Monica's Tears: Augustine on Words and Speech

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The third volume of the Blackfriars *Summa Theologiae*, translated by Herbert McCabe, is entitled (I have always supposed by him) *Knowing and Naming God*. These words make a concise brief for the philosopher of religion. Of its two movements, *knowing God* seems at first glance the more demanding and critical, yet it is evident that for Aquinas and the Patristic tradition which preceded him, *naming God* was of equal difficulty and weight. In fact the two cannot be separated for to name one must, in some sense know which, for the early theologians, formed an almost insurmountable obstacle to our speaking of God.

Augustine is continuously occupied with how we can know God, and with how we can name Him. It is the problem with which he opens the *Confessions*, for if we do not know what or whom we address then how can we call upon our Lord? To *call upon* we need a name, and a name involves definition and definition risks idolatrously presuming to know the divine essence.

> How shall I call upon my God, my God and my Lord, when by the very act of calling upon him I would be calling him into myself?[1]

The primary Biblical text for the naming of God for Patristic and medieval readers alike was Exodus 3. 1-14, the story of Moses at the burning bush. Moses, herding his father-in-law's sheep, is addressed by God and in the negotiations which follow Moses asks the Deity for a name,

> And God said to Moses 'I AM WHO I AM' —you must say to the sons of Israel 'I AM has sent me to you'. (Ex. 3.13-14)

'I AM WHO I AM'the Hebrew translated (*Ehyeh-asher-ehyeh*) might better be translated as *I am there, wherever it may be—I am really there*. It is not so much a statement of metaphysical ultimacy as a declaration of the presence and actuality of God for Israel in that time of need.

In his Latin Bible Augustine read *Ego Sum Qui Sum*. The Christian Fathers, working for the most part in Latin and Greek and ignorance of

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the Hebrew saw in this privileged name a metaphysically resonant tile. They did not however say that Scripture here defined the Divine essence. East and west they are insistent—what God is we do not know. Who God is for us we may learn. Moreover *Ego Sum Qui Sum* was of first importance for the Fathers (and for Aquinas) not primarily for its philosophical merit but because they took it to be a name given to Moses by God. It is a gift.

For all their philosophising the Fathers remain mindful of the biblical context in which that name was given, which is in a vocation narrative, the calling of Moses. Moses' search for his sheep is interrupted by the sight of the burning bush (which arouses his curiosity) and the subsequent divine address 'Moses, Moses' (which greatly startles him). This address is followed by their speaking to one another and by the giving of the divine Name.

Precisely here is the scandal of revealed faith, the startling, impossible insight that philosophical excellence and spiritual striving can at most disclose the One as Unknown, yet that this God who is wholly Other nonetheless can choose, and does choose, to bend down to make himself known to Israel in the particularity of her lived life in the desert, in Exile, in the Temple, in the contingencies of the historical and the everyday and supremely, for Christians, in Christ. I AM WHO I AM, eternal God, is disclosed as the 'I am with you, I am really with you'. This is God at the point of address. Augustine returns again and again to the name 'I Am' which he consistently associates with the Latin '*idipsum*' 'the Selfsame'.

> My faith, Lord, calls upon you. It is your gift to me. You breathed it into me by the humanity of your Son, by the ministry of your preachers. (*Confessions* I. 1.1))

Augustine at the outset of the *Confessions* makes a remarkable observation—the gift of faith is breathed into us not only by the humanity of the Son but by other people, by the ministry of preachers. In contrast to Socrates' dying exhortation in the *Phaedo* that his friends follow the solitary path of the seeker of truth, away from the distractions of human company, Augustine makes no detour round the 'madding crowd's ignoble strife'. God revealed through other people, in all their peculiarities and contingencies, even their failings. This, Augustine has come to believe, is the way God elects to speak to us by means of neighbours, friends, family and in his case, although he did not always see it so, through Monica, his mother,

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> Alas for me! Do I dare say that you were silent, my God, when I was straying from you? Were you really silent to me at that time? Whose, then, were the words spoken to me by my mother, your faithful follower? Were they not your words, the song you were constantly singing into my ears?...In truth they came from you, but I failed to realize that and assumed that you were silent and she alone was talking. (*Confessions* II.3.7)

If we cannot separate love of God from love of neighbour then nor can we separate knowledge of God from the teachings and testimony we have received from other people. This much must be a consequence of belief in revelation. If God acts in and is known in human history, accounts of these actions are passed down to us by others. It is a profoundly social religious epistemology.

Preachers, teachers, mothers—other people—that is how God chooses to teach us. Other people teach us to speak and to read in the first place and other people subsequently teach us to speak and read and sing the things of God. Our teaching of one another is one of these divinely intended ligatures of love.

The *Confessions* is preoccupied with questions of speech and language. Even Augustine's account of infancy turns largely around questions of speech. As a baby, he says, I knew only to suck and to weep. Augustine underlines this narrative of his infancy with the fact that the Latin *infans* means literally 'without speech'. Notoriously, for Augustine, even the infant is not free from savage wilfullness and selfishness but the acquisition of language allows the child to hone these to a new sharpness.

At school he was flogged for harmless play, and praised 'so that I might get on in the world' to 'excel in the skills of the tongue, skills which lead to high repute and deceitful riches.' (*Confessions* I.9.14) Would any sound judge of the matter 'think it right for me', he asks, 'to be beaten because I played ball as a boy, and was hindered by my game from more rapid progress in studies which would only equip me to play an uglier game later?' (*Confessions* I.9.15). He presents his schooling as in large part schooling in deceit and in self-deception. Learning the alphabet, learning to read and write, those were good skills to learn which still stand by him but at school he was forced also to memorise

> the wanderings of some fellow called Aeneas, while forgetting my own waywardness, and to weep over Dido, who killed herself for love....I could weep over the death Dido brought upon herself out of love for Aeneas, yet I shed no tears over the death I brought upon myself by not loving you, O God... (*Confessions* I.13.20)

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As a youth he is trained to 'be more wary of committing some barbarism in speech than of being jealous of others who did not commit it when I did.' (I.19.30) A student schooled in this way will be more greatly offended by someone who mispronounces the word for 'human being' than by one who 'flouts your commands by hating a fellow-human.' (I.18.29) It is all training in mendacity. Indeed the higher he ascends the academic ladder the more accomplished he becomes in deceit of self and others.

All this is not without an element of irony, for it is by means of words that he convinces us of their treachery, and we know further from the almost contemporary sections of *de Doctrina Christiana* that he by no means thought rhetoric should be shunned by Christians, nor did he ever lose his love of Virgil. Speaking is demonized in the text to a literary end, for nothing Augustine says in the *Confessions* is unconsidered. It is far from being a 'tell all', yet not for this less truthful. We have no reason to doubt that as a young man he was dismissive of his mother's Christian faith or that once he stole pears 'for the hell of it', but these incidents in the texts are signs which point beyond themselves. The theft of pears represents a moral nadir not because it was the worst thing the young Augustine did. He admits to sexual excess but does not provide the details which might titillate more than elevate. The theft of pears by its motiveless triviality shows the degradation of one who, in bad company, delights in doing the bad for its own sake just as later, in the faithful company of the Church, he will delight in the good.

We do well then, to keep an eye throughout on the figure of Monica. She is Augustine's model Christian, emblematic of the simple faithful the bishop grew so much to admire, and sometimes of 'mother' Church. The autobiographical section of his book ends with her death at Ostia.

Monica provides a foil in the chronicle of her son's worldly success and spiritual failings. She is not presented as perfect, she has a youthful drinking problem, some quaint religious practices and is overly ambitious for her son. While the young Augustine acquires the rhetorical skills that will gain him preferment, Monica is represented as a person of modest intellectual achievements. She is not a reader of Cicero, Homer or the neo-platonists yet it is she who, as Augustine comes to see, has been in possession of the truth which eluded him for all his intellectual athleticism ('You wanted to show me first and foremost how you thwart the proud and give grace to the humble...' (VII. 9.13)). Monica enables Augustine to make a point salient to any work of theology: that professors of theology are no more likely to be saved than those of simple faith and learning.

But Monica has a part to play in the sub-plot concerning words and

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speech. As Augustine gains in rhetorical agility Monica, at almost every mention, is described as incoherent with tears. In the end it is Monica's tears which are heard.

> You stretched out your hand from on high and pulled my soul out of these murky depths because my mother, who was faithful to you, was weeping for me more bitterly than ever mothers wept for the bodily death of their children...and you heard her, O Lord, you heard her and did not scorn those tears of hers which gushed forth and watered the ground beneath her eyes wherever she prayed. (III.11.19)

What then happens in the Milan garden, the famous under-described moment of his conversion? Augustine tells us that after agonies of soul-searching he, the great professor of rhetoric, throws himself down under a fig tree and sobs; the tears 'burst from my eyes like rivers, as an acceptable sacrifice to you.' (VIII. 12.28).[2] In the midst of incoherence he hears the voice of a child chanting 'Tolle, lege, tolle, lege', 'Pick it up and read', which Augustine interprets as a command to read the Bible and this text, once dark and obscure, now speaks directly to him. He, like Moses, has been addressed.

In the garden, and it is partly Eden, the great wordsmith is once again deprived of words, once again *in fans*. It seems that God's early gift to this 'salesman of words', as he describes his early profession, is to deprive of speech. When the new convert is considering in what manner he may tactfully resign from his teaching post,

> so that young boys who were devoting their thoughts not to your law, not to your peace, but to lying follies and legal battles, should no longer buy from my mouth the weapons for their frenzy

and resolved

> no more to offer myself for sale, now that you had redeemed me (IX.2.2)

he suffers a providential chest infection which makes it difficult to speak and so has an excuse to escape from his teaching obligations.

The symbolic overtones of a professor of rhetoric who loses his voice are not far to seek. But the question is, how he may ever speak again? Why, we may ask, if Augustine has become so critical of human speaking in the *Confessions*, does he not after his conversion choose a life of silence? This would seem an appropriate act of contrition for a former 'salesman of words' perhaps life in the desert as some kind of linguistic Simon Stylites—and indeed Augustine is worried as to how he can speak. He cannot abandon words. Words are not bad in themselves—

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I am blaming not the words, which are finely-wrought, precious vessels, but the wine of error mixed for us in them by teachers who are drunk themselves. (I.16.26)

Where can he find the teaching that will lead to truthful speech? It is the crux of the *Confessions* that if words are the means of corruption so also are they the source of healing. More properly it is the Word who is this source, and the Word speaking through the words of other people and, pre-eminently, those of Scripture.

Augustine retreats to Cassiciacum with a few friends and students and immerses himself in the words of Scripture. In particular he reads the Psalms which he reads as songs of fire—'how I was inflamed by them with love for you and fired to recite them to the whole world' and especially to the Manichees who had misled him and deluded themselves (IX.4.8).

Augustine provides us with a detailed account of reading the fourth Psalm.[3] Verse 2 pierces him to the core: 'How long will you be heavy-hearted human creatures? Why love emptiness and chase falsehood?'[4] This sums up his life so far: 'I, certainly, had loved emptiness and chased falsehood.' He repeats the verse several times, 'Why love emptiness and chase falsehood?' Its prophecy 'cries out' to him, 'and so I trembled as I heard these words, for they are addressed to the kind of person I remembered myself to have been.' (IX. 4.9). If only those who rush after externals, including his later self, would say '*Who would show us good things?*' (Psalm 4.6/5). Instead, 'They pour themselves out on things which, being seen are but transient, and lick even the images of these things with their famished imaginations' (IX. 4.10). Developing this metaphor of true and false feeding, he tells us that in his previous life he was 'eating up time as well as I myself was eaten by it.' Now he tells us 'a different *wheat and wine and oil.*' (IX. 4.10, cit. Psalm 4.8/7)

The next verse of the Psalm

wrung a cry from the very depths of my heart: *In peace! Oh. In Being itself!* What did it say? *I will rest and fall asleep.* Yes, who shall make war against us when that promise of scripture is fulfilled, *Death is swallowed up in victory*? In truth you are Being itself, unchangeable, and in you is found the rest that is mindful no more of its labors...

In words reminiscent of the famous 'restless heart' Augustine has found he need rest no where else but in God—'it is you, *you, Lord, who through hope establish me in unity.*' (IX. 4.11, Psalm 4.10/8).

Readers of modern translations will not find the words that so moved Augustine, *In peace! Oh. In Being itself I will rest and fall*

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asleep. The NRSV has simply 'I will both lie down and sleep in peace: for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety'. Augustine reads in his Latin Bible '*in pace **in id ipsum** dormiam et requiescam*' ... in *the Selfsame* will I rest. Augustine takes the Selfsame (*idipsum*) to be the God of Exodus, the 'I AM'. He 'read on and on, all afire', appalled that he had once been amongst those who bayed against 'honey-sweet scriptures'.[5] Augustine, in the middle of his life having been made once again *in fans*, learns to speak again through the words of Scripture. These provide the basis of a 'redeemed rhetoric' whereby Divine Word indwells human words.[6]

Augustine, in the garden does not come to know what God is, rather he comes to know that he is known and loved by God. After being made wordless and speechless he comes to believe that the Word through whom all things were made has spoken to him. At Cassiciacum he finds the God who spoke to Moses, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, addressing him. God has entered into the dialogue which Augustine will pursue in his *Confessions*. The fulfilment of his cerebral quest to know what God might be like (does the world rest in God like a sponge in an endless sea?) comes not in a mastering certainty but in love and in speech.

And this brings us to Ostia. The ecstasy at Ostia is the most memorable involving Monica in the *Confessions*. It stands at the very end of her life, though neither she nor her son knew at the time. The two stand at a window overlooking, again, a garden and

> Forgetting what lay in the past, and stretching out to what was ahead (Phil.3.13), we inquired between ourselves...what the eternal life of the saints would be like. (IX.10.23)

They speak of the things of God and in their speaking together are lifted up in ardent longing towards *the Selfsame* (*idipsum*). Moving beyond all bodily creatures they arrived at 'the summit of our own minds' and, passing beyond these, briefly touch 'the land of never-failing plenty where you pasture Israel forever with the food of truth', before failing back to 'the noise of articulate speech'. (IX.10.24)

The indebtedness of this account of this ascent to Plotinus is unconcealed—inquiry after the truth, movement beyond natural things, brief union with the One before a falling back. Sometimes to the embarrassment of his Christian readers, Augustine is quite prepared to retain what he thinks valid in the Platonists but here, at the summit of Monica's Christian life, the resemblance to Plotinus is marked. Has the bishop failed to notice that he is still wearing the garb of the philosophers, writing some ten years on? It is far more likely these overt

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neo-platonic references serve to make the oddities of this ascent, from a philosophical point of view, all the more apparent.

It is precisely Monica's presence which reveals the differences. In the first place the experience is shared, an impossibility in Plotinian union where the soul is no longer conscious that she is in the body, no longer conscious of herself as distinct from the One, and so could not be conscious of another person.[7] The Christian unitive vision involves no such collapse of seeker into Sought.[8] On the contrary, the promise of resurrection holds out that individuality will always be our condition. Ostia is no flight of the alone to the Alone but a foretaste of the life of the saints—which is indeed the topic of Augustine and Monica's conversation.[9] It is through their speaking and shared longing that they are lifted up and touch 'the Selfsame', leaving there the 'first fruits of our spirit' and return again to 'the noise of articulate speech, where a word has a beginning and end.' (IX.10.25).

And then there is the person of Monica herself. Ancient philosophy is better conceived as a way of life than a branch of study, as Pierre Hadot has persuasively argued. This was its attraction and limitation. Philosophy involved practices, changes in diet and occasionally in dress. The neo-platonism widely regarded in Augustine's day (and probably by himself) as the true philosophy involved such disciplines. Philosophy had stages of spiritual progress and beginners were restricted to certain texts. In the *Enneads* the philosopher progresses from ethics, to considerations of the sensible world and finally consideration of the divine things.[10] Unitive experiences were rare, and the achievement of the adept. Porphyry, the student of Plotinus, mades it clear that philosophy is not for ordinary people—not for those 'who practise manual trades or who are athletes, soldiers, orators, or politicians, ... but people who have reflected on the questions, "Who am I? Where do I come from?" And who, in their diet and other areas, have established for themselves principles different from those which rule other ways of life.'[11] Monica, although praised by Augustine for intuitive philosophical grasp, has not undergone the rigorous moral and intellectual training required for philosophical ascent. This was, for Augustine, a failing of Platonism or rather the triumph of Christianity which could win the unlearned to truths which the Platonist had never dared preach to them. The Plotinian soul of the adept elevates itself to a Deity who is attractive but by no means bends down to be known. Through the Incarnation, so Augustine had come to believe, God reaches out to the many who are without the help of philosophy and leads them home.

The ascent at Ostia is often contrasted with an earlier philosophical ascent (or ascents) in Milan, sometimes called the 'failed' Platonic

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ascent (VII.10.6). That the Ostia ascent is better we take for granted, but it's not immediately obvious why this should be so. Pierre Courcelle has made clear that the similaries of the two are striking—the same words, phrases and stages of progress.[13] At the time of the earlier ascent Augustine is not yet baptised but already reading Christian scriptures. He makes a deliberate attempt to return to himself by means of a philosophical strategy (VII.10.16).

The very similarities alert us to the differences. The Milan account uses metaphors of vision throughout—Augustine enters a vision and sees a light. The verb, *videre*, is used six times.[14] Ostia is more of an *audition*. Although it begins with a glimpse of the garden, terms of vision are avoided as Augustine and Monica move through words to the Word. Thus one ascent is visual, the other auditory; one is philosophical, one Christian; one (it is said) unsuccessful whereas the other succeeds.

Instead of contrasting later success with the early failure we may note that, in its own terms, the philosophical ascent in Milan did not fail. Augustine tells us that by this means he saw an incommunicable life, the very light of creation,

> The light I saw was not this common light at all...it was exalted because this very light made me, and I was below it because I was made. Anyone who knows truth knows it, and whoever knows it knows eternity. Love knows it. (VII.10.16)

Augustine did not doubt the veracity of this *seeing*. That was real enough: it is open to all who seek to understand through the things that are made (Romans 1.20). The disappointment of Milan is that what he saw left Augustine unsatisfied. Even the vision of the philosophically adept is not enough.

By a strategy of philosophical contemplation Augustine has gone as far as one can by reason and has a vision of the light of creation, but even that elevated seeing is blind. He is shown that although 'that which I might see exists indeed, I was not yet capable of seeing it.' His gaze is feeble. Here his sensory metaphors shift from the visual to the auditory, and then to those of taste. Trembling with love and dread he '*seems to hear*' a voice, and that voice promises he will be fed

> I *seemed to hear* your voice from on high: 'I am the food of the mature; grow then, and you will eat me. You will not change me into yourself like bodily food: you will be changed into me.' (VII. 10.16)

The vision of light is exceeded by an elusive audition, a *seeming to hear* which holds beyond it the promise of Eucharistic eating. Augustine is baffled,

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> 'Is truth then nothing, simply because it is not spread out through space either finite or infinite?' ...Then from afar you cried to me, 'By no means, for *I am who am.*' (VII.19.16)

Ego Sum Qui Sum (Exodus 3.14). These words make clear to the attentive and Christian reader not just what Augustine has seen, but Who it is addresses him: the very God who spoke to Moses. It is after hearing these words 'in the heart' that

> no possibility of doubt remained to me; I could more easily have doubted that I was alive than that truth exists, truth that is seen and understood through the things that are made. (VII.19.16)

At Ostia, and now baptised, Augustine no longer *seems to hear* but hears. He hears the words of Monica and his own words as they reflect on the words of Scripture. The two are lifted up into the Word. As they talked, he tells us, they touched the very edge of the Eternal,

> ...then, sighing, we left the first-fruits of our spirit captive there, and returned to the noise of articulate speech, a word that has a beginning and an end. (IX.10.26)

They ponder how different these human words are 'from your Word, our Lord, who abides in himself, and grows not old, but renews all things.'

Augustine and Monica fall back from this epiphany, as did Augustine in his Milan ecstasy, though not this time to disappointment but a sense of peace. As Christians they have the Word and each other in the communion of faith. By the gift of the Word in Scripture and their shared faith they guide each other in love for they, too, are informed by the Word and participate already in the Word who feeds them from his altar as he will 'pasture Israel for ever with the food of truth'. The vision at Ostia is social, not solitary, for that is how we hear the Word—through Scriptures, preaching, the witness of others. These are the ligatures of love which bind us to one another and to God.

At Ostia Monica's tears finally give way to her words as these are sublimed to the Word itself. In their holy colloquy mother and son are caught up into that Word, teaching and leading one another. All this is absent from the earlier solitary ascent. The ascent at Ostia is shared because the life of the saints is social. It is from other people that we learn to speak.

How fitting that Augustine should share this moment with his mother, who likely taught him to speak in the first place. At her death it is his turn to cry. He holds back his tears for many hours, in case he appeared weak and lacking in faith, but after a bath, in the privacy of his

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own room and before God, he weeps for his mother and for himself, strewing his tears 'as a bed beneath my heart' (*Confessions* IX.12.33).

1 *Confessions* 1.2.2. All citations are from the translation of Maria Boulding, OSB (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997).
2 Rowan Williams has pointed out to me that here body obeys the call of God, even while the will cannot.
3 James O'Donnell points out that this passage of Book IX is remarkable in ancient literature as an account of a 'sustained act of reading'. O'Donnell, J. J., *Augustine: Confessions.* Volume III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 91. The numbering of verses differs from our modern numbering. The latter is given after the slash mark.
4 Compare NRSV 'How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?
5 Henry Chadwick translates *in idipsum* as 'the Selfsame', in some ways a preferable translation to '*in Being itself*'.
6 For 'redeemed rhetoric' see Marcia Colish, *The Mirror of Language* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), Chapter One. 'Augustine ...depicts the new birth in faith which he experiences as a linguistic rejuvenation. He could now speak to God as unabashedly as a child: "I prattled to You", he says. (Colish, p. 32, cit. *Confessions* 9.1.1). The simple strategy of speaking only words of Scripture is not, of course, enough for Augustine. The words of Scripture, even the names of the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit, were never far from the mouths of the Manichees he tells us, 'exceedingly carnal and talkative people' (III. 6. 10). The will must be directed aright by love.
7 Compare Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.7.
8 See John Burnably, *Amor Dei* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1991), p. 34.
9 228
10 Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 154
11 Porphyry, *On Abstinence*, I, 27, I, cit. Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, p. 157.
12 See his *De Vera Religione*, 4.7)
13 Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1950), p. 222-3.
14 O'Donnell, p. 128.

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