

The Pear-Theft in Augustine's 'Confessions'

One of the most disturbing events in the famous *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (354-430), concerns the theft of some pears from a tree ; a venture in which Augustine as a mere youth of sixteen took part¹. Bertrand Russell, in describing this event and its significance for Augustine, writes :

It appears that, with some companions of his own age, he despoiled a neighbour's pear tree, although he was not hungry, and his parents had better pears at home. He continued throughout his life to consider this an act of almost incredible wickedness².

Among other writers on Augustine, this episode has been singled out for particular consideration by one, Eberhard Vischer, in his 'Eine anstößige Stelle in Augustins Konfessionen.'³ Vischer however, sees the event as a lesson in God's Grace, both for Augustine, and for the many who were destined to read his *Confessions*.

The aim of the present study is to show that the pear-tree episode is much more significant than has been recognized. Indeed, it will be argued that its sources lie very deep, both in Augustine's youthful past, and in his re-examined experience, particularly as interpreted in the

1. *Confessions*, Book II, Chapters IV to VIII (hereafter as *Conf.*, II, IV to VIII).

2. Bertrand RUSSELL, *A History of Western Philosophy*, &c. (Simon & Schuster), p. 345.

3. In *Harnack-Ehrung* (Leipzig, 1921), pp. 183-194. The opinions of various other authors who have treated the episode are summarised in *Das Schuldbewußtsein in den Confessiones des heiligen Augustinus*, by Dr. theol. Peter Schäfer (Würzburg, 1930). See pages 32 through 36. None of the interpretations comes near to the present author's approach. Unfortunately, the episode of the pear-theft does not receive extensive examination from one of the most voluminous writers on Augustine's *Confessions*, namely Pierre Courcelle. Neither in his *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris, 1950), nor in his more recent *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire* (Paris, 1963), does the episode come extensively under Courcelle's scholarly scrutiny.

light of his studies of the Scriptures ; studies which intervened between the pear-stealing and the recount of it in the *Confessions*. Furthermore, as will be shown, the episode is of the utmost importance for appreciation of the *Confessions* as a work of great genius, whence also derives in part its enduring impact upon the Christian tradition of the West.

The *Confessions* was first publicized about 398 of the present era, when its author was about forty four. Approximately two years prior to its appearance, Augustine had been consecrated Bishop of Hippo Regius in Numidia Proconsularis of Romanized North Africa. He held this position until his death in the year 430. Augustine's rise to the rank of Bishop was all the more remarkable in that only a mere eight years previously he had been converted from the detested Manichean heresy which had claimed his allegiance for nine years.

It is significant for subsequent considerations that the religion of the Manichees saw the material universe as produced by the amalgam of two ultimate principles — the one, good and spiritual, which presided over the Kingdom of Light ; the other evil and material, which ruled the Kingdom of Darkness. The physical universe was the site of the conflict between the two powers, or deities. In the Manichean context, the forces of good made for the separation of the spiritual element, of which light itself was the manifestation. Too, the human soul derived from the same principle. In opposition to this salvific separation were the forces of darkness which strove to keep the spiritual element enmeshed in the darkness of matter. To this faction belonged also the human body. One immediate consequence was that man himself, being composed of body and soul, was divided between the hostile factions.⁴

Returning to the *Confessions*, and prompted by the pear-theft, it is of interest to observe the various references which Augustine makes to trees in this work. Mostly he alludes to the tree itself, but sometimes it is represented only by the fruit (*fructus*) (Bk. IV, Ch. v, 10), or on other occasions, merely by the wood (*lignum*) (Bk. I, ch. xvi, 35 and Bk. IX, Ch. XIII, 35). All books, with the exceptions of the sixth, eleventh and twelfth, contain at least one such reference, and some (the seventh book, for instance), have several. The greatest number of allusions is to be found in the thirteenth and final book of the *Confessions*, which contains five such references. A reason for this abundance is suggested by the

4. A concise summary of Manichean mythology is to be found in psalm CCXXXIII in *A Manichaean Psalm-Book*, Part II, Volume II of *Manichaean Manuscripts of the Chester Beatty Collection*, edited by C. R. C. ALBERRY (Stuttgart, 1938). Among the publications on Manicheism, the English reader is referred to Francis Crawford Burkitt's very readable *Religion of the Manichees* (Cambridge, 1925). Geo Widengren's more recent *Mani and Manichaeism* (translated by Charles Kessler, revised by the author, London 1965), written by one whose sympathies lie with the Manichees, makes interesting reading. Unfortunately however, source references are often lacking. For information on Manicheism in Augustine's North Africa, the reader is referred to W. H. C. Frend's 'The Gnostic-Manichaean Tradition in Roman North Africa' in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, IV, 1 (1953), pp. 13-26.

context. Augustine has come to the end of the book based upon the story of his life. After the manner of the Gospel, it must be a life which bears fruit. Fittingly enough, all the allusions in the thirteenth book are to fruit-bearing trees.

As would be expected, some of Augustine's consciousness of trees in the *Confessions* derived from the previous years which he spent in poring over the Christian Scriptures. Thus, the enumeration of the various parts of material creation (including trees) in the thirteenth chapter of the seventh book, is taken directly from Psalm 148. A similar account in the thirteenth book (Ch. xxv, 38) is from *Genesis* I, xxix to xxx. Likewise too, the famous cedars of Lebanon of the Bible are mentioned in the eighth book (Ch. II, 4), as well as the ninth (Ch. IV, 7). Other more directly relevant examples will be treated at a later stage in the present article.

Yet another instance of the significance which Augustine attaches to trees in the *Confessions* is to be found in the curious example which he cites of how rightly to possess a tree :

He is happier who knows how to possess a tree, and for the use thereof renders thanks to Thee, although he may not know how many cubits high it is, or how wide it spreads, than he who measures it and counts all its branches, and neither owns it nor knows its Creator⁴.

Apart from the Christian Scriptures, another possible source of Augustine's interest in trees would derive from the nine years which he spent as a Manichee. Trees occupied an important place in the mythology of this religion and were believed to have sprung from the semen of demons, which after ejaculation had fallen upon the ground⁵. In the Manichean context, and in the ancient world in general, the semen, even of the demons of darkness, was held to be rich in the light element. Trees and their fruits were therefore a particularly rich source of this precious element which had been lost to the Kingdom of Light⁷.

This belief was at the basis of the importance attached to diet, particularly by the Elect, or « saints » of the Manichees. They, being on a higher level than the common members of the sect, by eating the fruit of trees, possessed the power of liberating the light element from its bondage in the darkness of matter⁸. The importance of this aspect of mythology in

5. *Conf.*, V, IV, 7. English extracts are from the J. G. Pilkington translation in the *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, edited by Philip Schaff (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1902). Latin citations, when used (for the *Confessions*, or other works), are from the text of the Gaume brothers *Opera Omnia* of St. Augustine (Parisii, 1836 to 1838).

6. WIDENGREN, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-8 ; BURKITT, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-9. See also St. Augustine's *Concerning the Nature of Good, against the Manichaeans*, Chapter 44. (All English translations of Augustine's works are from the *Select Library* series.)

7. WIDENGREN, p. 57.

8. BURKITT, p. 41 and pp. 45-7.

the Manichean ethics, is acknowledged by Augustine himself in several places⁹.

Since Augustine was a Manichee for a whole nine years of his early manhood, this facet of his past should not be discounted too readily in explaining the great guilt which long tortured him over the trifling theft of a few pears. Indeed, there are several aspects of the pear-theft which are very interesting when viewed from a Manichean perspective.

In the first place, the plucking of fruit was considered sinful. Its perpetrator had involved himself in the realm of matter. A still worse crime for the obtaining of food was the killing of animals. Such acts were forbidden, particularly for the Elect of the Manichees whose exalted rank in the sect rendered such transgressions all the more blameworthy. The Elect, or 'saints' were dedicated to a total abstention from involvement in the material world. Accordingly they renounced the ordinary forms of human activity, including also all physical engagements. Whether pleasures or labours, they all implied the crime of involvement in the material realm. Important too, for present purposes, is the fact that the injunction against such activities, extended to the plucking of fruit from trees. The detaching of the pears from the tree therefore constituted a crime in the Manichean code of morals¹⁰.

Secondly, while the plucking of fruit was in itself a crime, it was less serious when perpetrated by the common 'hearers' of the sect. Fortunately too, they could make reparation for their offense by offering some of the fruit to the Elect. These, by eating it, could liberate the light-element which it contained and so bring good out of the evil that had been done¹¹. In addition, the Elect would pray for the offerer of the fruit, that his many crimes (including the plucking of the fruit) should be forgiven him.

It remains therefore, that if the fruit be plucked, then the use to which it is put becomes all-important. The higher the form of life to which it is destined, the more forgiveness for the initial crime. Fruit accepted by the holiest of the Manichean 'saints' therefore effected the greatest reparation. However, it follows conversely that the grosser and viler the form of animal life to which it is offered, the greater the increased guilt of the initial crime. In this regard, it is interesting to observe that Augustine specifically mentions that he and his friends threw the stolen pears to some pigs :

To shake and rob this (pear-tree) some of us wanton young fellows went, late one night... and carried away great loads, not to eat ourselves, but to fling to the very swine¹².

9. *Conf.*, III, x, 18; *Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon*, XXXI, 4.

10. BURKITT, p. 47ff.

11. *Reply to Faustus*, VI, 4 to 8.

12. *Conf.*, II, IV, 9.

An added significance derives to this aspect of the ' theft ' through the realization that Augustine elsewhere classifies the pig as standing for something which is unclean- ' porcus significat aliquod immundum.¹³ '

Lastly, yet another significant detail emerges from the above recount of the theft. It occurred late one night. In the Manichean context, this is the time when the powers of darkness are at their prime, because physical darkness itself derives from the Kingdom of Darkness¹⁴. Therefore, from the Manichean viewpoint, this circumstance constitutes yet another reprehensible aspect of the ' theft '.

To attribute one motive to an action performed by so complex a personality as Augustine would be a hazardous venture indeed. Yet equally unwarranted would be the exclusion of all influence stemming from the Manichees whom he rejected after nine years of allegiance, and whom he subsequently so often and vehemently denounced¹⁵. Certainly, the extreme guilt with which he viewed the theft about twenty eight years later, becomes less puzzling in the light of the above aspects of Manicheism. Moreover, that Augustine makes no explicit mention of the harm done to the owner of the tree, or even omits to mention whether it did indeed have an owner, is added evidence that this aspect of the ' theft ' did not overly concern him.

The above considerations may help explain what prompted Augustine to magnify the significance of the pear-theft. Yet, whether this beso, or not, there still seems to be another and most important reason for the magnified guilt of the theft as recorded in the *Confessions*. This would stem from the dramatic genius of Augustine. It appears that the episode is modelled upon the theft of the fruit by Eve, from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in *Genesis*¹⁶. This particular book of the Scriptures held a perpetual fascination for Augustine, and he wrote more than one commentary upon it during his life¹⁷.

In part, Augustine's attraction for *Genesis* derived from his puzzling over the origin of evil and his obsession with the enormity of the Original

13. *Enarratio in Psalmum, CXXI, 1*. This reference is omitted in the English translation in the *Select Library* edition, due to the fact that only part of the work is translated there.

14. *Reply to Faustus, XX, 1 to 9* ; also : *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus*, chapters 13 to 32.

15. In the *Select Library* translations alone, are to be found- *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* (written 388) ; *On the Morals of the Manichaeans* (388 A.D.), *On Two Souls, against the Manichaeans* (391 A.D.), *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus called Fundamental* (397 A.D.), *Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon* (400 A.D.), and *Concerning the Nature of Good, against the Manichaeans* (404 A.D.).

16. *Genesis* 2 to 3.

17. Thus, in 389 Augustine completed the *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*. In 393 he began the *De Genesi ad Litteram*. Work on this was resumed in 426, but he died without completing it. Meanwhile in 401 he began writing another *De Genesi ad Litteram* which was eventually completed in twelve books in 414.

Sin of the first parents. This great Sin entered innocent Creation when Eve succumbed to the wiles of the serpent and stole the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is interesting to observe that Augustine regarded his theft of the pears in a similar light. The enormity of sin enters the *Confessions* with the stealing of the pears, just as it entered the story of humanity with the theft of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The pear-theft would then be the Original Sin of Augustine's *Confessions*.

It is the realization of this interesting resemblance which provides a new and extremely fascinating interpretation of the *Confessions*. There was a second, important tree in the Garden of Eden, as Augustine well realized. The second tree was the Tree of Life¹⁸. Significantly too, Augustine insisted upon the literal meaning of the word *arbor*, and hence upon the real, physical presence of both trees in Eden¹⁹.

Just as in Adam, all men sinned, so too in Christ's death they were all called to eternal salvation. It is interesting to observe that with the initial Fall, and the subsequent Recall to salvation, there were again two Trees involved. These were the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life respectively; the latter represented at the redeeming death of Christ by the Tree of the Cross. Of this Tree also is Augustine well aware, for he refers to Christ as He 'who hung upon the Tree' (*quae pependit in ligno*)²⁰. Finally, it is to be observed that in the Scriptures, the rôle of the second Tree is not as evident as that of the first, since it merely constitutes the support for the dying Savior, and the fashioned wood becomes a Tree in another sense.

It remains therefore that the Scriptures are polarized between two epochal events: the Fall of mankind in Eden on the one hand, and on the other, the Recall of mankind to salvation through the death of Christ on the Cross. Significantly too, both events feature an important Tree—the former, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; the latter, the Tree of Life²¹.

What is of interest to present considerations is that the *Confessions* also contains two principal focal points. As a work of art, it is polarized

18. *Genesis*, 2, IX: 'And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. Cf. *The City of God*, XIII, xx and xxi.

19. *De Genesi ad Litteram*, VIII, 8.

20. *Conf.*, IX, XIII, 35. The question of Christ hanging upon a tree is discussed at length in *Reply to Faustus*, XIV.

21. The identification of the cross with the tree of life is made elsewhere by Augustine. Thus he writes: 'Dicimus quidem lignum vitam, sed secundum intellectum lignum crucis, unde accepimus vitam.' (*In Ioannis Evangelium*, Tractatus I, 16). A similar identification is made in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, II, 34: 'Potest ergo videri propterea homo in labores huius vitae esse dimissus ut aliquando manum porrigat ad arborem vitae, et vivat in aeternum. Manus autem porrectio bene significat crucem, per quam vita aeterna recuperatur.'

between two powerful climaxes — the first is the domination of Sin as expressed in the strange episode of the theft of the pears ; the second is the triumph of Grace which occurs at the memorable moment of Augustine's conversion in the garden²².

In the conversion scene, Augustine's bitter weeping at his long and obstinate resistance to conversion is interrupted when he hears the sound of a child's voice chanting : ' tolle lege, tolle lege ' (take up and read, take up and read). Interpreting this as a divine command, he takes up the book which he has been reading, opens it a random and his gaze lights upon the exhortation of the Apostle Paul — an exhortation which was to change his entire life :

Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying ; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof²³.

From then on, it is simply a matter of working out the details of the new situation brought about by Augustine's final conversion to the Christian religion. Significantly too, this event occurs almost exactly half-way through the entire book. Soon, his mother Monnica dies, her prayers for her son's conversion having at long last been answered, and the concrete biographical details end. The rest of the *Confessions* is devoted to Augustine's favourite topic — the book of *Genesis*.

It remains therefore, that to the Fall and the Redemption of mankind as recounted in the Scriptures, there corresponds a similar pair of focal points in the autobiography of Augustine's *Confessions*. His life of sin finds its fullest (if only symbolic) expression in the theft of the pears. Here, as with the stealing of the forbidden fruit in Eden, is the dominance of Evil in an epochal manner, from which (as also in the Scriptures), it appears that all other evils flow. Similarly, to the Redemption of the human race by Christ's death on the Cross, there corresponds the conversion scene in the garden, in the *Confessions*. This powerful polarization, if truly present in Augustine's autobiography, would provide it with a covert, but almost irresistible appeal to the Christian psyche.

The above parallel between the two focal points of the Scriptures and those of the *Confessions*, receives further substantiation from adversion to a seemingly trite detail in the conversion scene. Augustine describes the events immediately prior to the great moment of his conversion as follows :

I flung myself down, how, I know not, *under a certain fig-tree (sub quadam fico arbore)*, giving full course to my tears, and the streams of mine eyes gushed out, and acceptable sacrifice unto Thee²⁴.

22. *Conf.*, VIII, XII, 28-30.

23. *Ibid.*, 29.

24. *Ibid.*, 28. Italics are added.

Here then, is the fourth tree ! Like the Tree of the Redemption, it too is unobtrusive. But it is nonetheless an important ingredient of the nexus. The tetrads can now be completed, with the following relationships :

Scriptures :

<u>Fall of Mankind</u>	::	<u>Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil</u>
<u>Redemption of Mankind</u>	::	<u>Tree of Cross (i.e. of Life)</u>

Confessions :

<u>Fall of Augustine</u>	::	<u>Pear-Tree</u>
<u>Salvation of Augustine</u>	::	<u>Fig-Tree</u>

The mention of the fig-tree in Augustine's account is seemingly so insignificant that to claim the above relations may appear rather far-fetched. On the other hand, it is to be observed that however trite a detail this may seem to be, nevertheless posterity has seized upon the presence of the tree as being a most essential element of the event. This is well illustrated by a collection of reproductions in the rear of Courcelle's *Les Confessions de saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire*²⁵. Courcelle has assembled there a series of pictures of the 'tolle lege' scene which range through many artists and much of history ; in fact from the fourteenth century down to the present. It is interesting that of the forty-five depictions of the memorable scene, only two or three lack the presence of the tree.

Again, the fig-tree was a most important tree of antiquity, not only nutritionally, but also religiously²⁶. Further, and more relevantly to the present considerations, it is a well-known tree of the Bible. One has but to recall such incidents as the cursing of the barren fig-tree by Christ²⁷, and the reference to the shoots of the fig-tree as indicating the approach of summer²⁸. Indeed, in the Old Testament, the fig-tree is seen as an integral part of civic and domestic felicity :

They shall sit every man under his vine and his fig-tree and none shall make them afraid
for the mouth of the Lord of Hosts has spoken²⁹.

25. The reproductions are between pages 688 and 689. In addition, a recent article by Vinzenz Buchheit well explains that the presence of the fig-tree is supremely relevant to the theme of the eighth book of the *Confessions*, notwithstanding Augustine's seemingly casual mention of this tree. See : Vinzenz BUCHHEIT, *Augustinus unter dem Feigenbaum (zu Conf. VIII)*, in *Vigiliae Christianae*, 22 (1968), pp. 257-271.

26. For the religious aspect, see : 'Feige' *Wort-Gebärde-Amulett ; Ein volkswundlicher Beitrag zu Amulettforschung*, by Lenz [Kriss-] Rettenbeck, (München), 1953. See also, Vinzenz Buchheit, *art. cit.*

27. *Matthew*, 21, XVIII-XXI.

28. *Matthew*, 24, XXXII and *Luke*, 21, XXIX-XXX.

29. *Micah*, 4, IV.

Last, but not least, there is the significance which Augustine himself attaches to the very description of the fig-tree in his conversion scene. It has been well pointed out by Courcelle that the words used by Augustine are most significant. He employs the strange expression *sub arbore fici* and not the more forthright alternative : *sub arbore ficu*, or even more simply : *sub ficu*³⁰. However, that is most interesting, and as Courcelle observes, Augustine uses the above strange phrase of *sub arbore fici* in another place. This happens when he is commenting upon the episode in which Christ told Nathanâel what He saw him sitting under the fig-tree, when Philip went looking for him, to tell him about the Messiah³¹. In other words, Augustine would seem to impute to his experience under the fig-tree a significance similar to that of Nathanâel's being seen by Christ *sub arbore fici*.

From the above considerations, it can be seen that the presence of the fig-tree in Augustine's conversion scene is a most significant detail. Less obvious however, is the explanation of why the Tree of Sin in the *Confessions* is a pear-tree. In general, both trees have similarly shaped fruits, but differ in other morphological aspects, such as foliage and tree-structure. Moreover, the pear-tree is virtually absent from the Bible. Further, any significance it may have possessed in the Manichean mythology is not extant.

On the other hand, in consideration of the great importance which Augustine attached to all details of the Scriptures, the mere fact that the pear-tree does *not* appear in the Bible, is not insignificant. It can be argued (in a manner to which we trust, the great Augustine would not object), that inasmuch as sin is a turning away from the word of God, so too, it is best concerned about a tree which does not find expression in the word of God.

In any case, granted the over-all validity of the previous considerations, then the following equivalence can be constructed :

<i>Scriptures :</i>	<i>Confessions :</i>
Tree of Knowledge of Good Evil	∴ Pear-Tree
Tree of the Cross (i.e. of Life)	∴ Fig-Tree

If the above parallels are conceded, they not only account for the magnified guilt of the pear-theft in the *Confessions*, but they also provide some explanation of the powerful and persistent appeal of the *Confessions* down through the ages. It is modelled upon the Fall and Redemption of mankind as depicted in the Scriptures. The similarity, though covert,

30. Courcelle, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

31. *John* 1, XLIII-LI. Most significantly too, Augustine explicitly amplifies the expression 'sub ficu' of the scriptural text, to 'sub arbore fici,' (*In Ioannis Evangelium*, tractatus VII, 20.)

is nonetheless a powerfully operative attraction to those readers already familiar with the Bible. The present study claims that it was part of the great genius of Augustine, whether instinctively, or deliberately, to have chosen the above-explained structure for his autobiography in the *Confessions*.

In conclusion, it follows too, that the *Confessions* like the famous *City of God* of Augustine is also fashioned upon an inner polarization. Just as the *City of God* is structured on the Two Cities, the one evil and of Satan, the other good and of God ; so too, the *Confessions* is polarized between Two Trees — on the one hand, the pear-tree, representing the Tree of Sin ; and on the other, the fig-tree, representing the Tree of Redemption. Seen in this manner, both works possess a similar, basic structure.

In general therefore, the seemingly excessive guilt which Augustine attached to the trifling theft of a few pears is seen to be most significant. Quite apart from motives of great personal piety, it is most noteworthy that there are sound dramatic and psychological reasons for the emphasis on the event. These reasons have been explained above. As concealed they would vastly augment the appeal of the *Confessions*. Once revealed, they are recognized to be the work of gifted genius. Their author was the great Augustine, the former professional orator of Carthage, Rome and Milan, who abandoned the selling of words for the purchasing of eternal salvation.

Leo C. FERRARI
St. Thomas University
University of New Brunswick
N.B., Canada