

What Dorothy Sayers Taught Me About Translating Augustine's *Confessions*

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Voces istae psalmi quas audivimus et ex parte cantavimus, si dicamus quod nostrae sint, verendum est quemadmodum verum dicamus; sunt enim voces magis spiritus dei quam nostrae. Rursum si dicamus nostras non esse, profecto mentimur.

Enarrationes in Psalmos 26, en. 2.1

Lord Peter Wimsey's investigations have brought him to the offices of a theatrical impresario whom he interrupts in the middle of casting "a young lady in the minimum of clothing." After a brief wait in the outer room, we are told, "the inner door opened . . . and the young lady emerged, clothed and apparently very much in her right mind." She is described as "clothed" so that we will know she has changed out of her skimpy chorus-girl outfit and is fit to be seen in the outer room and to head out into the streets of London looking respectable. But what is "very much in her right mind" doing? In context it points ahead to her announcing to a friend that she has been cast in a show, an announcement met with suitable congratulations. Yet it is an odd formulation, surely, since we have been given no reason to question her sanity; and if we had, the ability to report a modest professional success in a few sensible words is not obviously decisive evidence in favor of her being *compos mentis*.

Some of you, I'm sure, will recognize the source of these unexpected words. They are an allusion to the story of the Gerasene (or Gadarene) demoniac as recounted in the Gospels according to Mark and Luke. In case you're a little rusty on your Synoptic Gospels, however, the story is about a man possessed by a multitude of demons—"Our name is Legion, for we are many," they say. When Jesus casts out the

demons, he sends them, at their request, into the herd of swine feeding nearby. The swine rush down the hill into a lake and drown. The demoniac, who before had been running around naked and wild, terrifying people, is now found, as both Evangelists put it, “clothed and in his right mind.”

To anyone who doesn't recognize the language, “clothed and in his right mind” is puzzling and incongruous; but Dorothy Sayers was writing for an audience that could be expected to recognize the source of the language—at the very least to know that it is Scriptural, even if its precise original context did not come immediately into their minds—and so the language would not be in the least jarring.

But let's take this a step further. We recognize the language—we know that it's a quotation from Scripture, perhaps we even recognize its context. What does that do for us? In this case, not much: we are not to think of the chorus girl as in any way like a demoniac, or of Lord Peter as a Christ-figure (he is responsible neither for her being clothed nor for her being in her right mind), or of, well, anyone in the story as being like swine. The quotation adds a fillip of literary *jeu d'esprit*, and we readers who are in on what the author is doing feel a pleasant sense of innocent self-satisfaction; but there is nothing more than this. The quotation does not help the text “make meaning,” as the literary folks say. It's just decorative.

Now suppose my copy of *Have His Carcase*—that's the name of the novel I've been talking about—put “clothed and very much in her right mind” in quotation marks and attached a footnote that read “Mark 5:15/Luke 8:35.” What would be the point of that? Precisely because the quotation does not help the text make meaning, there's no particular reason to identify its source. The quotation marks and footnote would tell me that Sayers is quoting Scripture—a fact that, if I have to learn it by means of quotation marks and a footnote, cannot do for me what little there is to be done for me.

When one text helps another text make meaning, we call this relationship “intertextuality.” My illustration from Dorothy Sayers is not a case of intertextuality, I think, but a case of merely decorative quotation. But what gets me thinking about this, as of course you already know from my title, is Augustine’s *Confessions*. I’m working on a translation, and quite early on I came up against a very practical problem. How should I handle Augustine’s very frequent quotations from Scripture? There are several different possibilities. Some translators put the Scriptural language in italics, others in quotation marks. Some give parenthetical citations, others use footnotes, and still others collect a list of citations by section or chapter without clearly attaching them to particular sentences. In a moment I will address the technical problems that beset these solutions, but for now, the important point is that in order to decide what to do about Augustine’s quotation, one first has to decide what Augustine’s quotations are doing. And that is what this paper is about.

“Great are you, Lord, and highly to be praised.” These are the words with which the *Confessions* opens: *magnus es, domine, et laudibilis valde*. They are a quotation from the Psalms. Except they aren’t, exactly: Psalm 47:2, 95:4, and 144:3 all have “great is the Lord and highly to be praised” (*magnus dominus et laudibilis valde*), but Augustine has turned the third-person statements into second-person address. He is not describing God but speaking to him.

On the face of it we might think this is a merely decorative quotation, like the one from Dorothy Sayers. Augustine’s use of the Psalm even has this in common with Sayers’s use of the Gospels, that both quotations are casually edited to fit the literary context. Sayers changes the gender of a pronoun (“clothed and . . . in *her* right mind” – the chorus-girl is a woman whereas the demoniac was a man); Augustine adds a

second-person verb and changes the case of a noun. In both instances the reader who doesn't recognize the source of the quotation is no worse off, it seems to me, and the reader who does is no better off. Putting quotation marks around the Augustine quotation and attaching a parenthetical citation or footnote to it therefore seems as needlessly intrusive, as pointless a display of editorial knowing-best, in the case of Augustine as it would be in the case of Sayers.

In one respect, in fact, the apparatus is even *more* intrusive in the Augustine case than it would be in the Sayers case. As I noted earlier, a thoughtful reader of *Have His Carcase* who didn't recognize the quotation from the Gospels might well puzzle a bit over the language; a footnote would at least explain why the language might seem a little odd ("ah," such a reader would say to himself, "she's quoting Scripture; Sayers is such a literate writer of detective fiction. That's exactly why I like her"). In Augustine's case, there's nothing odd about his starting off his *Confessions* with "Great are you, Lord, and highly to be praised." It does not clash with the context—as the opening sentence, there's no context yet for it to clash with—and it does not unsettle any of our expectations, particularly if we know what *Confessions* means. (*Confessio* has a threefold meaning: self-blame [*confessio peccati*], determined avowal [*confessio fidei*], and praise [*confessio laudis*].) So what exactly is gained by the quotation marks and citation?

Ah, but you rightly object: the cases are not parallel. Sayers's quotation really is purely decorative, but Augustine's is substantive. He is not adorning his ordinary speech with the language of Scripture as a display of erudition: the language of Scripture *is* his ordinary speech. Now that, I think, is right. What I like to say is that in the *Confessions*—other works of his are different, but in the *Confessions*—Augustine does not quote Scripture; he speaks the language of Scripture as his own language.

Now suppose that's right—I know it's vague, but I hope its sense will become more determinate over the course of the paper—but suppose that's right. Then how much sense does it make to wall off the Scriptural language from the non-Scriptural language by using quotation marks or italics or some other such device? Quotation marks reinforce the idea that Augustine is quoting Scripture in something like the way Sayers is, although no doubt to more serious purpose; but if what he's actually doing is speaking the language of Scripture as his own language, the quotation marks are out of place. And the citations are, if anything, even worse. What are we to do with them? There are two possibilities. One is that we're supposed to see them and think, "Oh, he's quoting Scripture again"—which is unedifying and distracting and serves no useful purpose—or we're actually supposed to look them up, which turns Augustine's text into a kind of crossword puzzle challenge, or perhaps something like Joyce's *Ulysses*, where the thick texture of allusion and linguistic legerdemain is a virtuoso performance that only the most initiated can hope to appreciate.

So at this point, I would argue for no quotation marks (or other typographical device) to separate Scriptural language from non-Scriptural, and no citations either. And in fact in the bits of my translation that have been published already in the 3rd edition of *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*—the theft of the pears in Book 2, the encounter with the Platonists in Book 7, and the discussion of time in Book 11—that's what I did; and to my very great surprise I haven't heard a peep of complaint out of anyone. To my mind, the resulting text reads the way it ought to read, as one continuous unified voice, sometimes (as a well-instructed reader will know) in language that Augustine speaks from the sacred text, and sometimes in language that Augustine speaks from his own store of thought and reflection. There are no "special bits" that demand to be read with particular solemnity or in a different voice or with air-quotes or what have

you.

I noted earlier that the giving of Scriptural citations is complicated by various technical problems, and it's time to look at some of those. In fact we have already encountered one of the difficulties, though it is admittedly the least of them. I mean the fact that Augustine frequently makes small changes to the Scriptural text so that it fits seamlessly in context. If we're going to give a reference for "Great are you, Lord, and highly to be praised," what should it be? Chadwick gives us "Ps. 47: 2," which (understandably) gives no indication that the wording of the original has been slightly changed and (rather less understandably) overlooks the other two passages in Augustine's Psalter that have exactly the same wording as 47:2. Sheed cites the other two passages but not Psalm 47:2. Pine-Coffin gives only the last of the three. (Pine-Coffin also translates "Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty?" — which tells you all you need to know about why you shouldn't be using Pine-Coffin.) Boulding alone cites all three passages and tips us off that it's not an exact quotation: "See Ps. 47:2 (48:1); 95 (96):4; 144 (145):3." If you're going to use "See" for any quotation that's not exact, you're going to be using it an awful lot—as indeed she does, with admirable consistency. Chadwick sometimes uses "Cf." for the same purpose, but rarely, and guided by criteria that remain opaque to me.

Not much hinges on getting this right, of course. Whether you're reading Chadwick, Sheed, Pine-Coffin—no, not Pine-Coffin—or Boulding, your understanding of the opening sentence of the *Confessions* is not affected one whit by the reference. And if you do look up whatever reference is given—has anyone, anywhere, ever actually done that? I mean, any normal reader of the *Confessions*, in which I include people who teach the *Confessions*. What kind of weirdo actually looks up the references?—anyway, if you *did* look up the reference, you'd find some language

reasonably close to Augustine's (to which the only sensible reaction is, "huh, here's some language reasonably close to Augustine's, which is what he was quoting," which wasn't worth the trouble of looking up the reference, now, was it?).

Sometimes, however, the language you would find if you looked up the reference (which, as I've noted, you wouldn't actually do) isn't in fact reasonably close to Augustine's. His text is not ours. In those cases a bare textual citation is actually worse than nothing at all, and Chadwick's occasional addition of "Old Latin Version" doesn't help all that much. If you're going to give a reference at all, you need to give a footnote that contains an English translation of Augustine's text. (Note that I don't yet admit the necessity of giving a reference at all.) In some cases, doing so is just scholarly overkill, but there are certainly places where it's important. Consider Augustine's exegesis of *In principio*, "In the beginning," the opening words of Genesis. In the course of arguing that the "beginning" of which this text speaks is in fact God the Son, we find this puzzling language: "This is your eternal Word, who is also the beginning, because he speaks to us" (11.8.10). The language is puzzling in much the same way that Sayers's crack about "clothed and apparently very much in her right mind" is puzzling. How does the fact that the Word speaks to us establish that he is the beginning? That's just . . . random. Augustine's text of Scripture to the rescue. Here is his version of John 8:24–25:

[Jesus said,] "Unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins." So they said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "The beginning, because I am also speaking with you." ("*nisi credideritis quia ego sum, moriemini in peccatis vestris.*" dicebant ergo ei, "tu quis es?" dixit eis Iesus, "*principium quia et loquor vobis.*")

We may still wonder what Augustine's text of John is supposed to mean, but at least we can now understand why this language appears here.

This example—there are many others I could give—points up the way in which

the kind of experience that Augustine intended for his readers is simply unrecoverable for us. Suppose I know the Fourth Gospel very well, so well that I catch every echo of John in the *Confessions* and delight in the way in which this very Johannine thinker makes the evangelist's thought and language his own. I'm still not going to get this one, because my text of the relevant passage will have Jesus saying, not "The Beginning, because I am also speaking with you," but something like "Even what I have told you from the beginning." The footnote that informs me about Augustine's peculiar text does clear up the mystery for me, but the immediacy of the experience is lost. That's not how intertextuality works its magic.

Consider a fairly mundane example of intertextuality that does work. One moment in the genesis of this paper came when I asked a friend of mine, "What do you think of when you hear this: 'It is he that hath made us'?" He immediately replied, "And not we ourselves." So for him, for me, and for anyone else who is minded to complete the phrase in that way, when Augustine in Book 10 goes looking for God in creation, and creature after creature answers his inquiry, "He is the one who made us," the unspoken half of the verse still sounds. It is not only that God is their creator, but that they themselves bear the marks of their own insufficiency; they witness to their dependence, their contingency, their moment-by-moment need for God; and this is no less true of the creature Augustine, and of the memory by which and in which he seeks God. It is God who has made us, God who has remade us, and not we ourselves.

Ah, but here's the problem. My friend completed the verse in that way because, like me, he's an Anglican steeped in our historic liturgies, and that's the way the verse goes in the text of the *Jubilate* that has been a key part of Morning Prayer in our tradition since the first English Prayer Book. As it happens, that's also the way the text went in Augustine's Psalter—*ipse fecit nos, et non nos*—so my friend and I have just the right

mindset to get out of this passage everything that Augustine was expecting us to get out of it, things said and left unsaid. But almost every modern translation of the Psalter says something like “He made us, and we are his” or “He made us, and we belong to him.” So most people who recognize the Psalm and complete the quotation in their minds will complete it in the wrong way, and “we are his” unfortunately doesn’t fill out Augustine’s meaning in the same way, not at all.

My favorite example of a case in which the difference between Augustine’s text and ours thwarts intertextuality comes in Book 11:

Yours is the day, yours also the night. At your command the moments fly away. Generously make room in them for our meditations on the hidden things of your law, and do not close your law against us when we knock. For it was not in vain that you willed the writing of so many pages of dark secrets, and those woods do not lack for your stags, which shelter there and are refreshed, ranging and feeding, lying down and chewing the cud. O Lord, perfect me and reveal them to me. (11.2.3)

There is a particularly dense texture of Scriptural allusion here, and much of it will be familiar to many. “Yours is the day, yours also the night” is Psalm 73 (74):16. “Do not close your law against us when we knock” recalls Matthew 7:7–8: “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.” The Matthew text is particularly pervasive in the *Confessions*, and if you’ve made it all the way to Book 11 without recognizing the allusion, you’re not doing it right. But then what on earth is going on with the sudden intrusion of stags in the woods? The strange imagery of these two sentences derives from Augustine’s text of Psalm 28:9 (29:5): “The voice of the Lord perfects the stags and has revealed the woods; and in his temple all cry, ‘Glory.’” Note, then, that Augustine is asking to be one of the stags who are at home in, and nourished by, the mysterious dark woods of Scripture.

That's a bit of meaning that is absolutely lost without a footnote, and only two of the commonly used English translations—Sheed (in the annotated second edition) and, one hates to admit it, Pine-Coffin—actually provide anything helpful, though Foley's notes in Sheed provide the text without the interpretation and Pine-Coffin the interpretation without the text.

This points up one of the things I find most puzzling about the standard approaches to intertextuality in translations of the *Confessions*: translators provide unnecessary help—unhelpful help—in the form of detailed references to Scriptural texts when knowing those references doesn't actually shed light on the meaning of Augustine's text, and then they completely punt in cases where readers actually need a reference, text, and explanation in order to make sense of what Augustine is doing. I find it quite mysterious, and I don't even have a theory as to why they do it.

Sometimes, too, translations will simply smooth out an instructive difficulty. Consider this passage from Augustine's self-examination in Book 10:

Grant what you command, and command what you will. You enjoin continence on us. As a certain writer says, "Knowing as I did that no one can be continent unless God grants it, and that the knowledge of who grants continence is itself an element of wisdom." (10.29.40)

I've translated fairly literally, so that you can see that the quoted sentence is grammatically incomplete; it lacks an independent clause. Not one translator is honest about this; they all supply something to complete the sentence.¹ But the incompleteness of the quotation carries meaning and should not be "corrected." Augustine purposefully does not finish the quotation: "I went to God and implored him." That Augustine leaves off the conclusion—therefore I prayed for continence—recalls his earlier failure to ask for God to give him continence, back in Book 6 (6.11.20).

¹Chadwick is perhaps an exception; his syntax is difficult to make out.

But why leave it off here? Perhaps because the first two sentences of the paragraph (which will be repeated, in reverse order and with some variation of vocabulary, at the end of the paragraph) have already implicitly stated that prayer; perhaps because at this point Augustine is not interested in his past prayer (“I went . . . and implored”) but in what continues to need prayer. Whatever the correct interpretation might be, the translator surely should not hide from the reader the fact that there is something in need of interpretation; and since only an unusually well-instructed reader will be able to fill in what’s missing from this quotation of Wisdom 8:21, a footnote is called for.

Obviously, then, my translation is going to include references, texts, and explanations where they’re genuinely helpful—and, frankly, I’m not sure I have the guts to break from the consensus of translators and offer no apparatus at all for the garden-variety quotations, semi-quotations, and allusions. For even if knowing the particular source of Augustine’s language isn’t always, or even usually, important to understanding the text of the *Confessions*, knowing that the source is Scriptural arguably is. Even in my by now well-worn example of the opening lines of the *Confessions*, though the particular reference carries no meaning—you could look up the passages in the Psalms, think hard about them, and be not one bit more enlightened—the fact that Augustine begins his work with the language of Scripture is surely important. It is precisely the signal that Scriptural language is his language, the Psalmist’s voice his voice. And more than that, it incarnates the idea—which Augustine is shortly to make explicit—that God is not merely the object but the source of praise: God gives the need for praise and gives also the will and the words by which that need is fulfilled. Here Augustine’s own commentary on the Psalms—this is the text that stands as epigraph for the paper—reveals the principle at work:

The words of the psalm that we have heard and in part sung: if we should say that they are our words, it would be altogether astonishing if what we said were

true; for they are the words of the Spirit of God, and not our own. And yet if we should say that they are not our own, we are most certainly lying. (*Enarr. in Ps. 26, en. 2.1*)

So to let the opening words of the *Confessions* stand with no indication at all that they are both the words of the Spirit of God and Augustine's own words would surely be a mistake.

And there are other reasons for indicating when Augustine's language has a Scriptural source. Sometimes the texture of Scriptural quotation is very dense; sometimes pages go by with little or nothing from Scripture. Attention to when Scripture is present and when it's absent is often revealing, and (unless we are to count on a readership that's much more biblically literate than we have any right to expect, even, alas, among Christian students) that dimension of meaning is simply going to be lost without some sort of apparatus. Further, there are patterns of use of Scripture that can also be informative. I always tell my students that you know Augustine is particularly serious when he's quoting the Psalms, the Fourth Gospel, or Romans. We've seen why the Psalms are so important and pervasive in the *Confessions*. The Gospel of John is particularly important for Augustine's Christology. Romans (Paul generally, but Romans in particular) plays a decisive role in the story of Augustine's conversion; in Book 8 Augustine carefully leads up to the conversion scene by quoting several passages from Romans in their canonical order before he gets to the decisive quotation from 13:13.

My tentative solution—I will be interested to see if anyone has any thoughts about the merits of this solution—is to put Scriptural citations in the margins next to the parts of Augustine's text in which those passages are quoted, half-quoted, or alluded to, but not to use quotation marks or italics to set off the Scriptural text from Augustine's text. That way Augustine's text can be read as the unified voice that it is, but the fact

of his dependence on Scripture—the fact that his words are also the words of the Spirit of God—can be evident as well. Footnotes will be used for the kinds of cases I’ve noted, in which Augustine relies on a text of Scripture that differs from ours in a way that impedes understanding of his text or otherwise calls for explanation.

I have suggested that the kind of experience Augustine intended for his readers is unrecoverable for us because we know too little – too little of the text of Scripture, and certainly too little of *his* text of Scripture. But it is also unrecoverable for us because we know too much. For intertextuality and its associated phenomena are not exclusively backward-looking. Our reading of the *Confessions* or any other similarly rich work will inevitably be colored—ideally, enriched, but possibly deformed—by association with other things we have heard or read, even things that are later than the *Confessions* and possibly quite alien to its context. About this aspect of intertextuality I have much less to say. I will content myself with two observations, one about teaching and the other about translating. In teaching the *Confessions* it can quite frequently happen that perfectly bizarre discussion arises that will turn out to have its origin in a free-form association between the *Confessions* and some other text. Being aware of this, and being on the alert to track down the clash of ideas to its intertextual source, is an important tool for short-circuiting discussions that would otherwise be both mystifying and counter-productive. (Or, if you’re cleverer than I am, of drawing illumination from the most orthogonal intertextual relationships. Whatever works for you.)

As for translating, the translator has to be either incredibly cautious about the possibility of intertextual traps, or else incredibly brazen about deliberately setting them up. I am actually rather pleased with this line from the discussion of time and eternity in Book 11:

Who will catch hold of their heart and pin it down so that it will be still for just a little while and seize, for just a little while, the glory of an eternity that remains ever steadfast and set it beside times that never remain steadfast and see that eternity is in no way comparable to them? (11.11.13)

I think “who will catch hold of their heart and pin it down” is, independently, a perfectly lovely, if somewhat expansive, translation of the Latin; if it also happens to reveal the translator’s fondness for Mr Hammerstein and Dame Julie, so be it. And anyone who catches the allusion, and is thereby brought to think of the human soul as the exasperatingly flighty Maria, twirling about idly when she ought to be still and collected in prayer, will actually (I contend) have precisely the right sort of picture in mind to understand Augustine’s point.

Not all such intertextuality is so benign. In Warner’s translation (which I used the last time I taught the *Confessions*), we find this: “Our rest is our place. Love lifts us up to it.” Cue a seminar room full of people riffing on “Love Lift Us Up Where We Belong.” In case you’re not familiar with this landmark of Western culture, “Love Lift Us Up Where We Belong” was a hit for Joe Cocker and Jennifer Warnes in 1982, when it appeared in the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman*. Neither the song nor the film, as far as I can tell, is of any particular help in contemplating the passage that is at that point undergoing exegesis: “And the Spirit of God was borne over the waters.” Warner can hardly be blamed for this, since his translation predates the movie by a number of years; but there is a moral here. Pop culture being as fragmented as it is, any translator would be well-advised to do a bit of classroom testing, to make sure there’s no apparently innocuous passage that incongruously evokes a Justin Bieber song or a classic scene from *The Big Bang Theory*. And it is partly for that reason that I intend to offer the use of my translation to any of my colleagues who are teaching the *Confessions*, assuming, of course, that I ever get the thing done.

My attitude going into this project could be summed up something like this: pieces of scholarship are footnoted; prayers are not footnoted. I would much prefer to let Augustine's words stand as they are, even when they are also the words of the Spirit of God, and let the intertextuality do its work according to the capacity of the reader. But then I *would* think that. Augustine is my favorite theologian, my first philosophical love, and I do not read him in the detached, scholarly, philosophical spirit that I bring to Thomas Aquinas or John Duns Scotus. And I am surely not alone in this, for to a surprising extent, Christians still think Augustine's thoughts, still understand with his mind, still draw up battle lines around his controversies.

But then I'm not just translating for me and those like me. I'm translating also for the—no doubt—much larger audience for which the *Confessions* is, if not exactly a work of scholarship, at least a work to be approached in a scholarly fashion. And for that, the right kind of help—not to mention an absence of the wrong kind of help, the unhelpful help—is necessary. This paper represents the fruit of some reflection about what that right kind of help might be.