

The Fruits of Augustine's *Confessions*

Two New Translations by
Sarah Ruden and
Peter Constantine

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Augustine, *Confessions*. Trans. Sarah Ruden.
Modern Library, 528pp., \$16 paper.

Augustine, *Confessions*. Trans. Peter Constantine.
Foreword by Jack Miles. Liveright, 368pp., \$17 paper.

TWO NEW TRANSLATIONS OF AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS*, by Sarah Ruden and Peter Constantine, raise the question: do we need more translations of a work when there are already dozens of English translations available? This brief review's answer is yes, we do, and we could use even more. Every translation uncovers a new Augustine, none more or less "correct" or "authentic" than the next. Rather, each offers a perspective that others miss. Ruden and Constantine create very different feelings about Augustine and his *Confessions*, and to read their translations side-by-side reveals just how much artistic insight is asked of the translator. There is perhaps no better way to begin than by judging these new translations by their covers.

Constantine's cover has 19th century English stained-glass windows depicting grape clusters and their leaves. The medium reflects the austerity of Constantine's Augustine that makes his *Confessions* feel like an antique. Jack Miles, who writes the foreword to Constantine's

translation, remarks upon the moment he determined that the *Confessions* “wasn’t classical literature at all. This ... this was *European!*” (emphasis his). Indeed, the *Confessions* has profoundly influenced (western) European literature. Still, we do well to remember that its origin is both classical and African.

When Augustine wrote the *Confessions* in his mid-40s around the year 400 CE, he had recently become bishop of Hippo Regius (modern Annaba, Algeria) in the Roman province of Africa Proconsularis. Born and raised in the African countryside, after five or so years in Rome and Milan, he readily gave up Italy (and Europe) for his home in Africa. From the African perspective, Rome was just another city “in the lands across the sea,” and he wrote the *Confessions* with local concerns in mind. Thus, the air of European chivalry in a traditional approach to the *Confessions* like Constantine’s feels out of place.

That said, there is a real universality to the *Confessions* due to its ability to engage readers at a deeply human level that divorces it from any particular time or place. “Augustine,” Constantine explains, “is the first autobiographer to achieve a warm and intimate bond with his audience.” It is Ruden, though, who attempts this “warm and intimate bond” between her Augustine and his modern reader by breaking with conventions traditionally used to translate the *Confessions*.

Ruden’s cover captures the bemusement one should feel when reading the *Confessions* for the first time. Famously, the work has no discernable introduction, and it is hardly clear what the story is really about—but more on this later. Her cover art is a partly eaten pear. Unlike grapes, pears play an unexpectedly prominent role in the *Confessions*, for the majority of Book 2 is devoted to the time when the teenage Augustine stole some from a neighbor’s tree. When only nine of the *Confessions*’ thirteen books include stories from Augustine’s past, the reader should wonder why he spends so much time on such a seemingly insignificant moment. But that is precisely the point.

Augustine wrote the *Confessions* not long after Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire. Yet, Augustine’s African rivals, the Donatists, glorified the old days of larger-than-life martyrs who had been killed opposing Rome. For Augustine, those days were long gone. The battle was now with oneself in one’s own mind. Accordingly, they were precisely the dull moments—for instance, stealing some pears—wherein a Christian’s war was waged. The mundane pear on Ruden’s cover, then, is entirely apropos.

Ruden wishes to bring to life Augustine’s inner psychology in a way that makes him accessible to a modern audience. The flexibility, as she calls it, of her translation is clear when contrasted with Constantine’s. Speaking of pears, consider two sentences from the passage that inspired her cover, which Constantine translates as follows:

But I wanted to steal and I did, driven not by any need, but by a lack of regard for justice and an abundance of wickedness. For I stole something of which I had plenty and far better; nor did I seek to enjoy what I had stolen, only the theft and the sin itself.

Constantine's Augustine is reserved and his language formal. In contrast, Ruden's is emotional and colloquial. This is Ruden's translation of the same two sentences:

But I wanted to commit this crime, and commit it I did, though destitution didn't drive me to it—unless I was starving for what was right but turning my nose up at it anyway, and at the same time stuffed and swollen with my own sinfulness: so I stole a thing I had a better sort of in lush supply already, and I didn't want to enjoy the thing my hand grasped for—the actual stealing, the transgression, was going to be my treat.

Ruden has unpacked quite a lot—perhaps too much—from the Latin in the passage quoted above. She wishes to write what the Latin means, not simply what it says. On the topic of fruit, consider Augustine's conversion story in Book 8.

In the events immediately preceding his conversion, in a state of spiritual despair, Augustine threw himself under a certain fig tree to be alone and cry. Constantine's translation reads:

I collapsed beneath a fig tree, I do not remember how,
and let my tears flow, streams pouring from my eyes...

Compare Ruden:

Hardly knowing where I was or what I was doing,
I sprawled under a fig tree and gave my tears free
rein. Rivers of them burst out of my eyes...

"Hardly knowing where I was or what I was doing" is a lot to make of *nescio quomodo*, which Constantine renders simply, "I do not remember how." But "gave my tears free rein" for *dimisi habenas lacrimis* is as literal as one can get, and they are indeed "rivers" (*flumina*) of tears that "burst forth" (*proruperunt*), not mere streams that pour. Here, at least, it is not Ruden who adds emotion to the text but instead Constantine who suppresses it.

"Gave my tears free rein" is laudable also because the words capture an important classical allusion. They recall Vergil's Aeneas, the Trojan refugee who abandoned his lover, Queen Dido of Carthage, and led his followers to Italy. As he approached this foreign land, "he spoke thus, shedding tears, and gave his fleet free rein" (*sic fatur lacrimans, classique immitit habenas, Aeneid 6.1*). The allusion colors our interpretation of Augustine, who, like Aeneas, is lost abroad. Christians interpreted Aeneas' abandonment of Dido as a rejection of lust, and Augustine is about to follow suit.

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Ruden and Constantine footnote the numerous biblical quotations that permeate the *Confessions*. There is, however, regrettably little acknowledgement in both translations of classical influences and literary plays with predecessors generally, Christian or not. For instance, Augustine's fig tree is not just any fig tree. It is "a certain" (*quadam*) biblical tree that represents sex and lies—the very things that Augustine will reject when, in a moment, he converts. Augustine's world was replete with competing brands of Christianity firmly imbedded within classical traditions. To find this biblical tree alongside a weeping Augustine-Aeneas reflects this rich literary milieu and engages an audience for whom the classics were still alive.

Speaking of audiences, Augustine never actually speaks to us. The entirety of the *Confessions* is a conversation between him and an unresponsive God, his primary interlocutor. We are made to feel like voyeurs, unsure whether we should be there or not. In a way, Ruden's Augustine invites us in, while Constantine's keeps us at a distance.

What the *Confessions* is "about" is never entirely clear. It is hardly a "confession" in the traditional sense of the term. Nor is it exactly autobiography, at least by modern standards. When read from the beginning, the first historical narrative—Augustine's infancy—comes as a surprise. Soon, however, we realize that his past supplies fodder for philosophical rumination. But these stories stop at the end of Book 9. There are still four more books comprising almost half of the work. As we read into Book 10, we wonder whether he will tell us more stories about his past. After all, a decade remains between the last historical narrative of Book 9 and the time he wrote the work, and there is still plenty to talk about, not least how he became bishop. To the disappointment of some readers, he will say nothing more about his past, but we do not know this (unless, say, a book review tells us). The ideal reading of the *Confessions* has no expectations or assumptions: it begins at the beginning, reads to the very end, and confronts each new perplexity firsthand as it arises.

Both Ruden and Constantine recreate the uncertainties every reader should experience when reading the *Confessions*, not as much by what they say as by what they do not. They number books and sections, but that is it. There are no content summaries or section headers, so the reader cannot skip to the famous parts. What the story is remains unclear, and that is good. The absence of signposts helps

draw us into the (albeit carefully crafted) stream of consciousness that is Augustine's narration, and it asks us to find something in it for ourselves without knowing what to look for.

Let us consider one last passage from the enigmatic last four books. Among the most emotional (and emotive) passages in the *Confessions* comes at the end of Book 11. After largely failing to produce an account of what time is, though not for lack of trying, Augustine explains what the experience of time is like. In Constantine's translation, Augustine says:

But now my years are spent in sighs, and You are my solace, Lord, my eternal Father; but I have been scattered amid times whose order I do not know, and my thoughts, to the deepest recesses of my mind, are shredded into a jumble and turmoil until I flow as one into You, melted and purified by the fire of Your love.

Compare this with Ruden's Augustine:

"But now my years are spent in groaning; yet you are my comfort, Master, you are my eternal father.

"But, as it is, I have exploded into pieces of time whose sequence I don't know; and in a riot of contradictory states of being, my thoughts, the inmost viscera of my soul, are mangled—and I'll continue this way until I'm cleansed in the fire of your passion and made fluid and run into you."

Ruden prefers physical translations of words when they are available—groans, explosions, guts. In contrast, Constantine tempers the language to focus on the mind. Perhaps, then, it is his Augustine who emerges as the more introspective and psychological. It is up to the reader to decide which is more relatable.

Ruden wishes to "provoke debate and thereby bring more attention to the task of translating this astonishing author." She succeeds at this, and so does Constantine. Her Augustine is loud; his is quiet. Whose Augustine is right? Both, and neither. The ideal reader of the *Confessions* will have the two translations open side-by-side, and add more translations to the bookshelf as they are published. ¹