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CAUGHT IN THE ACT: VOYEURISM AND PERFORMANCE IN AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS*

*Abstract*

Through theories of performativity and as performance, this article explores Augustine's troubled relationship with spectacles of suffering in *Confessions*. For Augustine, pleasure at pain proves the most apt example of all pleasure as an end in itself – all pleasure that does not end in God. And all who partake of this pleasure are guilty of a kind of voyeurism. But can *Confessions* be saved from Augustine's own critique? Many scholars have suggested it can. Some claim that Augustine's theatricality finds its *telos* in God. Others point to the performativity of prayer, suggesting that this performativity precludes voyeuristic engagement. The profound performativity of *Confessions* has not been overlooked. Yet by using concepts interior to the text (theater, prayer, imitation, suffering, curiosity, humility) as a framework for interpreting the text as a whole, this article exposes the (still) unresolved dilemma suspended at the heart of that performativity.

*He, the bishop, has nothing to bequeath but his sins.*  
– Jean-François Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*

Does *Confessions* give you pleasure? Should it? For what is *Confessions* if not a recounting of Augustine's turmoil? And why would you find pleasure in his suffering? In what follows I will use Augustine's discussion of the "three inordinate desires (*trium cupiditatum*)" in book ten as a lens through which to read *Confessions*, asking alongside Augustine: Is there a good way to encounter such scenes of suffering? Is there a good reason for recounting them? This essay begins with an analysis of Augustine's critique of the theater and the related inordinate desire, the lust of the eyes (*concupiscentia oculorum*). It then examines how *Confessions* is implicated in this critique, as well as the possible solutions to this performative contradiction. Finally, it will demonstrate how Augustine's ruminations on the final inordinate desire (*ambitione saeculi*) call into question any resolution, suggesting that perhaps in the end *Confessions* is just one more sin to heap onto Augustine's "massive mound" of misery.<sup>1</sup>

*Augustine's Critique of the Theater*

In *Confessions*, Augustine's critique of theater centers almost entirely on suffering.<sup>2</sup> "Theater productions ravished me, brimming as they were with depictions of my own miseries

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.43.70 (CCL 27:193; trans. Sarah Ruden, *Confessions* [New York: The Modern Library, 2017], 343). Throughout, I use Sarah Ruden's beautiful new translation of *Confessions*. When necessary for clarity, I provide my own translation.

2. For more on the centrality of violence and suffering to Augustine's critique of spectacles see Matthew Drever, "Entertaining Violence: Augustine on the Cross of Christ and the Commercialization of Suffering," *The Journal of Religion* 92, no.3 (2012): 331-61.

(*miseriarum*), and with kindling for my own fire. What does a human being want with the pain he feels (*dolere*) when he watches scenes of mournful tragedy (*tragica*), notwithstanding he wouldn't want to suffer (*pati*) such things personally?"<sup>3</sup> Why do we watch scenes of tragedy? Augustine says it is because we *like* it. "Just the same, the spectator wants to suffer (*pati*) anguish (*dolorem*) from these things, and the anguish (*dolor*) itself is his pleasure (*voluptas*)."<sup>4</sup> We want to suffer. We enjoy it. But we do not want to "suffer such things personally." Then, we must ask, how do we want to suffer them? Perhaps. . . impersonally?

This dynamic holds for a variety of spectacles.<sup>5</sup> Augustine makes a passing remark about gladiatorial shows further on in book three, claiming that the spectators feel "nothing but the pleasure (*voluptate*) of someone else's suffering (*mali*)," which anticipates Alypius' downfall in book six.<sup>6</sup> While attending a show, Alypius is determined to keep his eyes (and mind) closed to the violence at hand. But he is seduced by the noise: "Curiosity (*curiositate*) overcame him, and... he opened his eyes. He was run through with a wound in his soul more lethal than the physical wounding he'd longed to look at."<sup>7</sup> Why is Alypius wounded so deeply? Because he *loves* it, he eats it up, or rather, drinks it up. He "guzzled the cruelty" and "gulped down the demons of rage" — he was "delighted" and "got drunk on the gory diversion."<sup>8</sup> Augustine uses the same word here to describe Alypius' affliction that we will see him use to describe that of theater goer — insanity (*insaniam*) — "an insanity that prodded him sharply to come back."<sup>9</sup>

With regard to this insanity, images of violence and suffering are particularly dangerous. And, though it might seem silly to us, Augustine illustrates this with recourse to everyday trivialities. While he is no longer ravished by the theater, he can be seduced by a dog chasing a hare or a lizard catching flies or even flies falling into a spider's web. And is the offense small just because the animals are small? Of course not.<sup>10</sup> This infatuation reveals something about Augustine. Why does he love suffering? Because he is "marred by disgusting mangle (*turpi scabie*)" which is "the source of [his] love affair with sorrow (*dolorum*)."<sup>11</sup> So if Augustine is diseased, what is this itching infection?

### *The Lust of the Eyes*

Gene Fendt claims that Augustine identifies three responses to suffering in *Confessions*. If I myself am suffering, Augustine calls this misery (*miseria*). If someone else is suffering, I am moved to mercy, empathy, or compassion (*misericordia*).<sup>12</sup> But theater produces a third,

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3. Augustine, *Conf.* 3.2.2 (CCL 27:27; Ruden, 52).

4. Augustine, *Conf.* 3.2.2 (CCL 27:27; Ruden, 52).

5. For a more general discussion of late ancient Christian responses to spectacles of suffering, in addition to their employment of "Christian spectacles," see Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Martyrdom and the Spectacle of Suffering" in *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). For a chronology of Augustine's comments on spectacles throughout his corpus, see R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). And responding to Markus: Richard Lim, "Augustine and Roman Public Spectacles," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

6. Augustine, *Conf.* 3.8.16 (CCL 27:35; Ruden, 68).

7. Augustine, *Conf.* 6.8.13 (CCL 27:82-83; Ruden, 151).

8. Augustine, *Conf.* 6.8.13 (CCL 27:83; Ruden, 152).

9. Augustine, *Conf.* 6.8.13 (CCL 27:83; Ruden, 152).

10. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.57 (CCL 27:186; Ruden, 331).

11. Augustine, *Conf.* 3.2.4 (CCL 27:28; Ruden, 55).

perverted reaction.<sup>13</sup> This is what Augustine diagnoses as insanity, or an “amazing madness (*mirabilis insania*).”<sup>14</sup> As Fendt puts it, “between misery and mercy, then, there is drama, ‘pictures of my miseries’ in miseries of others performed on the stage, which arouse my grief, but lead neither to acts of charity nor to resistance and escape, rather – if the playwright is very good – to a return ticket.”<sup>15</sup> The feeling of pain and the pleasure in that pain become ends in themselves. Affect unattached to any person, even oneself, is the object of the theater:

But what kind of empathy is it at the end of the day, where made-up events on the stage are concerned? The listener isn’t hearing a call to come help, but is only being invited to feel pain (*dolendum*), and the more pain he feels, the more he applauds the one who acts out these apparitions. And if human disasters – ancient or invented as they might be – are acted out in such a way that someone in the audience fails to feel pain, he withdraws with his nose in the air, complaining. If, on the other hand, he does feel pain, he stays, transfixed, and weeps and enjoys himself to no end.<sup>16</sup>

This suffering for pleasure’s sake deprives suffering of its usefulness, its end, and creates suffering as its own enjoyment, “transforming *uti* into *frui*.”<sup>17</sup> M. B. Pranger describes this theatricality as “the ultimate manifestation of the soul’s self-estrangement and narcissistic involvement with itself.”<sup>18</sup> The weeping of the theater-goer “freezes sadness into sadness preventing [him] from linking his weeping to a self.”<sup>19</sup> It is a way of losing the self in objectless emotion, a way to avoid the self (and God) through a detachment, a distancing, an abstraction.

This becomes even clearer in book ten, where we read of a curious incident with a mutilated corpse. Augustine is discussing the pleasures that he still fails to resist after his conversion. These he calls the “diseases of my sins” which he separates into “three categories of inordinate desire (*cupiditate triplici*)”: the lust of the flesh (*concupiscentia carnis*), the lust of the eyes (*concupiscentia oculorum*), and worldly ambition (*ambitione saeculi*).<sup>20</sup> In the first category we find things directly related to the pleasure of the senses such as sex, food, drink, smells, music, and, lastly, the pleasure of the eyes. With this last pleasure, even cute sandals are a threat: “In going beyond essential, restrained usefulness and religious meaning, these things are merely added by humankind to the already existing enticements of the eyes.”<sup>21</sup>

Yet, there is a temptation that surpasses that of fashionable footwear and too-sweetly-sung Psalms. It is “a certain shallow, curious cupidity (*vana et curiosa cupiditas*)” that is “cloaked in

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12. Gene Fendt, “The Moral Problem in Reading *Confessions*: Augustine’s Double Argument against Drama,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 72, (1998): 171-84, at 173. For another discussion on the relationship between *miseria* and *miseria* in this passage also see Paul M. Blowers, “Augustine’s Tragic Vision,” *Journal of Religion and Society*, Supplement Series 15: *Augustine on Heart and Life: Essays in Memory of William J. Harmless, S.J.* (2018): 164-66.

13. This “third” category is not exactly separate from *miseria* or *miseria* but a perversion of them.

14. Augustine, *Conf.* 3.2.2 (CCL 27:27; Ruden, 52).

15. Fendt, “Moral Problem in Reading *Confessions*,” 173.

16. Augustine, *Conf.* 3.2.2 (CCL 27:27-28; Ruden, 53).

17. Fendt, “Moral Problem in Reading *Confessions*,” 173.

18. M. Burcht Pranger, “The Unfathomability of Sincerity: On the Seriousness of Augustine’s *Confessions*,” in *Actas do Congresso Internacional As Confissoes de santo Agostinho 1600 Anos Depois: Presenca e Atualidade*, ed. Manuel Barbosa Da Costa Freitas and José Maria Silva Rosa (Lisbon: Universidade Catolica Editora, 2002), 238.

19. Pranger, “Unfathomability of Sincerity,” 237.

20. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.41.66 (CCL 27:191; Ruden, 339), 10.30.41 (CCL 27:176; Ruden, 314). Augustine draws this threefold formulation from 1 John 2:16. We find a version of these already in book 3 (Augustine, *Conf.* 3.8.16 [CCL 27:36; Ruden, 68]).

21. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.34.53 (CCL 27:183; Ruden, 327).

the name of comprehension (*cognitionis*) and knowledge (*scientiae*).<sup>22</sup> According to Augustine, it is because of our linguistic conflation of “knowing (*noscendum*)” with “seeing (*videndi*)” that this is called “the desire of the eyes” (*concupiscentia oculorum*), “since this is part of the urge to gain information, and since the eyes are chief among the senses for this.”<sup>23</sup> But this is not knowledge, rather it is “cloaked in the name of comprehension and knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> Augustine dubs this a “twisted knowledge” (*perversae scientiae*), a knowledge in which “there isn’t the smallest benefit” and “people don’t yearn for anything anyway but simply to know.”<sup>25</sup> He identifies this *concupiscentia oculorum* with *curiositas*.<sup>26</sup> And temptations towards this *curiositas* bombard us every day, from spiders to magic to a friend’s “silly stories.”<sup>27</sup> This distorted curiosity is the same disease that infects the audience of spectacles: “because of this sick craving (*morbo cupiditatis*), ‘amazing things’ are exhibited at shows.”<sup>28</sup>

Unlike the lust of the flesh, although “catered to by these same physical senses,” the lust of the eyes does not find its enjoyment in the pleasure of the physical senses. Here Augustine draws a distinction between “pleasure” and “curiosity” in the senses: “pleasure (*voluptas*) seeks things that are beautiful, melodious, sweet-smelling, tasty, and smooth, whereas curiosity (*curiositas*) may actually seek the opposite of these for the purpose of testing; not in order to submit to some irritation, but from the itch to try something and find out about it.”<sup>29</sup> A mindless, idle scratching. And the pleasure found in suffering is the best example of this kind of curiosity: “What pleasure is there in seeing the wounds on a mutilated corpse, which make you shudder in horror? Yet if there’s one lying anywhere, people flock to it, in order to get depressed, to turn white.”<sup>30</sup> There is no pleasure that should be found in the thing itself, nothing beautiful. Therefore, one can be sure that the pleasure is derived simply from seeing, from the satisfaction of this “sick craving.” This disease, we might say, is a kind of voyeurism.<sup>31</sup>

So, why do we find pleasure in suffering? At the heart of this pleasure is a perverse curiosity, a desire to see but not be seen: “The human soul, in fact so blind and sick, ugly and unseemly, wants to lie low and unseen – but doesn’t want anything else to lie low and not be seen by itself.”<sup>32</sup> “They love the truth when it discloses itself but hate it when it discloses them.”<sup>33</sup> Rather than recognize my own sinfulness and repent, rather than humble myself before God, I (like Augustine and his depraved pear picking)<sup>34</sup> am “in love with the ‘freedom’ of a runaway

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22. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.54 (CCL 27:184; Ruden, 328).

23. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.54 (CCL 27:184; Ruden, 328). For Augustine this perverse “seeing” might have originated with Adam and Eve. According to Joseph Torchia, “Augustine coordinates his understanding of *curiositas* as the ‘lust of the eyes’ with the ‘opening of the eyes’ of Adam and Eve” (Joseph Torchia, *Restless Mind: Curiositas & the Scope of Inquiry in St. Augustine’s Psychology* [Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2013], 227-30, 239).

24. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.54 (CCL 27:184; Ruden, 328).

25. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.55 (CCL 27:185; Ruden, 329-30).

26. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.55 (CCL 27:184-185; Ruden, 329), 10.35.57 (CCL 27:185-186; Ruden, 57-58). For more on Augustine’s equation of *curiositas* and *concupiscentia* see Joseph Torchia, *Restless Mind*, 95-118.

27. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.57 (CCL 27:186; Ruden, 331).

28. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.55 (CCL 27:185; Ruden, 329).

29. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.55 (CCL 27:184-185; Ruden, 329).

30. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.55 (CCL 27:185; Ruden, 329).

31. I am certainly not the first to employ this term. For example, Paul M. Blowers, commenting on the effects of the theater, terms this a “self-indulgent emotional voyeurism” (Blowers, “Augustine’s Tragic Vision,” 165).

32. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.23.34 (CCL 27:173-174; Ruden, 310).

33. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.23.34 (CCL 27:173; Ruden, 310).

slave."<sup>35</sup> Curiosity is pleasure at my own capacities for mastery and freedom. In this sense, in finding myself as my own end, I participate in a "backward imitation" of God.<sup>36</sup> I put myself in the place of God—in the "shady guise of omnipotence."<sup>37</sup>

Yet there is also an important sense in which this is not simply a desire to *be* God. Augustine tells us that God himself was tempted with this very perversity, referencing the episode in Luke and John where Satan tempts Jesus to perform miracles "not in order to save anyone, but merely because they're called for in an experiment."<sup>38</sup> But God does not engage his own creation voyeuristically. He humbles himself by taking on flesh, entering into the muck of things. He risks himself. While we act like runaway slaves, he "acted as our slave."<sup>39</sup> God does not revel in his freedom, but sacrifices it. *Concupiscentia oculorum* exposes our desire to be less bounded than God himself.

With this "twisted knowledge" in mind, we can appreciate Augustine's critique of the Academics as well. The Academics "expressed the view that everything should be doubted, and they'd determined that no part of truth could be grasped by humankind."<sup>40</sup> They flit around saying: "Nothing definite can be grasped about how to lead our lives. . . No, wait, let's make a careful search and not give up hope."<sup>41</sup> And of his pre-conversion self, unwilling to decide, he recalls: "in the tradition of the Academics (or what passes for it), I held all the possibilities in doubt and bobbed around among them all."<sup>42</sup> See everything, commit to nothing.

Love of suffering is the clearest symptom of the sinful condition of those who refuse to turn their eyes onto themselves—to see their condition and repent. Augustine himself was (and is) guilty of this voyeurism. He bobbed around like the Academics, afraid to commit and to *submit*. "I was, you see, holding my heart back from any admission of the truth, as I feared the sheer drop into it; but hanging (myself) in the air above it was more like killing myself."<sup>43</sup> The unattached floating that the theater stirs up in us is not just a disease; it is suicide.

### *Imitation, Prayer, and Augustine's Holy Theater*

Now we must first point to the obvious problem: Augustine recounts in *Confessions* the very things he condemns, calling a glut of dangerous images and emotions to the mind of the reader. This, of course, is the paradox of all attempts at censorship.

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34. Read through the lens of 10.30.41-10.43.70, Augustine's episode with the pears may be characterized as some combination of the lust of the eyes and worldly ambition, but it is decidedly *not* the lust of the flesh: "there was not pleasure for me in that fruit, the pleasure was in the crime itself" (Augustine, *Conf.* 2.8.16 [CCL 27:25; Ruden, 49]). On the relationship between curiosity and pride, and how this pertains to Augustine's theft of the pears see Torchia, *Restless Mind*, 229. On pride and *curiositas* in the episode with Alypius above see Lim, "Augustine and Roman Public Spectacles," 143-45.

35. Augustine, *Conf.* 3.3.5 (CCL 27:29; Ruden, 55).

36. Augustine, *Conf.* 2.6.14 (CCL 27:24; Ruden, 47).

37. Augustine, *Conf.* 2.6.14 (CCL 27:24; Ruden, 47).

38. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.55 (CCL 27:185; Ruden, 330).

39. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.43.69 (CCL 27:193; Ruden, 342).

40. Augustine, *Conf.* 5.10.19 (CCL 27:68; Ruden, 126).

41. Augustine, *Conf.* 6.11.18 (CCL 27:86; Ruden, 157).

42. Augustine, *Conf.* 5.14.25 (CCL 27:72; Ruden, 133).

43. Augustine, *Conf.* 6.4.6 (CCL 27:77; Ruden, 142).

More interesting, given his critique of the theater (and of *concupiscentia oculorum* more generally), is the drama that is *Confessions*. Augustine warns of the dangers of watching “scenes of mournful tragedy.”<sup>44</sup> He recounts the destruction of his own “pitiful” enjoyment in reading such scenes, “weeping for the death of Dido” while “I endured dry-eyed the utter misery of myself dying away from you, God.”<sup>45</sup> Yet *Confessions* is not just theater but, often, *tragedy*.<sup>46</sup> It is a tale of “the massive mound of [Augustine’s] misery.”<sup>47</sup> This dangerous depiction seems uncharacteristically reckless coming from a man ostensibly so concerned about church songs. Perhaps this dilemma is resolved by the fact that Augustine does not critique depictions of suffering as such, but a certain aestheticization of suffering. Perhaps even these treacherous images can be redeemed. We find evidence of this in the suffering Christ.

In addition to being the most naked manifestation of *concupiscentia oculorum*, pleasure in suffering poses dangers specific to Christianity. Augustine explains that our emotions can be shaped, or “trained,” by habit.<sup>48</sup> Theater is an abstracted emotion machine, that produces a machine-like response in the viewer, too. This voyeuristic viewing forms a feedback loop where “the more a person is stirred by such feelings, the less they are able to be unaffected by them.”<sup>49</sup> Curiosity is a habit that one forms, and one that must be forcefully broken. This is particularly concerning with images of suffering because training ourselves towards this response affects our ability to be moved by the suffering of Christ. Worse, we might like it (and not in a good way). James K. A. Smith claims that for Augustine

It is not only the beautiful which moves us and affects us – not even only the beautiful, I would argue, that moves us toward God. Indeed, are we not ultimately moved by the One who was ‘uncomely’ who ‘had no beauty or majesty that we should be attracted to him, nor appearance that we should desire him’ (Is. 53:2), and whose suffering visage affects us like no other sublimity? It will not only be the ‘beautiful’ and that which ‘delights’ which is affirmed in a Christian aesthetic more broadly conceived, but all that affectively moves us to ultimately find our delight and meaning in God – which might include the painful and sorrowful, insofar as it is ‘used’ to ultimately enjoy God.<sup>50</sup>

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44. Augustine, *Conf.* 3.2.2 (CCL 27:27; Ruden, 52).

45. Augustine, *Conf.* 1.13.20-1.13.21 (CCL 27:11; Ruden, 22).

46. As Robert O’Connell puts it so vividly: “Only an accomplished dramatist could ever so strongly have engaged us in those desperate struggles of soul that came upon him after the death of his youthful friend – his name a lesser artist would have told – but if he had, we would not then so sharply scent a world entire reeking with the stench of death, shudder in the grip of those moments when sorrowing alone was sweet to us, peer into the faces of every advancing crowd, search hopelessly at every crossing for our own dead friend, until we reel in the grip of a sudden vertigo that makes us, too, a ‘great riddle’ to ourselves” (Robert J. O’Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978], 129). For more on Augustine and tragedy see Paul M. Blowers, “The Tragic Christian Self: Three Late-Ancient Profiles,” in *Visions and Faces of the Tragic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Paul M. Blowers, “Augustine’s Tragic Vision,” *Journal of Religion and Society*, Supplement Series 15: *Augustine on Heart and Life: Essays in Memory of William J. Harmless, S.J.* (2018): 157-69; Philip Burton, “Alternative Comedy: The Language of the Theatre,” in *Language in the Confessions of Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Michael P. Foley, “A Spectacle to the World: The Theatrical Meaning of St. Augustine’s Soliloquies,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 22, no. 2 (2014): 243-60; David W. Tracy, “Augustine Our Contemporary: The Overdetermined, Incomprehensible Self,” in *Augustine Our Contemporary: Examining the Self in Past and Present*, ed. Willemien Otten and Susan E. Schreiner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018); Werner Weismann, *Kirche und Schauspiele: Die Schauspiele im Urteil der lateinischen Kirchenväter unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Augustin*, Cassiciacum 27 (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1972), 123-95.

47. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.43.70 (CCL 27:193; Ruden 343).

48. Drever, “Entertaining Violence,” 338.

49. Augustine, *Conf.* 3.2.2 (CCL 27:27, translation my own).

50. James K. A. Smith, “Staging the Incarnation: Revisioning Augustine’s Critique of Theatre,” *Literature & Theology* 15, no. 2 (2001): 123-39, at 129. Smith is building on the earlier work of Robert J. O’Connell and Carol Harrison: Robert J. O’Connell,

Confronted with the suffering Christ we are supposed to be led to compassion and moved to repentance.<sup>51</sup> It is through the suffering of Christ that we see his humility and learn to imitate it: "They were to grow weak and see at their feet the holy being in his weakness, as he shares the pitiful human hide that clothes us; in their exhaustion, they could throw themselves on him, and as he rose, he could lift them along with him."<sup>52</sup> Since Augustine claims that we are "saved through faith in his suffering," it is absolutely essential that we are able to engage suffering correctly.<sup>53</sup>

Curiosity destroys this capacity. Augustine proposes imitation (*imitatio*) as a potential antidote for *curiositas*, but it does not come without its own risks. It is precisely Augustine's ambivalence towards mediation (upon which *curiositas* is predicated) that leads to his ambivalence towards imitation. Jennifer Herdt claims that for Augustine "we return to our divine exemplar not by imitating glorious heroes or self-sufficient philosophers, but only by accepting the love shown to us in Christ's self-emptying humility."<sup>54</sup> Imitation of virtue can easily cultivate independence and pride, producing a "backwards imitation" of God. Rendering us unable to see God's beauty and our own sinfulness, any imitation that does not humble us before the feet of God produces a mediation between the self and the self and between the self and God. Performed correctly, imitation should close the distance between oneself and God. Augustine suggests that while the devil is the "fraudulent mediator," God sent Jesus as "the truthful mediator" "so that by his example [we] might learn that very same humility."<sup>55</sup> Christ mediates between us and God by giving us an example of humility before God to imitate. Yet even in calling Jesus a mediator, Augustine assuages his concerns about mediation: "Inasmuch as he was a man, he was a mediator, but inasmuch as he is the Word, he is not in the middle, because he is equal to God, and is God in the presence of God, and one God together with him."<sup>56</sup>

If the mediation that Christ provides is justified in this way, what about imitating other humans? Imitating the imitators of Christ? Or more pointedly: Are we supposed to stave off *curiositas* by engaging the sufferings of Augustine as we engage those of Christ: by learning from the suffering of Augustine and imitating his humility? Augustine signals some ambivalence on this point. In so far as we can learn self-restraint and humility from imitating the imitators of Christ, this seems to be permissible. More explicitly he tells us that part of the purpose of imitation is learning to abstain from curiosity – how to "hold yourselves back" from "the impulses of the dead soul" which include "the fraudulent heading 'knowledge'" or "the poison of officious curiosity (*curiositatis*)."<sup>57</sup> The soul "achieves restraint by imitating Christ's imitators."<sup>58</sup> These messengers are "examples to imitate in all kinds of their own self-denial."<sup>59</sup>

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*Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1992). These three works also provide a discussion of the Platonic origins of Augustine's critique of the theater, which I do not attend to here.

51. Drever, "Entertaining Violence," 354.

52. Augustine, *Conf.* 7.18.24 (CCL 27:108; Ruden, 196, slightly modified) Ruden uses female pronouns here in keeping with *veritas*; Also on the humility of Christ cf. 10.43.69 and 7.9.14.

53. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.43.68 (CCL 27:192; Ruden, 342).

54. Jennifer Herdt, "The Theatre of the Virtues: Augustine's Critique of Pagan Mimesis," in *Augustine's City of God: A Critical Guide*, ed. James Wetzel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 111.

55. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.43.68 (CCL 27: 192; Ruden, 341).

56. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.43.68 (CCL 27:192; Ruden, 342).

57. Augustine, *Conf.* 13.21.30 (CCL 27:259; Ruden, 458).

58. Augustine, *Conf.* 13.21.31 (CCL 27:259; Ruden, 458).

59. Augustine, *Conf.* 13.25.38 (CCL 27:265; Ruden, 469).

When speaking of Self-Restraint, Augustine claims that she “held whole flocks of people who could teach me by example.”<sup>60</sup> We may imitate others in order to break the habit of curiosity and form one of humility. And this humility is cultivated in the same way that curiosity is cultivated by the theater, by affects. Habits are shaped by feelings. Therefore, we must cultivate and restrain feelings in order to reform habits. But Augustine seems to suggest here too that imitating humans is a stepping stone, just a starting point. “Once our feelings. . . are held back from passion for the world. . . that will no longer be ‘according to [your] kind’ as if you all were imitating your neighbor, whoever is going ahead of you, or as if you were living under the authority of a better person.”<sup>61</sup> Imitation of humans is of very limited usefulness because it places someone “in the middle.” And you really should be cautious. We have witnessed the perils of mediation. Imitation is a slippery slope.

In the final words of *Confessions*, Augustine leaves us with this: “But who among humankind can offer another human being a way to understand this? What angel could offer it to another angel? What angel could offer it to a human being? We must ask you for it, and look for it from you; we must knock at your door: in this way, we will receive it, we will find it, and you will open the door to us.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, imitation may be able to shape affects, it may humble us so that we might knock, but it can never (directly) lead to understanding. Understanding, if it comes, must come from God alone. For we are made in the image of God. Therefore, “a person renewed in his mind and contemplating your truth that is understood doesn’t need another person as a guide; he is not to imitate his *own* kind. Rather, with you as a guide he validates on his own what your will is.”<sup>63</sup> And having undergone this, “being completed as a spiritual being he judges all things—all that should be judged, at any rate; but he himself is judged by no one.”<sup>64</sup> He becomes a kind of holy voyeur.

But ultimately, we do not achieve even self-restraint on our own. Augustine insists that “no one, of course, can be self-restrained unless you grant it.”<sup>65</sup> And Self-Restraint herself tells Augustine that none of the exemplars gained her on their own. Rather, “their Master and God gave me to them. . . Throw yourself forward onto him!”<sup>66</sup> Given all of this qualifying, we might ask: why not cut out the middleman altogether? Humans are flawed anyway. Maybe we should just stick to the suffering of Christ and close our eyes to Augustine’s sufferings after all. And we might also ask a more fundamental question: if curiosity has altered my ability to view suffering correctly, how can I know that in reading *Confessions* I will learn from and imitate Augustine’s (or Christ’s) self-restraint rather than enjoy his suffering? In order to learn self-restraint by imitating Augustine I have to exercise self-restraint in reading Augustine.

Could there be another way that *Confessions* curbs *curiositas*? Smith ultimately suggests that Augustine’s drama is redeemed by its “affective *telos*”: “that people are moved toward God.”<sup>67</sup> But Pranger and Fendt take this explanation a step further, claiming that the issue is resolved in the form of Augustine’s *Confessions* as *prayer*. According to Pranger, Augustine’s text is

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60. Augustine, *Conf.* 8.11.27 (CCL 27:130; Ruden, 234).

61. Augustine, *Conf.* 13.22.32 (CCL 27:260; Ruden, 460).

62. Augustine, *Conf.* 13.38.53 (CCL 27:273; Ruden, 482).

63. Augustine, *Conf.* 13.22.32 (CCL 27:260; Ruden, 460).

64. Augustine, *Conf.* 13.22.32 (CCL 27:261; Ruden, 461).

65. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.31.45 (CCL 27:178; Ruden, 319).

66. Augustine, *Conf.* 8.11.27 (CCL 27:130; Ruden, 234).

67. Smith, “Staging the Incarnation,” 133.

performative rather than descriptive. Augustine asserts: "I want to perform (*facere*) the truth in my own heart, in your presence, in my testimony; and with my pen I want to perform it before many witnesses."<sup>68</sup> Augustine is not *telling* the truth but *making* the truth.<sup>69</sup> He carries out the Word "with both actions and words."<sup>70</sup> *Confessions* is not "authentic" or "true" in the sense that it portrays events any more real than those of the theater. In fact, scholars question the historicity of even some central events in the narrative. Rather, for Pranger, the problem is one of time, of immediacy. In confessing, Augustine does not reveal himself, he makes himself before God—for before God there is "no moment at which a decision can be deferred, a promise not kept."<sup>71</sup> And not only is Augustine praying, we, in reading, are praying with him: Fendt tells us that "it is *necessary* to pray while reading *Confessions*."<sup>72</sup>

The genre of prayer closes the distance of mediation upon which voyeurism relies. The voyeur is unbounded. Augustine's word is his bond.<sup>73</sup> "Not for one single moment is one allowed to free oneself from this particular shape of time and creation, let alone that one might be at liberty to float freely alongside the stream of facts and events and come up with stories about what is going on inside; stories that would in turn exceed the boundaries so tightly set."<sup>74</sup> As Augustine's reader, I too am bound. I cannot hover, I am deeply caught up. Only by "transforming these words into my own flesh" do I truly read *Confessions*.<sup>75</sup> His suffering is my own. I cannot be removed from it in the way that the spectator is removed from the suffering on stage. Therefore, the performativity of the text is the very thing that redeems it.

### *Those Who Come to Look*

Or is it? A prurient interest in pain is clearly intolerable for Augustine. It is perversion, madness. While images of suffering may be used affectively to move us towards God, surely a voyeuristic pleasure in suffering has not been redeemed. Yet it often feels as if Augustine is *seducing* us, and not just with beauty.<sup>76</sup> Corpses proliferate in the *Confessions*.<sup>77</sup> And given his grotesque choices of metaphor, it seems that not even Augustine can resist invoking the mangled body to draw us in. The destruction of sin (along with God's correctives and punishments) is almost invariably portrayed through metaphors of disease and wounds,

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68. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.1.1 (CCL 27:155; Ruden, 277).

69. For "making" truth in Augustine and in confession more broadly, see Jacques Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2)," in *Without Alibi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 109. See also Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 115.

70. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.4.6 (CCL 27:157; Ruden, 281).

71. Pranger, "Unfathomability of Sincerity," 104. On making (and unmaking) oneself through confession see Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*, trans. Stephen W. Sawyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 15-17 and "Christianity and Confession" in *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*, trans. Graham Burchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

72. Fendt, "Moral Problem in Reading *Confessions*," 177.

73. Pranger, "Unfathomability of Sincerity."

74. Pranger, "Unfathomability of Sincerity," 235.

75. Fendt, "Moral Problem in Reading *Confessions*," 179.

76. Virginia Burrus, Mark D. Jordan, and Karmen MacKendrick, *Seducing Augustine: Bodies, Desires, Confessions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

77. Not least of all the metaphorically dead and rotting Augustine.

festering flesh, violence and torture, starvation, and death.<sup>78</sup> We are incessantly made subject to Augustine's suffering. His metaphorically mutilated body and soul constantly take center stage: "But that wound of mine made by the hacking off the woman I'd had before wasn't healing; on the contrary, after excruciating inflammation and pain came putrefaction and a growing numbness and hopelessness."<sup>79</sup> He even invokes that oh-so-intoxicating imagery of the arena, painting himself as a gladiator, no less! "How had that sorrow been able so effortlessly to pierce me to the core, unless it was because I had already bled my soul out onto the sandy floor of the arena by feeling affection for a mortal being as if he were immortal."<sup>80</sup> It seems that Augustine is drawing us into the same curiosity that the theater creates in the spectator. Doesn't this threaten to undo his critique (or *Confessions*) entirely?

Several scholars suggest that Augustine not only redeems the theatrical, but must actually out-do theater—that the theatricality of the theater was not evocative enough for Augustine, and that he must call forth the Christian God in a more affectively powerful event. Donnalee Dox observes that "actors on a stage could not satisfy his desire for a single God any more than prostitutes could satisfy his body or Plotinus his mind. Long after the events he describes, he comes to understand that his desire for God was far more powerful than anything the stages could evoke."<sup>81</sup> Pranger is curious how Augustine might match these pagan pleasures:

But what about the pleasure of tragedy? How else is human behavior to be made dynamic and dramatic but by the duplications and mixtures of tragedy that produce the sweetest balsam imaginable, the love of pain? Or, to phrase the question differently, is Augustine able to come up with an alternative that, being a better play, produces better enjoyment? Exactly what role is time supposed to play in outdoing theatricality?<sup>82</sup>

And Herdt poses a similar question: "How, in the face of the powerful sway of corrupt pagan loves, can the holy spectacle of Christian worship lure human desire toward the truly good?"<sup>83</sup>

Pranger answers that the immediacy of prayer accomplishes this task as well. In prayer, extremes meet in a way that surpasses even the love of pain. Addressing God directly renders "the pleasure of tragedy" just another "superfluous extension" of the theater.<sup>84</sup> But if the act of prayer itself creates a better theater, then why risk evoking such dangerous images? Or perhaps a better question: If prayer excludes the possibility of (or surpasses the need for) voyeurism, if everything is so tidy, then why does Augustine still seem so nervous about recounting his suffering?

In book ten, Augustine tells us how reading him should affect us. "Well, when the confessions of my past wrongdoings. . . are read and heard, they arouse the heart out of its sleep of despair, in which it says, 'I can't.' It then lies awake in its passion for your mercy, and in the sweetness of your grace, through which every weak person gains power, when this grace makes him

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78. Instances of this are too frequent to enumerate. The *Confessions* is riddled with phrases like: "as from scratching fingernails, a seething, swelling putrefaction and revolting pus resulted" (Augustine, *Conf.* 3.2.4 [CCL 27:28; Ruden, 55]).

79. Augustine, *Conf.* 6.15.25 (CCL 27:90; Ruden, 165).

80. Augustine, *Conf.* 4.8.13 (CCL 27:46-47; Ruden, 87).

81. Donnalee Dox, "The Idea of a Theatre in Late Antiquity: Augustine's Critique and Isidore's History," in *The Idea of the Theatre in Latin Christian Thought: Augustine to the Fourteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 19.

82. Pranger, "Unfathomability of Sincerity," 238.

83. Herdt, "The Theatre of the Virtues," 128.

84. Pranger, "The Unfathomability of Sincerity," 239.

aware of his weakness."<sup>85</sup> So hearing his confessions, hearing of Augustine's wrongdoings and misfortunes, is intended to shake the readers out of "despair" and reveal to them their weakness, their bad habits, so that they may be humbled. Like the suffering Christ, we must engage the suffering Augustine correctly. Then, to ensure we have understood, he insists: "It delights good people to hear about the past evil acts of those who are now free of them; it isn't a source of delight that these acts are evil, but rather that they are no longer going on."<sup>86</sup> But Augustine's suffering is not in the past; it is in the present. The simultaneity, the immediacy, of prayer is exactly what undermines Augustine's own justification for sharing his suffering. We cannot rejoice that Augustine no longer suffers because he does. As Fendt notes, "Augustine does not remember his youthful despairs and defeats in the way he felt them then, but in the way they cause him sorrow at the time of writing."<sup>87</sup> And it is not only the sufferings of the past that Augustine recounts. In book ten, Augustine admits that he is *still* suffering temptation. Augustine clearly catches this, too; directly following he asks "what's the advantage that I testify – in your presence, but relayed to humankind as well as through my writing – as to who I *am* as yet, instead of who I *was*? I've in fact seen and put on record the advantage of testifying to the latter."<sup>88</sup>

But, he admits, people are curious (*curiosum*) about who he is right now.<sup>89</sup> And his response is to question *our* motives. He asks what we want to benefit from hearing these things, and insists that he reveals himself to brothers, not to outsiders or "other parents' sons."<sup>90</sup> He does not want us to be voyeurs but brothers who will rejoice at his closeness to God and pray for him in his failings.<sup>91</sup> Pray for me, cry for me, "[hold] me dear."<sup>92</sup> It is as if Augustine, somehow able to detect our curiosity, chastises us for it while we read. He catches us in the act – peeking in the window, gazing at him. And he not only directs us how to read the text, he demands it of us. If we do not obey, we are not the ones to whom he offers himself (not the ones whom he has come to *serve* – what exactly this serving consists of we will return to).<sup>93</sup> As Fendt states starkly, "there is only one way to read Augustine's *Confessions* which is valid. Every other way is ruled out by the text and is not merely an intellectual error, but sin."<sup>94</sup>

But are not brothers guilty of this sin, too? Even if I try to close my eyes to these images, I cannot resist, I am assaulted by the mangled body of Augustine. And like Alypius, *I like it*. I gulp it down. I come back again and again. I drag others with me.<sup>95</sup> My soul, too, has been wounded. I am no longer the person I was when I came. I am part of the mob, part of

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85. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.3.4 (CCL 27:156; Ruden, 279).

86. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.3.4 (CCL 27:156; Ruden, 279).

87. Fendt, "Moral Problem in Reading *Confessions*," 176.

88. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.3.4 (CCL 27:156; Ruden, 279).

89. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.3.4 (CCL 27:156-157; Ruden, 279).

90. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.3.5 (CCL 27:157; Ruden, 280).

91. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.3.5 (CCL 27:157; Ruden, 280). Augustine makes a similar argument to justify the reading of martyr narratives in *Serm.* 280.2 (PL 38:1281).

92. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.3.5 (CCL 27:157; Ruden, 280).

93. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.3.5; 10.4.6 (CCL 27:157; Ruden, 280, 281).

94. Fendt, "Moral Problem in Reading *Confessions*," 171.

95. Augustine, *Conf.* 6.8.13 (CCL 27:83; Ruden, 152). Here I confess the same fault as Fendt who similarly admits, "What do I do with this pity? I go back and read it again. Worse, I buy a copy and give it to someone else" (Fendt, "Moral Problem in Reading *Confessions*," 175). All the more to Fendt's point that *Confessions*, as a mimesis of "the text of bliss," "makes us all plagiarists – generally bad ones" (Fendt, 182).

Augustine. Confessing with him, I am converted. But I am transformed not only through prayer but through a morbid curiosity that threatens the very transformation I have undergone. Can even the transformative power of prayer stifle this perverted pleasure? Can the voyeur be removed from the tragedy?

*Redeemed Theater or Disgraced Augustine?*

In the latter part of book ten Augustine, describing "three categories of inordinate desire," again, and perhaps most strikingly, confronts us with his misery. Even post-conversion, Augustine laments his suffering: "Is human life on this earth not a wholly uninterrupted trial?"<sup>96</sup> This, it seems, is what he was preparing us for at the beginning of book ten, when he justified recounting who he is *now* in all of his misery.

The second category of inordinate desire is the lust of the eyes, or what I have called voyeurism. Those who yield to this second kind of temptation are "utterly lost."<sup>97</sup> Yet, Augustine himself is not entirely free of this temptation. The theaters don't entice him, but those mundane events with tiny animals still draw him in. In these times, the same predation going on in these animals is going on within him.<sup>98</sup> He admits to God "if you didn't point out my weakness and quickly warn me either to raise my mind to you through some meditation on this sight, or to disregard it entirely and pass on, I'd grow paralyzed and empty-headed."<sup>99</sup> Perhaps Augustine is doing the same for us. By providing his own sufferings for the viewing, himself as spectacle, and then questioning our motives in viewing him, perhaps Augustine is showing us how we, too, are engaged in this habit of relating to suffering voyeuristically. He points out our weakness and quickly warns us to raise our minds to God—or we, too, will become "paralyzed and empty-headed."<sup>100</sup> As Fendt asks, "if...Augustine's pictures of misery please us, if they pull us along, is that not a confession of our disorder?"<sup>101</sup> Is Augustine seducing us into confession with these images?

Yet he says, "I proceed from there to praising you, the wonder-working creator and ruler of all things, but it's not on that basis that I *begin* to be mindful. Getting up quickly is one thing, not falling is another."<sup>102</sup> Perhaps the danger *is* too great. Is it better not to fall at all? Would it be better not to tempt us with this suffering? But no, our lives are full of these incidents, and "when our heart becomes a container for stuff like this, and carries around masses of it, an endless supply, then even our prayers are often broken in on and disturbed."<sup>103</sup> *Even our prayers are often broken in on and disturbed.* Although Augustine prays, and we must pray with Augustine, this is no "uninterrupted prayer."<sup>104</sup> The voyeuristic gaze has the power to disturb this prayer, both ours and his. The simultaneity that justified Augustine's theatricality has been fractured. Prayer cannot solve all the problems the text creates because who can pray

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96. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.28.39 (CCL 27:176; Ruden, 314).

97. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.54 (CCL 27:184; Ruden, 328).

98. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.57 (CCL 27:186; Ruden, 331).

99. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.57 (CCL 27:186; Ruden, 331).

100. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.57 (CCL 27:186; Ruden, 331).

101. Fendt, "Moral Problem in Reading *Confessions*," 179.

102. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.57 (CCL 27:186; Ruden, 331).

103. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.35.57 (CCL 27:186; Ruden, 331).

104. Pranger, "Unfathomability of Sincerity," 227.

ceaselessly? Perfection will only come with death.<sup>105</sup> Now nothing but God's mercy can rescue us.<sup>106</sup>

Voyeurism is eluded not by my prayer but by God's gaze. Those who read the *Confessions* without praying are made a fool of. In seeking to surpass God rather than submitting to him, engaging in a "backwards imitation" of God, "they disclose that you're the creator of all the natural world, and that therefore there is, in every sense, nowhere for anyone to draw back from you."<sup>107</sup> There is no escape. As Fendt expresses so beautifully, "to try to read *Confessions* without oneself confessing is to be an actor ignorant of the import of his words."<sup>108</sup> And he continues later, "it is utterly exorbitant – and inescapable. As if the whole world of words had been infiltrated by another power."<sup>109</sup> For those who love to see but not to be revealed, "the truth will give them their due, forcibly revealing all those unwilling to be revealed, but not itself being revealed to them."<sup>110</sup> The tables are turned. The voyeur is dressed down, himself made into the spectacle.

But this still does not quite exonerate Augustine. For while Fendt proposes "three possible escapes from the problem of reading *Confessions*" (of which only the one discussed above is viable), he proposes no secure escape from the problem of *writing Confessions*. Perhaps, as he suggests, "the disorder is not in the art."<sup>111</sup> But it might be in the artist.

So now it is finally time to turn to the third inordinate desire, worldly ambition (*ambitione saeculi*). And this desire is seemingly even more invasive than the others. "A third kind of temptation hasn't let me be, has it? And can it possibly let me be any time in my life?"<sup>112</sup> This is "the wish to be loved by other people."<sup>113</sup> And he admits "It's even hard for me to deduce how much I'm purified from this infection, and I have great anxiety over my hidden faults, which your eyes are aware of but mine aren't."<sup>114</sup> He suggests that it may actually be better to recognize his misery in secret: "I am needy and poor, but better off if I moan in private out of unhappiness with myself and seek your mercy, until my shortcomings are overcome and come to perfection in that peace that an arrogant eye never sees."<sup>115</sup> So perhaps Augustine recounts his own suffering because he wishes to make us aware of our own voyeurism. But remember: Augustine questions his choice to share these things with us. He admits that people *want* to know who he is now: "as to who I am right now, at this very period when I'm writing my confessions, many people are eager to know this, both those who're acquainted with me and

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105. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.30.42 (CCL 27:177; Ruden, 317).

106. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.36.58 (CCL 27:186; Ruden, 332).

107. Augustine, *Conf.* 2.6.14 (CCL 27:24; Ruden, 47).

108. Fendt, "Moral Problem in Reading *Confessions*," 178.

109. Fendt, "Moral Problem in Reading *Confessions*," 181.

110. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.23.34 (CCL 27:173; Ruden, 310).

111. Fendt, "Moral Problem in Reading *Confessions*," 181.

112. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.36.59 (CCL 27:187; Ruden, 332).

113. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.36.59 (CCL 27:187; Ruden, 332). Also see Foley's discussion of *thumos* and its connection to theatrical imagery in Augustine's *Soliloquies* (Foley, "Spectacle to the World," 249–53).

114. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.37.60 (CCL 27:188; Ruden, 334).

115. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.38.63 (CCL 27:189–190; Ruden, 337).

those who aren't."<sup>116</sup> The people are curious, *we* are curious.<sup>117</sup> Perhaps he cannot help but satisfy this curiosity. People love suffering and Augustine loves to be loved.

"Where praise of me is concerned, I ought to be touched not for my own sake, but because of what's in my neighbor's interest. But whether that's how it is with me, I don't know."<sup>118</sup> Augustine is unsure if he has our best interest in mind. He creates himself as a spectacle, risking our sin. Images of suffering please people. They draw us in. They are applauded, enjoyed, craved – addictive even. If we are the voyeurs, Augustine conforms himself to our viewing. And he is not sure whether he does this for our sanctification or our approval.

(Admittedly, this wouldn't be the first time. In book six he divulges: "I was seeking to use my education to please other people – not to teach them, but just to please them. Because of this, you took the rod you use for instruction and battered my bones to pieces."<sup>119</sup> It seems that Augustine didn't quite learn his lesson.)

Augustine admits that in *this very moment* he questions his own truthfulness: "*Even now*, does this remain to be dealt with: that I, in myself, lead myself astray, and that before your eyes I don't behave truthfully, in my heart and with my tongue?"<sup>120</sup> Even now, even before God's eyes he cannot determine if he is truthful; like Alypius and the theater-goer, he has succumbed to a kind of insanity (*insaniam*).<sup>121</sup> And if you are thinking now that this is getting a bit too meta, Augustine takes it just one step further:

But speech issuing from the mouth and actions that become popularly known carry with them extremely perilous temptations, due to the passion for praise. This passion cadges and amasses marks of esteem to enhance some sort of individual prominence. The passion for praise remains even when I take myself to task for it, by the very fact that I do so: often the boasting over contempt for fatuous boasting is more fatuous. Thus there's no boasting about contempt of boasting: while the boasting is going on, it can't be condemnation of boasting.<sup>122</sup>

Even his condemnation of himself cannot be a true condemnation if we are reading it. We cannot imitate Augustine's humility because Augustine isn't even sure if he is being humble. We cannot learn self-restraint from *Confessions* because *Confessions* may be the epitome of indulgence.

As a result, Augustine loses God. He is ejected from before his eyes.<sup>123</sup> "Thus I lost you, because you don't stoop to being kept along with falsehood."<sup>124</sup> What can he do? "Whom could I find to reconcile me with you?" The answer: Christ, the one who mediates without mediating. In him rests Augustine's "strong hope that you will cure all my diseases," because he seeks us out even when we aren't seeking God.<sup>125</sup> So just as Self-Restraint commanded, Augustine throws his

116. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.3.4 (CCL 27:156; Ruden, 279).

117. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.3.3 (CCL 27:156; Ruden, 278).

118. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.37.62 (CCL 27:189; Ruden, 336).

119. Augustine, *Conf.* 6.6.9 (CCL 27:80; Ruden, 147).

120. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.37.62 (CCL 27:189; Ruden, 337, emphasis mine).

121. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.37.62 (CCL 27:189; Ruden, 337).

122. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.38.63 (CCL 27:190; Ruden, 337).

123. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.41.66 (CCL 27:191; Ruden, 340).

124. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.41.66 (CCL 27:191; Ruden, 340).

125. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.43.69 (CCL 27:192; Ruden, 342), 11.2.4 (CCL 27:196; Ruden, 348).

troubles onto God and begs "Teach me and heal me." No one but God can judge Augustine, not even Augustine. And even when Augustine fails to pray, *especially* when he fails to pray, he cannot escape God's gaze. "I am caught in the act then, Master, of being whoever I am."<sup>126</sup> Before God we are always seen and always seen for who we are. No matter how we try, we cannot hide.

It is not just the foolish voyeur who is dressed down — we, in our voyeuristic habits are exposed. And Augustine himself is equally laid bare. Comically, tragically, he seems to ask: Is it worse that you are a voyeur or that I make myself into your spectacle? In testifying to us, Augustine performs his most tragic confession: that even this confession may not be a confession. At every moment he must ask God to keep his speaking "from any kind of recklessness and any kind of falsehood."<sup>127</sup> But he cannot be sure that even saying this he doesn't say it because it is what he thinks we want him to say. And he confesses this too. Perhaps this infinite digression will lead to infinite humbling. Perhaps, as Augustine claims, this is meant to arouse the feelings of both him and "those who read this."<sup>128</sup> Addressing God with us and for us Augustine says that in "testifying to our miseries" "we therefore open our feelings toward you."<sup>129</sup> Perhaps operating affectively, Augustine creates a theater that cultivates humility in the same way that theater produces curiosity — compulsively, recklessly, endlessly. Or maybe he just wants to sell tickets.

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126. Augustine, *Conf.* 10.2.2 (CCL 27:155; Ruden 277).

127. Augustine, *Conf.* 11.2.3 (CCL 27:195; Ruden, 346).

128. Augustine, *Conf.* 11.1.1 (CCL 27:194; Ruden, 344). As Virginia Burrus writes, "what does confession effect? Not an eradication of shame but a continuous turning within shame — a sustained state of contrition, repentance, conversion. Not a catharsis but an ongoing responsiveness — a painfully unrelieved openness" (Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 115).

129. Augustine, *Conf.* 11.1.1 (CCL 27:194; Ruden, 345).