Augustine on Loving Too Much

Friendship and the Fall of the Soul in the Confessions

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Abstract

The article analyzes the friendship narratives contained in Books Two, Three and Four of Augustine's *Confessions*, treating them not as biographical accounts, but as illustrations of Augustine's philosophical ideas, namely, the fall of the soul and the role played in it by love. All those narratives seem to describe a homoerotic dimension of friendship. It is argued that making such homoerotic friendship, and not heterosexual love between man and woman, an allegory of the fall of the soul enables Augustine to show better the mechanism of the fall, namely, its excessive intensity and the fact that it perverts a naturally good relationship of the soul with the whole of creation.

Keywords

Augustine – confessions – friendship – homosexuality – fall of the soul

1 Introduction¹

Since the fifties scholars have debated the notion of 'autobiography' and its relevance to the *Confessions*. John O'Meara claimed that "The *Confessions* is no autobiography, and not even a partial autobiography. It is the use of Augustine's

1 I want to express my gratitude towards all the anonymous reviewers who commented on this paper in the whole process of peer review. Their appreciation of its value was encouraging and their criticism certainly helped to make the contribution better.

life and confession of faith in God as an illustration of his theory of man".² Pierre Courcelle emphasized the presence of literary fiction in the first nine books of the *Confessions* through an analysis of the traditional literary *topoi* used by Augustine.³ However, the term 'autobiographical' found its place in the later literature on the subject. When we take a look at the works written about the *Confessions* during the last three decades, this notion is present in most of the analyses of the literary form of the work.⁴

At the same time, the very relevance of the problem of truth vs. fiction in the *Confessions* to the understanding of this work has been challenged.⁵ The focus of this article will be the narratives concerning certain adolescent friendships of Augustine, which can be found in Books Two, Three and Four. My approach is based on the assumption that it is not useful to treat those narratives as if they were accounts of the nature of Augustine's relationships in his early years; a more fruitful method is to see these narratives as a way to present his philosophical ideas about the fall of the soul and its return to God (this strategy was called "dramatizing metaphysics" by David Burrell).⁶ Augustine looks at his life in a scriptural and exegetic way. He makes the story of his life a 'text' which can be compared to the two other monumental symbolic structures or two great 'Books'; God speaks to people through Scripture and through the whole creation, so both of these can be looked upon as 'texts' which can be approached hermeneutically in the search for hidden meanings.⁷

2 O'Meara 1954, 18.

3 Courcelle 1968.

4 See e.g. Archambault 1982, 29; Suchocki 1982, 366; Olmsted 1989, 21; Shanzer 1992, 42; Mackenzie 2009, 212; Steinhäuser 1992, 15; O'Donnell 2001, 205 refers to the *Confessions* as "the first modern biography" and does not explain why it is not the first *autobiography*.

5 Cf. Mathewes 2003, 8: "It has become a scholarly commonplace to state that the work is not an autobiography in any exegetically useful sense".

6 Burrell 1970, 333. Suchocki 1982, 365 calls Augustine's personal history in the *Confessions* a "lens" through which the fall and salvation history is made clear; she also observes that "[t]he macrocosmic universal history is repeated in the microcosmic details of a single life, so that the one history reveals the universal history" (377). Also Cooper 1984, 94 writes about the same feature of the *Confessions* when he talks about Augustine's method as "universalization of the particular spiritual journey which he himself experienced". In a similar vein, Van Fleteren 1990, 130 says that "the *Confessiones* is ... an anthropology, a philosophy of the human being, based on Augustine's own life".

7 As the monumental study by Bochet 2004 demonstrated, Augustine, on the one hand, applies the method of scriptural exegesis to his life, and, on the other hand, the exegesis of the Scripture becomes the Ricoeurian "Herméneutique de soi" (cf. e.g. 104-109, 157). Earlier, Flores 1975, 10 argued that the creation is indeed a kind of God's speech, just as the autobiographical narrative of the *Confessions*. Augustine writes his own story, but God also 'writes' the history of humankind, and exegesis of the Bible is an attempt at interpreting this history. A similar view is expressed later and developed in the Trinitarian context by Di Lorenzo 1985,

One of the central problems, if not *the* central philosophical problem of the *Confessions* is the fall of the soul and its return to God through conversion. This can be and has been examined from various points of view,⁸ but in this article I would like to propose to focus on how Augustine sees the role of love in the fall of the soul in the first books of the *Confessions*.⁹ I will show in what way Augustine uses the friendship narratives to elucidate how love turns away from God, and falls.

In order to do that, I will show that Augustine, in those narratives, alludes to homosexual desires and behaviours for a particular literary and philosophical/theological purpose. What needs to be stressed is that my reading of those allusions is, methodologically speaking, not a 'proof' of anything about the actual facts from Augustine's life. The autobiographical narratives of the *Confessions* are no historical accounts which have to be deciphered in order to determine 'what Augustine really did'. But as I am going to demonstrate, what is quite certain in the narratives of Books Two and Three is that they are deliberately vague in creating an ambiguous, erotic atmosphere, in which friendship and sexuality are dangerously close to each other and are both referred to by means of one, crucial term: love.

Scholars, in general, tend to avoid the issue of homoerotic friendships in Books Two and Three, perhaps because the subject is entangled to such an extent in the ideological battles of our time. Marie Aquinas McNamara is even more vague about the nature of Augustine's sexual experiences than he himself in the *Confessions*,¹⁰ although her objective is a (psycho)historical reconstruction, not a literary or philosophical analysis of the narratives in question.

75. Gusdorf 1948, 21 (in Archambault 1982, 29) argues that the Scripture is a mirror in which Augustine sees a reflection of himself as well as of every human being. In that sense even the last, *sensu stricto* exegetical books of the *Confessions* are 'autobiographical', especially through transcending the individual perspective of Augustine in the act of contemplation of the truth.

8 For example, one of the problems is whether the conversion is a continuous process or a particular event (and if so, how many of such events we can find in the *Confessions*)—see Courcelle 1968, 49–78; Ferrari 1984, 50; O'Loughlin 1992; Starnes 1990, e.g. 213; Reta 1999, 239–242. There is also a common view that Books Seven and Eight describe, respectively, an 'intellectual' and a 'moral' conversion (Alfaric 1918, 361–391; Courcelle 1968, 169; O'Meara 1954, 11; McMahon 1989, 99; Dobell 2009). Probably the most famous interpreter of Augustine's doctrine of the fall of the soul was O'Connell 1968 and 2003 [first edition: 1969]. For an early criticism of his view see e.g. Madec 1970. Cf. also summaries and evaluations of the controversy in Penascovic 1986 and Rombs 2006.

9 The bishop of Hippo uses love (*amor*) in a wide sense of the 'will', 'desire', 'longing' etc., as in his famous saying *pondus meum amor meus* (13.9.10; cf. also 4.15.27 and 7.17.23; cf. Torchia 1990).

10 McNamara 1958, 37–43.

On the other end of the spectrum is John Boswell, whose book is focused on homosexuality and who does not hesitate to conclude that Augustine described homosexual experiences.¹¹ Todd Breyfogle, in his more nuanced reading of Book Three, suggests (albeit in a footnote) that Augustine's remarks could be interpreted as a *confessio* of homosexual sins.¹² A similar interpretation is considered by Therese Fuhrer and Jochen Schultheiß.¹³ Recently, Danuta Shanzer also seems to head in the same direction in her discussion of Augustine's letters to Evodius, suggesting that it is highly probable that the language of transgression and impurity, present in his friendship narratives in Books Two to Four, is a "discreet reference to homosexuality".¹⁴

Having all that in mind, I will advance the hypothesis that narratives concerning male friendships in Books Two and Three involve sexuality at some level. But what interest me here is not the nature of the sexual experiences of Augustine-the-character in the *Confessions*, but the philosophical purpose of Augustine-the-author that may lie behind the literary form of those narratives.¹⁵ Even if we could determine any 'facts', those would not tell us anything useful

11 Boswell 1980, 135 also comments: "Unlike many of his Christian contemporaries, Augustine bitterly regretted the sexual aspect of such passions ... and rejected as an adult the possibility of licit homosexual relationships". In this context, one might also mention Masterson 2014, who describes the metaphorization of homosexual desire, basically, in three ways: as an expression of close friendship between two men, as an expression of 'knowledgeable authority' forbidding unacceptable sexual practices, and as an expression of admiration. Some aspects seem to come close to what I attempt in this paper (for example, the use of literary allusions or the interplay between friendship and sexuality, see the comments *ibid.* 2014, 34 on the letters of Paulinus of Nola and Ausonius), but the author never mentions Augustine in his work. In fact, Masterson's analysis of the *Vita Antonii* (the only religious text in the book) points to a very different appearance of homosexuality. In Athanasius, same-sex desire, instead of being a metaphor for masculine intimacy or admiration, "were instead examples of the worst thing sin could be" (136). As the reader will see, Augustine's approach is quite different.

12 Breyfogle 2003, 48 n. 64.

13 Fuhrer 2004a, 109; Schultheiß 2011, 126-127.

14 Shanzer 2017, 289-290.

15 McMahon 1989, xv analyses the interaction of those two perspectives on a literary and rhetorical level. He distinguishes between "Augustine the speaker" and "Augustine the author". What I called 'Augustine-the-character', however, is not the same as 'Augustine the speaker' in McMahon, since the latter often takes a post-conversion perspective. 'Augustine the author' is the one who "composed, shaped and revised the work so as to present convincingly the unrehearsed, spontaneous and often wandering prayer of Augustine the speaker" (*ibid.*). McMahon associates Augustine the author with what can be described as an objective, 'divine' perspective in the *Confessions*, because, as he says, he "contrives this literary form, in part, to imitate the providential ordering he has experienced in his own life. God guides the speaker's *Confessions*, just as he has guided, and does guide, Augustine's life. We can now see that both arrive at fulfilment" (*ibid.* 37).

or interesting about Augustine's doctrine of the fall of the soul and very little about the rhetorical brilliance of the *Confessions*. A more interesting question is: if Augustine is dramatizing metaphysics in his autobiography, which 'metaphysics' exactly is being dramatized?

2 The Polluted Spring Water: Friendship and Sexuality in Books Two and Three

Augustine places the beginning of his sexual life, described in Books Two and Three, between his sixteenth and nineteenth year. I do not want to enter a debate whether it is 'normal' for a boy to feel and behave like young Augustine, because what is important here is that for the bishop of Hippo his increased adolescent interest in love and sexuality was far from 'normal'. It was rather a proof of the depravity of humankind after the fall or an illustration of what the fall is. He is very vague about the details and obviously focuses rather on creating an atmosphere than on reporting the facts: 'I was burning to find satisfaction in hellish pleasures' (*exarsi enim aliquando satiari inferis*, 2.1.1)¹⁶ and 'my search for delight was simply to love and to be loved' (*quid erat quod me delectabat, nisi amare et amari?* 2.2.2). Those, however, are desires, not acts. The latter are alluded to when he confesses: 'I exceeded all the bounds set by your law' (*excessi omnia legitima tua*, 2.2.4). *omnia* is certainly an inspiration for the reader's imagination, but hardly a concrete piece of information.¹⁷

The same vagueness is also at stake in another statement: 'Sensual folly assumed domination over me, and I gave myself totally to it in acts allowed by shameful humanity but under your laws illicit' (*accepit in me sceptrum (et totas manus ei dedi) vesania libidinis, licentiosae per dedecus humanum, illicitae autem per leges tuas*, 2.2.4). A bit later, he boasts in front of his adolescent friends (2.3.7) about his sexual exploits, which he comments upon: 'I used to pretend I had done things I had not done at all' (*fingebam me fecisse quod non feceram*). Should it make the reader suspicious about Augustine's sincerity as the author of the *Confessions*? Perhaps a little. Later on, however, Augustine's language is again highly imaginative: 'I came to Carthage and all around me hissed a cauldron of illicit loves' (*veni Carthaginem, et circumstrepebat me*

16 The Latin text according to the edition: O'Donnell 1992 (electronic edition: www.stoa.org/hippo). Translation by Chadwick 2008.

17 Schultheiß 2011, 126-127 points out that Augustine's phrase *silvescere ausus sum variis et umbris amoribus* (2.1.1) may suggest a variety of sexual practices, heterosexual or homosexual, autoerotic, sadomasochistic etc.

undique sartago flagitiosorum amorum, 3.1.1)? Thomas Stearns Eliot certainly did not resist the appeal of those words, when, in his *Waste Land*, he made out of them a powerful metaphor of the human condition.

In Book Three the focus on love itself is very clear: 'As yet I had never been in love and I longed to love; and from a subconscious poverty of mind I hated the thought of being less inwardly destitute. I sought an object of my love; I was in love with love' (*nondum amabam, et amare amabam, et secretiore indigentia oderam me minus indigentem, quaerebam quid amarem, amans amare*, 3.1.1). Later he also adds that 'During the celebration of your solemn rites within the walls of your Church, I even dared to lust [after a girl] and to start an affair that would procure the fruit of death' (*ausus sum etiam in celebritate sollemnitatum tuarum, intra parietes ecclesiae tuae, concupiscere et agere negotium procurandi fructus mortis*, 3.3.5). Chadwick translates *concupiscere* in the quoted sentence as 'to lust after a girl'; whereas the Latin does not say this explicitly. But this interpretation is challenged by what Augustine has said earlier, at the beginning of Book Two, describing his desire to *amare et amari*:

But no restraint was imposed by the exchange of mind with mind, which marks the brightly lit pathway of friendship. Clouds of muddy carnal concupiscence filled the air. The bubbling impulses of puberty befogged and obscured my heart so that it could not see the difference between love's serenity and lust's darkness.¹⁸

In the first chapter of Book Three he basically says the same thing in different words:

Yet physical things had no soul. Love lay outside their range. To me it was sweet to love and to be loved, the more so if I could also enjoy the body of the beloved. I therefore polluted the spring water of friendship with the filth of concupiscence. I muddied its clear stream by the hell of lust, and yet, though foul and immoral, in my excessive vanity, I used to carry on in the manner of an elegant man about town. I rushed headlong into love, by which I was longing to be captured.¹⁹

18 August. *Conf.* 2.2.2: *sed non tenebatur modus ab animo usque ad animum quatenus est lumen limos amicitiae, sed exhalabantur nebulae de limosa concupiscentia carnis et scatebrae pubertatis, et obnubilabant atque obfuscabant cor meum, ut non discerneret serenity dilectionis a caligine libidinis.*

19 August. *Conf.* 3.1.1: *sed si non haberent animam, non utique amarentur. amare et amari dulce mihi erat, magis si et amantis corpore fruerer. venam igitur amicitiae coinquinabam sordibus concupiscentiae candoremque eius obnubilabam de tartaro libidinis, et tamen*

Those two texts are quite dense with meanings. There is no doubt that Augustine wants to leave to the reader's imagination what exactly were his sins and especially what the gender of the objects of his love was. He does not say explicitly that his love was for his male peers, but it is hard to imagine that, when he talks about friendship, he means friendship with women. *Amicitia* in Roman culture was considered to be a bond between men and devoid, by definition, of sexual and erotic element, so when Augustine writes about the *vena amicitiae*, it is almost obvious that he means relationships with his male peers.²⁰

In the first chapter of Book Three he states at first that it was generally sensible beauty that attracted him. But then he says that the beauty of intelligent beings attracted him much more than lifeless beauty. What mattered to him was reciprocity which, of course, can exist only between persons: *amare et amari*. So it seems that the initial impulse in friendship was a desire for mutual love, which was initially contained within the boundaries of friendship, but which over time tended to become erotic or sexual. In Book Two *concupiscentia carnis* invades the emotional and intellectual bond between two incorporeal minds or spirits (*animi*, 2.2.2) and in Book Three Augustine abandons metaphors and says explicitly that, even though reciprocal love was sweet to him, it was even sweeter to be able to enjoy sexual contact (*amantis corpore frui*).²¹ The fearful requests of Monica that he avoid sleeping with other men's

foedus atque inhonestus, elegans et urbanus esse gestiebam abundanti vanitate. rui etiam in amorem, quo cupiebam capi. The passage has also been interpreted in terms of sadomasochistic eroticism: Fuhrer 2004a, 166-167; Fuhrer 2004b, 178 emphasizes the presence of (sado)masochistic metaphors: *capi, vinculum, conligabar* etc. and also *caederer virgis ferreis*. The same point is made by Schultheiß 2011, 126-127. I am thankful to the anonymous reader of the article for bringing those references to my attention.

20 Shanzer 2017, 289-290, n. 68 is more cautious. When she wonders about the meaning of transgressing the *limes amicitiae* by Augustine, she merely asks: "Would *amicitia* be used of a woman?" I would be less hesitant in this matter, given the fact that Augustine never discusses friendship with women in the *Confessions* and such a relationship, being an uncommon phenomenon in his contemporary culture, would probably have been commented upon by the author. Konstan 1997, 38 demonstrates that *eros* and friendship were incompatible in antiquity. For his discussion on friendship in Rome, including that between men and women, see 122-149, esp. 146. Burton 2004, 209-243, on 212 also claims that erotic passion was seen as absent in Roman friendship, albeit he mentions the intense, passionate emotionality of it (213) and occasional sexual "transgressions" (215-216). However, Burton mentions more atypical forms of friendships between *senex* and *adulescens*, *dominus* and *servus* or between two women, but he does not say a word about a friendship between man and woman.

21 The use of the term *frui* alludes, of course, to the famous Augustine's distinction between *uti* and *frui*. Needless to say, in this context *frui* points to the unlawful enjoyment of the creation.

wives, if he has to indulge in sexual pleasures, *may* be interpreted as indicating that her son's exploits were heterosexual, but not necessarily so. After all, Monica's concern is not shared by her son at all and Augustine himself is consistently silent about the nature of his pleasures and the gender of the body which he wanted to enjoy.

If we shift our attention to the more philosophical meaning expressed symbolically in those accounts, what seems to be important is that what was happening in his experience of friendship was an 'excess' of love. This is emphasized when Augustine speaks about the lack of *modus* and *limes* in his relationships (2.2.2) or the absence of *modulari* and *metae* (2.2.3); he also confesses that he 'exceeded' all the boundaries of the law (*excessi*, 2.2.4). The imagery of water in Book Two (e.g. *fluxus*, *fluctus*, *vena*, *aerumna*, *gurgēs*) also invokes the overwhelming atmosphere of chaotic, violent overflow. Augustine suggests that his love began with the pure interest in the soul of the other person and was at first contained within the spiritual realm, but was later overflowing into the realm of the body. As a result, he was not able to see the difference between *dilectio* and *libido* (2.2.2). But still, his aim was not simply sexual contact or not primarily so, but rather a spiritual bond, and his polluting of 'the spring water of friendship' came later by some irresistible force. Submitting to his excessive desires, Augustine saw himself as *elegans et urbanus* (3.1.1), which might mean that homoerotic relationships seemed to him and his peers something fashionable and associated with the higher social classes.

This hypothesis is also supported by the fact that in the whole of the *Confessions* Augustine does not mention any interest in women's souls other than his love for the unnamed mother of Adeodatus, and he certainly does not describe any female friend. However, he devotes much space to describing his reciprocal, emotional bonds with other men. In the first books, these are the unnamed companions of his youth, but later he writes about historical figures such as Nebridius or Alypius, with whom he planned to live together, but the plan was abandoned, because they were doubtful whether their 'little wives' would agree to it (*utrum ... mulierculae sinerent*, 6.14.24). This intense desire to share spiritual life with other men is contrasted with Augustine's view of women; they were for him the source of physical pleasure: 'I thought I would become very miserable if I were deprived of the embraces of a woman' (*putabam enim me miserum fore nimis si feminae priverer amplexibus*, 6.11.20).

In Book Two, women enter the picture, when he wishes some *modus* were imposed on his desires:

If only someone could have imposed restraint (*modularetur*) on my disorder. That would have transformed to good purpose the fleeting

experiences of beauty in these lowest things, and fixed limits (*metas praefigeret*) to indulgence in their charms. Then the stormy waves of my youth would have finally broken on the shore of marriage.²²

Marriage is described as the best way to prevent the boiling or running waters of love from spilling out.²³ But, as Augustine remembers with regret, his family did not force him into marriage. When his father Patricius saw signs of his son's pubescence in the bathhouse, he was happy, while his mother trembled with fear. And so Augustine found himself in between the two 'waters', as it were, the paternal *balneae* of concupiscence and the maternal, sacramental water of baptism. However, he did not seem to be hesitant which way to go.

We may compare the two instances of the outflow of love, the first connected with male friendships and the second with relationships with women. In the second case, marriage would be the way to contain the waters of love within the vessel of lawful relationship. Here the excess would consist in having sex outside marriage, cheating on his wife or, even worse, sleeping with someone else's wife. The boundary (*limes, meta*) here separates the legitimate heterosexual object from illegitimate ones. In the case of friendship, however, the boundary is not between the only legitimate object of affection and forbidden ones, but it exists within the relationship: the *limes amicitiae* separates pure, spiritual love from any eroticism or sexuality, which in love between the two male *animi* is impure by definition.

In Book Two there is another ambiguous passage which precedes the narrative about the theft of pears, central to the book. Augustine describes the gang of his adolescent friends, among whom he 'was ashamed not to be equally guilty of shameful behaviour' (*puderet me minoris dedecoris*, 2.3.7). He continues: 'With them I rolled in its [*scil.* Babylon's] dung as if rolling in spices and precious ointments' (*iter agebam platearum Babyloniae, et volutabar in caeno eius tamquam in cinnamis et unguentis pretiosis*, 2.3.8). Does this 'rolling' symbolize shared interest in women and boasting about heterosexual conquests? Or, perhaps, the 'rolling with them in dung' involves also some of the homoerotic overtones that Augustine suggests earlier? Again, the bishop of Hippo seems to be deliberately vague about this.

22 August. *Conf.* 2.2.3: *quis mihi modularetur aerumnam meam et novissimarum rerum fugaces pulchritudines in usum verteret earumque suavitatibus metas praefigeret, ut usque ad coniugale litus exaestuarent fluctus aetatis meae?*

23 What Augustine writes in the *Confessions* is consistent with his later theology of marriage, expressed in *De bono coniugali*. In chapters 3.3-5.5 of this work, Augustine emphasizes that in the fallen world marriage is the only lawful outlet for human sexuality and excludes any possibility of morally accepting pre- or extramarital sexual relationships.

Also the pear theft itself (2.4.9), as scholars have already pointed out, has many features of a sexual sin.²⁴ The link to the fruit in the *Genesis* account is obvious, but it has not been emphasized in the secondary literature that the fruit in Pagan literature symbolized erotic love and seduction.²⁵ The theft occurs at night, which is also not insignificant, and the whole narrative begins with ‘theft receives certain punishment by your law’ (*furtum certe punit lex tua*), which (especially in the context of the earlier *excessi omnia legitima*) can be understood as reference to illicit sexual behaviour. Again, it is not impossible that Augustine is speaking here about what he had already alluded to in 2.2.2 and 3.1.1, namely, about the pollution of friendship with sexuality.

For example, when he says that he was excited by breaking the law, not by the object of his pursuit, and that the stolen pears were not really to his taste, it could be understood as an allusion to the fact that sexual experiments with other boys were not as pleasurable as contact with girls, but what was exciting about them was that they were forbidden. Augustine admits: ‘I had a quantity of better pears. But those I picked solely with the motive of stealing’ (*erat mihi enim meliorum copia, illa autem decerpsi tantum ut furarer*, 2.6.12).²⁶ Eating pears from his own garden would have been more natural, satisfying and legitimate, but curiosity and the thrill of doing something forbidden motivated him to steal. It might be that here Augustine vaguely suggests that sexual contacts with girls were more natural, satisfying, and oriented, more or less, towards lawful marriage, while he was drawn, for some reason, to ‘polluting the spring’ of friendship.

He also emphasizes the irrationality of his behaviour: it is not what anyone would expect from him, he does not understand why he did what he did, and he would not have done it, if he had been alone: the pressure of the group was an important cause of his behaviour. He described his purportedly sexual transgressions as ‘rolling in the dung of Babylon’, and in the theft narrative he mentions pigs. Of course, both images come from the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 11:32), but the fact that he was rolling in dung with others could

24 O'Donnell and Cavadini pointed out its close association with *concupiscentia carnis* (O'Donnell 1992 *ad* 2.4.9; Cavadini 2003, 26 and 29–30).

25 Augustine must have been familiar with Ovid's narrative about Atalanta and Hippomenes (*Met.* 10.638–680), where golden apples are so seductive to Atalanta that she loses the race—a telling example of the attractive and distractive power of the fruit. Another significant, mythological appearance of the apple as the symbol of sexual attraction can be found in the story of the judgement of Paris (e.g. *Ov. Her.* 16).

26 *decerpere* can also have a sexual meaning, like in *Ov. Rem.* 103: *delectat Veneris decerpere fructum*. Cf. also *ThLL*, vol. 5, s.v. *decerpo*. I owe this suggestion to one of the anonymous reviewers.

suggest that the pear theft was not only a sexual sin, but also a homosexual one.

What I already suggested and what seems to be at the centre of his picture of friendship in Books Two and Three is the excessive nature of love which overflows beyond lawful boundaries, polluting what was intended to be pure and, more precisely, polluting what is spiritual with what is carnal. The boundary emphasized by Augustine is that between the spirit and the body. So my hypothesis here is that Augustine's emphasis on the excessive and immoderate nature of his friendships is a deliberate, rhetorical strategy which serves a specific, philosophical purpose, namely to illustrate in a pictorial and vivid way Augustine's understanding of the role played by love in the fall of the soul.

We can infer two things from what has already been said. First, that the dynamics of the fall consists in a natural love that becomes too intense and leads from the spiritual to the corporeal, which is coherent with Augustine's general view that the fall of the soul means turning away from its natural place in the spiritual realm between God and the world and sinking (*defluere*) into the sensible, material realm. This sinking and crossing the boundaries of the divine law has a motive that was explicitly stated by Augustine when he described the reaction of his father to the signs of Augustine's puberty in the baths: 'His delight was that of the intoxication which makes the world oblivious of you, its Creator, and to love your creation instead of you. He was drunk with the invisible wine of his perverse will directed downwards to inferior things' (*gaudens vinulentia in qua te iste mundus oblitus est creatorem suum et creaturam tuam pro te amavit, de vino invisibili perversae atque inclinatae in ima voluntatis suae*, 2.3.6). This sentence, in fact, describes two aspects of this intoxication or drunkenness of the will. The first is loving a creature instead of the Creator (*pro te*) and the second the general downward inclination of the will. It seems that it is the second aspect which is illustrated by the friendship narratives of Books Two and Three, that is, the overflowing of love from the spiritual realm into the corporeal one. The first aspect, as I will show, is elaborated in detail in the narrative of Book Four.

3 The Water Poured Out onto the Sand: the Passionate Friendship in Book Four

In Book Four Augustine describes a period of his life which began about three years after the pear theft, that is, in the nineteenth year of his life. It was a period in which he was 'seduced and seducing, deceived and deceiving, in a

variety of desires' (*seducebamur et seducebamus, falsi atque fallentes in variis cupiditatibus*, 4.1.1), after he experienced a philosophical conversion through reading Cicero's *Hortensius* and desired to turn away his love from sensible pleasures towards the Wisdom which he understood to be the God of his childhood. He started to feel burning love for God (3.4.7-8). And yet, his reluctance to accept the unsophisticated, African Christian spirituality of his mother led him to the Manichaeans, who seemed to be the representatives of the esoteric and elitist Christianity which was more to his taste.²⁷ However, he confesses that it was also the names of Jesus and Paraclete which attracted him to the Manichaeans (3.6.10).

It is quite striking how differently Augustine approaches the problem of love and sexuality in Book Four. After rhetorically refined and brilliantly vague pictorial descriptions of his sexual sins in the previous books, there seems to be a sudden break with that when he turns nineteen, at the beginning of Book Four. Both his conversion through the *Hortensius* and the atmosphere of Manichaeism surely contributed to this shift, since they both first enkindled in the young rhetor a desire for spiritual goods, and the latter was openly hostile towards the body and sexuality. Augustine was highly efficient in convincing his readers through the ages that he had innumerable women in his life and that before the conversion of 386 he pursued sexual satisfaction above all. There are numerous sermons in which Augustine's alleged promiscuity is contrasted with his subsequent conversion to celibate life. If we treat the *Confessions* as a biographical source, such an image of Augustine's sexual life is no more than a fantasy, since all we can learn from the *Confessions* is that he had sexual relationships with two women in his life and with the second one only for a very brief period of time. The rest of his sexual life remains a fascinating but relentlessly vague series of metaphors.

What is certain is that the 'cauldron of illicit loves' from the beginning of Book Three somehow cools down in Book Four. But it does not solve the problem of excessive love. We meet the mother of Adeodatus and, if we take her to be the greatest (human) love of his life, its description is rather peculiar:

In those years I had a woman. She was not my partner in what is called lawful marriage. I had found her in my state of wandering desire and lack of prudence. Nevertheless, she was the only girl for me, and I was faithful to her. With her I learnt by direct experience how wide a difference

27 As Cary 2000, 48 puts it, the Manichaeans were "those most committed to an 'advanced' and spiritual Christianity" in North Africa of his time.

there is between the partnership of marriage entered into for the sake of having a family and the mutual consent of those whose love is a matter of physical sex, and for whom the birth of a child is contrary to their intention—even though, if offspring arrive, they compel their parents to love them.²⁸

Within the context of excessive love and boundaries of law we may say that Augustine arrived at a partial solution. His love was contained within the limits of a monogamous relationship or even some sort of common-law ‘marriage’, but it was not entirely harmonious with God’s will. It was *like* a marriage, but no real marriage, there was procreation, but sex was not for the sake of procreation. The particular status of this relationship indicates a new period of Augustine’s life, where he is consciously pursuing God, understanding that he is more lovable than his creatures, but there is some inauthenticity in it. It is quite similar to the Manichaeism religion, as the bishop of Hippo portrays it: Manichaeism promised moral purity and true knowledge, but provided neither. But Augustine was a strange Manichaean: his teachers condemned procreation, but he had a son almost immediately after he became involved with the unnamed woman; they preached renunciation, but he found a way to satisfy his sexual desires and persisted in it while being an *auditor*. His quasi-marriage, as he confesses, was a result of *vagus ardor inops prudentiae*, that is, a desire which was not fully moderated by reason. The adjective *vagus* is an echo of the ambiguity and vagueness of the sexual atmosphere of Books Two and Three, where Augustine’s love seemed to have wandered between female and male, body and spirit.

It is worthwhile to notice the contrast between the exuberant rhetoric of his narratives concerning friendships in the previous books, the passion overflowing in the very language he used to describe it, and this sober, if not cold, factual report about his quasi-marriage. Such rhetorical shifts are never accidental in the *Confessions*. Augustine is obviously reluctant to use his long-term relationship with a woman for his literary and philosophical purposes. He hardly mentions anything specific about the woman with whom he spent many years, built a home, and raised a son. Instead, he focuses his attention on a relatively shorter relationship with a friend of his age, who also became a

28 August. *Conf.* 4.2.2. *in illis annis unam habebam non eo quod legitimum vocatur coniugio cognitam, sed quam indagaverat vagus ardor inops prudentiae, sed unam tamen, ei quoque servans tori fidem, in qua sane experirer exemplo meo quid distaret inter coniugalis placiti modum, quod foederatum esset generandi gratia, et pactum libidinosi amoris, ubi proles etiam contra votum nascitur, quamvis iam nata cogat se diligere.*

Manichaean. Another important facet of the narrative of Book Four is that we do not find the ambiguity and fluidity concerning female and male, body and spirit; on the contrary, we have a clear situation. The female/body is separated from the male/spirit, which is symbolized by two distinct relationships with the most important persons in Augustine's life at this time. A nineteen-year-old Augustine has a 'wife' with whom he has sex on a regular basis and a friend with whom he enjoys a purely spiritual intimacy. Both are unnamed. But we cannot overlook the fact that the first is portrayed in a rather boring and ordinary manner, while the other as exciting and special.

Augustine says a great deal more about his friend than about the mother of Adeodatus. Their friendship began already in childhood and grew along with the two boys. But it became more serious and intimate when they turned nineteen, now being a 'sweet' (*dulcis*) experience, increased by a 'fervour of identical desires' (*cocta fervore parilium studiorum*, 4.4.7). Augustine is already building up the emotional intensity, using the metaphor of heat associated with passion. His quasi-marriage was a result of *ardor*, but it seems to have led to the cooling of passion, not stirring it, whereas his friendship seemed to be increasingly burning with love. He admits it was 'sweet to me beyond all the sweetnesses of life that I had experienced (*suavi mihi super omnes suavitates illius vitae meae*, 4.4.7).

In contrast to the paragraph in which he delivered a 'factual report' about his love for a woman, this chapter is based on a dynamically built up tension which culminates in an abrupt and poignant confession: God 'took the man from this life when our friendship had scarcely completed a year' (*abstulisti hominem de hac vita, cum vix explevisset annum in amicitia mea*, 4.4.7). Since the beginning, then, this narrative, unlike the previous accounts in Books Two and Three, develops in the shadow of death. But what is similar to those earlier accounts is that also the crucial element of this friendship is excessive, passionate love. Already at the beginning Augustine says that his friend was *nimis carus* and that the friendship was sweet *super omnes suavitates* (4.4.7). The language of exaggeration and excess dominates also in the description of the subsequent mourning; Augustine uses extremes such as *omnia* and *nihil* or expressions as *quidquid* and *undique* to emphasize the intense nature of his love for his friend.

In the normal course of the psychological experience of loss and mourning, which might have inspired this narrative, such excessive and extreme emotional states are commonly found. But Augustine is not writing a diary to capture his emotions; he is constructing a carefully designed book, he is dramatizing metaphysics, and he does this some twenty years afterwards. It is precisely this 'loving too much' which is described as problematic in this narrative.

The sinfulness of the friendship derives from the same source as in Books Two and Three: excessive love. But whereas in the previous books the excess of love was so great that it was overflowing into sexuality, crossing the lawful boundaries between body and spirit, now it is described as less 'carnal'. Instead of providing the reader with a set of vague, sexual images, Augustine strongly focuses on the irrational intensity of love itself, expressed through otherwise traditional images like the metaphor of *dimidium animae* (4.6.11; taken, of course, from Horace's *Ode* 1.3.8).²⁹ The bishop of Hippo uses the experience of loss and mourning to show the excessive intensity of his feelings.

Some scholars, however, notice also some homoerotic dimension of Augustine's feelings in the narrative.³⁰ What is striking in it, when we compare it to the description of friendship in Books Two and Three, is that it may be *erotic*, due to the excess of passion, but it is certainly not *sexual*. What Augustine says about his friend may bring a romantic relationship rather than friendship to the contemporary readers' minds, even though it would probably not encourage such associations, let us say, in the late 18th or early 19th century, when customary, 'Rousseau style' forms of friendship among the higher social classes seem to us now extremely sentimental and affectionate.

The problematic nature of the intensity of love in this friendship was captured to a certain extent by Schlabach, who pointed out that in the *Confessions* the medicine for heterosexual love is *continentia*, that is, a simple rejection of all sexual contacts, whereas there is no such medicine for the 'passion of friendship'.³¹ This may also contribute to our understanding of the peculiar

29 The very idea, as O'Donnell 1992 *ad* 4.6.11 notes, has become already conventional in Augustine's times. O'Donnell points also to another similar expression in the same book (*unam fuisse animam*) and refers the reader to Ovid who speaks in this way about Orestes and Pylades (*Trist.* 4.4.72). Curiously, however, he is silent about Plato and the speech of Aristophanes (*Smp.* 190c-193c), perhaps because in Plato it is clearly an image not of friendship, but of erotic passion. Aristotle uses a similar idea of the 'second self' to describe friendship without any erotic overtones (Arist. *EN* 9, 1166a31-32).

30 Cavadini 2003, 28 suggests that Augustine understands his excessive love for the dead friend in terms of *fornicatio*, but he claims that this term has a very wide meaning in Augustine, covering all forms of leaving God for the sake of created beings. Levenson 1985, 504 does not allude to sexuality, but notices that "the danger of friendship is passion. Two friends may become quite inseparable ... The single possibility of being enjoyed with the friend becomes the only virtue in things. And this is what happens to Augustine. One friendship becomes for him a passion. His friend becomes the basis of the world, the beauty and meaning of the world." Schlabach 1992, 132 avoids associating the passionate nature of this friendship with eroticism or sexuality. Boswell 1980, 135 (despite the agenda of his book) notices the erotic atmosphere of the narrative, but does not force a thesis that this friendship entailed actual sexual contacts.

31 Schlabach 1992, 132.

way in which Augustine describes his 'wife' in the same book; his sexual desires were to a certain extent 'contained' (*con-tinere*) by his long-lasting heterosexual relationship, while he could not find such containment within the purely spiritual bond with his dear friend, to the risk of permeation of this relationship with erotic (but not sexual) feelings.

Augustine says that he recovered from his pain after the death of his friend through going to Carthage and making other friends in the Manichaean community there (4.8.13). When he describes the joys of those new friendships, he wants to contrast them with his earlier, excessive love and even remarks that the true love of a friend is 'without demanding any physical response other than the marks of affectionate good will' (*nihil quaerens ex eius corpore praeter indicia benivolentiae*, 4.9.14; cf. *amantis corpore frui* in 2.2.2).³²

Why did Augustine not choose his passion for women in general or his relationship with the mother of Adeodatus in particular in order to show love's role in the fall of the soul? Why did he decide to use the homoerotic friendship as a model for the fallen love? As I argued, it has nothing to do with what Augustine 'really' did or felt in his adolescence, but very much with what the bishop of Hippo wanted to teach his readers when he was writing the *Confessions*. In the later books he has other purposes, so he freely speaks about his passion for women. In Book Six there is no need to 'cool down' his relationship with the mother of Adeodatus, so Augustine confesses his pain when she was *avulsa a latere* (6.15.25). In Book Eight, where he focuses on his conversion to the ascetic, celibate Christian life, the attachment to the sexual love of women becomes an excellent illustration of what he wants to say, so he no longer says a word about his excessive love for his male friends.

But his purpose in Books Two to Four is to demonstrate that the soul falls by its excessive love of creatures. The material beings are good and beautiful, and spiritual beings are even more so; therefore, it is natural to love them. However, to love them too much means to turn away from God by breaking his law. As I pointed out earlier, the description of the fall of love by means of Patricius' reaction to Augustine's sexuality in the baths contains two aspects. First, the sinking of the soul down from the spiritual realm, where it belongs, to the material realm, is illustrated mostly in Books Two and Three, but the other aspect, namely loving a creature instead of or to the exclusion of God (*pro Deo*) seems

32 Even though the 'hissing cauldron of illicit loves' seems to be absent here, Boswell 1980, 129 and Breyfogle 2003, 48 n. 64 suggest that it was possible and compatible with the Manichaean aversion to procreation that the sect encouraged perhaps a sort of romantic, homoerotic friendship between the *auditores*.

to be developed in Book Four. The problem with his nineteen-year-old friendship is also excess, but the excess lies not in sensuality, but in exclusivity.

In Book Four this narrow exclusivity consists in loving creatures at the cost of excluding God, which means loving the mutable as if it were immutable, loving a shadow as if it were the real thing, loving an imperfect good with the hope of obtaining perfect happiness. It is not so much the material nature of being loved, but rather the fact that it is something created. Creatures do not exist in a full way, they do not possess their own being and they are not beings in their own right. They are constantly receiving existence from the only One who really exists, and they, as Augustine puts it later, are neither fully existent, nor fully non-existent (*nec omnino esse nec omnino non esse*, 7.11.17). Giving oneself fully to a mutable thing is expressed by a recurrence to the symbolism of water: 'I had poured out my soul on to the sand by loving a person sure to die as if he would never die' (*fuderam in harenam animam meam diligendo moriturum ac si non moriturum*, 4.8.13). It is not about polluting the pure spring, but about the spring being poured out. The paradox is that the narrow exclusivity is depicted by an opposite movement of spreading and wasting in the process. Whereas in the first case, Augustine needed to show the transgression of the boundary between spirit and body, the out-flowing of love to the material realm, in the second case he needed to demonstrate a more general boundary between any creature (as existing in a relative way) and the Creator, who exists absolutely.

Why are both aspects of the fall illustrated by means of male friendship, even though each in a different way? It seems that Augustine believed that the heterosexual love relationship is not a good image of the sinking of the soul from the spiritual realm to the material one. It is quite normal and usually expected that sexuality is an expression of intense love between man and woman. After a period of getting to know each other, falling in love and becoming close, love normally overflows the boundary between spirit and body, culminating in intercourse. There is a spiritual doctrine in which the fall could be perfectly depicted by heterosexual love and procreation, namely, the Manichaean dualism. Augustine, however, certainly did not want to be considered as such when he was writing the *Confessions* as the new bishop of Hippo. Male friendship, degenerating into vaguely described homosexual feelings and experiments, was a much better illustration of how the soul, existing at the spiritual level of being, sinks down into the realm of the senses and thus breaks God's law. Sexuality between man and woman can be contained within the boundaries of legitimate marriage, which is God's medicine for the fall into the material realm, while sexual contact between two men can never be contained in such a way and is always a sin.

The bishop of Hippo also seemed to be convinced that the passionate, but not overtly homosexual, relationship between him and his friend described in Book Four was a good way to depict the exclusion of the Creator by the excessive love of a creature, which is an important aspect of the fall of the soul, captured by Augustine in his fundamental distinction between *uti* and *frui*. In Book Four the senses or the body are not a problem *per se* anymore; it is the intensity of feeling and its exclusive investment in one person that leads to sin. Augustine describes the recovery from mourning as having a *circle* of friends, mutually loving each other and not expecting from each other more than the usual *indicia benevolentiae*, whereas the problem with his dead friend was that he was the only source of happiness and the object of exclusive love, which made even his quasi-marriage look as if it were devoid of passion.

The bishop of Hippo chose a subtly homoerotic friendship to show this 'narrowing down' of love and its 'gluing itself to the object' (*figatur glutine amore*, 4.10.15). He needed a relationship where there was too much loving, but within the boundaries of the spiritual realm. This may be the reason why he focused on the death of the friend and not, for example, on their shared activities, because he wanted to emphasize that the heart of the problem of Book Four is mutability vs. immutability and not body vs. spirit (as in Books Two and Three). Again, his relationship with the mother of Adeodatus would not serve this purpose well, because the excessive intensity of love for his 'wife', the mother of his son, would not convey the same philosophical meaning as the excess in friendship. But later, when he needs a vivid example to illustrate the power of sensible *consuetudo*, holding him back just before fully committing to God and the Church, his addictive love for the 'embraces of a woman' (contrary to the apparent indifference of Alypius to such matters) will prove very useful.

Another reason for the use of male friendship as a model for a fallen love could be that it is much easier for Augustine to convey a sense of 'something wrong happening to something basically good' than in the case of a heterosexual relationship. Augustine conceives the fall of the soul as a form of *perversio* or *perversitas*, in the sense that something natural, good and intended by God is used by the soul to reject God, disobey him and spoil the goodness of his plan. The beautiful, 'very good' material world was created for the soul to love and enjoy, on the condition that this love is contained within the lawful boundaries and does not become excessive, either by too great a fascination with the sensible or by fixing the love on particular objects of the world to the exclusion of the Creator who gives them existence. This natural relationship of love with the creation was distorted in a perverse way by the soul's fall, but it is not the relationship as such that is wrong, as in the radically dualistic view of Manichaeism. What is bad is only the excess which occurs in the natural love

towards the creation. Augustine is not a Manichaean and that is why he decides that male friendship will be a better illustration of the soul's relationship with God's creation. Deep love for each other is fine, but if this love ignores the Creator and his love and becomes excessive either by too much interest in the senses or by being too exclusive and passionate, then the soul falls and what is originally good, becomes perverted.

4 Conclusion

I propose to read Augustine's autobiographical narratives not as descriptions of his actual experiences (regardless of whether the narratives are based on true events or not), but as literary or rhetorical illustrations of his philosophical ideas concerning the fall of the soul. Augustine's vagueness about the nature of his adolescent sexual experiences and his occasional allusions to them seem to suggest that his intense, passionate 'love of love' resulted in the 'sexualization' or 'eroticization' of his male friendships, which seems to be more concrete in Books Two and Three and much more subtle in Book Four.

In Books Two and Three Augustine describes a friendship which, instead of being a purely incorporeal bond between two spirits, becomes polluted by a sexual desire and sexual contact between friends. This is an illustration of the sinking of the soul from the spiritual realm to the material one. In Book Four Augustine presents us with a friendship which becomes immoderate and too passionate; there is no overt pollution by sexuality, but there is intensity beyond lawful measure. This is a metaphor for the obsessive fascination with the creatures to the point of loving them, mutable and imperfect beings, as if they were God. I also pointed out that in both types of fallen love the central problem is the excess of love—in the first case, the excess consists in the overflowing of love into the material realm, in the second in an exclusive focus on a creature and the disregarding of the Creator (which makes love pour out and waste away). Those two types of fallen love seem to be two aspects of one process.

Both kinds of narrative focus on male friendship having an emotional intensity, which is lacking from the rather dry and cold report about the woman with whom Augustine spent over ten years in a common-law 'marriage' and had a son. It seems to be a deliberate rhetorical strategy, chosen because male friendship is much more useful to Augustine to illustrate what happens with love in the fall of the soul. Both the sexual expression of love and passionate, exclusive intensity are normal phenomena in heterosexual love, but not in male friendship, which enables Augustine to show how something good

becomes distorted. The fallen male friendship serves therefore as an illustration of *perversio* or *perversitas*, a crucial element of Augustine's theory of the fall: natural love is distorted by the soul because of excess. Only God's grace can enable the soul to love a friend truly, that is, in God.

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