GARRY WILLS ON AUGUSTINE

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Over the past several years Garry Wills, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (Touchstone, 1992), has been working on a translation and commentary on Saint Augustine’s *Confessiones*. While Wills’s complete translation of all thirteen books of this Christian classic is not yet completed at this writing, Viking Press has provided a taste of what promises to be an astounding piece of work. Following the 1999 publication of *Saint Augustine, A Penguin Life*, Wills has given us four more little volumes: *Saint Augustine’s Childhood* (2001), *Saint Augustine’s Memory* (2002), *Saint Augustine’s Sin* (2003), and finally, *Saint Augustine’s Conversion* (2004). Together they offer a powerful entry into Augustine’s life and work, debunk widely held opinions and prejudices concerning the man and, perhaps most importantly, tempt readers to reexamine how it is we hear and evaluate any witness of faith, including our own.

The *Confessiones* is the most widely read and quoted of Augustine’s works. Its title is most often left untranslated and takes the English form “Confessions,” leaving the reader somewhat confused as to the nature of the work. Is it a simply a personal confession of sins? Some say it is. The paperback edition I purchased in college was subtitled, “The autobiography of a prodigal who became a saint,” and on the cover was a rather poor illustration of two bishops seated in a confessional, one talking and the other with his ear pressed to the screen. But the book defies such a simple explanation. For while there are confessional and autobiographical elements, Augustine is very careful about what he says—and doesn’t say. His *Confessiones* is a deep and profound confession of faith, and as often as not takes the form of prayer and meditation. Wills makes a break with tradition and translates *Confessiones* as *The Testimony*. It’s a nice move and underlines Augustine’s deeper theological purposes. Wills sees in the entire *Testimony* a meditation on Genesis, “probing the mysteries of God to be found in the opening book of the Bible.” And he goes on to explain:

Augustine’s *Testimony* is an act of purification from sin, of the kind priests invoke as they prepare to read Scripture in public. It is, then, a prayer to be made worthy, a petition for entry into the sacred revelation. In this light, Augustine is approaching Genesis by a process that attunes him to it, makes him see its pattern in his own life, revealing the relevance of what he has undergone to what he is proposing. (*Conversion*, 35)
Augustine began writing his *Testimony* in 397, about ten years after his baptism, six years after becoming a priest, and two years into his service as bishop. It takes the form of thirteen books and is not a large piece of work. Most modern translations run about three hundred pages. In the first nine books Augustine tells his story from birth to baptism. Book Ten is an essay on the nature and function of memory. Book Eleven takes the shape of a prayer before studying Scriptures. Books Twelve and Thirteen are an exposition of the first chapter of Genesis. *The Testimony* marks the beginning of what Wills refers to as “Augustine’s Magical Decade,” which also included the composition of *The First (Literal) Meaning of Genesis* and *The Trinity* (*De Trinitate*). Wills maintains that if these three books were all we had of Augustine it would be enough to “ensure his status as one of the greatest thinkers in history” (“Augustine’s Magical Decade,” *New York Review of Books* 46/8, 6 May 1999, p. 4).

In their four volumes, *Saint Augustine’s Childhood, Memory, Sin, and Conversion*, Wills and his publishers offer us introductions, translations, and commentaries at the heart of *The Testimony*. To be sure, these are but selected pieces from a much greater work, but as presented they provide an exceptional introduction to Augustine. These are little books, well bound, neatly printed with an easy-to-read type and not too many words per page. They will easily fit into a coat pocket or the case for your laptop—they’re the kind of book you read while traveling. And maybe that’s what makes them such a good introduction to Augustine, for he is a deep, complicated, challenging theologian, and sometimes such work is better digested in small bites. Those who take the time to chew on Augustine’s words will be richly rewarded.

Augustine stands as one of the towering figures in Western thought. Any treatment of both Roman Catholic and Reformation theology and practice needs at some point to deal with this preacher from a rather obscure corner of the late Roman Empire. The writing of this African bishop also provides an intersection for ongoing ecumenical dialogues. There is an old saying that goes something like this, “If you want to learn about a saint—spend some time with their saints.” Well, Augustine is the great saint of Western Christianity. The bulk of Catholic theology is connected to Augustine, either in agreement with or reaction against the man. And his influence on the Reformation traditions cannot be understated. A quick look into the general index to the American edition of *Luther’s Works* shows that Luther only makes reference to the Bible more than he does to Augustine. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* the blessed John Calvin cites Augustine over seven hundred times—about once every other page!

The problem with reading Augustine is that everyone has an opinion—in most cases strong opinions. The bare outlines of his life are clean enough. Born in Roman North Africa in 354, to Patrick and Monnica, he trained in rhetoric and prepared for service in the Empire. Along the way he acquired a mistress and fathered a child. After a long journey of faith and a profound personal/vocational
crisis, Augustine was baptized in Milan by St. Ambrose. Within a short time both his son and mother died, and he returned to Africa. He served as the Catholic bishop of Hippo until his death in 430. Some view Augustine as one of the great thinkers of all time, and heir of Saint Paul in the preaching of God’s grace. Others are not convinced, accusing him of never fully “recovering” from the Manichean dualism of his youth. He is portrayed as an emotionally stunted, sex-obsessed mama’s boy, prone to fits of rage. In his treatment of Luther, Richard Marius sums up the opinion of many with this description of Augustine:

Augustine (354–430) was one of the most fanatical, superstitious, and ugly-tempered men in the history of Christianity, a barbarous influence on Western civilization, the worthy recipient of Edward Gibbon’s ironic scorn. He has always been the hero of those who condemn human nature for its wickedness, extol God as the arbiter of the universe, and find life in the senses not only wicked, but distasteful. (Martin Luther, the Christian Between God and Death [Harvard Press, 1999] 47)

Gary Wills, however, refuses to put Augustine on the couch of postmodern therapeutic theology. He does not set out to heal the bishop, plumb the depths of his pain, or to defend the reader’s enlightened sensibilities over and against Augustine’s rustic ways. Rather, he invites the reader to pay attention to the words and message of the man himself.

Wills is a prolific social and political journalist who has produced works such as Nixon Agonistes; “Negro President”: Jefferson and the Slave Power; and many others. He is perhaps the most skilled and insightful exegete and literary critic of our time and is a regular contributor to the New York Review of Books. (More than one preacher and student have told me the best introduction to biblical criticism they’ve ever encountered is Wills’s Lincoln at Gettysburg.) He approaches Augustine’s Latin Confessiones with a deep respect for the text and a zeal to explain and translate the old words into clear and sometimes provocative English. All the tools of literary criticism are used to open The Testimony—research into form and sources, rhetorical and linguistic analysis and, of course, some intelligent, imaginative speculation.

It is Wills’s skill as a translator that drives his treatment of Augustine. He allows the Latin African to speak in a powerful concise English, while at the same time preserving the rhetorical gymnastics of the original. The puns, alliterations, chiasms, paradox, and all the rest of the rhetorical tools that Augustine brought to the faith are in the Testimony. (Ask me, “How good are Wills’s translations?” Answer: They are so good that while reading Wills, this poor country preacher in the far northwest corner of Minnesota found himself dusting off the faded red cover of a Loeb Classics edition of St. Augustine, checking out the Latin.) Wills lets Augustine sing. For example, in second book of The Testimony Augustine examines his reasons for joining his friends in the nasty youthful vandalism of a pear tree:
I would not have robbed on my own,
where what I robbed was not alluring
but that I robbed.
I would not have robbed at all
had I been robbing alone.
How infectious, then is this affection, (o nimis inimica amicitia)
the mind’s inexplicable swerve,
the way laughter and pranks become a readiness to harm,
a willingness to inflict loss,
without any compensating gain,
no sense of a wrong being requited!

Someone has but to say,
Let’s do it!—
and feeling shame becomes one’s only shame.
(et pudet non esse impudentem)
(Saint Augustine’s Sin, 57)

Wills’s skill as a translator opens Augustine to fresh interpretations. Throughout the first book of The Testimony (Saint Augustine’s Childhood) a case is made that Augustine’s reflections on his own childhood are grounded in his thoughtful observations of his own son. What other child was he able to observe so closely? Far from being a sexual prodigal he is shown to be a doting father, in a long-term monogamous relationship with the boy’s mother. Wills translates the pious name of Augustine’s son, Adeodatus—literally, “a gift from God”—as “God-send.” There is a certain poetry at work here and I am attracted to it. (But please note: Adeodatus is the Latin translation of Hebrew names that are not at all foreign to English, names like Jonathan and Nathaniel. Maybe a more pedestrian translation, even “Johnny” or “Nate,” could have endeared the reader to the tender realism with which Augustine paints child development.) The Teacher, a dialogue between Augustine and his son, is included as an appendix to Childhood, and serves to further illustrate the warmth of their relationship, as well as to verify his theory on learning.

Wills also offers a name for the unnamed mother of Godsend. He calls her Una, from the Latin, unam habeaban, “I lived with only one woman.” She was his “One and Only.” This is a helpful translation. Far from being a libertine, when he was still in his teens Augustine entered into a relationship with a woman and stayed faithful to her for the next fifteen years. Wills, along with Peter Brown, the great biographer of Augustine, thinks he might have even met her at the Catholic church services he attended with his mother (Saint Augustine, 16). In the year 400, the Council of Toledo, Canon 17, recognized such relationships as legitimate—it is not too far off base to call Una his wife. Not until Monnica made arrangements for him to marry an underage heiress who would raise his social status was Una sent away. She returned to Africa and seems to have joined the Christian community. Wills speculates that Augustine never called her by name out of respect and, perhaps, affection for the mother of his son. As Luther says in one of the Table Talks, “Saint
Augustine was a pious sinner, for he had only one concubine” (Luther’s Works 54:49). (By the way, Luther is only half right. Augustine may well have been a pious sinner, but as soon as Una was set back to Africa he found another woman to take her place.)

Through thoughtful translations, a simple laying out of the facts, and maybe with a little pious hope Wills breaks the formula “Augustine + sin = sex.” His introduction to book two of The Testimony (Augustine’s Sin) clearly argues that Augustine’s view of sin is far more complex than a simple obsession with sex.

He sees the three primal sins of Genesis—the sins of Adam, Eve, and Cain—played out in Augustine’s life. Eve’s is a sin of appetite, a sin of the flesh, and a yielding to pleasure. She sees the fruit of the tree is good, so she eats. There is no surprise here and not much to explain. Augustine has a sexual past, but unlike the free-will theologians, Jerome and Pelagius, Augustine is no rigorist. He wrestles with the common assumption of his day that a philosopher, pagan or Christian, ought to be celibate, but he is not terribly shocked by sins of the flesh. Adam’s sin, however, is far more interesting and haunting. Adam joins Eve in her sin, out of fear. He does not want to be torn from her. Augustine meditates on how he and some friends stripped a pear tree and fed the fruit to the hogs. He sees in the actions of this little mob the root of Adam’s sin. This community, a little gang of adolescents, old enough to be fathers but not grandfathers, steal not because they either need or even desire the pears, but because of a compulsion to solidarity (socialis necessitudo). They were afraid to break ranks. The sin of many is greater than the sum of individuals’ sins. The third primal sin is that of Cain. Here Augustine does not refer to the murder of Abel, but rather to Cain’s anguish over God’s rejection of his offering. Looking back on his own life, he remembers his exaggerated grief following the death of a friend. He speaks of how he lived only to keep alive the memory of the other. There is a self-absorption here that he likens to Cain’s envy. It leads to the abandonment of parents, a rejection of God, and the founding of a city east of Eden. These are themes hinted at in The Testimony and more fully developed years later in The City of God. Augustine’s view of sin goes far deeper and darker than what people do or do not do with their genitals. After emerging from a century of genocide and as we stumble into tomorrow we would do well to think on all this!

If Wills is able to explore the depths of Augustine’s view of sin, his careful critical skills are put to even greater use as he explores Augustine’s growth in faith. Unlike some who see in him a sudden conversion, a dramatic move from sin to disciplined faith, Wills describes throughout the life of Augustine an evolving sense of Christian vocation. As he puts it in his introduction to Book Nine of The Testimony, “The God of Genesis is not a text in the past, but an unrecognized constant in Augustine’s life, ‘deeper in me than I am in me’ (intemior intimo meo)” (Saint Augustine’s Conversion, 41). By means of careful scholarship Wills is able to show how themes of grace and providence run deep in Augustine.

When he was sixteen and at the baths, his father, Patrick, saw him “clothed
with unstable manhood” (Saint Augustine’s Sin, 39). Too many readers of
Augustine have let their imaginations run wild at this point and have piled up all
sorts of lurid ideas about what the boy was doing and the father saw. Wills rightly
points out that Augustine is making a theological statement here. The key word is
“clothed” (indutum). As a young man he was clothed in sin—as are all the children
of Adam and Eve. But there are other forces at work in his life—his mother’s pray-
ers, life with Una and Godsend, frustrations with his career, conversations with
friends and teachers, and the example of faithful servants of God, such as Ambrose
and many others. All work to bring him to the point in the garden when he hears
the voice calling him to “Lift! Look!” There he reads in the Roman letter about be-
ing clothed in the Lord Jesus Christ (sed induite dominum Iesum Christum). The
bath scene with Patrick, his father in the flesh, foreshadows his baptism by Saint
Ambrose, his father in Christ. In baptism, he is once again clothed (indutum),
not with unstable manhood, but with Christ. This is a vocational conversion.
Augustine’s faith had been a long time in its development, but there came a day of
clarity. The aspiring rhetor for the Roman Empire leaves his career and becomes a
celibate Christian philosopher and later bishop of an African backwater.

Ten years after his conversion, Augustine looks back on his life and ponders
his next move. Books Nine and Ten of The Testimony are presented by Wills as
Saint Augustine’s Memory. His work on memory is the longest section in the Testi-
mony, and for those looking for a simple autobiography of a sinner turned saint it
is perhaps the most disappointing section. It is a rare combination of philosophy
and prayer. Augustine presents us with a study of how the past, present, and future
are intertwined through a trinity of memory, present experience, and anticipation.
It is tinged with sadness and yet remains ever hopeful. There is much to regret. But
the future holds even more. This section is the hinge on which whole work turns.
For what follows is not only a trinitarian meditation on the first chapter of Genesis,
but on the rest of his life and work among the people of God.

In the opening sentences of The Testimony he prayed to God, “Our heart is
unstable until stabilized by you” (Childhood, 29). Now, in Memory, we are given a
glimpse of one who has been stabilized in Christ. Wills’s translation is superb.
Augustine speaks English with a quiet dignity and answers all who would question
his reason for giving his Testimony:

But why let others overhear my testimony, as if they could treat my symptoms?
People want a transgressive knowledge of other’s lives, but are blissfully ignorant
of what might change their own. Why, anyway, should they care to hear from me
about my own condition if they will not hear from you about theirs? I shall risk
testifying to you, Lord, in such a way that, even though I cannot be the one to
make my own testimony credible to others, the love with which they listen will
lend it credit. (Memory, 31)

Garry Wills himself provides the best reasons for reading his treatment of
Augustine’s Testimony. He is a faithful Roman Catholic believer. As a young man
he received a Jesuit education and prepared for the priesthood. He writes that it was an encounter with Gilbert Chesterton and the other critics of Vatican One that gave him the freedom to not take holy orders. At the same time, it was Augustine who allowed him to remain grounded in the church. Of course, his story is far more complicated than the two previous sentences suggest! But they are telling. During the same years in which he was preparing Augustine for publication, Wills also produced *Papal Sins: Structures of Deceit* (Doubleday, 2000) and *Why I Am a Catholic* (Mariner, 2003). These two books are not for the faint of heart. They are thoughtful, well researched, hard-hitting examinations of a deeply flawed organization—the church visible—and while Wills is Roman Catholic, it’s far too easy to translate his observations to any denomination. Yet, time and again, these volumes break into a confession of faith. The shadow of Augustine extends far beyond Wills’s work as commentator and translator. I would even suggest his ongoing, deeply personal conversation with Godsend’s father shapes his very being. The old African bishop will do that to a person.

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But now the journalist Garry Wills has written "St. Augustine" (in the Penguin Lives series of brief biographies), which tries to revise the popular view of the saint, and the work may disappoint some sinners. In the book, Mr. Wills says that Augustine wasn't sex-obsessed at all but concerned with how sexual dysfunction reflects man's fall from grace, and that the "Confessions" was not an autobiography in the conventional sense but "mainly a theological meditation on his own life." "Revelation is not simply Garry Wills's Venice: Lion City is a tour de force -- a rich, colorful, and provocative history of the world's most fascinating city in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when it was at the peak of its glory. This was not the city of decadence, carnivâ€." The Confessions of Saint Augustine (Image Books) by Saint Augustine and translated The Confessions of Saint Augustine. 392 Pagesâ€-2012â€-2.07 MBâ€-3,742 Downloads. â€¢ Chapter VIII. The same when at Rome, being led by others The Confessions of Saint Augustine THE CONFESSIONS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE By Saint Augustine Bishop of Hippo BOOK I Great art 191 Pagesâ€-2014â€-619 KBâ€-154 Downloads. The confessions of saint augustine. By Saint Augustine. Bishop of Hippo. BOOK I. Great art NR PLUS Podcasts The Bookmonger. Garry Wills on Augustineâ€™s Confessions: A Biography. About NR Staff. Hosted by John J. Miller. April 19, 2011 12:16 PM. Share on Facebook. Share on Twitter. Share on Flipboard. Email this article. Latest Episodes From The Bookmonger.Â It looks as if control of the Senate will be determined by a pair of January runoff elections in Georgia. Democrats insist they will win both seats and tie the Senate 50-50 (with Vice President Kamala Harris breaking the tie). But history is not on their side. Republicans have won every statewide runoff Garry Wills, a journalist and historian, is the author of numerous books, including Nixon Agonistes (1970), Inventing America (1978), Explaining America: The Federalist (1981), and Lincoln at Gettysburg (1993), which won a Pulitzer Prize that year. His most recent book is What the Qurâ€™an Meant: And Why It Matters (2017).Â Augustine: On the Trinity: Books 8â€-15, edited by Gareth B. Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. ix. â€©. 8. Paul Henry, Saint Augustine on Personality (Macmillan, 1960), p. 1. â†©. 9. Augustine, Against Petilianâ€™s Letter 3.19. â†©.