative 9). Similarly, "The Book of Ephraim" refigures rather than refutes the Augustinian paradigm. Perhaps Merrill believed "a low-budget/Remake" was all the culture could afford.

For Merrill, the guide who acts in the tradition of Monica and Beatrice is the figure Ephraim. In the first movement of "The Book of Ephraim," following some preliminary scene-setting in Section A and Section B, Ephraim is formally introduced. As they get to know each other, Merrill will say Ephraim "settles to the task of answering, like an experienced guide/ Those questions we had lacked the wit to ask" (53). Later, however, Merrill will wonder, "Shall I come light-hearted to that Spring-tide/ Knowing it must be fathomed without a guide"(129). The initial attitude of Merrill and Jackson is simply one of curiosity. Ephraim, whose words from Merrill's transcriptions are set in capitals without punctuation, indicates his birth coincided with the beginning of the Christian era:

Correct but cautious, that first night, we asked  
 Our visitor's name, era, habitat.  
 EPHRAIM came the answer. a Greek Jew  
 Born AD 8 at XANTHOS Where was that?  
 In Greece WHEN WOLVES & RAVENS WERE IN ROME  
 (Next day the classical dictionary yielded  
 A Xanthos on the Asia Minor Coast.)  
 NOW WHO ARE YOU We told him. ARE YOU XTIANs  
 We guessed so. WHAT A COZY CATACOMB  
 Christ had WROUGHT HAVOC in his family  
 ENTICED MY FATHER FROM MY MOTHERS BED  
 (I too had issued from a broken home--  
 The first of several facts to coincide.)  
 Later a favorite of TIBERIUS Died  
 AD 36 on CAPRI throttled  
 By the imperial guard for having LOVED  
 THE MONSTERS NEPHEW (sic) CALIGULA

Ephraim is matter-of-fact about his own sexuality; he will later praise the relationship of Merrill and Jackson as "THE FORTUNATE CONJUNCTION" (59). His description of religious tension within the family is reminiscent of one in the Confessions, with roles reversed. Augustine wrote, "Even at that age I already believed in you, so did my mother, and the whole household except my father. But, in my heart, he did not gain the better for my mother's piety and prevent me from believing in Christ just because he still disbelieved himself. For she did all that she could to see that you, my God, should be a Father to me rather than he" (32). In both instances, the son defends the mother.

Merrill's parenthetical remark, "the first of several facts to coincide," sets a new thematic and structural dynamic in motion. The guide in some ways resembles Merrill, or a part of Merrill. He will later speak of Ephraim and entertain the possibility more blatantly: "As through smoked glass, we charily observed/ Either that his memory was spotty/ (Whose wouldn't be after two thousand years?)/ Or that his

lights and darks were a projection/ Of what already burned, at some obscure/Level or another, in our skulls" (75). As a rhetorical strategy within autobiography the character initiates a partial doubling of the protagonist, another means of discovery and understanding for writer and reader. At its simplest, Ephraim often seems to say what Merrill thought to say, wanted to say, was willing to consider, or wished were the case. In the larger context of the autobiography, Ephraim is an element, like others; he is what Merrill would later characterize as a "many-sided facet of the universal gem" (75).

Seemingly parallel "facts" which "coincide" will often amount to exaggerations, negations, or corrections about Merrill, giving anything labeled "fact" a relative quality. Here, for example, the mention of "having LOVED/ THE MONSTERS NEPHEW" looks forward in a skewed way to incidents with Merrill and his nephew, Wendell, whom he obviously cares for. But the foreshadowing is forewarning that even relationships like these can become subverted. For Merrill and Jackson, Ephraim becomes inner voice, traveling companion, consoler, teacher, rhetor and literary critic. If he is less than a great god, he is more than a simple guide for the perplexed.

From just these opening lines it is easy to see why Merrill has been honored for technical virtuosity. A casual tone warrants a casual rhyme. These lines favor a loosely patterned final t or d with some rhymes more pronounced: habitat/that, coincide/died, or the more provocative linkage of Rome, CATACOMB and home with the echoing m qualities of family and MOTHERS. The final position in the lines sets

up contrasts or parallels between throttled and loved, as well as family and BED, reinforcing the Oedipal drama. Merrill creates internal rhymes like guessed, Christ, ENTICED, and the alliterative clustering of consonants in "COZY CATACOMB/Christ had wrought HAVOC."

The dominating ten-syllable lines force the word Christians, transcribed in Merrill's shorthand as XTIANS, to be read as a single syllable, thus eliminating Christ, or, if kept as an extra syllable, to suggest a superfluous notion. Variation in iambics give emphasis to the trochaic throttled, as well as Ephraim and Christ. Parenthetical remarks break rhythms to offer, in this case, corroboration of information about Ephraim, or a joke, the pun on sic meaning sick.

The polarities within the passage support the contrast between the "correct but cautious" Merrill and Jackson and the extravagance of Ephraim. As the poem advances, it will dramatize the accommodating friendship among these differing selves. Above all, Merrill is able to use his prodigious knowledge of poetics to support his autobiographical project. In a slightly different context, he says earlier in the poem, "Since it had never truly fit, why wear/ The shoe of prose? In verse the feet went bare" (48).

In section C, Merrill's verse paragraphs advance through a series of questions: "Why was he telling us?....Was he a devil?....What?.... If? .... What if... (52, 53). Ephraim responds with wit. As if the medium were the telephone, he wants to make the most of "precious long distance minutes -- don't hang up" (53). Beneath the lightness is a theme traditionally given a more serious tone, and Merrill is disturbed:

"So much facetiousness--well, we were young/ And these were matters of life and death -- dismayed us" (53). It may not dismay the reader that Merrill reinvents Metaphysical poetry. What does disturb is Merrill's occasional feigned ingenuousness, a mannerism which can become cloying.

Ephraim turns the gloom of mortality into cosmology, a shift in keeping with the conversation's smooth, bantering surface. His vision is more Eastern than Western. He tells Merrill and Jackson that our lives advance in cycles of death and rebirth until we escape into a celestial hierarchy; we then advance in stages of "PEACE FROM REPRESENTATION/ Odd phrase, more like a motto for abstract art--or for Autocracy" (54). Ephraim is called a patron while those still subject to earthly cycles are called representatives. Each patron acts as a "secular guardian angel" with a representative on earth for whom he or she is responsible, though a patron cannot control or intervene. For the poet, this cosmology, compressing the space between the heavens and earth, allows opportunity for talk not only with Ephraim, but also with friends and family who have died.

In Section E, Ephraim presents himself as a kindly and eccentric pedagogue, sounding like Merrill's advisor, Gerrish Thurber, at Lawrenceville. Full of aphorisms and warnings, when he gives moderate advice it is "the tone/ We trusted most, a smiling Hellenistic/ Lightness from beyond the grave" (59). But when Ephraim tells a rather macabre story about George Bernard Shaw, now a patron, who had to select a new representative from among the dead and "ONCE HAD TO CLAIM/ A FINE BROTH OF A BOY COOKED OVER FLAME/ This was the tone we trusted

not one bit./ Must everything be witty?" Ephraim responds with equanimity: "AH MY DEARS/ I AM NOT LAUGHING/ I WILL SIMPLY NOT SHED TEARS"(61), a statement equal to Merrill's own acceptance and reserve.

On the negative side, in Section G, when Maya Deren visits Stonington and Ephraim responds to her, she finds him "too much the courtier living for pleasure" (67), no doubt something Merrill had heard suggested of himself. And in Section H, when David Jackson, under hypnosis, sees an image of Ephraim, "his smile was that of an old friend, so casual," but it was also true that "souls can't feel at E's level" (71).

Then, in a modern melodrama of sin and confession, "our brush with the Divine Law" (72), Merrill and Jackson offer to help Ephraim and another patron, Hans Lodeizen, an old friend of Merrill's who died in 1950. Ephraim and Lodeizen want to give their representatives a better chance at life; Merrill and Jackson recommend relatives and friends to parent them. But the directions go awry, and in the case of Lodeizen's representative, the child is born not to "Gin--that will be Virginia--West,/ A skier and Phi Bete" (64), but to "VIRGINIA WEST IN STATE/ASYLUM" (73), revealing the perils of misinterpretation. As a result:

We have MEDDLED And the POWERS

ARE Furious Hans, in Dutch and grim  
 May send no further word. Ephraim they've brought  
 before a kind of court  
 And thrown the book (the Good Book? YES) at him.  
(73)

Following the incident "the cup went dead" (73). The first movement

ends with Merrill visiting the culture's contemporary confessional, his psychiatrist's office; the psychiatrist thinks about Merrill and Jackson at the Ouija board and asks, "Can you find no simpler ways/ To sound each other's depth of spirit" (74). Somewhat relieved, Merrill enters the "Guilt-obliterating sunlight" (74), and Ephraim once more returns to the Ouija board. In an inversion of Christian belief, the Word made Flesh, Merrill comments: "we, all we knew, dreamed, felt, and had forgotten/ Flesh made word, became through him a set of/ Quasi-grammatical constructions which/Could utter some things clearly, forcibly,/ Others not" (75). For the autobiographer, Ephraim activates the power of memory and the ordering capacity of language. Ephraim "was the revelation/ (Or if we had created him, then we were)" (76). Merrill rejects rigid theological schema in favor of "the marvelous night's pudding" (76).

When Ephraim accompanies Merrill and Jackson on an around-the-world tour, undertaken in the late fifties, he poses as the debunker of world religions. The Vedanta is "A DULLARD'S DISCIPLINE" (81). But when word arrives that Merrill's father has died, the Ouija board is a source of comfort. Merrill's father appears, and later Ephraim reports the entrepreneur was "BORN YESTERDAY/To a greengrocer" (81), celestial justice at work. Ephraim also guides Merrill to think of death in a new way. In one session, he asks Merrill to imagine a particular bedroom. The one Merrill imagines is new to him until the whole scene becomes clearer. He watches the death of Rufus Farnetton who died of a heart attack in the Transvaal in 1925. He was Merrill's previous incarnation. During the painful scene Merrill asks, "Can we stop now

please? U DID WELL JM./ DEATHS ARE TRAUMATIC. FEW REMEMBER THEM" (87).

In the third movement Ephraim's teachings are disconcerting. The human race is imperiled by ecological imbalance. Further, the result of atomic warfare was the destruction of souls: "NO SOULS CAME FROM HIROSHIMA U KNOW./EARTH WORE A STRANGE NEW ZONE OF ENERGY./Caused by? SMASHED ATOMS OF THE DEAD, MY DEARS" (99). There are, however, other worlds, "SOULS FROM B4 THE FLOOD B4 THE LEGENDARY" (100). More important stands the relationship between heaven and earth. Unlike the Augustinian world, earth is not dependent upon heaven; it's the other way around: "When the flood ebbed or the fire burned low/ Heaven, the world no longer at its feet,/Itself would up and vanish? EVEN SO" (100).

Ephraim acknowledges it was he who destroyed the novel Merrill had been working on. To him the novel was a move away from reality. Section Q, a compendium of favored quotations Merrill had collected, includes one from Ephraim dated November 26, 1961. It compresses Ephraim's vision in a prayer to the earth as it simultaneously alludes to the nine spheres of Heaven:

AM I IN YR ROOM SO ARE ALL YR DEAD WHO HAVE NOT GONE  
 INTO OTHER BODIES IT IS EASY TO CALL THEM BRING THEM AS  
 FIRES WITHIN SIGHT OF EACH OTHER ON HILLS U & YR GUESTS  
 THESE TIMES WE SPEAK ARE WITHIN SIGHT OF ALL CONNECTED  
 TO EACH OTHER DEAD OR ALIVE NOW DO U UNDERSTAND WHAT  
 HEAVEN IS IT IS THE SURROUND OF LIVING

...

AND NOW ABOUT DEVOTION IT IS I AM FORCED TO BELIEVE  
 THE MAIN IMPETUS DEVOTION TO EACH OTHER TO WORK TO  
 REPRODUCTION TO AN IDEAL IT IS BOTH THE MOULD & THE  
 CLAY SO WE ARRIVE AT GOD OR A DEVOTION TO ALL OR MANY  
 IDEAL OF THE CONTINUUM SO WE CREATE THE MOULDS OF  
 HEAVENLY PERFECTION



...

EARTH HAS

ALREADY SEEN THE RETURN OF PERFECTED SOULS FROM 9  
 AMENHOTEP KAFKA DANTES BEATRICE 1 OR 2 PER CENTURY FOR  
 NOTHING LIVES IS MOTIONLESS HERE

...

NOW YOU UNDERSTAND MY LOVE OF TELLING MY LIFE  
 FOR IN ALL TRUTH I AM IMAGINING THAT NEXT ONE WHEN WE  
 CRASH THROUGH IN OUR NUMBERS TRANSFORMING LIFE INTO  
 WELL EITHER A GREAT GLORY OR A GREAT PUDDLE

(104)

In the fourth movement Ephraim prepares to return to the "surround of living." As he begins his departure from Merrill and Jackson, a new spirit is mentioned. The seriousness of the change is emphasized when Jackson is asked to place his hand on the edge of the board. The hand turns red "as if it had been trod on for attention" and an unknown voice tells Merrill six months more remain to be devoted to the autobiographical project (117). Obviously Merrill heeded the warning, received in June, and worked for the rest of the year on his book. As for Ephraim, "Next week we called him and he came, but things were not the same" (118). Indirectly, he makes brief appearances in the remainder of the poem. He is alluded to on a trip to Venice, and in Section Z he may be sensed as a loving shadow, a thief of love. At home in Stonington, evidence existed that a burgler had entered. When police arrive it seems nothing has been stolen. However, a certain carton is out of place:

--oh my dear,  
 Letters scrawled by my own hand unable  
 To keep pace with the tempest in the cup--  
 These old love-letters from the other world  
 We've set them down at last beside the fire.  
 Are they for burning, now that the affair  
 Has ended? (Has it ended?)

Through the figure of Ephraim, Merrill encountered an extraordinary way to discover and reveal aspects of himself, a person of wit, strength, liveliness and principle, one who perhaps had come to sense that heaven is "the surround of living."

Unfortunately, but humanly, Merrill's life carries far darker visions. Merrill reaches into the darkness when he discusses in various sections the novel he never completed. In that novel Ephraim was to be represented through a different guise: "Notes for the ill-starred novel. Ephraim's name is Eros--household slave of Ptolemy,/ Alexandria's great astronomer" who has "ears/Of propositions not just from the spheres" (91). Unlike Ephraim the teacher, "heaven went/A step beyond its own enlightenment/ And taught the slave of intellect to feel." Those in the novel would be "caught one by one/ In his implacable panopticon" (91). The setting was to be Sante Fe, where Jackson and Merrill visited in 1958. Merrill recounts several incidents of the trip; Ephraim had said, "THE AIR/ ABOVE LOS ALAMOS IS LIKE A BREATH/ SUCKED IN HORROR" and had encountered "A KIND OF GOD/ HALF MAN HALF TALKING TREE" (77, 78), bleak forebodings for a clash of elements.

What Merrill wanted for his novel were "the kinds of beings we recall from Grimm,/ Jung, Verdi, and the commedia dell'arte" (48). The classic Jungian archetypes begin with Joanna, both dragon and serpent. Section J, the first extended treatment of the novel begins, "Joanna (Chapter One) sat in the plane,/ Smoke pouring from her nostrils" (77). She will later be described as "a slitherer/ Tombless, untamed,

whose least coalfire-blue scale/ The phantom of an infant slithers from" (114). Replaying Merrill's broken home theme, Joanna will seduce the husband of Lucy Prentiss: "Jung on the destructive/ Anima would one day help me breathe/ The smoke of her eternal cigarette/ Coiling round old Matt Prentiss...(In the twin bed Lucy sleeps on and off)" (79). Arriving in Sante Fe, she will meet a Ouija board partner, the "queer neighbor" Sergei Markovitch. They would "'Recognize' each other, or I as author/ Recognize in them the plus and minus/ -- Good and evil, let my reader say--/Vital to the psychic current's flow" (79). In his own autobiography, Memories, Dreams, Reflections, Jung reflected that people "find themselves out upon the road of individuation. In no time at all they will become acquainted with the positive and negative aspects of human nature" (Jung 346). Merrill may suggest that he "let my reader say," but it seems clear that Joanna represents the "minus" of psychic current.

Another couple will be drawn into the sphere of Eros. Ellen Prentiss Cade, granddaughter of Matt and Lucy Prentiss, will watch her husband Leo's behavior in a darker representation of David Jackson under hypnosis:

Let Leo rather, on the evening  
 He lets himself be hypnotized, see Eros.  
 Head fallen back, lips parted, and tongue flexed  
 Glistening between small perfect teeth;  
 Hands excitedly, while others watch,  
 Roving the to them invisible  
 Shoulders, belly, crotch; a gasp, a moan--  
 Ellen takes Lucy's arm and leaves the room,

(91)

The grotesquery will continue. Somewhat like Merrill trying to affect the birth of Ephraim's representative, Leo will want to father the representative of Eros. To his wife Ellen, Leo would seem deranged or possessed. She won't know whether to seek help from a psychiatrist or a priest. The frightened woman will be portrayed as "torn/ Between distaste and fright. Leo, or someone/ Has made a theatre of their bedroom....nightly/ Performances whose choreography Eros dictates and, next day, applauds" (92). Seemingly, the novel will take on a political undercurrent. Leo will be described as a Vietnam veteran. When he ventures out from Santa Fe to a Pueblo burial ground, he will hallucinate a scene from the past full of violence and brutality:

Smooth skin, mouth gentle, eyes expressionless--  
 The "spy" his outfit caught, one bamboo-slender  
 Child ringed by twenty weary men--  
 Expressionless even when Leo--even when--  
 (93)

The scene, telescoped in Merrill's staccato phrasing, is to be interrupted, and "Sleep overtakes him clasping what he loathes/ And loves, the dead self dressed in his own clothes"(93). Under the spell of a destructive Eros, death is violent and "love is act/ Not sacrament" (92).

Recalling a scene in which Merrill and Jackson wondered whether Ephraim was a devil (53), in the novel Matt Prentiss will turn himself over to the power of Eros: "The old man's heart sank. 'Eros, if I must, '/ He said out loud, 'I go behind the falls./ Make him be there, my angel, and alive--/ Anything you say I will believe" (114). In contrast, the person who will somehow escape Eros is Sergei, supported in New Mexico by an 'earthly' patron, Rosamund Smith, described as

"perennially youthful, worldly, rich" (57). In a violent outburst Sergei will "rip her from her frame/ And grandly show the pieces to the door" (112). Later, presumably in reference to the seduction of Eros, it will be said that he "steeled himself to move beyond its range" (114). As the novel ends, Joanna will disappear, "how I never asked myself, and do not now" (115). As for Leo, he "is healed. His little boy is born" (115). A new power station will rob the Prentiss family of the waterfall and stream on their property. The occurrence suggests another of Jung's remarks in his autobiography, "The idea dawned on me that Eros and the power drive might be in a sense like the dissident sons of a single father, or the products of a single motivating psychic force which manifested itself empirically in opposing forms, like positive and negative electrical charges" (Jung 153).

Despite Merrill's references to Jung, however, a cautionary note seems in order. Later, in a single word at the end of a line, Merrill reminds the reader of the provisional nature of his conceptual design: "Jung says -- or if he doesn't, all but does --/ That God and the Unconscious are one. Hm" (118).

In defending the novel's premises Merrill thought of it as a way to get beyond the self (110), and "an effort to survey/ the arteries of Ephraim's influence" (110). Rather, searching for an artery, Merrill drew blood from a vein. As rhetorical strategy within autobiography, he was able to fashion a more comprehensive portrait of himself as one sensitive to the power of Eros yet, like Sergei, ultimately capable of resistance or transcendence.

Maya Deren and David Jackson

The figures of Ephraim and Eros enable Merrill to schematize his autobiography in much the same way that Henry Adams, earlier in the century, discussed "Order" and "Chaos" in The Education of Henry Adams. But like so many autobiographies, the writer's outline of theology or theory is often undermined. Augustine's portraits of Alypius or Ambrose may remain with us longer than his uncovering of Trinitarian doctrine within Genesis.

In "The Book of Ephraim" Merrill recounts a number of relationships, including his friendship with Hans Lodeizen to whom he referred in a number of earlier poems, and his Greek lover Strato, focus of his book, The Fire Screen. "The Book of Ephraim" includes a tribute to Strato beginning, "Humor that breaks into an easy lope/ Of evasion my two poor legs cannot hope/ To keep up with. Devotion absolute/ Moments on end..." (94). Two characters have an important, continuing presence in the work, Maya Deren and David Jackson.

If, in the Augustinian paradigm, Ephraim and Eros offered a way to express error and confession, Maya Deren represented an opportunity to consider death and mystical vision. Several sections are devoted to her. She is first introduced in Section D as a New York bohemian who "fills her Village flat with sacred objects, dolls, drums, baubles that twirl and shimmer,/ Stills from work in progress, underfoot/ the latest in a line of big, black, / Strangely accident-prone Haitian cats" (55). Merrill also gives an oblique clue toward understanding her full significance in his autobiography: "Barefoot at parties dances. Is

possessed/ (Cf. her book on voodoo, Divine Horsemen)/ During a ceremony (1949?)/ By Erzulie" (55). Maya Deren's presence translates the Augustinian paradigm into a primitive cultural context.

Deren's Divine Horsemen was first published in 1953, with an introduction by the noted American student of mythology, Joseph Campbell. In the book, Deren synthesized her understanding of the Voudoun religion of Haiti; her work was based on a number of trips she had made, with the initial intention of capturing Haitian rituals on film. Her swerve from that project is reminiscent of Merrill's abandonment of his novel. She wrote, "I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulation" (Deren 6). In her metaphor, "The Russian has another way of saying this: 'He who wears the shoe knows best where it pinches'" (6). In "The Book of Ephraim" Merrill wrote, similarly, "Since it never truly fit, why wear/ The shoe of prose?" (48)

Deren's career was eclectic. She was born in 1917, and her parents were Russian emigres; her father, a psychiatrist, worked at the Syracuse State School for the Feeble Minded. Deren attended the International School of Geneva, received a journalism degree from Syracuse University, and an M.A. from Smith. She worked as a journalist and writer, went on to study dance and film, and both directed and appeared in a number of experimental film projects. (Clark et al,

passim). The obvious relevance of Divine Horsemen to "The Book of Ephraim" is that major elements in Voudoun cosmology are remarkably similar to Ephraim's. In her introduction, Deren wrote, "Like all religions, Voudoun is built on certain basic premises. Briefly, it proposes that man has a material body, animated by an esprit or gros-bon-ange-- the soul, spirit, psyche or self--which, being non-material, does not share the death of the body. This soul may achieve (by stages elaborated in the discussion immediately following) the status of a loa, a divinity, and become the archetypal representative of some natural or moral principle." Moreover, "it has the power to displace temporarily the gros-bon-ange of a living person and become the animating force of his physical body. This psychic phenomenon is known as 'possession'" (16). In Divine Horsemen, as Merrill indicates, Deren reports her own possession by Erzulie, goddess of love (Deren 247-262). Unlike other mythologies, Erzulie is not the exclusive principle of generativity. But the quality which may have attracted Deren to her is that Voudoun "has denied her emphasis as mother of life and of men in order to regard her (like Mary, with whom Erzulie is identified) as mother of man's myth of life--its meaning. In a sense, she is the very principle by which man conceives and creates divinity" (Deren 138).

In Section G, Merrill and Jackson are feeling discomfort with their Ouija board preoccupation. Maya's visit brings relief: "We need a real, live guest. So Maya comes,/ And soon to a spellbinding tape --dream-drums--/ Can be discovered laying down in flour/Erzulie's heart-emblem on the floor" (67). In Divine Horsemen various symbols of



Voudoun gods are illustrated; during ceremonies they are sketched on the ground with flour or ash. Maya "danced merengues with us" (67), and her presence lightens the tone. Ephraim aligns her with his own cosmology, telling her "she was in her FIRST LAST ONLY life, that she knew it, that she had no patron" (67). But eventually, "Maya departs for city, cat, and lover./ The days grow shorter. Summer's over" (67). When Maya next appears in the work, she is portrayed as reporting a dream; it is then interpreted by Ephraim as a gentle possession by a god. It permitted her a glimpse of heaven.

She is a girl again, her fire-clear eyes  
 Turning her beautiful, limber, wise,  
 Except that she alone wears mourning weeds  
 That weigh unbearably until he leads  
 Her to a spring, or source, oh wonder! in  
 whose shining depths her gown turns white, her jet  
 To diamonds, and black veil to bridal snow.  
 Her features are unchanged, yet her pale skin  
 Is black, with glowing nostrils -- a not yet  
 printed self...Then it is time to go. (88)

Merrill is consistent in relating the language of film to Maya, his honored filmmaker. Her association with vision is sustained in the sonnets of Section R as Merrill recounts her death in 1961:

Hair-roots white. The blind, sunset-invaded  
 Eyeball. Lucent spittle overbrimming  
 Lips wiped of all pretense. And in the ward's  
 Gloom the gleam of tongs, clean stench of gauzes.

What light there was fell sideways from a mind  
 Half dark. We stood and tried to bear  
 The stroke for Maya, as her cats had done.

The other eye, the one that saw, remained  
 Full of wit, affection, and despair.  
 Then Ghede mounted her. Brought his whip down.

Ghede is the Voudoun god of both life and death, 'mounting' the word used to describe possession. Maya's cats were said to go through lives from which Maya was spared. The lines themselves seem "wiped of all pretense," marked by the delicate shadings of white, blind, gloom, gleam, and half dark.

Because of Ephraim's consoling cosmology, Maya can continue the conversation after death. She is given new life:

DAVID JIMMY I AM YOUNG AT LAST  
 WHO ALL THESE YEARS TRIED TO APPEAR SO  
 MY HAIR IS TRULY RED EPHRAIM IS STILL  
 A COURTIER SHALL I TEACH HIM HOW TO CHA CHA

At home in heaven she is the "LITTLEST FAUVE" of Erzulie. In her final appearance in the poem she is patron, naturally, of a representative in Haiti, "black Felicite newborn/ In Port-au-Prince" (116). Marred by obscurantism and overly abrupt shifts in tone, Merrill's protrait of Maya Deren nevertheless contributes to the work's continuity and places particular aspects of the Augustinina paradigm, visionary experience and death, in new relief.

Because the Ouija board required the hands of both Merrill and David Jackson, the transcripts themselves are symbol of an active, engaging, empathic and loving relationship of more than two decades. Merrill has said that after "The Book of Ephraim" was written a subsequent Ouija board message reported, "David is the subconscious shaper of the message itself, the 'Hand' as they call him. Of the two of us, he's the spokesman for human nature, while I'm the 'scribe,' the one in whose words and images the messages get expressed." He then wondered if the work "shouldn't have been signed with both our names --

or simply 'by DJ, as told to JM'" (Merrill 68).

Merrill captures their energetic beginnings in Stonington in 1955: "Now, strangers to the village, did we even/ Have a telephone? Who needed one!./ We had each other for communication/ And all the rest" (49). The portrait is domesticated by numerous details -- purchasing and refurbishing a home, entertaining family and friends, suffering illness during travel. As only an intimate may be allowed, Merrill comments on Jackson's parents, particularly his mother who "deserves the martyr's palm/ With oakleaf cluster for those thirty-nine/ Mortal years with Matt" (66). But the portrait of Jackson is not always flattering. He is often the one to ask the familiar spirit questions that seem naive, and there are tensions. When Ephraim reveals that Jackson will live a few more lives, while Merrill's life on earth will be his last, Merrill finally interprets the development in more comprehensible terms: "Foreshadower of nothing, dearest heart, / But the dim wish of lives to drift apart" (69). There are times when "Tediums/ Ignited into quarrels, each 'a scene from real life,' we concluded as we vowed not to repeat it" (85). Jackson figures prominently in two incidents, when he is hypnotized by Merrill in order to have a vision of Ephraim, and when an unidentified spirit causes Jackson's hand to redden as warning that their project must continue: "DJ massaged his fingers. Fun was fun./ The pencil in my writing hand had snapped" (117). Jackson himself has written modestly, "I'm flattered to think I lent a hand, the second hand, to JM's hours of labor" (Lehman 305).

In clearly one of the most gentle closings of any section in "The Book of Ephraim," Merrill evokes both Jackson and Maya Deren in a prayer of blessing. From the perspective of twenty years, he writes:

Times we've felt, returning to this house  
 Together, separately, back from somewhere--  
 Still in coat and muffler, turning up  
 the thermostat while a slow eddy  
 Chill about our ankles all but purrs--  
 The junk mail bristling, ornaments in pairs  
 Gazing straight through us, dust-bitten, vindictive--  
 Felt a ghost of roughness underfoot.  
 There it was, the valentine that Maya,  
 Kneeling on our threshold, drew to bless us:  
 Of white meal sprinkled then with rum and lit,  
 Heart once intricate as birdsong, it  
 Hardened on the spot. Much come-and-go  
 Has blackened, pared the scabby curlicue  
 Down to smatterings which, even so,  
 Promise to last a lifetime. That will do.  
 (69)

The symbol of the goddess of love retains a presence and both men honor the "small figure boldly hued,/ Never held in high enough esteem" (108).

### III.

The final section of "The Book of Ephraim" gathers together motifs of family, art and home. Merrill reflects from the perspective of midlife and present time, the closing months of 1974.

In section W, Merrill recalls an encounter with his nephew Wendell, while Merrill was visiting Venice enroute to Stonington. Appropriately, the section is written in Dante's terza rima, the verse form Merrill praised for its fluid movement (Recitative 89). In his analysis of terza rima, John Freccero said, "Any complete appearance of a rhyme...BA BCB...incorporates at the same time a recall to the past and a promise of the future that seem to meet in the now of the

central rhyme". It possesses a "forward motion toward recapitulation". He compares terza rima to Augustine's sense that time is composed of memory, attention and expectation (Freccero 262, 266, 270.) More particularly, in this instance the rapid motion seems appropriate for youth, while its capacity to recapitulate is appropriate for the autobiographer;

When in the flashing pink-and-golden calm  
Appears a youth to mount the bridge's stairs.  
His pack and staff betoken those who come

From far off, as do sunburnt forehead, hair's  
long thicket merman-blond, the sparkling blue  
Gaze which remembrance deep in mine compares

With one met in some other sphere--but who,  
Where, when? Dumbly I call up settings, names,  
The pilgrim ever nearer, till we two

Cry out together, Wendell! Uncle James!  
(122)

Here is a more common vision of rebirth. This "pilgrim" is surely an image of the younger Merrill. Like his uncle, he is devoting himself to art. In the arch language Merrill uses, the "other sphere" is clearly his own youth. Dining together they enjoy "dish on dish/ Produced by magic, and all night to pay" (123). Merrill is struck by the severity of Wendell's drawings in which "pain, panic and old age/ Affect his subjects horribly" (123). In a charming reversal, the two walk past memorials to other Venice visitors, Wagner and Stravinsky, and Merrill finds himself becoming the spokesman for high culture: "The Renaissance/ Needn't be judged by its aristocrats,/ Etc.,' till my companion yawns" (125). As the two drift apart, Merrill must concede that he could not "Guide Wendell's theme (this world's grim truths)

around/ To mine" (126). The nephew's visit enables Merrill to move from his often invoked role of abandoned, rejected child to that of surrogate father. In the poem, Wendell was the child born when Merrill had proposed his niece as a suitable mother for Ephraim's representative. Merrill now describes himself, with some irony, as Wendell's "other-worldly guardian" (126). Ultimately the incident is purely symbolic. When critic Stephen Yenser investigated Merrill's life, he could find no nephew named Wendell (Yenser 222). A full explanation will not be forthcoming from Merrill, for "in these sunset years" he will "hardly propose/ Mending my ways"(126).

An appropriate end to pilgrimage in the Augustinian model would be heaven. Merrill's Venice is a "heavenly city/ Sinking" (119). At a Venice museum hangs Giorgione's La Tempesta; the painting gives Merrill cause to look back and rethink family relationships. In the painting a young man holding a staff stands near a woman with a child in her arms; the setting is a garden with a town in the distance. In an article Merrill read, he discovered that x-rays of the painting revealed part of the scene was painted over another which showed a "curdling nude arisen, faint as ectoplasm/ From flowing water which no longer fills/ The eventual foreground" (127). The relationship of images is a narrative of action and consequence. The scholar's interpretation was that within the flowing water had been a dragon or serpent from whom the woman was saved. The overpainting shows the savior, Saint Theodore, patron of Venice, and his mother whom he saved; Merrill wryly observes that the mother also holds "a child/ Who needs explaining" (127). He notes the Oedipal content: "'her beauty such/ The youth

desired to kiss her,' as the quaint/ Byzantine legend puts it" (127). But Saint Theodore is not savior of all women for "Grown up he will/ Destroy a temple to the Magna Mater/ And his remains still cause electric storms/ In our day" (127).

Through contemplation of the painting and its commentary, Merrill affects a resolution of his own Oedipal conflicts. The tableau brings him to "a matter hitherto/ Overpainted--the absence from these pages/ Of my own mother" (128). Merrill now sees the full complexity of her character, partly reflected in various people he has chronicled. She is "here no less a Maya's prodigality/ Than in Joanna's fuming--or is she/ The last gap of my dragon? I think so" (128). He follows with his own distancing, yet domestic portrait.

My mother gave up cigarettes years ago  
 (And has been, letters tell, conspicuously  
 Alive and kicking in a neighbor's pool  
 All autumn, while singsong voices, taped, unreel,  
 Dictating underwater calisthenics). (128)

This is Merrill's own version of reconciliation with his mother, for whom he obviously had conflicting feelings. His wit, I think, is not meant to trivialize. Rather, "What I think I feel now, by its own nature/ Remains beyond my power to say outright" (128).

The final section of "The Book of Ephraim" is charged with negative energy. It is "Zero hour. Waiting yet again/ For someone to fix the furnace. Zero week/ Of the year's end" (134). The vocabulary of negation continues: fallen, empty, nothing, no reply, total failure. But the tone is far from despair. Looking at their box of transcripts Merrill and Jackson decide not to burn them: "Too much/

Already, here below, has met its match" (136). Instead, they look out from their enclosed space and recall a figure some critics associate with Rosamund Smith, the earthly patron, described by Merrill as a "twilight presence" (Yenser 236). In any event, the conclusion is one of acceptance and community:

And look, the stars have wound in filigree  
The ancient, ageless woman of the world.

She's seen us. She is not particular--  
Everyone gets her injured, musical  
"Why do you no longer come to me?"  
To which there's no reply. For here we are.  
(136)

The point of view is not one of complacency. When Merrill says "we must improve the line/ In every sense, for life" (134) in this final section, he returns us to the beginning of the poem, with its tone of urgency: "Time it had transpired, was of the essence./Time, the very attar of the Rose,/Was running out" (47). Time demanded action, because time is the essence. Saint Augustine's Confessions moves from the earth toward timeless heaven; Merrill's autobiography moves from the intrusion of the heavenly toward an acceptance of the earth.

Two aspects of "The Book of Ephraim" seem particularly worth observing for the history of autobiography. One is its performance quality as distinct from Augustinian private meditation. When Merrill stopped working on his novel, he felt that he "alone was left to tell my story"(48), as if signaling a very personal narrative. But actually Merrill's points of reference are to more public arts like theatre, film, opera and dance. He begins "The Book of Ephraim" as if presenting a playscript's opening pages: "Backdrop: The dining room



at Stonington....Properties: A milk glass tabletop" (49). Section D is a listing of "Dramatis Personae" (55), with brief sketches of more than a dozen people. At times it is as if he is giving director's notes for pacing: "Pause. Then, as though....Silence. Then (animato)..." (53, 100). He often uses the language of film with Maya Deren. She dances, as does a hermit "who once danced, you stood rooted, moved by fierce/ Young men at the pueblo" (111). In Japan when Merrill and Jackson were traveling, "From the Osaka puppets we were learning/ What to be moved means" (80). Merrill recalls himself as a thirteen-year-old boy hearing "Gotterdammerung. From a long ago/ Matinee--the flooded Rhine, Valhalla/ In flames" (100).

The second aspect of importance is the communal nature of the poem's development itself, beginning with the small community of Merrill, Jackson and Ephraim. Beyond this, patrons appear to comment on the work-in-progress: "Ford and Clay/ Look up from the gazette where Section K/ Has just been published: POPE SAYS THAT WHILE BITS/ STILL WANT POLISHING THE WHOLES A RITZ/BIG AS A DIAMOND. I would rather hear/ Mr. Stevens on the subject--mere/ Bric-a-brac?" (116). Even more important, Merrill says straightforwardly, "Years have gone by. How often in their course/ I've 'done' for people bits of this story./ Hoping for what response from each in turn--/ Tom's analytic cool? Alison's shrewd/Silence?" (131). Merrill's autobiography suggests a model, perhaps influenced by the model of a psychotherapy session, in which autobiography is developed in dialogue rather than in silence.

In this discussion of structure and character, there is a great deal in "The Book of Ephraim" I have not touched upon, especially its wide range of reference. Obviously, Merrill himself came to feel more needed to be said. Following the publication of "The Book of Ephraim" he published two subsequent books using material gathered in Ouija board sessions. Mirabell: Books of Number, published in 1978, won the National Books Award. Scripts for the Pageant appeared in 1980. All three books, with the addition of a "Coda", were published in 1982 as The Changing Light at Sandover, a trilogy of more than 500 pages. Cosmology becomes more fully elaborated in the later volumes; among other developments, Ephraim reappears and is revealed to be Michael the archangel. But neither of the other books of the trilogy are so carefully grounded in autobiography.

James Merrill admired Wallace Stevens; under his influence, "the young practitioner could seek out his own faith, in his own time, and arrive (with any luck) at his own humanity" (Merrill 120). "The Book of Ephraim" profiles this journey for Merrill. Along the way, he drew upon many resources, including Western mythology, Christian theology, primitive religion, and twentieth century psychotherapy.

Like the Confessions, "The Book of Ephraim" moves toward self-understanding and rebirth. Both works turn to a received text and look toward a trusted guide for assistance. Merrill is more overt in seeing aspects of himself in others -- in those he knew, like Hans Lodeizen; those he imagined, like Sergei Markovich and Wendell Pincus; and those with whom he communicated, like Ephraim. His difficult journey is

symbolized by the work's complex structure.

In the end, Augustine arrived at intimacy and light. Merrill's relationship with "the other world" is less embracing; his concept of grace is more naturalistic. Merrill's guide, Ephraim, withdrew from the scene, as did Augustine's Monica. But Augustine could turn to the ultimate guidance of God to sustain him. Merrill's nonchalance is distinct from Augustine's sustained intensity. Nevertheless, Merrill's autobiography illuminates his faith in the sacred, in art, in an ideal of wholeness, in generation and language. Whatever the exact nature of the pilgrim's turning, or conversio, and whatever the object of contemplation, the prayer often sounds the same: "Tell me, tell me, as I turn to you,/ What every moment does, has done, will do--/ Questions one simply cannot face in person" (112).

## CHAPTER IV

### THE END OF LIFE:

#### ROBERT LOWELL'S DAY BY DAY

Yet in this tempting leisure, good thoughts drive out bad; causes for my misadventure, considered for forty years too obvious to name, come jumbling out to give my simple autobiography a plot.

#### Day by Day

##### I.

In the seventh book of his Confessions, Saint Augustine symbolized his estrangement from God in physical terms. It was as if he dwelt in the regione dissimilitudinis: "I perceived myself to be far off from thee in the region of utter unlikeness."<sup>6</sup> He continued, "I heard your voice calling from on high saying, 'I am the food of full-grown men. Grow and you shall feed on me. But you shall not change me into your own substance, as you do with the food of your own body. Instead you shall be changed into me.' I realized too that you chastened man for his sins; you made my life melt away like gossamer, and I asked myself, 'Is truth then nothing at all, simply because it has no extension in space, with or without limits? And far off, I heard your voice, saying I am the God who IS. I heard your voice, as we hear voices that speak to our hearts, and at once I had no cause to doubt" (147). In brief, the passage outlined essential aspects of the Augustinian auto-

biographical paradigm: a sense of fundamental disorientation; error, growth and change; a transformation and spiritualization of the physical; the active grace of God overtaking the will of man; the intrusion of God's voice of authority overcoming argument and doubt.

In 1944, Robert Lowell, "perhaps more than any other twentieth century poet...now thought of as 'autobiographical'" (Hamilton 105), titled his first book Land of Unlikeness, reflecting the influence of the Augustinian paradigm. Beginning in the 1950's Lowell developed a more focused interest in autobiography. But in Life Studies, published in 1959, he appeared to set aside Augustine's particular world view. In the first poem of that book he invoked one of Augustine's most important visions, the City of God, only to reject it; portraying himself on a train from Rome to Paris he wrote:

Reading how even the Swiss had thrown the sponge  
in once again and Everest was still  
unscaled, I watched our Paris pullman lunge  
mooning across the fallow Alpine snow.  
O bella Roma! I saw our stewards go  
forward on tiptoe banging on gongs.  
Life changed to landscape. Much against my will  
I left the City of God where it belongs.  
(LS, 3)

The setting was identified as 1950, "the year Pius XII defined the dogma of Mary's bodily assumption" (LS 3), perhaps encouraging one recent critic to argue, as many others had before him, that "after roughly 1950 God no longer existed in Lowell's universe, though he sometimes mentioned him unfavorably" (Perkins 406). While the assertion may be true of Lowell's long middle period from the late 1950's to the early 1970's, a time of enormous productivity as well as personal suffering, I

believe it is not true of Lowell's final book, Day by Day, published in 1977, the year of his death. In this chapter I will argue that Day by Day represents a return to Augustine, though from a new perspective. For Lowell, as he approached the age of sixty, the imagery, pattern and concerns of the Confessions, perhaps dimly recalled from his earlier study, offered rhetorical strategies and a language with which he could reflect personal history, in particular his perspective on mental illness and the value of art.

For Lowell, the publication of Land of Unlikeness had been preceded by a fairly traumatic youth and young adulthood. When he was born on March 1, 1917, his father was not in the country, away on duty as a Naval officer. Even after his father's return, subsequent early retirement, and employment for a Boston soap manufacturer, the elder Lowell remained distant; in part this was due to the extraordinary dominance of the boy's mother, Charlotte Winslow Lowell. Like Lowell's father she too was a member of an old, if declining, Boston family. Lowell was an only child; his later comments suggested typical Oedipal conflict in his youth, estrangement, rebellion, rejection of his parents, and, as early as 1935, mental disturbance significant enough to warrant parental consultations with a psychiatrist (Hamilton 3-28). He attended private schools, then went to Harvard, where he encountered difficulty. At the suggestion of Dr. Merrill Moore, Lowell spent a summer in Tennessee and was introduced to significant Modernist writers and teachers, including Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom. He completed his undergraduate work at Kenyon College where Ransom had gone to teach

and where Lowell's literary interests were supported by friends and young writers, notably Peter Taylor and Randall Jarrell.

Lowell continued his friendship with Tate, who encouraged Lowell's study of religion, the metaphysical poets and their modern followers, as well as his New England heritage. Describing this period, Lowell said, "I think Tate and I felt that we wanted our formal patterns to seem a hardship and something that we couldn't rattle off easily" (CP, 241).

Lowell read a number of works by Continental Catholic intellectuals, and later said that a particularly important writer for him at the time was Etienne Gilson. Gilson's The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, a compilation of his Gifford Lectures given at the University of Aberdeen in 1931 and 1932, was probably source for a great deal of Lowell's understanding of Augustine. Gilson explored the dynamic of reason and faith; virtually every lecture makes reference to Augustine's thought. For example, in a lecture called "Beings and their Contingence," he quoted from the tenth book of the Confessions: "'To all those that surrounded my bodily sense, I said, Speak to me of God, you who are not He, speak to me of Him, and they all cried out with a loud voice: He made us.'" Gilson commented, "Ipse fecit nos: the words of the ancient psalm never sounded in the ears of Aristotle, but Saint Augustine heard them, and the cosmological proofs of the existence of God were altogether transformed" (Gilson 72).

In 1940 Lowell married fellow writer Jean Stafford and converted to Roman Catholicism the following year. Land of Unlikeness appeared in a limited edition of 250 copies. Some of the poems were then revised and included in Lord Weary's Castle, published in 1946, for

which Lowell won the Pulitzer Prize.

Overall, Land of Unlikeness emphasizes a more historical and cultural interpretation of regione dissimilitudinis than the personal one offered by Augustine. The poems are portraits of a land, history and culture in moral decay. The divine voice is more combative than consoling. Lines from "Christmas Eve in Time of War," set in Boston, are typical:

Tonight the ventry of capital  
Hangs the bare Christ-child on a tree of gold--  
Tomorrow Mars will break his bones. I am cold,  
War's coddling will not warm me up again.

"I bring no peace, I bring the sword," Christ said,  
"My nakedness was fingered and defiled."  
"But woe unto the rich that are with child."

In his introduction to the volume, Allen Tate described Lowell as "consciously a Catholic poet." While noting Lowell's emphasis on culture, Tate suggested the work had a personal dimension. He said Land of Unlikeness "points to the disappearance of the Christian experience from the modern world and stands, perhaps, for the poet's own effort to recover it" (LU, Introduction)<sup>7</sup>. One poem of Land of Unlikeness, "In Memory of Arthur Winslow," clearly integrates personal with religious and historical material. From the perspective of Lowell as future autobiographer, the poem confirms his sensitivity to Augustinian language and foreshadows important elements of his later autobiographical strategy.<sup>8</sup>

"In Memory of Arthur Winslow" is divided into four parts, each with two ten-line stanzas. The formal arrangement masks considerable shift in tone as well as attitude toward the poem's subject, Lowell's



maternal grandfather.

The poem begins with a specific time and setting: Easter, Boston, the Charles River, and Phillips House, a part of Massachusetts General Hospital. It is a deathbed scene, with Lowell's grandfather dying from cancer. The episode is placed in the context of classical and Christian mythology:

This Easter, Arthur Winslow, less than dead  
 Your people set you up in Phillips House  
 To settle off your wrestling with the crab--  
 The claws drop flesh upon your yachting blouse  
 Until longshoreman Charon come and stab  
 Through your adjusted bed  
 And crush the crab. On Boston Basin, shells  
 Hit water by the Union Boat Club wharf:  
 You ponder why the coxes' squeakings dwarf  
 The resurrexit dominus of all the bells.

The inclusion of Charon and "resurrexit dominus" is an example of what Hugh Staples, one of Lowell's first and best critics, had in mind when he noted that "symbolism drawn from both Christian and pagan traditions are harmoniously fused" (Staples 29). In the resolution of the poem, Christian imagery transcends the classical, reminiscent of Augustine's discussion of the regione dissimilitudinis; Augustine commented on parallels between the Platonist and Christian message, but also observed differences; for example, "In the same books I also read of the Word, God, that his birth came not from human stock, not from nature's will or man's, but from God. But I did not read in them that the Word was made flesh and came to dwell among us" (145).

In Lowell's portrait, the nonhuman is continuously animated: claws "drop flesh," boats "hit water," the sound of coxes "dwarf," bells speak of the risen Christ. Easter prefigures, by implication,

the resurrection of Arthur Winslow into eternal life; the time of year becomes significant for personal drama. A single phrase, "less than dead," is given double referents, to both Winslow and his relatives. Something sinister is also implied. His relatives "set you up" as if staging the event; they do so in the spirit of reconciling some debt, to "settle off" an implied obligation; Winslow's bed has been "adjusted," to facilitate the death; it is as if they are mercantilists who hired the "longshoreman" Charon to conduct the journey to the Acheron.

Their plan is subverted. In the next stanza the violent imagery of "wrestling" and "stab" yield to the appearance of Christ: "risen Jesus walks the waves to run/ Arthur upon a trumpeting swan/ Beyond Charles River to the Acheron/ Where the wide waters and their voyager are one." It is victory for Christ and mystical union for Winslow. As Augustine put it, "you have sent your Spirit from on high, through Christ, who ascended into heaven and opened the floodgates of his bounty, so that the flowing waters might enrich your city" (320).

When the scene shifts to Winslow's burial in Dunbarton, New Hampshire, the poet becomes part of the setting:

The stones are yellow and the grass is grey  
 When we ride you to the Dunbarton Hill  
 In a mortician's Packard limousine;  
 The dozen Winslows and the Starks half fill  
 The granite plot and the dwarfed pines so green  
 From watching for the day  
 When the great year of the little yoeman come  
 Bringing the Mayflower Compact and the faith  
 That made the Pilgrim Makers take a lathe  
 To point their wooden steeples lest the Word be dumb.

At the scene of his family burial ground, Lowell is able to place himself within both family history and American history. Winslow's and

Stark families included Edward Winslow, the governor of Plymouth, who came over on the Mayflower; and General John Stark, a Revolutionary War general who founded Dunbarton. Lowell's ancestors continued to distinguish themselves in later years and included clergymen, poets, and a Harvard president (Axelrod 241). Both rock and tree are "watching," as if for a second coming of Christian Pilgrims; instead, Lowell portrays the coming of death, expressed by a symbol of modern materialism, the "Packard limousine." Other lines suggest a role for the poet and an identification with his forbears: the Pilgrims helped design this "plot" and were "Makers" who undertook action "lest the Word be dumb."

Lowell's sense that Christian faith suffered decline and that his family, including Arthur Winslow, are implicated, becomes clearer when he looks back five years later:

This Easter, Arthur Winslow, five years gone  
 I came to mourn you, not to praise the craft  
 That netted you a million dollars, late  
 Mining in California's bays  
 Then lost it all in Boston real estate;  
 Then from the train, at dawn,  
 Leaving Columbus in Ohio, shell  
 On shell of our stark culture struck the sun  
 To fill my head with all our feathers won  
 When Cotton Mather wrestled with the fiends of Hell.

Arthur Winslow was a kind of fisherman in a "craft," who "netted" gold in "bays." As the poem's first stanza made clear, he would end up "wrestling with the crab." The "shells" which skimmed the water by the Union Boat Club in Boston and whose "coxes' squeaking" competed with church bells, are duplicated in the Midwest by factories, "shell/ On shell of our stark culture." The scene causes Lowell to return to a

more heroic vision and earlier times of religious victory. A void exists between everyday reality and projected resurrection. As Augustine said in the Confessions, one could hope God was "my helmsman when I ran adrift, and you did not desert me as I travelled along the broad way of the world" (118).

That hope is expressed in "A Prayer For My Grandfather To Our Lady," subtitle of the final two stanzas of the poem. It sustains the poem's water symbolism, specific Boston referents, and echoes of classical myth:

Mother, for these three hundred years or more  
 Neither our clippers nor our slavers reached  
 The haven of your peace in this Bay State:  
 Neither my father nor his father. Beached  
 On these dry flats of fishy real estate,  
 O Mother, I implore  
 Your scorched, blue thunderbolts of love to pour  
 Buckets of blessings on my burning head  
 Until I rise like Lazarus from the dead:  
Lavabis nos et super nivem bealabor.

On Copley Square I saw you hold the door  
 To Trinity, Kingsolving's Church, and saw  
 The painted Paradise of harps and lutes  
 Sink like Atlantis in the Devil's jaw  
 And knock the Devil's teeth out by the roots;  
 But when I strike for shore  
 I finds no painted idols to adore:  
 Hell is burned out, heaven's harp-strings are slack.  
 Mother, run to the chalice, and bring back  
 Blood on your finger-tips for Lazarus who was poor.

While the plea for salvation is clear, several ambiguities are apparent. Does "For My Grandfather" mean that the prayer is composed by Lowell for his grandfather to offer? This seems beyond the capacity of Arthur Winslow, because Mariology was excluded from Pilgrim theology. Why is Lowell certain that none of his ancestors reached the "haven of your peace"? Did they err because they were Calvinist, or because

their culture precipitously degenerated into materialism? If Lowell is the "I" of the prayer, why is he pleading here, since none of his errors have been recounted?

Perhaps the prayer was based on a number of assumptions, some of which had implications for Lowell as future autobiographer. There was, indeed, something inherently wrong with Puritan culture; it was born cursed, and easily corrupted. Even the outpouring of artistic temper, a "painted Paradise of harps and lutes," actually resembled non-Christian culture, "like Atlantis," and had to be destroyed. The value inherent in the Pilgrims' progress must be subjected to a transvaluation, as Augustine did when he reappraised Platonist texts. Further, Lowell may have considered himself as both inheritor and representative of all the families of Lowell, Winslow and Stark. To pray as "I" was to pray for all.

More specifically, the prayer represented a turning to the Catholic, often associated with the feminine; Augustine referred to "our Catholic mother the Church" (205). Lowell associated this Mother with power, fire, cleansing, and then with a Eucharist meal. Similarly, when Augustine prayed for his mother Monica, he associated her with the sacrament; when Monica expressed her final wishes to her son "all she wanted was that we should remember her at your altar, where she had been your servant day after day without fail. For she knew that at your altar we receive the holy Victim, who cancelled the decree made at our prejudice" (204). Art as artifice, "painted Paradise" and "Painted idols," were to be set aside.

The overall motif of death and rebirth, the vision of one who will "rise like Lazarus from the dead," was, of course, central to the pattern of Augustinian autobiography, as well as general Christian culture. In the first book of the Confessions, Augustine described his plight and reported, "in the midst of these things, I was dying, separated from you, my God and my life" (330). He described the theme of his life when he said, "I held back from the step by which I should die to death and become alive to life" (175).

Lowell's poem is exceptionally detailed, dated, with most specifics carrying symbolic value. The world is animated, the nonhuman personified, the culture is materialist and guilty. All are in need of prayer and transformation; Lowell himself is individual and representative, and as an artist has a critical role to play.

## II.

Lowell never offered a clear explanation of his later, seeming change of heart concerning religion and gradual setting aside of religious imagery. In 1946 he told his wife he no longer considered himself Catholic, but in 1949 he informed friends he was going back to the Church. He sought readmission to the Episcopal Church in Boston in 1955, and in 1977, contemplating his death, asked to be buried at a high mass service (Hamilton 121, 150, 224, 468). In Life Studies Christianity does seem to be more an element of historical than a personal commitment. But in 1961, when he dedicated Life Studies to Frederick Seidel he gave a slight interpretation:

Then there is the question whether my poems are religious, or whether they just use religious imagery. My last poems [those in Life Studies] don't use religious imagery, they don't use symbolism. In many ways they seem to be more religious than the early ones which are full of symbols and references to God. I'm sure the symbols and the Catholic framework didn't make the poems religious experiences. Yet I don't feel my experience changed very much. It seems to me it's clearer to me now than it was then, but it's very much the same sort of thing that went into the religious poems -- the same sort of struggle, light and darkness, the flux of experience. The morality seems much the same. But the symbolism is gone; you couldn't possibly say what creed I believed in. I've wondered myself often. Yet what made the earlier poems valuable seems to be some recording of experience and that seems to be what makes the later ones. (CP, 250)

Lowell is not his best critic. Life Studies is essentially a symbolic work. In the opening passage from "Behold the Alps" previously quoted, surely Swiss, Everest and Paris all carry symbolic value in Lowell's discussion of nature and civilization. He denies symbolism, then evokes two of the most traditional symbols of all, darkness and light. In the Confessions the same passage that describes the regione dissimilitudinis says, "All who know the truth know this Light, and all who know this Light know eternity" (147). There is something of Etienne Gilson's perspective in Lowell's comment, at least at this time. Gilson said, "It is a curious fact, and well worth noting, that if our contemporaries no longer appeal to the City of God and the Gospel...it is not in the least because they have escaped their influence. Many of them live by what they choose to forget" (Gilson 17).

Beginning in 1949 and continuing almost to the end of his life, Lowell spent periods of varying lengths hospitalized for manic-depressive illness. Life Studies was partly an outgrowth of a never-

completed prose autobiography Lowell began in 1954 after an extended stay at Payne Whitney Clinic (Hamilton 220). He stated his intention humbly: "I am writing my autobiography literally to 'pass the time.' I almost doubt if the time would pass at all otherwise. However, I also hope the result will supply me with swaddling clothes, with a sort of immense bandage of grace and ambergis for my hurt nerves. Therefore the book will stop with the summer of 1934. A few months after the end of this book, I found myself" (CP, 362).

The prose of these sentences, fluid and casual, incorporates important ideas: writing about the past is a means to transcend an oppressive present; autobiography, while exposing the self, actually offers comfort, a protection one can express in the Christian images of "swaddling clothes" and "grace;" a pattern he hoped to recount was the Augustinian one of a self who feels lost and is then "found." For the recovering patient it would be a proof that at one moment he did feel defined.

The motifs of the Life Studies poems -- mental illness, Lowell's World War Two imprisonment as a conscientious objector, decaying civilization and declining families, childhood experience, painful memories, marital stress -- as well as its less formal style, defined a seemingly new mode in American poetry, distinct from the impersonality and formalism of previous decades. Exponents of the style included W. D. Snodgrass, John Berryman, Ann Sexton and Sylvia Plath. They were given the epithet "confessional" poets, and their influence proved extensive (Perkins 382 ff.)



To most critics the work of Life Studies now appears highly stylized and less revelatory than when first published, even in comparison to Lowell's later work. One might compare two sonnet monologues, both portrayed as being spoken by Lowell's second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick. The first is from Life Studies:

"The hot night makes us keep our bedroom windows open.  
 Our magnolia blossoms. Life begins to happen.  
 My hopped up husband drops his home disputes  
 and hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes,  
 free-lancing out along the razor's edge.  
 This screwball might kill his wife, then take the pledge.  
 Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust...  
 It's the injustice...he is so unjust--  
 whiskey-blind, swaggering home at five.  
 My only thought is how to keep alive.  
 What makes him tick? Each night now I tie  
 ten dollars and his car key to my thigh....  
 Gored by the climacteric of his want,  
 he stalls above me like an elephant."  
 (LS, 88)

The heroic couplets contain the sentiment, and the speaker is, for all the melodrama, a bit detached. In The Dolphin, published in 1973, the speaker is identified without doubt as Hardwick; part of the discussion concerns their daughter, Harriet. The monologue is epistolary:

"I despair of letters. You say I wrote H. isn't  
 interested in the thing happening to you now.  
 So what? A fantastic untruth, misprint, something;  
 I meant the London scene's no big concern, just you...  
 She's absolutely beautiful, gay, etc.  
 I've a horror of turmoiling her before she flies  
 to Mexico, alone, brave, half Spanish-speaking.  
 Children her age don't sit about talking the thing  
 about their parents. I do talk about you,  
 and I have never denied I miss you...  
 I guess we'll make Washington this weekend;  
 it's a demonstration, like all demonstrations,  
 repetitious, gratuitous, unfresh...just needed.  
 I hope nothing is mis-said in this letter."  
 (D, 58)

The Dolphin drew themes from the dissolution of Lowell's marriage to Hardwick and subsequent marriage to Caroline Blackwood in England. In the sonnet from The Dolphin, syntax is more casual, topics fragmented, and many referents left unclear. The poem represents some of the movement in Lowell's autobiographical work since 1959.

In approaching Day by Day several of Lowell's comments on autobiography over the years seem particularly relevant, especially his remarks on veracity, unity and the influence of present time. Of the poems in Life Studies he told Frederick Seidel,

I've invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there's a lot of artistry, I hope, in the poems. Yet there's this thing: if a poem is autobiographical--and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing and of historical writing--you want the reader to say, This is true. In something like Macauley's History of England, you think you're really getting William III. That's as good as a good plot in a novel. And so there was always that standard of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry -- the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell.

(CP, 247)

Lowell's sense of fiction in history and the relationship of autobiography to art helped him fashion richer textures. In the late 1960's he began to write a series of sonnets based on current and retrospective events in his life. The cycle was continually expanded, revised, and published in a number of versions, including Notebook (1971) and History (1973). In one comment on the work Lowell mentioned sensitivity to the "instant," and the relationship of poems within the series: "Notebook mixes the day-to-day with history -- the lamp by a

tree out this window on Radcliffe Square...or maybe the rain, but always the instant, sometimes changing to the lost. A flash of haiku to lighten the distant. Has this something to do with the rhymeless sonnet? One poem must lead toward the next, but is fairly complete; it can stride on stilts, or talk" (CP, 270-71). Even more elaborately stated, the Afterward to Notebook maintained that "the poems in this book are written as one poem, intuitive in arrangement, but not a pile or sequence of related material. It is less an almanac than the story of my life....The time is summer, an autumn, a winter, a spring, another summer....I have flashbacks to what I remember, and fables inspired by impulse. Accident threw up subjects, and the plot swallowed them -- famished for human chances" (N, "Afterward"). Lowell's discussion of "the instant" is reminiscent of Etienne Gilson's analysis of Saint Augustine:

Saint Augustine considers the universe as a kind of unfolding, a distensio, which imitates in its flowing forth the eternal present and total simultaneity of the life of God....Successive instants that would otherwise simply arrive and pass away into the void, are gathered up and held in his memory, which thus constructs a duration, just as the sight gathers up dispersed matter into a framework of space.  
(Gilson, 386)

Lowell's conception is less lofty. But as he contemplated Day by Day he did place it in an Augustinian context. Writing to his long time friend Elizabeth Bishop about the project, he spoke of a "journey of the soul":

I regret the Letters in Dolphin [like the Hardwick sonnet quoted above]. The only way to make a narrative was to leave a few. I hesitated to send you a copy of the Selected Poems, but Giroux [his publisher] acted on his own; which

is right because the bulk of them were written under your eyes.

Autobiography predominates, almost forty years of it. And now more journey of the soul in my new book. I feel I, or someone, wrote everything beforehand. If I had read it at twenty would I have been surprised, would I have dared to go on?

(quoted in Hamilton, 455)

Students and admirers of autobiography can only be grateful that Lowell did go on to create, in his final years, a work of courage and strength.

### III.

Lowell began Day by Day in late summer, 1973. It was published in August, 1977, a few weeks before his death, and won the National Book Critics Circle Award for that year. It was initially criticized for its fragmentation, obscurity and lack of cohesion. Helen Vendler defended the book as possessed of "a form governed by intellectual mastery, a steady eye, and a genius for the natural affinities of words." In a later tribute she said, in an ingenuous voice characteristic of Lowell himself, "Without endorsing an imitative form, we can yet find in Lowell's casualness, his waywardness, his gnomic summaries, his fragmentary reflections, authentic representations of a sixty-year-old memory (Vendler 152, 168).

The poem "Seventh Year" indicates some of the difficulty with Day by

Day:

Seven years ago, my instantly dispelled  
dream of putting the place on its feet--

never again--I see it clearly,  
but with the blind glass eyes of a doll.

This early January  
 the shallow brown lakes on the drive  
 already catch  
 the first spring negative of the birds.

The burnished oxweight cows  
 now come closer to us and crash  
 foot over foot through vine and glass--

lowing to one another with the anxious  
 human voice of a boy calling cows.

We are at least less run-down  
 than Longfellow's house on Brattle Street,  
 where only his bearded bust of Zeus,  
 his schoolday self, is young,

where the long face of his wife  
 who burned to death  
 ages as if alive

as Longfellow, whose hand held  
 the dismissive laurel bough  
 that hides his grave.

The New England Augustans  
 lived so long one thought  
 the snow of their hair would never melt.

Where is Hart Crane,  
 the disinherited, the fly by night,  
 who gave  
 the drunken Dionysus firmer feet?

To each the rotting natural of his age.

Dividing the minute we cannot prolong,  
 I stand swaying at the end of the party,  
 a half-filled glass in each hand--  
 I too swayed  
 by the hard infatuate wind of love  
 they cannot hear.

The shape of the poem itself seems broken, with stanza length  
 varying from one to six lines. The time frame swings from the present  
 to the nineteenth century, then to the twentieth and back to the  
 present -- some other locale and a divided minute. Cows have a human

voice, a dead woman seems alive. There is a sense of loss -- of a house, a life, reputation, the ability to seize opportunity. The mood is consistent, but we have no idea where we are or why. Pronouns wander without antecedents. Lines sounding vaguely ironic are grounded in no stimulus: "I see it clearly,/ but with the blind glass of a doll." References to myth, Zeus and Dionysus, so prevalent in Lowell's early poems, seem gratuitous.

"Seventh Year" only makes sense in the context of the entire work, but even then, only as a mood piece. Other poems as mysterious as this in Day by Day are "Lives," "Art of the Possible," and "We Took Our Paradise." Unlike Augustine, Lowell often loses sight of his audience, presuming, perhaps justifiably, the reader is familiar with his biography and his previous works.

In Day by Day, Lowell is far more successful when he grounds a subgroup of poems in some discernible pattern, whether of image, season, theme, or experience; or when he develops a detailed character study, or focuses upon some significant event. To understand Lowell's submerged narrative requires comparison with a detailed chronology of Lowell's life, as well as corroboration from knowledge of publication dates for the poems. It is very easy to misread. For example, "Last Walk?" appears early in Day by Day, yet it records events, without indication, a year consequent to the sequence closing the volume. Not knowing this, one could assume the estranged couple of "Last Walk?" were reconciled. Instead, we have a symbolic drama which partially loses relationship to the autobiographical subject. Another subgroup

of poems set in Boston compresses events of several years into a single year. Lowell is responsive to the contradictory pressures upon the autobiographer, to acknowledge the influence of the present and at the same time shape a coherent work, but he is not always successful.

During the period from 1973 to 1977 chronicled in Day by Day, Lowell taught for several semesters at Harvard, and lived in England, then Ireland, with his wife, Caroline Blackwood. The period was marked by gradual estrangement within the marriage and by sickness; Blackwood suffered from serious back pain, and Lowell was hospitalized several times in quick succession for continuing manic-depressive illness. In the course of these years several events caused Lowell to reflect upon his past: the death of close friends and mentors; a continuing relationship with Elizabeth Hardwick and their daughter, Harriet; the growth of his young son, Sheridan, born in 1971; and times of meditation upon his parents, ancestors, his life's work, aging and death.

Like Life Studies, Day by Day is divided into several major parts. Part One may be read as offering variations on the classical and Augustinian theme of exile and return. Part Two contains fifteen meditations on potential and realized loss: of friends, family, lovers, and life itself. The more complex Part Three, divided into three subgroups, is dedicated to Caroline Blackwood and takes up various aspects of that relationship; it also recapitulates earlier portraits of exile and loss. The first subgroup portrays Lowell and his family in late summer at Milgate, Blackwood's home in Kent; the

second is set in Boston, with Lowell living by himself. The final subgroup most closely resembles the last section of Life Studies, as well as the Augustinian paradigm: a symbolic journey of death and rebirth in which the language of Augustine is preserved as a vehicle of interpretation.

Like an autobiographer approaching his work, a reader confronting Day by Day becomes conscious of imposing structure in order to understand. Lowell's remarks on a particular aspect of his life are often scattered and contradictory. I will discuss two of Lowell's major themes, the nature of the life cycle and the functions of memory and language; I will then explicate the more cohesive final poems. I acknowledge imposing an artificial order upon Lowell's life cycle poems, but in discussing the final section of the book I treat the poems in the order in which Lowell presented them. Because of my concern with the Augustinian paradigm, I foreground religious imagery which often appears as a trace or casual reference.

### The Life Cycle

Lowell's portrayal of childhood begins with the child in the womb. The poem "Marriage" compares Lowell and his family with the couple in Jan Van Eyck's painting, The Arnolfini Marriage, in which a man and woman stand side by side in a bedroom, and the woman is obviously pregnant. Lowell, Caroline Blackwood, together with Blackwood's three children, were being photographed:



We were middle-class and verismo  
 enough to suit Van Eyck,  
 when we crowded together in Maidstone,  
 patriarch and young wife  
 with our three small girls  
 to pose in Sunday-best.  
 The shapeless comfort of your flowered frock  
 was transparent against the light,  
 but the formal family photograph in color  
 shows only a rousing brawn of shoulder  
 to tell us you were pregnant.

For there, Sheridan, though unborn,  
 was a center of symmetry;  
 even then he was growing in hiding  
 toward gaucheness and muscle--  
 to be a war-  
 chronicler of vast inaccurate memory.  
 Later, his wierd humor  
 made him elf and dustman,  
 like him, early risers.  
 This summer, he is a soldier--  
 unlike father or mother,  
 or anyone he knows,  
 he can choose both sides:  
 Redcoat, Minuteman, or George the Third...  
 the ambivalence of the Revolution that made him  
 half-British, half-American.

The poem carries a trace of religious imagery. The father is "patriarch," the children are in their "Sunday-best." The painting of Van Eyck was to serve as a marriage document in "an age of Faith," as the poem later describes the period. The unborn Sheridan is idealized, a "center of symmetry." After birth the child will possess a rare gift in the world: he can "choose both sides." The poem employs one of Lowell's fundamental strategies for self-representation, a comparison of himself with another -- another person, time, or classical figure. The people in the painting are somewhat like the people being photographed. Sheridan, in his ability to choose both sides, is "unlike father or mother" and other differences are implied; perhaps they lack

"symmetry," and are therefore unbalanced. Implicit, too, is a foreshadowing; the son, like the father, will become a "war chronicler;" a previous poem describes Sheridan with a "plastic armory" (68). Lowell, whose work partly chronicled his reaction to wars in Europe, Korea and Vietnam, also possesses "inaccurate memory." Sensitive to American history, he is, like his son, a product of "the Revolution."

"Marriage" ends in prayer, but it suggests that the ritualization of life may be a form of self-deception and conceal the fact that such moments, like birth, are fleeting. But the moment also becomes art for Van Eyck and a sacrament, traditional source for grace. The parallel ends in foreboding:

They wait and pray  
as if the airs of heaven  
that blew on them when they married  
were now a common visitation,  
not a miracle of lighting  
for the photographer's sacramental instant.

Giovanni and Giovanna,  
who will outlive him by 20 years...

A second pre-birth poem is more brutal. "Fetus," based on a newspaper article concerning an abortion trial in Boston, is infused with irony: "so many killers are cleared of killing,/ yet we are shocked a fetus can be murdered--." In the womb, the fetus could not be supported by Puritan culture; it was "too young to be strengthened/ by our old New England hope of heaven/ made unsentimental by our certainty of hell," as if such belief bolsters those who are able to be born. Lowell's unspoken question is: what would be lost if one were to perish as a fetus? His implied answer is that one would lose

personal history, with all its contradictions in art, thought, time, economy, science and perceptions. The fetus "has no past,/ not even an immovable wall of paintings--/ no room to stir its thoughts,/ no breathless servility,/ overacting the last day,/ writhing like a worm/ under the contradicting rays of science--/ no scared eye on the audience." The fetus is emblem of the man who is born and then dies, however. Both "have nothing to take."

The child in the womb is one image of prelapsarian existence Lowell represents more symbolically in the poem "Ants," centered on the kind of animal image recurrent throughout Lowell's career. To begin with, ants, unlike young writers in the time of Ezra Pound and later, are not under an injunction "to make it new." They are conserving, proud, fearless, unthreatened, incapable of being manipulated. Their society is not based on change, cannot be corrupted, and is self-assured: "like the Chinese traditional painter/ renewing his repertory flowers--/ each touch a stroke for tradition." Lowell projects his own history, felt as so much weight, into this scene:

I lie staring under an old oak,  
 stubby, homely, catacombed by ants,  
 more of a mop than a tree.  
 I fear the clumsy boughs will fall.  
 Is its weak, wooden heart strong enough  
 To bear my weight if I should climb  
 From knob to knob to the top?  
 How uneasily I am myself,  
 as a child I found the sky too close.  
 Why am I childish now and ask  
 for daffy days when I tried to read  
Walden's ant-war to you for love?

A vision of childlike innocence is preserved when Lowell portrays his own son, whose weapons are harmless, whose language is unaffected, and

whose remarks are ingenuously on the mark. Yet the adult Lowell can prophecy and see the child inheriting a society far different from "Ants," one of change and death. In "Sheridan," he writes, "Today/ only the eternal midday separates/ you from our unchangeably sunset and liver-invigorated faces."

Lowell recounts several misadventures of his childhood which take on a more sinister aspect, charged with the symbolism of fire. His grandfather, Arthur Winslow, appears in "Grass Fires," set at the Winslow country home. By accident, the young Lowell, trying to smoke out a rabbit from his hole, sets fire to grass and then to a tree favored by the grandfather. Like a vengeful god, Winslow curses the child: "'You damned little fool,' nothing to quote, but for him original." The towering man felt the attack personally, but it was the young Lowell, at least in memory, who put out the fire. Looking back from a different perspective, it was illusion to think the child "snuffed out the inextinguishable root." The aging Lowell cannot alter the elements and all they represent: "I can do little,/ as little now as then,/ about the infernal fires--/ I cannot blow out a match." Nevertheless, a child is one who preserves the essentially positive elements of the Christian mystery. He quotes a child saying, "heaven is a big house/ with lots of water and flowers--/ you go in a trunk" (38).

Lowell's portraits of his adolescence and young adulthood are often affectionate and warm. In a poem to Peter Taylor he says, "America once lay uncropped and golden,/ it left no tarnish on our windshield.../ In a generation under Prohibition,/ The Red Revoltuion, the Crash,/ cholesterol and bootleg--/ we were artisans." Now, in present time,

"our loyalty to one another sticks like love" (24). In the almost formal quatrains to Jean Stafford, he thinks of his first wife and fellow Catholic and recalls, "our days of the great books, scraping and Roman mass--/ your confessions had such a vocabulary/ you were congratulated by the priests--/ I pretended my impatience was concision" (29).

Lowell's most extensive use of the strategy of self-presentation through identification occurs in poems about John Berryman. "For John Berryman" begins with similarities and ends in prayer, as if Berryman's suicide in 1972 was a kind of martyrdom. The two poets, says Lowell, shared "the same life,/ the generic one/ our generation offered." Its phases included study, teaching, grants, travel, drinking, sex and a commitment to craft:

first students, then with our own,  
 our galaxy of grands maitres,  
 our fifties fellowships  
 to Paris, Rome and Florence,  
 veterans of the Cold War not the War--  
 all the best of life...  
 then daydreaming to drink at six,  
 waiting for the iced fire,  
 even the feel of the frosted glass,  
 like waiting for a girl...  
 if you had waited.  
 We asked to be obsessed with writing,  
 and we were.

He cherishes "the good old days/ when we sat by a cold lake in Maine,/ talking about the Winter's Tale." Then he considers what separates them; Berryman had "humor." Now what divides them more fundamentally is Berryman's death. For Lowell, often criticized for egoism, thinking of Berryman takes him out of himself, and he prays:

To my surprise, John,  
 I pray to not for you,  
 think of you not myself,  
 smile and fall asleep.

The presence of Berryman is also felt in other poems. When suicide is personified in the poem "Suicide," the voice may be thought of as Berryman's:

Why haven't you followed me here,  
 as you followed me everywhere else?  
 You cannot do it  
 with vague fatality  
 or muffled but lethal sighs.

Lowell's response may be interpreted as answer to Berryman, partly defining their difference: "Do I deserve credit/ for not having tried suicide--/ or am I afraid/ the exotic act will make me blunder." Berryman may be the subject of "The Spell," a prophetic figure from whom "we almost expected a miracle,/ when on good days at the dot of six/ he changed/ his room-chilled black coffee/ to spirits in our bitter mugs." The powerful nature of Berryman in Lowell's life is perhaps seen in the poem's opening lines: "Sometimes I begin to fear a dead/ lost spirit who claimed he could haunt--/ perhaps he could hex me... only by haunting himself." Finally, in one of the volume's closing poems, Berryman is explicitly identified as the friend in the following:

I read an article on a friend,  
 as if recognizing my obituary:  
 "Though his mother loved her son consumingly,  
 she lacked a really affectionate nature;  
 so he always loved what he missed.

(DBD, 121)

Lowell's development of the figure of Berryman in Day by Day is also one of the ways he approaches the theme of aging. In one couplet

he asks, "Do you wake dazed like me,/ and find your lost glasses in a shoe?" (27) At times Lowell speaks of aging with great tenderness. One consolation for the aging person is that he is no longer the object of envy (22). The sharp opposition between the self and one's environment disappears, since both are in decay. He still wishes to be a participant in life: "I see myself change in my changed friends--/ may I live longer, yet break no record" (78). At Harvard the environment reacts to him as if he were young, but he notices he is surrounded by people who may have been barely born when he was first in Cambridge. He now identifies with his grandfather, as he is treated for heart disease in the same Phillips' House of Massachusetts General Hospital where Arthur Winslow died: "Twice he was slipped champagne and oysters....I too am passed my half-bottle...no oyster" (87). On the other hand, age provokes fears, including those of separation, senility, and death. Religious images send mixed signals:

In a church,  
 the Psalmist's glass mosaic Shepherd  
 and bright green pastures  
 seem to wait  
 with the modish faithlessness  
 and erotic daydream  
 of art nouveau for our funeral. (24)

Lowell's sustained image for the life-giving and life-taking process throughout Day by Day is breath, as in "the sweet agitation of the breath of Pan" (97), or this passage which returns us to Land of Unlikeness:

After fifty  
 the clock can't stop,  
 each saving breath  
 takes something. This is riches:  
 the eminence not to be envied,  
 the account  
 accumulating layer and angle,  
 face and profile,  
 50 years of snapshots,  
 the ladder of ripening likeness. (22)

### Language and Memory

Throughout Day by Day Lowell meditates upon the two essential capacities for the autobiographer, language and memory. He gestures toward contemporary thought, speaking of being "caged in fiction's iron bars" (105) and "the memorable must be foregone;/ it never matters,/ except in front of our eyes" (85), thus acknowledging the constructed quality of language and the power of the present. Language is an originating and transforming principle. When he introduces a classical allusion to Ulysses and Circe, he begins, "Ten years before Troy, ten years before Circe--/ things changed to the names he gave them" (3). But overall, Lowell's perspective seems much more aligned simply with that of an artisan working with intractable materials, and that of an old man who simply can't remember.

Lowell recalls an early experience with language. In "The Day" he remembers seeing a herd of cows on a hill: "they were child's daubs in a book/ I read before I could read" (53). He seems particularly conscious of the play of language. He observes his son speaking "in Kentish cockney: weir guns" (68); and in a couplet about Jean Stafford he writes, "Towmahss Mahnn: that's how you said it.../ 'That's how



Mann must say it, ' I thought" (29). He recalls Robert Frost's admonition to him, "If you could come a little nearer the language of the tribe" (94). But it's not all play. The opening of "Ten Minutes," ostensibly about a bedsheet, may also be read as metaphor for a sheet of paper:

The single sheet keeps shifting on the double bed,  
the more I kick it smooth, the less it covers;  
it is the bed I made.  
Others have destinations, my train is aimless.  
I know I will fall off into the siding and thistle--  
imagining the truth will hide my lies.

Lowell also captures a wonderful spirit of youthful braggadocio: recalling a time in New York with a friend, the two asserted, "'If life could write,/ it would have written like us'" (46).

Lowell's memory could be a source of pleasure, especially as an antidote to depression, and a conserving principle. The dynamics of memory required the exercise of the imagination. Thinking of Stafford, he says, "I can go on imagining you/ in your Heidelberrry braids and Bavarian/ peasant aprons you wore three or four years/ after your master's at twenty-one" (29). Nevertheless, neither memory nor imagination can alter facts, nor change what has been written: "We cannot recast the faulty drama,/ play the child,/ unable to align/ his toppling, elephantine script,/ the hieroglyphic letters/ he sent home" (85). The child is Lowell.

Memory has a critical cultural and historical dimension, a source of anxiety: "England like America has lasted/ long enough to fear its past" (30). Given such fear, Lowell sees value in memory loss: there are those "hoping to lose their minds:"

the wisdom of this sickness  
 is piously physical,  
 ripping up memory  
 to find your future--  
 old beauties, old masters  
 hoping to lose their minds before they lose their friends.  
 (38)

Memory loss could help one set aside the prospect of death: "If I had lived/ and could have forgotten/ that eventually it had to happen,/ even to children--/ it would have been otherwise" (15).

Finally, in one of the late poems in Day by Day, Lowell links aging, language and memory in what ultimately is a failure of meaning:

I am too weak to strain to remember, or give  
 recollection the eye of a microscope. I see  
 horse and meadow, duck and pond,  
 universal consolatory  
 description without significance,  
 transcribed verbatim by my eye.  
 (120)

This may be another ironic definition of what Lowell had earlier referred to as "the realistic memory " (85).

#### IV.

The most compelling sequence of poems Lowell wrote after "Life Studies" was the final group of eighteen poems in Day by Day. I suggest that "Day by Day," this title sequence, represents the transformation of the Augustinian autobiographical paradigm into a metaphor for the process of mental illness and recovery, and the saving grace of art.

The sequence opens and closes with prayer. The first line of "Turtle" is, "I pray for memory," the very capacity to imagine the past. Not only does the aging, reflecting mind suffer loss of memory,

the body endures a failing kinesthesia. Lowell is "an old turtle,/ absentminded, inelastic,/ kept afloat by losing touch.../ no longer able to hiss or lift/ a useless shield against the killer." A turtle is like a priest in a "brown Franciscan cowl," and also "a knight errant/ in a foolsdream of armor."

Using the language of cinematography, a "film of dreaming," Lowell imagines an attack by three snapping turtles. They appear like vultures and "what is dead in me wakes their appetite." With "high school nicknames on their tongues" they are reminiscent of the boys who taunted Lowell in his youth. The difference between these strong, young turtles and Lowell is apparent: "nothing has passed between us but time." Like a transcendent, permanent principle of death, the aggressors ask, "You've wondered where we were these years?/ Here we are." When Lowell, as turtle and victim, is attacked, eventually a snapper "works me underwater drowning my neck,/ as it claws away pieces of my flesh/ to make me small enough to swallow." Like Christ, the soldier and priest is poised to be consumed. In a gentler metaphor, one of the closing poems in the sequence says, "This winter, I thought/ I was created to be given away."

Lowell once began to write an essay, "Art and Evil," which was never completed. But in the essay he drew distinctions suggestive of the dynamic of contradiction at work in the "Day by Day" sequence.

Now, one of the hopeful characteristics of our human nature is that we cannot put up with evil for long, unless it is made exciting, and we cannot put up with excitement unless it is true. All parties agree on this, but from there on, the approach is classical or romantic. The

romantic approach is that man is the victim of the gods; this is on the whole the position of Greek classical drama, a position which the imagination will never quite disown. The classical approach is man's abuse of God's love; this is the position, on the whole, of Plato and the world religions, a position they can never get rid of. Both sides call on Christ. Here I am tempted to overreach myself and address you for a half minute as a theologian and Christian apologist. I would like to say that I see being as made up of hierarchical elements: nature, man, society, the angels perhaps, and God. We see each element from time to time as good, indifferent, or bad, as black, white, or gray. The war of God and creation, of classicist and romantic goes on forever. What is special about Christ is that he takes both sides at once.

(CP, 133)

What emerges as the sequence develops is this dual vision of Lowell. He seems both suffering sinner and martyred saint. For Augustine, one progresses from error to transcendence. If Lowell's distinction is meaningful, Augustine sided with Plato. For Lowell, one could shift from one position to the other and back again, or hold both simultaneously. And, "from time to time," nature would seem far superior to man. Thus, the sequence will end in recovery but not redemption. The evil of mental illness is both "exciting" and "true."

After defining the time frame as the "Seventh Year," Lowell expresses the sense that time, one's own time, or natural time, cannot be prolonged, and that time is the instrument of physical and mental decay. In the poem "Shaving," there are "never enough hours in the day." Among the first signs of decline is an inability to focus on people, or make practical distinctions: "unable to follow the drift/ of children, their blurting third-degree. / For me,/ a stone is as

inflammable as a paper match." Lowell's failing health is mirrored by Caroline Blackwood. He first establishes a basis for identification. She, too, is writing ancestral memoirs of suffering, betrayal and death, and is a kind of religious figure "in the tallest, hardest armchair.../ out of character churchly," the posture as inappropriate to Blackwood as it would be to Lowell. They both bear the impulse of abandonment: "At the sick times, our slashing/ drastic decisions made us runaways."

Describing "Caroline in Sickness," Lowell implies that pain can be a source of religious illumination:

Tonight the full moon is stopped by trees  
or the wallpaper between our windows--  
On the threshold of pain,  
light doesn't exist,  
and yet the glow is smarting  
enough to read a Bible  
to keep awake and awake.

The repetition suggests both insight and insomnia. The source of Blackwood's illness, severe back pain, was an auto accident, and "thirty years later you still suffer/ your spine's spasmodic, undercover life," parallel to Lowell's sometimes hidden, but permanent and recurrent mental illness.

Blackwood then turns on Lowell. His persistent rhetorical strategy of identification goes too far; there are plain differences between them. His romanticism and talk of stars must stand in contrast to her stoicism and worldly indifference. Ironically, it is because of Lowell's ability to identify or emphathize which allows Blackwood to speak. Lowell says, "I give this voice to you/ with tragic diction to rebuke the stars." Blackwood repeats herself: "I am indifferent to

the stars--...I am indifferent--/ what woman has the measure of a man,/ who only has to care about himself/ and follow the stars'/ extravagant journey across the sky." Lowell poses the existentialist question: if God is dead, a god who is source and blame for suffering, would she then accept responsibility for her own being and "stand upright in spite of her spine?" Blackwood is able to match Lowell's irony. She understands the God of her ancestors, but "if God is dead/ how can I be certain another old man/ will drop again from the stars...A new old lover/ might hurt a thousand times worse." Lowell defines the relationship with an image from childhood, a seesaw, "one up, one down,/ one hitting bottom, the other/ flying through the trees--/ seesaw inseparables?" He ends with a question, as he echoes a poem placed earlier in the book, also about Blackwood; it was titled "Last Walk?"

Having encountered Lowell as victim, with the time frame narrowing from seventh year to "Ten Minutes", Lowell turns upon himself as sinner, his confession reflected in the accusations of others. To his mother he seemed selfish, to his friends he was taunting. He was a liar, fearful, without direction, a buffoon, his actions without purpose, his writing without truth. Even on such insignificant matters as telling the truth about insomnia, his wife calls him a poseur: "why, you haven't been awake ten minutes." Then a brief couplet presages mania, its shape is fear, anxiety and guilt: "I grow too merry,/ when I stand in my nakedness to dress."

With the poem "Visitors" Lowell begins his descent into hell and mental suffering more elaborated than he had ever described before in

poetry. It is initiated with the arrival of four ambulance drivers who waste no time robbing him of his dignity and his home. It suggests the poet sees himself Christ-like for "yesterday I was thirty-two, a threat/ to the establishment because I was young." He is a kind of proletarian hero since the ambulance light burns with "aristocratic negligence." In this descent one driver implies that the Augustinian paradigm as literary artifact is irrelevant: "Where you are going, Professor, you won't need your Dante." Having been sick so many times before, Lowell can see the point. Medicated, or, as he later described himself, a "thorazined fixture" (113), distinctions between cosmic polarities become irrelevant:

heaven and hell will be the same--  
to wait in foreboding  
without the nourishment of drama...  
assuming, then as now,  
this didn't happen to me--  
my little strip of eternity.

"Strip of eternity" no longer implies definable space, but its loss; he will be stripped of such a vision and, as he said in the previous poem, "stand in my nakedness" (109). Time, which has been continuously fragmented, is reduced to incoherence, "illegible with second-thoughts." Unlike Augustine, he is conscious that what is really lost is all time, diurnal and eternal.

At least in the retrospective act of composition, it is Lowell's sense of irony that is part of his salvation. Awaiting Lowell at the entrance to the mental hospital named "The Priory," as if a residence for clergy, is posed the equivalent of an angel, "blanche-white," or a Charon figure as in Lowell's early poem on Arthur Winslow. It is "a

bearded bust/ of dear, dead old Dr. Wood...our founder." Part religious figure, part psychological, "He looks like Sigmund Freud... cured by his purgatory of mankind." Lowell then spies a patient at a window whom he later meets and sees "pluck up coleslaw in his hands." These three evocations -- Freud, the founder, and the patient -- constitute the grouping of the poem's title, "Three Freuds," implying similarity among patient, doctor, and mentor; or founder, prophet, and follower. The poem ends with lines perhaps once spoken by Blackwood. In context they make Lowell seem a mystic:

When you emerge  
it may seem too late.  
You choose to go  
where you knew I could not follow.

A few months after his stay at The Priory in October, 1975, Lowell was placed in Saint Andrews Hospital in Northampton (Hamilton, 1982, p. 452), setting for the next poem, "Home." In his earlier "Life Studies" and in other prose writing, Lowell was particularly adept at poignant characterizations of mental patients. In the opening sonnet of "Home," Lowell includes a painter, an alcoholic and himself:

Our ears put us in touch with things unheard of-  
the trouble is the patients are tediously themselves,  
fussing, confiding...committed voluntaries,  
immune to the outsider's horror.  
The painter who burned both hands  
after trying to kill her baby, says,  
"Is there no one in Northampton  
who goes to the Continent in winter?"  
The alcoholic convert keeps smiling,  
"Thank you, Professor, for saving my life;  
you taught me homosexuality is a heinous crime."  
I hadn't. I am a thorazined fixture  
in the immovable square-cushioned chairs  
we preoccupy for seconds like migrant birds.



In common phrases Lowell is able to express hallucination, delusion and lack of control experienced by the patients. In the final couplet Lowell's ironic sense substitutes "preoccupy" for "occupy," and his habit of transforming himself into animals creates the image of a group of birds. Isolation is victory for the patients are "immune to the outsider's horrors." They can live with the illusion they chose to be there, but these "voluntaries" have actually been "committed," not out of conviction but out of compulsion. In his portrayal of himself as saint, Lowell can listen to the "alcoholic convert" praise him for "saving my life." His use of the sonnet form, here and later in the same poem, implies that Lowell is gaining some control over this round of illness. His irony seems unrelenting as he dramatizes a conversation between Blackwood and a doctor:

At visiting hours, you could experience  
my sickness only as desertion...  
Dr. Berners compliments you again,  
"A model guest...we would welcome  
Robert back to Northampton any time,  
the place suits him...he is so strong."

Blackwood's attitude toward Lowell's illness perhaps recalled a similar attitude within Lowell's family, which he reported in another unpublished autobiographical fragment. Implicit would be a comparison of Blackwood with his mother:

This Philadelphia illness [when Lowell was a toddler] was my first experience with the strange contraries of hardiness and sickness which were always a great part of our family life. At this time, I too came down with flu, which mysteriously lasted for three weeks. I felt very close to Mother because she took joy in giving me every comfort and care.... She made sickness something of a pleasure and a privilege and surrounded it with good sense, humor, and ease.

Yet, mentally or verbally, it was hardiness which was always praised. When, later, I simply would not be sick, hardiness was fine and yet somehow associated in my mind with perverse stubbornness, with an assertion of my will against my mother's. Hardiness could be hardness of heart, self-love, whereas a few convenient light illnesses were an announcement of one's tenderness, tolerance, and family spirit.

(CP, 304)

The mother sent confusing signals to the child, and he responded similarly.

In the final stanza of "Home" Lowell becomes prophet, supplicant and a "stricken soul." He imagines a conversation with the devil and predicts, "Less than ever I expect to be alive/ six months from now." In the final lines, with a tone of resignation, Lowell recalls the Blessed Virgin to contrast his attitude with hers; she was faithful, he was not:

The Queen of Heaven, I miss her,  
we were divorced. She never doubted  
the divided, stricken soul  
could call her Maria  
and rob the devil with a word.

Lowell's soul is not strong enough and his words are "illegible" (110). In "Day by Day" female figures are as contradictory as others; sometimes encouraging and supportive, at other times oppressive and critical.

In the plotting of "Day by Day," the poem "Shadow" represents the drama's epiphany, equivalent to Augustine's experience of revelation in a Milan garden. Attenuated as it is, and quickly followed by qualification, it occupies the pivotal position in the sequence. Augustine turned to the words of Paul; Lowell turns to Whitman.

Systematically, he sets aside argument and pose. Like Augustine, there is a recognition of both intimacy and separation. Substituting for the call of God is the call of the night. True to Lowell's temper, in the end God's heavenly trumpets are naturalized in the sounds of the asylum, and angels are orderlies:

I must borrow from Walt Whitman to praise the night,  
twice waking me smiling, mysteriously in full health,  
twice delicately calling me to the world.  
Praise be to sleep, and sleep's one god,  
the Voyeur, the Mother,  
Job's tempestuous, inconstant I AM...  
who soothes the doubtful mourners of the heart.

Yet to do nothing up there but adore,  
to comprehend nothing but the invisible night--  
fortunately the narcotized  
Christian heaven cannot be dreamed or staffed...

. . .

Yet the day is too golden for sleep,  
the traffic too sustained...  
twang-twang of the asylum's leaden bass--  
those bleached hierarchies  
moving and shifting like white hospital attendants,  
their single errand to reassure the sick.

Lowell knows that the mental hospital is not the true setting for his long-term recovery, as the next two poems, "Notice" and "Shifting Colors" make clear. As one "resident doctor said, 'We are not deep in ideas, imagination or enthusiasm--/ how can we help you?' Lowell knows that recovery for him includes a return to his art, to the season, a home, and an embrace of present time: "we must notice --/ we are designed for the moment." The phrase does not imply that the moment excludes any other time; rather it may be read as the moment expressive of all time.

As Augustine did in the final books of the Confessions, standing within the present, in the final poems Lowell thinks of his origins and destiny, offers thanksgiving, and prays for grace. There is a new humility present. Having read something about John Berryman, surely his previous attitude would be to identify with him. Now, "Alas, I can only tell my own story." The origins of the "real Robert Lowell" (CP, p. 247) include his discovery of what truly is essential to his rhetorical strategy; he "first found/ a humor for myself in images,/ farfetched misalliance/ that made evasion a revelation." Humor here may refer to alchemical humors, basic elements of the human constitution. And what seems even more fundamental to his origins is the disclosure, never before acknowledged, of the real psychic damage done to him early in life. Merrill Moore, the "family psychiatrist," who may also have been his mother's lover, told him something about himself and Lowell responded heroically:

When I was in college, he said, "You know  
you were an unwanted child?"  
Was he striking my parents to help me?  
I shook him off the scent by pretending  
anyone is unwanted in a medical sense--  
lust our only father...and yet  
in that world where an only child  
was a scandal--  
unwanted before I am?

The phrase "I am" recalls the earlier definition of God, "Job's tempestuous, inconstant I AM" (116), giving the phrase the added meaning of being unwanted by God. Lowell then turns to a pre-birth scene as he had in "Fetus" and "Marriage," poems which can be viewed as preparatory to this one. He imagines his pregnant mother who was living

at the time with her Lowell inlaws on Staten Island. The scene is actually compressed from prose he had written but not published twenty years earlier in which he said, "The two years before my birth are more real to me than the two years which followed" (CP 292). In prose he wrote, "She took pride in looking into the great Atlantic Ocean and saying, without a trace of fear or illusion, 'I wish I could die.'" (CP 300). Here he writes that he must not blame his mother "for yearning seaward, far from any home, and saying,/ 'I wish I were dead, I wish I were dead.'/ Unforgivable for a mother to tell her child--/ but you wanted me to share your good fortune,/ perhaps, by recapturing the disgust of those walks." The actual words, "I wish I could die," are in an earlier poem in the sequence, but they are spoken by Lowell, who thought of the phrase as a mock prayer, "as one would instinctively say Hail Mary,/ I wish I could die." (114). Lowell also retells another story of his youth he had earlier recounted in unpublished prose (CP 301-302), which reflected a desire to identify with Christ. Christ represented one who was wanted.

When I was three months,  
 I rocked back and forth howling  
 for weeks, for weeks each hour...  
 Then I found the thing I loved most  
 was the anorexia Christ  
 swinging on Nellie's gaudy rosary.  
 It disappeared, I said nothing,  
 but mother saw me poking strips of paper  
 down a floor-grate to the central heating.  
 "Oh Bobby, do you want to set us on fire?"  
 "Yes...that's where Jesus is." I smiled.

In the prose version, Lowell gave a more naturalistic and easily understood explanation. His nurse had a rosary and "what I loved more

than the beads of Katherine's rosary was the silver crucifix. It was heavy, intricate, and important, as I could see from Katherine's awed and loving glance upon it. Katherine told me about Jesus and I regret to recall that my feelings were highly egocentric: I saw, with despair, that I was second fiddle even in my nurse's affections" (CP 301). Identification in the poetry version seems to be ordinary jealousy in the prose version. As Lowell moves toward defining a critical aspect of the origins of his life, he concludes the poem by asking with an echo of a vengeful God, "Is the one unpardonable sin/ our fear of not being wanted?"

Unlike Augustine, who, when he completed the Confessions, had a whole career before him, Lowell calls his remaining time "The Downlook," when memories can be consoling and one can still confess error. In this atmosphere of elemental thinking, Lowell gives thanks, inspired by a gift he received, a "primitive head/ sent me across the Atlantic by my friend." But he plans his thanksgiving by invoking Christian prayer. The head was "to be offered Deo gratias in church." With this figure, Lowell completes his final identification, combining a longing and thanksgiving characteristic of the Confessions. Lowell concludes,

It is all childcraft, especially  
its shallow, chiseled ears,  
crudely healed scars, lumped out  
to listen to itself, perhaps, not knowing  
it was made to be given up.  
Goodbye nothing. Blockhead,  
I would take you to church,  
if any church would take you...

The scene at the church, hoping for entrance, is reminiscent of the conclusion to the Confessions, with its metaphor of a closed door: "We must ask it of you, seek it in you; we must knock at your door. Only then shall we receive what we ask and find what we seek; only then will the door be opened to us " (347).

In a 1974 tribute to John Crowe Ransom, Lowell wrote:

He knows why we do not come back to a photograph for aesthetic pleasure, no matter how colorful and dramatic, not even if it is of a person loved. We cannot feel, as in painting, the artist's mothering work of hand and mind. I once asked the master photographer Walker Evans how Vermeer's View of Delft (that perhaps first trompe l'oeil of landscape verisimilitude) differed from a photograph. He paused, staring, as if his eye could not give the answer. His answer was Ransom's-- art demands the intelligent pain or care behind each speck of brick, each spot of paint.

(CP 27)

The "Epilogue" to "Day by Day" takes up the same issue. Lowell becomes his own critic: "sometimes everything I write/ with the threadbare art of my eye/ seems a snapshot." But the important qualifier is "sometimes." The sequence ends in prayer and a call, like Augustine, to yield the will of man and hope for the grace of God to achieve a true reality; that is the destiny of the artist:

Pray for the grace of accuracy  
 Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination  
 stealing like the tide across a map  
 to his girl solid with yearning.  
 We are poor passing facts,  
 warned by that to give  
 each figure in the photograph  
 his living name.

## V.

When Saint Augustine looked to the future and the end of his life, he could imagine the glory of God. The young bishop could also anticipate that his ultimate transformation was a long way off. At sixty, Robert Lowell's view of the "life to come" was less optimistic and theocentric. In the first poem of Day by Day Lowell presents himself in the persona of Ulysses returning home:

Young,  
 he made strategic choices;  
 in middle life he accepts  
 his unlikely life to come;  
 he will die like others as the gods will,  
 drowning his last crew  
 in uncharted ocean,  
 seeking the unpeopled world beyond the sun,  
 lost in the uproarious rudeness of a great wind.

Yet Lowell was remarkably faithful to the Augustinian autobiographical paradigm. Despite its fragmented form, Day by Day projected a world of light and dark in which the present was foreground for memory, and the limited powers of language drew strength from the imagery of Christian pilgrimage. Progress for both protagonists included rejection of elements in the past, materialist or Platonist. They defined themselves not only by contrasting past and present, but also by identifying with others, like Bishop Ambrose, or John Berryman. Lowell and Augustine could imagine a prelapsarian past -- childhood in a garden setting. Both sought expressive power in dialogue, the ordering of narrative, recollection of dreams, and stories of exile and loss. Like Augustine, Lowell could envision a curve of events in life which embraced pivotal experiences of origin and error, transformation and epiphany, thanksgiving, death and rebirth.



But for Lowell order was undermined by his fundamental sense of not being at home in the world, unwanted. Too often, "caught in the augmenting storm,/ choice itself is wrong,/ nothing said or not said tells--/ a shapeless splatter of grounded rain..." (18). Recurrent cycles -- of love gained, then lost, the mind clear, then clouded -- were more felt than any ultimate progress.

In the Confessions the phenomenal world embodied symbols of transcendental reality. In Day by Day the language of Augustine offered symbols of an inspired, natural life. Both Augustine and Lowell turned to prayer.

Nurtured in formalism, Lowell in his later life could rejoice in the extravagance of romanticism, once considered banal: "Bright sun of my bright day,/ I thank God for being alive--/ a way of writing I once thought heartless" (75). Life in art was focus for his faith. In an elegy for a fellow artist, he said, "somewhere your spirit/ led the highest life;/ all places matched/ with that place/ come to nothing" (40). Heaven was supper, friends and language. Even a "single letter" was a worthy offering:

One wishes heaven had less solemnity  
 a sensual table  
 with half-filled bottles of red wine  
 set round the hectic carved roast--  
 Bohemia for ourselves  
 and the familiars of a lifetime  
 charmed to communion by resurrection--  
 running together in the rain to mail a single letter,  
 not the chafe and cling  
 of this despondent chaff.

(DBD 72)

Because of his consummate power to graphically portray the "despondent chaff" it is too easy to ignore that aspect of the autobiographer who, in the poem "Burial," tells a young child, "Your father died last month/ he is buried...not too deep to lie/ alive like a feather/ on the top of the mind.

## CHAPTER V

### SUBJECT TO SIGNS AND SEASONS:

LYN HEJINIAN'S MY LIFE AND FRANK BIDART'S "CONFESSIONAL"

"Religion is a vague lowing. I was beginning to look  
for some meaning when I should have been satisfied with events."  
--My Life

"Augustine too  
had trouble with his mother,--"  
--"Confessional"

#### I.

In this final chapter I will examine autobiographical works by the American poets Frank Bidart and Lyn Hejinian, born in 1939 and 1941 respectively. I am struck by the concentration of these writers upon particular aspects of autobiography we associate with the Augustinian paradigm. Hejinian's My Life reflects current interest in language and language theory and may be read as a radical critique of Augustine's vision of "the Word co-eternal." Bidart's concern is with psychological dynamics. In the central section of The Sacrifice he makes extended and explicit reference to the Confessions. These two younger writers are certainly not the only strong voices of contemporary American autobiography. But both seem exceptionally thoughtful about the process of composing one's life history.

In her poem called "Determinism," Lyn Hejinian suggested a special view of the autobiographical process:

People  
 think I have written an autobiography  
 but my candor is false (I hear a few shots  
 slouching at my realism).  
 As if corralled, or slowed by cold

all that intentional and unintentional experience  
 is unable to stop or change. Restlessly  
 I moved to new positions--spots  
 and postures-- that's all. I am myopic  
 with determination. And so

just as one might run one's fingers around  
 the edge of a glass  
 to make it squeal, similarly  
 in the hollow night a car circles  
 the edges of my consciousness

and this sentence is emitted.

("Language" Poetries 57-58)

Her protest against autobiographical realism is a contemporary commonplace, but she also questions a model in which the autobiographer appears to act willfully and with purpose. Here, action is resistant to alteration because movement proceeds "restlessly." In a sentence position usually occupied by a word like charged or filled, she inserts myopic to describe determination. There is a sinister quality about the image of a car surrounding consciousness in darkness, a feeling of entrapment. Finally, agents are hidden in the passive voice; a sentence is simply "emitted." Wordsworth's "spots" of time and Yeats' "slouching" toward Bethlehem are reinterpreted to make the actor the victim. Words are not instruments of communication, but almost random phenomena, like a "squeal." Running one's fingers around the edge of a glass is far different from producing music.

In this language-centered cosmology, God is neither center nor circumference. For Saint Augustine, of course, language was critical,

but its basis was the generative will, reason and grace of God. Augustine said his understanding of the Word began with study of the Platonists and was completed by his reading of the Bible (144). He concluded, "Therefore it is by a Word co-eternal with yourself that you say all that you say; you say all at one and the same time, yet you say all eternally; and it is by this Word that all things are made which you say are to be made. You create them by your Word alone and in no other way" (259). In Hejinian, language simply accumulates, and its impact is detrimental to freedom and thought. Autobiography becomes a narrative of linguistic acculturation, a record of what language has done to a person rather than what a person has done.

Stylistic implications of this point of view include the advancement of narrative almost randomly. Meaning derives from recurrence, repetition and association. Characterization, chronology and the marking of normal transitions in life take on secondary importance. In My Life, details of Hejinian's growing up in California in an extended family are lightly sketched. Instead, the work foregrounds the experience of language and meditates upon its power.

Hejinian's autobiography consists of thirty-seven prose paragraphs, varying in length from two to three typeset pages. Each paragraph begins with an indented caption, usually an expression appearing later, and thus aforeshadowing. The element is then repeated often, creating a leitmotif. For example, the first phrasal heading, "A pause, a rose, something on paper"(5)<sup>9</sup>, is replayed more than a dozen times. Its usual meaning may be paraphrased as 'I took the time

to record this.' One variant emphasizes the rose as memory, a pressed flower: "A pause, a rose, something on paper, in a nature scrapbook"(12). Another stresses pausing as time frame: "A pause, a rose, something on paper. Solitude was the essential companion"(15). A third focuses on paper and the meaning of words: "A pause, a rose, something on paper implicit in the fragmentary text"(39). The repeated phrasal unit gathers together essential concerns of autobiography, namely, time and memory, event and language.

Hejinian's linguistic foregrounding and the associative quality of sentences within paragraphs are easily illustrated. For example:

A large vocabulary finds its own grammar, and, conversely, a large grammar finds its own vocabulary. Wet will quiet trees. And I must admit that I find bulldozers beautiful in motion. On Beech Street we took a walk to see the three great copper beech trees which had been built around rather than built over. Where is the corner that apples turn, both red and green, when they turn brown. A common act, the swing of the leg. The plow makes trough enough. Does that kind of word-similarity constitute a word-sympathy. (68)

A relationship is implied between wet and trees, grammar and vocabulary. In each pair of words, the former binds or unites the latter, an admission of some ordering process giving shape to randomness. Hejinian is prompted to make another admission: she sees beauty in a bulldozer's motion. If bulldozers are beautiful, then so too must be grammar, vocabulary, and the nominalized wet.

With the introduction of the word bulldozers, Hejinian muses on a construction project, and that makes her return to the subject of trees. Beech, tree, street and the motion of the bulldozer create a context for her pun on the word turn. Thus, the paragraph develops relationships

around the general subject of motion. Her walk makes her think of the motion of a leg, and the earth-moving equipment suggests a plow in action. She then poses a natural question: is this more than word-play? No doubt, the effect of Hejinian's snake-like relational sentences is to demonstrate quite convincingly the powerful influence of language upon the individual. But a basic issue remains: whether, as she says, "word-similarity" is the same as "word-sympathy." Or, to broaden the question, is there any depth to this surface?

Early in her autobiography, she portrays herself as a jabbering, curious child, enchanted by the subtle distinctions made by adults. Certain images, like tightly drawn curtains, reflect a rigid, rationalist environment. Her absorption in auditory or visual stimuli, entering from a radio or window, are often interrupted. Yet a family outing, when her father would express his own musings, could provoke new awareness:

At night, to close off the window from view of the street, my grandmother pulled down the window shades, never loosening the curtains, a gauze starched too stiff to hang properly down. I sat on the windowsill singing sunny, lunny, teena; ding-dang-dong. He broke the radio silence. Why would anyone find astrology interesting when it is possible to learn about astronomy. What one passes in the Plymouth. It is the wind slamming the doors. All that is nearly incommunicable to my friends. Were we seeing a pattern or merely an appearance of small, white sailboats on the bay, floating at such a distance from the hill that they appeared to be making no progress. And for once to a country that did not speak another language. To follow the progress of ideas, or that particular time of reasoning, so full of surprises and unexpected correlations, was somehow to take a vacation. (9)

Probing differences between astrology/astronomy, pattern/appearance, stasis/movement, and foreign/native was a "vacation" defining her early intellectualism. In another early scene, the precocious child muses on the metaphysics of eating jello, then shifts to the way linguistic patterns become moral imperatives and notes the common mistake of failing to keep a plant properly nourished. With so many words, phrases, sentences and distinctions being absorbed, the youngster views life as "all loose ends" (13).

When she becomes a teen-ager, the power of reason turns to rule, concealment, sarcasm, facile social commentary and accommodation. If the child lacked linguistic tools to communicate, the adolescent lacked the motivation: "Now that I was 'old enough to make my own decisions,' I dressed like everyone else. People must flatter their own eyes with their pathetic lives. The things I was saying followed logically the things that I had said before, yet they bore no relation to what I was thinking and feeling....It was about this time that my father provided me with every right phrase about the beauty and wonder of books" (34). Hejinian sets phrases like "'old enough to make my own decisions'" in quotation marks; she then proceeds to discredit, analyze, or mine them for other connotations. Ambiguous pronouns and pronoun shifts from first to third person are also characteristic. Here, too, Hejinian's father becomes arbiter of appropriate language.

As a young woman asserting intellectual and social independence, she must confront cultural stereotypes, literary forbears, feelings about family, and the language of folk wisdom. To express this complexity, Hejinian draws upon a number of short phrases which gather



meaning by repetition: "The summer evening saw window shoppers in a reflecting system, men with merchandise agog. It is hard to turn away from moving water. He made me nervous as soon as he began offering a special discount. The work is probably a good deal wiser than the horny old doctor he was. I wrote my name in every one of his books. A name trimmed with colored ribbons. They used to be leaders of the avant-garde, but now they just wanted to be understood, so farewell to them. If I was left unmarried after college, I would be single all my life and lonely in old age" (52). The expression "it is hard to turn away from moving water," appears more than a half dozen times in My Life and suggests enchantment, involvement, as well as the classical image of flux. "I wrote my name in every one of his books" is first associated with Hejinian's grandfather; in this context, the "horny old doctor" could refer to William Carlos Williams, another old man, like her grandfather, in whose books she may have written her name.

Hejinian finds some resolution which she expresses with linguistic analysis, as well as great wit: "Only fragments are accurate. Break it up into single words, charge them to combination. Thinking about time in the book, it is really the time of your life. I was experiencing love, immensely relieved. It was, I know, an unparticular spirit of romance. Giving the back-up o.k. to the loaded semi" (53). As the narrative develops, someone in her adult life does, but My Life leaves ambiguous whether it is her father, grandfather, or the father of her children. This is a more extreme example of the extent to which language dominates chronology.

When My Life moves toward its completion, language does seem to

make accommodation to the norms of discourse and the norms of life. For the first time, two proper names appear, "Anna" and "Charles" (75, 85), and scenes become domestic: "the kids in their grass slippers ask what is for dinner and when is that what" (78). The autobiographer becomes speaker of aphorisms, like her mother and grandmother before her. Linguistic definitions, while still playful, sound pragmatic. Adjustment is embodied in the phrase, "displacements after illusions, which are all-to-the-good" (86). Stated plainly, in her final paragraph Hejinian says, "A sense of definition (different from that of description, which is a kind of story-telling or recounting, numerical, a list of colors) develops as one's sense of possibility, of the range of what one might do or experience, closes with the years" (88). If one definition of prayer is desire, My Life closes with prayer: "Wish for road woods, the dark past the trees. Airs for hours, quiet, walk it" (89).

In the course of My Life motifs we associate with the Augustinian autobiographical paradigm are present as traces, but subjected to radical revaluation. Error is mitigated by the cliches of ordinary speech, absorbed as linguistic event. Willfulness becomes subject for musing, not reconciliation. Confession in one instance is presented in an appropriate setting, but enfolded in linguistic distinctions:

The concert of Gregorian chants was held in the medieval wing of the museum, where the music shook the walls. The sales clerks crowded the door, working on commission. Affrighted fool child. You can't assume "no remorse" merely because the stripping away of superfluities is described as "remorseless." The symbolism of the rose depends on its thorns. That is more or less factual and hard to miss. (64)

The scene implies that the only relevant place for Gregorian chant today is a museum, and only in an Augustinian medieval setting would one find the words and music resonate enough to shake the walls. Sales clerks see opportunity only for profit and are probably working on the "commission" of what the medieval world would consider error. Someone, "an affrighted fool child," Hejinian talking to herself, is affected. But her response is quickly transformed into linguistic analysis. Feelings of fear and foolishness aroused by a lack of regret may simply be incorrect understanding of the varying definitions of remorse. Turning to a rose, what is "more or less factual" is not the validity of its traditional symbolism, but merely the fact that a rose has thorns.

For Hejinian, origin and generation are issues for scientists. Eternity is bound by earthly life: "Always infinity extends from any individual life, but eternity is limited between one's birth and one's death" (48). However, several refrains heard throughout the autobiography complicate this perspective. The experience of epiphany, domesticated as it is in My Life, often amusingly so, defies the confines of language. An epiphany is redefined as "astonishment" and embodied in a phrase repeated nearly twenty times in the text, "we who love to be astonished." Her wide-ranging list of special realizations include apprehension of the behavior of weasels, lizards, whales and moths; the color of night; human senses, the human heartbeat, and human ignorance; a mother's love and a grandfather's energy; finance and ice cream cones; "cyclone" fences and the discovery that "McDonald's is the

largest purchaser of beef eyeballs" (53). This may feel like parody, but not, perhaps, to someone who feels herself in the grips of a determined linguistic code.

One passage in My Life unites a bucolic image of cattle with community and beauty. In a subsequent image, "lowing," the characteristic sound of cattle, is linked with religion and forms its description: "religion is a vague lowing" (59). Religion defines an ideal separated from man because, true to Augustinian vision, its object is beyond the bounds of human speech. Characteristically, Hejinian speaks of religious sensibility hesitantly, and deflects its consideration with homely metaphor:

Imagine a field before harvest, or better. As for we who "love to be astonished," life is linked to man. Religion is a vague lowing. In the ideal town, beside water, flowers would hang from balconies and balconies would hang from houses. Garden snails are edible. They can alter inches but not hours. If we keep on abstracting, indeed. I'm rooting coleus in the Mrs. Butterworth's bottle. She shows the left profile, the good one. (59)

Other versions of heavenly cities are abstracts. Hejinian is more at home with Mrs. Butterworth than Beatrice.

My Life and the work of other designated "language poets"<sup>10</sup> like Hejinian may be faulted for incoherence. But more fundamentally, there is an inconsistency between theory and practice. Hejinian laments, "I suppose I had always hoped that, through an act of will and the effort of practice, I might be someone else, might alter my personality and even my appearance, that I might in fact create myself, but instead I found myself trapped in the very character which made such a thought

possible and such a wish mine" (46). But the protestation seems disingenuous in the light of her autobiographic achievement. She does not convince us that her interior life has a shallow bottom. True, she may not confirm Augustine's image of the individual soul in God's fixed order. Yet a patient reader of My Life will gain a very clear sense, not of a victim of language, but of a person with a great intelligence and wit. Despite constraints placed upon her, Hejinian can still consider a "vague lowing," find pleasure in cineraria and hydrangea, and, when thinking of pelargonium, appreciate a relationship between the giver and the given: "With a name like that there is a lot you can do" (14). Hejinian's own sentences and patterns certainly are more crafted than "emitted." Submerged within her opaque autobiography may be a voice much like Augustine's, hoping that the "hidden meaning of your words may be revealed to me" (255).

## II.

Marjorie Perloff characterized Lynn Hejinian's style as a "network of permutations" (dance of the intellect 224). Frank Bidart's style, on the other hand, approaches the plainest prose. For Alan Williamson it represents the "cruellest test for those raised on traditional notions of literary beauty" (166). Helen Vendler said that "the grotesque becomes in Bidart the figure of the ordinary, the human, the normal, and casts an eerie, oblique cloud over 'normalcy' itself" (361). All three of Bidart's books, Golden State (1973), The Book of the Body (1977) and The Sacrifice (1983), contain major autobiographical sections. Particularly relevant, Bidart's 470-line "Confessional,"

included in The Sacrifice, chooses as a central motif the famous scene in the Confessions when Augustine and Monica experience a mystical vision.

Bidart, like Sylvia Plath and Ann Sexton before him, learned how to find a voice for his most critical and painful psychological insights from Robert Lowell. Bidart told Ian Hamilton what it was like to be Lowell's student in 1966:

I was auditing...as a graduate student, and I was showing him poems of mine in his office hours. I've never known anyone else who did anything like this. He had what amounted to an open workshop once a week for two, two and a half hours, from, say, eight-thirty or nine in the morning to about eleven or twelve. He had this instead of having individual conferences with his students. People would bring their poems and sit around a desk and pass them around and everybody would talk about them. You didn't have to be connected with Harvard at all. He welcomed everybody. That was what was so extraordinary.

(Hamilton 391)

Lowell seemed to function as receptive analyst, in both the literary and psychotherapeutic senses.

Many echoes of Lowell are evident in Bidart's work, including the specific dating of his own age at the time of writing, the use of a mirror symbol, and the identification with others, as in this self-portrait: "He's still young--; thirty, but looks younger--/ or does he?...In the eyes and cheeks, tonight, / turning in the mirror, he saw his mother,--/ puffy; angry; bewildered" (GS 8)<sup>11</sup>. His themes are clearly inspired by Lowell: "the need for the past/ is so much at the center of my life/ I write to record my discovery of it,/ my reconciliation" (GS 11).

However, Bidart's life was quite different from Lowell's. He grew up in California, and his father was coarse, not well educated, and wealthy: "You left a bag of money; and were/ the unhappiest man/ I have ever known well" (GS 25). What divides Bidart's style from Lowell's, primarily, are the absence of efforts to draw parallels between personal and social history, the limited employment of irony, and the flatness of his diction:

--So many  
infatuations guaranteed to fail before they started,  
terror at my own homosexuality,

terror which somehow  
evaporated slowly with "Gay Liberation"

and finding that I had fathered a child--'

...All those who loved me  
whom I did not want;

all those whom I loved  
who did not want me;

(BB 27-28)

Bidart's poems have often portrayed the extreme psychological suffering of others, ranging from anorexics to necrophiliacs.

The Sacrifice begins with a long portrait of Vaslav Nijinsky and reaches its climax when "--the Nineteenth Century's/guilt, World War One,/ was danced by Nijinsky on January 19, 1919" (TS 30). The poem received the first Bernard F. Connors Prize from the Paris Review. The other major work in The Sacrifice, "Confessional," is specifically self-referential and is prefaced by two lines of Catullus: "I hate and I love. Ignorant fish, who even/ wants the fly while writhing" (TS 33).

Divided into two parts, "Confessional" begins in medias res with constricted, terse dialogue. The ambiguity of situation encourages the reader to speculate on circumstance, like the opening of mystery fiction:

Is she dead?

Yes, she is dead.

Did you forgive her?

No, I didn't forgive her.

Did she forgive you?

No, she didn't forgive me.

Has a crime been committed? Was this a natural death, or a kind of murder? Is the questioner seeking information or merely making sure the respondent is cognizant of a death? Could "Confessional" be the Christian mystery reversed, with the victim, unlike Christ, failing to forgive enemies? The poem's first twenty-five words succinctly define its major theme, death and guilt and the complex relationship between two people. The tone of inquiry is matter-of-fact, and the respondent seems equally controlled. Yet, why does the questioner raise the issue of forgiveness at all? Wouldn't a more natural question be, 'Did you love her?' or 'Do you miss her?'<sup>12</sup>

From such a broad framework, the next exchange quickly confines the perspective:

What did you have to forgive?

She was never mean, or willfully  
cruel or unloving.

When I was eleven, she converted to Christ--



she began to simplify her life, denied  
herself, and said that she and I must struggle

"to divest ourselves  
of the love of CREATED BEINGS,"--

and to help me do that,

one day

she hanged my cat.

I came home from school, and in the doorway  
of my room

my cat was hanging strangled.

The details of home and school clarify the dead person's identity as the speaker's mother. The dispassionate colloquy has turned to the subjects of perverted religious conviction and irrational behavior.

Bidart seems to offer an apologia for his mother, yet the context of not granting forgiveness has already been established. His "never mean, or willfully" denies what the incident describes: harshness and cruelty. His mother's conversion seems symptomatic of instability; the capitalized reference to "CREATED THINGS" gives God's creation a decidedly negative connotation; being "converted to Christ" in this setting emphasizes Christ as victim. The mother incorporates her son into this world, yet her program of self-denial begins with abuse. Although Bidart withholds forgiveness, he is still willing to suggest his mother's action was merely manifestation of sickness. Her cruelty is given a religious, then psychological rationale:

Did you forgive her?

Soon, she had a breakdown;  
when she got out of the hospital,  
she was SORRY...

For years she dreamed the cat  
had dug its claws into her thumbs:--

in the dream, she knew, somehow  
that it was dying; she tried

to help it,--

TO PUT IT OUT OF ITS MISERY,--

The son is obviously the mother's advocate. By referring to "the dream" when none was previously mentioned, Bidart suggests she believed her action took place in a dream world. But as the questioner continues the refrain, Bidart indirectly articulates the kind of psychic traps, delusions and manipulation suffered by a victim of emotional child abuse:

Did you forgive her?

I was the center of her life,--  
and therefore,  
of her fears and obsessions. They changed;  
one was money.

....DO I HAVE TO GO INTO IT?

Yet Bidart, as respondent, fails to either understand or acknowledge his mother's manipulation. Instead, child abuse remains twisted in ideas of moral imperative, right behavior and appropriate feelings.

He continues to state his mother's case:

I did love her...Otherwise,  
would I feel so guilty?

What did she have to forgive?

She was SORRY. She tried  
to change...

She loved me. She was generous.

I pretended  
that I had forgiven her--;

and she pretended  
to believe it, --

she needed desperately to believe it...

Finally, however, the authentic voice of the suffering child breaks free of all moralizing and rationalization: "SHE KNEW I COULD BARELY STAND TO BE AROUND HER." The moral and religious cast of the dialogue is not easily set aside. The speaker who cannot forgive still seeks forgiveness for himself, like a penitent in a Catholic confessional declaring his sins to a priest:

--Now, after I have said it all, so I can  
rest,

will you give me ABSOLUTION,--

...and grant this  
"created being"

FORGIVENESS?...

The religious ideal established by the mother is unattainable. She had sought divestiture of the lover of "CREATED BEINGS," but the son is merely one of the created. She had sought "rest in the Lord"; Bidart simply wants peace. From the questioner's perspective, it appears Bidart's pilgrimage toward understanding has much further to go even though he believes he has "said it all." Thus, to push Bidart to greater awareness, the questioner, obviously a psychotherapist, bluntly tells him, "Forgiveness doesn't exist: (38). This declaration completes the first part of "Confessional."

In the second part, suggesting another compressed psychotherapeutic session, the religious implications of Bidart's relationship to his mother are displaced by an extended discussion of Saint Augustine

and Monica. This displacement represents one of the most extreme uses of a Confessions motif. To the analysts Augustine and Monica represent the unattainable ideal. Bidart seems to condemn himself for a diminished life. His anger is directed toward a world where the voice of God is not heard.

He frames his discussion in a way that remains self-condemnatory and sexually naive:

She asked,--

and I could not, WOULD NOT give...

--That is the first of two sentences  
I can't get out of my head.

They somehow contain what happened.

The second is:--

THERE WAS NO PLACE IN NATURE WE COULD MEET.

Exactly what is meant by "NATURE" is unclear. Nor does the speaker seem to recognize the sexual implications of "WOULD NOT give." He immediately shifts to his analysis of Book Nine of the Confessions:

Augustine too

had trouble with his mother,--  
but the story of Augustine and Monica

is the opposite of what happened

between me and my mother...

We couldn't meet in nature,--

...AND ALL WE HAD WAS NATURE.

In part, Bidart blames his lack of generosity for the failure of mother and son to meet in nature. He continues to take upon himself the whole burden of Oedipal conflict, made even more delusional by a grandiose

perception of himself as a child. He reflects a child's view without considering the role played by the adult mother:

As a child I was (now I  
clearly can see it)

PREDATORY,--

pleased to have supplanted my father  
in mother's affections,

and then pleased to have supplanted my stepfather...

I assure you, though I was a "little boy,"  
I could be far more charming, sympathetic,  
full of sensibility, "various," far more  
an understanding and feeling  
ear for my mother's emotions, needs, SOUL

than any man, any man she met,--

He avoids the fact that the spiritual pact for reaching sainthood was his mother's idea, not his.

There follows a disclosure resembling Robert Lowell's admission in the closing pages of Day by Day, something told him later in his life about his youth. The odd quality of the disclosure, however, is Bidart's failure to probe its significance:

--Not long before she died,  
she told me something  
I had never heard,--

when I was nine or ten, early  
in her second marriage,

she became pregnant; she said she  
wanted to have the child...

she said that one day, when my stepfather  
was playing golf, she was out walking the course

with him, and suddenly

a man fell from one of the huge trees  
lining the fairways...



detachment from all things of the earth. Her friends asked "whether she was not frightened at the thought of leaving her body so far from her own country. 'Nothing is far from God,' she replied, 'and I need have no fear that he will know where to find me when he comes to raise me to life at the end of the world'" (Confessions, p. 200).

For the next few pages, the analysand expresses sadness masked by anger. He remains oblivious to the real threat to his own survival posed by his mother. He never acknowledges that separation from her was necessary or that he had been harmed by the person who strangled his cat.

Opposed to this relationship, Bidart creates a paean to Augustine and Monica, especially admiring Monica's "ferocity" (48) in her efforts to bring Augustine to Christ. Bidart's retelling of Book Nine of the Confessions is fairly faithful to the text. His spare style seems remarkably appropriate for recounting shared mystical vision. At the same time, echoing in the background is the analyst's refrain, "Do you know why you are saying all this?....How do you explain it?" (49, 51) The experience of Augustine was powerfully physical:

--While they were thus talking of, straining to comprehend,  
panting for this WISDOM, with all the effort

of their heart, for one heartbeat,

they together attained to touch it--;

...Then singing, and leaving the first fruits  
of their SPIRIT bound there,

they returned to the sound of their own voice,--  
to WORDS,

which have a beginning and an end...

"How unlike," Augustine says, "God's WORD,--  
changeless, self-gathered, unmade, yet forever  
making all things new..."

In a kind of peroration, Bidart adds a passage not in the Confessions:

SILENT

our expiations and confessions  
the voice that says: NO REMISSION OF SINS  
WITHOUT THE SHEDDING OF BLOOD,

The effect is to reinforce Bidart's theme of guilt and death.

Juxtaposed to this vision, the therapist asks, "Why are you angry?"

Bidart makes his final confession. The end of his own mother's life was a postlude to failure. She was not waiting for the welcome of God: "My mother, at the end of her life, was frightened." More critically, the autobiographer implicates himself:

She had MADE nothing.

I was what she made.--

She saw that her concern and worry and care  
in the end called up in me

protestations of affection  
that veiled

unappeasable anger, and remorse.

UNDOING THIS WAS BEYOND ME...

The reader may feel more than compelled to agree. Unrecognized, unacknowledged, Bidart seems practically Christ-like in taking on the guilt of his mother. The final words of the work are given to the analyst, who continues to see his role as enlarging Bidart's self-awareness: "Man needs a metaphysics; / he cannot have one."



"Confessional" is made especially complex, despite its carefully modulated surface texture, by the five voices it contains: analyst, analysand, Bidart as child, his mother, and, most importantly, the autobiographer. The autobiographer's voice, withheld from the dialogue, is evident everywhere, from the line breaks to the italics. Unstated, it is the autobiographer who, we imagine, will resolve this mystery story in which all clues are given but an arrest has yet to be made. He will recognize what Bidart failed to see earlier: that his life was complicated by protracted Oedipal conflict and by child abuse. Bidart's reading of the Confessions emphasizes the idyllic quality of the Augustinian autobiographical paradigm, far removed from the diminished world he sees around him. As a critique it implies that the Augustinian model perpetuates a false ideal against which to measure and narrate one's life. But Bidart's reading is a narrow one. In the midst of his own suffering, he seems to ignore Augustine's. Mystical vision was the experience of "one fleeting instant" (197). At all other times, Augustine, like Bidart, regarded himself as "still subject to signs and seasons, days and years" (326).

### III.

The final poem of The Sacrifice seems a fitting though discouraging one to conclude this study of modern American autobiographical texts related to the Confessions. The closing books of the Confessions meditated on the first chapter of Genesis. Bidart's final poem offers his own interpretation of the same passage.

Augustine drew elaborate parallels between the Genesis narrative, the Incarnation, the growth of the Catholic Church, and his own life. He located himself and all creation within a larger historical and theological framework. Bidart approaches the matter less ambitiously, yet, like Augustine, certain autobiographical themes are implied. He performs his reading by rewriting.

At first glance, except for punctuation and typography, "Genesis 1-2:4" looks like the beginning of a Bible composed for schoolchildren. We might compare the opening of the King James version with Bidart's:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be Light: and there was light. (Gen. 1:1-3)

\* \* \*

In the beginning, God made HEAVEN and EARTH.

The earth without form was waste.

DARKNESS was the face of the deep.  
His spirit was the wind brooding over the waters.

In darkness he said,  
LET THERE BE LIGHT.

There was light.

In light he said, IT IS GOOD.

Created becomes made, and void is waste, giving creation a less grand premise. Perhaps there is a more Manichaeian tone, as well. Darkness is personified, and the spirit of darkness was the wind.

Bidart's rendering of creation's third day implies a great deal of violence:

God said,  
                   LET THE BARE EARTH  
 BREAK OPEN, HEAVY WITH SEED.

The earth broke open.  
                                   Numberless PLANTS filled  
 with seed spread over the ground, and TREES  
 boughed with fruit heavy with seed.

His image of earth is more aggressive as well as more sexual than the King James version, his fourth day stresses the domination rather than the King James reference to "dominion," turning an issue of governance to one of power. Bidart's interpretation of an aggressor God, however, seems inconsistent with his following injunction, which does not appear in the Bible:

God said to the man and woman  
 and all the creatures of the earth  
 YOUR MEAT SHALL BE THE EARTH,  
 NOT THE CREATURES OF THE EARTH.  
 God looked.  
                   He said, IT IS VERY GOOD.

Night and day were the sixth day.

Bidart's emendation implies that, despite how the earth was created, or for what purpose, if any, it is wrong to perpetuate aggression. Read in light of "Confessional," it is a summons to avoid the kind of behavior which caused suffering in Bidart's own life.

At last, the seventh day ends with a finality hardly the intention of the King James Bible translators:

God blessed the seventh day, God made  
the seventh day a holy day,

because on the seventh day God rested, God ceased.

This was the creation of the world.

A powerful God abandoned creation to its own devices, which may be minimal.

Like Saint Augustine, Bidart takes a great deal of guilt upon himself. But in the late twentieth century he finds neither absolution nor final realization. Therapy may recognize that "Man needs a metaphysics," but "he cannot have one" (55). In both Hejinian's autobiography of her own language and Bidart's analysis of his mind's history, we sense a more general, wavering tone in contemporary American autobiography between anger and acceptance, nostalgia and profound longing. Augustinian conversion has become contemporary accommodation. The Confessions offer a complex model, and for some its effect has been disheartening. But autobiography, though written in the present about the past, is more often prelude. And some have found in Augustine's Confessions, or works influenced by it, a universe open to many voices, including those of the contemplative, the artist, and the explorer of the quotidian.

## CONCLUSION

### ENCHANTED BY GRACE

Beyond this let my faith speak for me.

Confessions 13.12

The Confessions of Saint Augustine established a paradigm for autobiographical writing. The work defined critical categories and patterns of experience and also created an environment of experimentation for future autobiographers. In his biography of Augustine, Peter Brown observes that "a Late Roman man who first opened his copy of the Confessions would have found a startling book: traditional forms of literary expression, that he had taken for granted, would flow into it only to be transformed beyond recognition" (165). The Confessions was cast as a prayer, focused on the inner life rather than on deeds accomplished, and compared the autobiographer with classical and Christian figures. Its vision embraced family relations and theology, and integrated biblical text with personal narrative.

The works of John Ashbery, James Merrill, Robert Lowell, Lyn Hejinian and Frank Bidart examined in this study illustrate ways in which the Augustinian paradigm is manifested in contemporary American autobiographical writing. Autobiographers adapt aspects of the Confessions as they exercise the same kind of freedom associated with

Augustine's own rhetorical strategy. For Augustine in the fourth century, as for autobiographers today, "there are simply no general rules" (Olney 3).

I will conclude by noting one final aspect of an autobiographical project: it is subject to revision, as the present instantly becomes the past. Robert Lowell's writing following Life Studies may be regarded as a series of autobiographical revisions. James Merrill's "The Book of Ephraim" evolved in the trilogy, The Changing Light At Sandover. A more recent example of autobiographical revision worthy of comment is the version of My Life by Lyn Hejinian published in 1987. Hejinian not only added material to the end of her 1980 text, but also altered lines and inserted new passages. As a consequence, the work now bears a greater affinity to the Augustinian paradigm.

Within a passage examined earlier, beginning "A large vocabulary finds its own grammar" (68), Hejinian has inserted the following:

I remind myself, I don't exactly remember my name, of a person, we'll call it Asylum, a woman who, and I've done this myself, has for good reasons renounced some point, say the window in the corner of the room, and then accepts it again. Then love, on dappled feet of war, came and took the flirts away. Is the bulk aesthetic discovery.

(My Life, 1987 69-70)

The collage technique of paragraph construction remains, but the reference to "Asylum" gives new specificity to the psychic landscape. Here, Hejinian mediates on the Augustinian motif of wandering and return, "renounced...then accepts again." The concept of autobiographical writing as leading to new awareness is reflected in her remark, "Is this bulk discovery."

Hejinian comments more deliberately on the traditional concerns of the autobiographer. She defines memory as "a separation from infinity" (87), then speaks of its relationship to the self: "We follow stars to form an authoritative constellation called Common Sense. Things are settled before we go, as I've got my own to do. To speak of the 'self' and improve it from memory" (89). Concerning the influence of present time and the irretrievable past she says that "it is impossible to return to the state of mind in which these sentences originated" (30). Hejinian shows more awareness of time and pattern in autobiographical process: "This is the year the psychic said was midway the road I lead my life along. Speak -- only to concentrate instability on the bird whose song you describe" (104). In a more direct Augustinian context, we may compare the following passages:

What was the meaning hung from that depend. If ideas are like air, you can't steal them. Proves porous, held in. This morning I am enchanted by its grace.

(My Life, 1980 33)

What was the meaning hung from that depend. Today the clouds appear to be entering the world from one spot in the sky. If ideas are like air, you can't steal them. Proves porous, held in. This morning I am enchanted by its grace.

(My Life, 1987 35)

The new inserted line, "Today the clouds appear to be entering the world from one spot in the sky," gives more weight to the final word, grace, supporting its Augustinian implication of transformation.

Another passage offers a garden setting, religious observation and recollection within Hejinian's particular style: "There was a garden, a hole in the fence, a grandfather who had no religion -- one can run through the holes in memory, wearing a wet hat" (30).

Overall, the new version of My Life exhibits greater sensitivity to the social and political environment. In her earlier version she referred to a babysitter who "dreamed of the day when she would gun down everyone in the financial district" (72). In the 1987 version she follows this remark a few sentences later with a broader and more directed comment: "Class background is not landscape--still here and there in 1969 I could feel the scope of collectivity" (74). Her world is more populated with specific people: "Larry, Paul and I had won 17 out of our last 18 games. Back home the ice cream had arrived, Gannon brought it, and we sat[sic] around gorging" (102). Her historical view can be both specific and sweeping: "Now where on long walks my grandfather had gone with his walking stick I go with my mace" (110). In an echo of Ashbery, she observes, "from age to age a new realism repeats its reaction against the reality the previous age admired" (104). Hejinian now concludes, "I too am a Calvinist--I accumulate conscience" (100).

While her vision is broader, she can also be subtly more personal. In the My Life of 1980 she says, "I became a hypochondriac and worried about the insane" (44). In 1987 the line becomes, "I became a hypochondriac and worried about becoming insane" (44).

Thus, language, which Hejinian had relentlessly foregrounded in 1980, takes its place within a wider vision and expanded awareness. She says now that "a paragraph is a time and place not a syntactic unit" (96). By exhibiting a greater sensitivity to pattern and to autobiographical process, My Life demonstrates the continuing relevance of the concerns and strategies represented by Augustine's Confessions.



That the autobiographical act is ongoing and subject to revision, because subject to time, conflict and change, was acknowledged by Augustine: "I am divided between time gone by and time to come, and its course is a mystery to me. My thoughts, the intimate life of my soul, are torn this way and that in the havoc of change. And so it will be until I am purified and melted by the fire of your life and fused into one with you" (279). I hope this study has demonstrated the importance of the Confessions, and has adequately challenged descriptions of the work as possessing a "static design" (Spengemann 44). Such categorizations fail to acknowledge the Confessions' dynamic character and value to those seeking guidance and support for their own autobiographical efforts.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, ed., William Morris (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969) 89.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Latin texts are from William Watts, trans., St. Augustine's Confessions (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979). All English translations are from R.S. Pine-Coffin, trans., Confessions (New York: Penguin, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> References refer to book and chapter within the Confessions. Where only one number appears, it refers to the chapter within Book Thirteen. When all citations within a paragraph are from the same chapter, the chapter number appears at the end of the paragraph.

<sup>4</sup> John Ashbery, Three Poems (New York: Viking Press, 1972). Subsequent references are to pages in this edition and will appear in the text.

<sup>5</sup> James Merrill, Divine Comedies (New York: Atheneum, 1976). Subsequent references are to pages in this edition and will appear in the text.

<sup>6</sup> The Latin text and English translation are from William Watts, trans., St. Augustine's Confessions (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979) 371-372. All subsequent English translations are from R.S. Pine-Coffin, trans., Confessions (New York: Penguin, 1961).

<sup>7</sup> The following abbreviations are used with the text citations: LU, Land of Unlikeness; LS, Life Studies; N, Notebook; D, The Dolphin; DBD, Day by Day; CP, Robert Lowell: Collected Prose. If the title of a poem from Day by Day is given within a paragraph, or if it is clear from which poem a quotation has been taken, no page reference is given. If there is any possible ambiguity concerning the source of a quotation from Day by Day, a page reference is cited.

<sup>8</sup> The following reading, while emphasizing religious imagery, is indebted to two earlier analyses of "In Memory of Arthur Winslow." Hugh Staples, Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962) 29-31, points out the personal character of the poem. Jerome Mazzaro, The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965) 4-18, identifies a number of the poem's references.

<sup>9</sup> Lyn Hejinian, My Life (Providence: Burning Deck, 1980). All page references are to this edition and are included in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Messerli, ed., "Language" Poetries: An Anthology (New York: New Directions, 1987), includes twenty poets who, broadly speaking, share Hejinian's aesthetic perspective. The anthology also reprints a segment of My Life. Messerli's introduction discusses differences among the poets and outlines their developing poetic theories. Theoretical remarks of Hejinian are cited.

<sup>11</sup> The following abbreviations are used with the text citations: GS, Golden State; BB, Book of the Body; TS, The Sacrifice. Because quotations from "Confessional" follow in sequence, no page references are given. If a citation is out of sequence, or if there is any possible ambiguity, a page reference is cited.

<sup>12</sup> The following interpretation has been influenced by my reading of the brief and elegant book by psychotherapist Alice Miller, The Drama of The Gifted Child (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

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The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

April 18, 1988  
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