

THE BARREN FIELD IN AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS

BEATEN IN school and badgered at home, the infant Augustine was daily, even forcibly reminded that he had to win for himself a place of prestige in the world by means of his studies. Even when writing the *Confessions* in his early forties, he still grieved over those early years of his life and the way he was relentlessly driven by his elders and mercilessly beaten at school in order that he might excel in his studies.¹

Suddenly however, at the age of sixteen, he was released from all this painful coercion. An abrupt break occurred in his studies, due to a temporary lack of funds to further his education. His impoverished, but ambitious parents had to cast about for funds to send him some three hundred miles away to complete his professional studies in the prestigious schools of Carthage.²

It would appear that by the age of sixteen, Augustine had had, if anything, far too much scholarly discipline for his years. The complete freedom which suddenly engulfed him, took him entirely by surprise. He did not know how to cope with circumstances so unprecedented in his limited experience. Added to this were the first awareness of "the muddy cravings of the flesh and the bubblings of first manhood."³ He was indeed like a work-horse which had grown in the harness, suddenly released at the prime of its powers: "the reins were loosened; I was given free play with no kind of severity to control me and was allowed to dissipate myself in all kinds of ways."⁴

From the many illusions in the course of the first three chapters of the second book of the *Confessions*, there can be no doubt that the dissipations which Augustine had in mind were principally sexual in character. This is stressed at length in the course of the second and third chapters, focusing particularly on the episode at the baths in the latter chapter. Augustine's father, upon seeing his son naked on that

¹ 1.9.14 (All such references are to the *Confessions*).

² 2.3.5-6.

³ 2.2.2.

⁴ 2.3.8.

occasion, realised that he was on the threshold of manhood and therefore rejoiced at the prospect of grandchildren. By contrast however, Augustine's mother, Monica, was positively alarmed by the news of her son's burgeoning sexual powers. As Augustine says, she was "seized with a holy fear and trembling"⁵ and set about vainly attempting to stem the flow of Augustine's new-found passions by all kinds of motherly prohibitions.

The obvious solution at that time and in that culture was of course marriage. Three times in the course of the second book, Augustine reproaches his parents for not having let him get married, so that "the waves of my youth might at least have spent themselves on the shore of marriage."⁶ Yet this obvious solution was denied the young Augustine.

The source of this refusal was obviously not his father, Patricius, (who had joyful anticipations of grandchildren), but his mother, Monica, who in Augustine's own words, "feared that a wife would be a handicap to me in my hopes for the future . . . hopes that I might attain proficiency in literature."⁷ However, with this legitimate outlet denied them, the powerful passions of first manhood found other releases with the young Augustine: "the madness of lust . . . held complete sway over me and to this madness I surrendered myself entirely!"⁸

During the course of the earlier chapters in the second book, Augustine alludes to these overwhelming passions with vivid metaphors. These are principally of two types. First, there are what may be termed aqueous analogies, when he likens these passions to the wildly surging waters, either of the ocean, or of some river.⁹ Secondly, (and containing the subject of the present study), are the comparisons to wild vegetation. Thus, with a most expressive metaphor, right in the first chapter of the second book, Augustine describes his acquiescence to the wild growths which crept over his innocent soul as follows: "*silvescere ausus sum variis et umbrosis amoribus*—I dared to return to woods by my various and shady loves."¹⁰ This is but the first of many

⁵ 2.3.6.

⁶ 2.2.3. (Cf. 2.2.4 & 2.3.8.) Sixteen was of course, not an unusually early age for marriage in the Roman Empire.

⁷ 2.3.8.

⁸ 2.2.4.

⁹ 2.2.2-4. For the significance of restless waters, particularly of the sea, see H. Rondet, 'Le symbolisme de la mer chez saint Augustin,' *Augustinus Magister* (1954) vol. 2 691-701.

¹⁰ 2.2.2. See also the opening pages of the author's 'Symbols of Sinfulness in Augustine's Confessions,' *Augustinian Studies* 2 (1971) 93-104.

such vegetative metaphors of the second book, which climaxes (appropriately enough) in the enigmatical pear-theft.¹¹

At this point, it is perhaps timely to question Augustine's purpose in employing the two kinds of metaphors already distinguished above. On the one hand there are the aqueous analogies which liken the passions to the stormy sea, or the roaring river; while on the other hand there are various expressions of wild vegetation. Indeed, both can be described as "wild" yet in contrasting ways.

The reason for the aqueous analogies is perhaps easier to divine. As Augustine intimates more than once in the text, the newly awakened youthful passions of his sixteenth year were like wildly surging waters which swept the helpless Augustine along in their wake: "I was . . . swept over the precipice of desire and thrust into the whirlpools of vice."¹² "I, poor wretch, boiled up and ran troubled along the course of my own stream."¹³ In effect, he was as helpless against the onslaught of these powerful passions as the small craft in the angry sea: "I was storm-tossed,"¹⁴ "I was tossed here and there . . . scattered abroad; I boiled over in my fornications."¹⁵

On the other hand, the reason for the vegetative metaphors is not so obvious. It is however, perhaps of significance that the very last sentence in the book refers to barren ground: "I slipped from you and went astray, my God, in my youth, wandering far from my upholder and my stay, and I became to myself a wasteland (*regio egestatis*)."¹⁶ This same idea of going off into a barren region is also found as early as the second chapter of the second book: "I went on going further away from you and further, making my way into more and more of

¹¹ 2.4.9. See also: Leo Ferrari, 'The Pear-Theft in Augustine's Confessions,' *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 16 (1970) 233-242.

¹² 2.2.2.

¹³ 2.2.4.

¹⁴ 2.2.2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ 2.10.18. (Cf. 4.7.12, where writing of the effects of the death of his dear friend, Augustine says: "et ego mihi remanseram infelix locus."). The phrase "*regio egestatis*" calls to mind the much-discussed "*regio dissimilitudinis*" (7.10.16). For one of the latest and most illuminating studies on this phrase, see: Pierre Courcelle, 'Tradition néo-platonicienne et traditions chrétiennes de la "region de dissemblance" (Platon, *Politique* 273d),' *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 32 (1957) 5-33. The meaning of the phrase would seem to be indicated by Augustine in *Enarratio in Psalmum 146* 7.14: 'a quibus longe est ubique est? Ubi putatis nisi quia iacent in dissimilitudine sua, exterminantes in se similitudinem Dei?' From this it would seem to follow that the phrase signifies the same reality as the '*regio egestatis*,' though diversely understood.

these sterile plantations (*sterilia semina*) of sorrow."¹⁷ Both these citations deal with what can be termed barren land.

Now, on the one hand, land can be barren because (for one reason or another) virtually nothing will grow on it. On the other hand there is that kind of land which is barren merely because it is not being cultivated. Vegetation abounds indeed, but it is of the wild and useless variety. It is this type of land, rather than the former which is the subject of the present study. Indeed, Augustine's very first reference to vegetation in the second book, implies that he has specifically such land in mind: "*Silvescere ausus sum variis et umbrosis amoribus.*"¹⁸

In this passage, the adjective "umbrosis" suggests the idea of luxuriant vegetation. Significantly too, the same word, or its variants is found on four other occasions in the course of the second book of the *Confessions*.¹⁹ Too, the verb "silvescere" provides further information about the type of land involved. This unusual word applies in the first place to the behaviour of vineal vegetation which is not kept carefully pruned—it runs wild.²⁰ In the cited passage, it is therefore question of a field, which was once cultivated and its plants pruned, being allowed to "run wild" as the expression puts it in English. The net result of this neglect will be the barren field which is the subject of the present study. Not only will the once cultivated plants of such a field "run wild", but they will be soon joined by those forms of forest vegetation which will succeed in establishing themselves upon the once fertile field. The end-product of this process of deterioration will be the barren field.

Before examining the metaphors describing the process of deterioration of the neglected field, the first stage of this process denoted by "silvescere" deserves further examination. This is the initial stage when the plant is neglected by the gardener. As a result of lack of pruning, foliage abounds and the plant accordingly becomes remiss in bearing fruit.²¹ This phenomenon invites analogy with the effects of

¹⁷ 2.2.2.

¹⁸ 2.1.1.

¹⁹ 2.1.1; 2.6.12; 2.6.13; 2.6.14 & 2.7.16.

²⁰ Columella, *De re rustica*, 4.11: 'Experience, the master of arts, has taught us to regulate the growth of first-year cuttings and not to allow a vine to run wild (*silvescere*) with a rank growth of useless foliage.' It is of interest that the same unusual word is employed by Ambrose: 'Ergo paradisus in principali nostro est, silvens plurimarum opinionum plantariis.' (*Epistola* 45, 7 (PL 16.1143)).

²¹ A fact known to any experienced gardener and also implied in Cicero's use of the word 'silvescere': 'Vitem ferro amputans coercet ars agricolarum, ne silvescat sarmentis et in omnes partes nimia fundatur.' (*De senectute*, 15). Cf. John 15.1-2.

deficient moral training, which of course is just what Augustine intends in his use of the metaphor implied in the verb "silvescere." Further, in this regard, it is noteworthy that just such a metaphor is to be found in the writings of Augustine's beloved Cicero.²²

In general then, it can be said that the process of deterioration of a field begins when it is removed from cultivation. This very word "cultivation" is significant, because for one thing, it gives the reader a clue as to one of the reasons why Augustine employs the metaphor of the uncultivated field in the second book of the *Confessions*. The analogy is valid even in English. As Augustine there stresses, his devoted parents had taken all kinds of pains to ensure that he became a "cultured" gentleman by their solicitude over his progress in his studies and their sacrifices to send him to the very best schools. Yet, at the same time, as Augustine well realised in retrospect, they seemed quite indifferent to his moral development. The result was that while he was becoming a "cultured" (or "cultivated") gentleman on the one hand, on the other hand the lack of moral training had resulted in an ethical wilderness in his personality. This jungle of indulgence contrasted sadly with the "cultivated" side of his character.²³

This inconsistency, hinging on the various meanings of "cultured" is equally valid in Latin, where the verb *colere* has as its primary meaning the act of cultivating a field. The past participle of *colere* is *cultum* from which is derived *cultura* denoting primarily the care of plants, and by analogy, the care of a personality, or some particular aspect of such a personality.²⁴ Accordingly, on the basis of these considerations and in view of the context of the second book, it seems to me that Warner has well rendered into English a certain passage in that book where Augustine complains about his parents' ambitions for him:

²² *De finibus* 4.14 & 5.14 where the analogy between vinetending and intellectual and moral education is brought out quite explicitly.

²³ Cf. 3.1.1: 'tamen foedus atque inhonestus, elegans et urbanus esse gestiebam abundant vanitate.' The contrast is also brought out in other places in the *Confessions*: 1.18.28-9 and 4.1.1, being notable occasions. It is noteworthy that the very same contrast between the public teachings of philosophers and their disgraceful private lives is brought out by Cicero in *Tusc. Disp.* 2.4-5, which even contains the example of the solecism (Cf. *Conf.* 1.18.29).

²⁴ Cf. Columella *De re rustica* 2.2: 'Neque est aliud colere quam resolvere et fermentare terram.' The extension of the analogy to the education of man is already implicit in the examples adduced from Cicero. 'Colere' is also used of many different fields of activities. Cicero uses it of arts and studies in *Ad familiares* 3.13, and it is particularly this use of the word which is relevant to present considerations, as the next citation in the text illustrates.

The only idea was that I should become 'cultured' (*disertus*) though this 'culture' really meant a lack (*desertus*) of cultivation from you (*a cultura tua*), God, the one true and good landlord and farmer of this field of yours (*agri tui*), my heart.²⁵

As has been noted, the first stage in the deterioration of a once cultivated field is that the plants, being no longer restrained and guided by pruning, therefore are free to "run wild." The next phase is the encroachment of the various forms of wild vegetation from the surrounding woods. This process would also seem to be implied in the verb "silvescere" which Augustine uses of his moral deterioration during the enforced idleness of his sixteenth year. Moral evil crept over his "cultured" soul like the brambles of the forest finding their way back into the neglected field. In this regard, it is interesting that in the seventh book of the *Confessions*, Augustine uses exactly this same kind of imagery in asking of the origins of moral evil: "Where, then, is evil? Where did it come from and how did it creep in (*inrepsit*) here? What is its root (*radix*) and seed (*semen*)?"²⁶

Next, regarding the various kinds of wild plants which would begin to take over the neglected field, the "scratchy" varieties are of particular interest to the *Confessions*, which contains many allusions to being scratched. Among the early intruders upon the neglected field would be such smaller varieties of "scratchy" plants as the thistle and the stinging nettle. It is significant here that the latter is mentioned some half dozen times in the Bible, usually in association with deserted habitations.²⁷ However, the nettle does not seem to be of specific relevance to the second book of the *Confessions*. The third book however, does contain an allusion very reminiscent of the itching rash which soon arises at the site where one has been scratched by a nettle. Accordingly, when describing how he fell in love soon after arriving in Carthage, Augustine recounts:

My soul was in poor health; it burst out into feverish spots (*ulcerosa*) which brought the wretched longing to be scratched (*scalpi*) by contact with the objects of sense.²⁸

²⁵ 2.3.5. Note the play upon words, in a typically Augustinian fashion, between 'disertus' and 'desertus'. The implication of 'desertus' here also makes interesting contrast with the 'ubera deserta' of 8.6.15 referring to the hermits of the deserts, thus rendered fertile in a spiritual sense.

²⁶ 7.5.7.

²⁷ Job 30.7, Proverbs 24.31, Isaiah 34.13, Hosea 9.6, Zephaniah 2.9.

²⁸ 3.1.1.

Other allusions to itching are to be found in the *Confessions*, but are of rather peripheral interest to the present topic.²⁹ Such however, is not the case with the subject of scratching and of being scratched. In fact, this becomes more relevant from the image of the barren field, which in the next stage of its degeneration (or "silvessence") would presumably become host to the larger varieties of thorned vegetation. The topic of being scratched therefore becomes as it were, even more painfully relevant. These larger thorned plants could not only scratch, but further, could pierce the skin painfully and draw blood.

Significantly enough, the second book of the *Confessions* also contains some interesting allusions to thorns. The first mention of them is just after Augustine first expresses regret that he had not been allowed to marry:

Then the waves of my youth might at last have spent themselves on the shore of marriage . . . for you shape even the offspring of our mortality and are able with a gentle hand to blunt the thorns (*ad temperamentum spinarum*) which were excluded from your paradise.³⁰

Noteworthy here is the association between the thorns and sexual concupiscence. Such a connection however, is not even implicitly made in the Bible concerning the exclusion of thorns from paradise, to which phenomenon Augustine made allusion in the cited passage above. In the biblical text (Genesis 3.17-18) the thorns are one of the many punishments which will afflict Adam and Eve (and their offspring), because of their disobedience. Thus God says to them:

Cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it will bring forth to you.

In the *Confessions* however, the sexual connotation is even more explicit in another reference to brambles in the course of the second book:

In this sixteenth year of my age when, because of our straitened circumstances, I had a period of leisure, living at home with my parents and not doing any schoolwork at all, the brambles of lust (*vepres libidinum*) grew up right over my head, and there was no hand to tear them out by the roots.³¹

²⁹ I.e. the scratching of theatrical spectacles (3.1.1), scratching the itching scab of lust (9.1.1. Cf. *Deuteronomy* 28.27) and the references to itching ears (1.10.16 and 4.8.13. Cf. 2 Timothy 4.).

³⁰ 2.2.3.

³¹ 2.3.6.

Here again, there would seem to be another biblical allusion, this time to the parable of the sower who went out to sow seeds.³² Augustine in the above cited passage, seems to see himself as one of the seeds which fell among the brambles. But once again, with respect to the biblical parable, the brambles signify not sexual concupiscence, but the love of the world in general.³³ Before pursuing further this strange connection of thorns with sexual concupiscence in Augustine's *Confessions*, one detail in the above passage which does merit discussion is the allusion to tearing the thorns out by the roots. It is noteworthy, for instance, that during the nine years that Augustine had spent as a Manichee (from nineteen to twenty-eight),³⁴ this idea of tearing out brambles would have been repugnant to him. Thus, as he himself points out in his treatise, *De haeresibus*, the Manichees even considered it a crime to root out thorns and thistles in clearing a piece of ground.³⁵ Short of removing the brambles by tearing them out of the ground, there is the alternative of cutting them back. It is perhaps significant that, again in the second book of the *Confessions*, the idea of cutting in regard to Augustine's burgeoning sexual powers comes from his mother:

She thought that if my desires could not be, as it were, cut off at the roots (*resecari ad vivum*), it would be unhealthy for the moment and dangerous for the future to restrain them within the bounds of the affections of marriage.³⁶

The tenth book of the *Confessions* does however contain an allusion to the removal of undesirable vegetation, but this time it is Augustine himself who performs the task: "In this enormous forest, so full of snares and dangers, many are the temptations which I have cut off (*praeciderim*) and thrust away (*dispulerim*) from my heart."³⁷

This passage evidently refers to temptations, but it would not be a justified conclusion to assume that here, as in the previous passages, Augustine has sexual temptations particularly in mind. Such is not borne out by the context of the cited passage, nor is it implied by the signification of thorns (outside of the second book) in the *Confessions* as a whole. Thus, in the fourth book, after recounting the enormous range of his ravenous readings in search of wisdom, Augustine sees in retrospect that all the knowledge he acquired was to no avail: "You

³² Matthew 13.3-20; Mark 4.3-9 and Luke 8.5-8. Cf. Jeremiah 4.3.

³³ Matthew 13.22; Mark 4.18-19 and Luke 8.14.

³⁴ 4.1.1.

³⁵ *Op. cit.* 46.

³⁶ 2.3.8.

³⁷ 10.35.56. Cf. 1.7.11, where, writing of childish ways, Augustine observes: 'nam extirpamus et eicimus ista crescentes.'

gave the order, and so it was done in me, that the 'earth should bring forth briars and thorns' to me."³⁸ Again in the tenth book, when trying to delve into the mysteries of memory, Augustine returns to the metaphor of the barren field to express the labour involved in producing fruits from his considerations:

For me, Lord, certainly this is hard labor, hard labor, inside myself, and I have become to myself a piece of difficult ground (*terra difficilis*), not to be worked over without much sweat.³⁹

The thirteenth book also contains allusions to thorns, but again without the association with sexual concupiscence of the second book. Thus, writing of how the accumulation of riches hinders the quest for moral perfection, Augustine writes: "Why are there then so many thorns (*spinæ*), if the earth is fruitful? Go root out those rough thickets (*extirpa silvosa demuta*) of avarice; 'sell what thou hast,' and be filled with fruit."⁴⁰ The allusion is to the rich young man of the Bible.⁴¹ Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give the money so obtained to the poor. His reaction of reluctant sadness is intimated further along in Augustine's text, when again using the thorn metaphor, he observes: "but that barren earth (*terra sterilis*) 'was grieved' and 'the thorns (*spinæ*) choked the word'."⁴² Too, implied, or explicitly present in all of these cited passages, is the idea of the barren field.

Turning next to the Bible, Augustine's great treasury of inspiration, thorns and briars are found to be featured on numerous occasions, some of which have already been noted. On other occasions, the barren field over-run with thorns and briars is a sign of the neglect and carelessness of the owner of the field.⁴³ In Isaiah however (where thorns and briars occur with impressive frequency), the condition is a sign of God's impending punishment of Israel.⁴⁴ Such cases however, symbolise divine punishment on a national or collective scale. However, in the case of Job, the application is on the individual and personal level, and therefore more akin to Augustine's usage in the *Confessions*. Thus, after examining his own righteousness in an attempt to understand why so great misfortunes have come upon him, Job ends the discourse as follows:

³⁸ 4.16.29. The quotation is from Genesis 4.18.

³⁹ 10.16.25.

⁴⁰ 13.19.24.

⁴¹ Luke 18.18-24 and Matthew 19.16-22.

⁴² 13.19.24. The quotes are from Luke 18.23 or Matthew 19.22.

⁴³ Proverbs 15.19; 22.5; 24.30-31 & Hosea 2.6.

⁴⁴ Isaiah 5.6; 7.23-5; 32.13; 34.13 and Hosea 9.6.

If my land has cried out against me, and its furrows have wept together;
 If I have eaten its yield without payment, and caused the death of its owners;
 Let thorns (*tribulus*) grow instead of wheat, and foul weeds (*spinae*) instead of barley.⁴⁵

Such biblical texts, both on the individual and on the collective levels, would seem to be an important source of Augustine's references to thorns and briars in the *Confessions*. However, as far as I have been able to ascertain, such texts do not of themselves warrant the strong association of thorns and briars with sexual lust, as found in the earlier chapters of the second book of the *Confessions*. With regard to this particular context, one can only speculate that the sexual sins alluded to there took place in the woods, where presumably the presence of thorns and briars would have been painfully in evidence, so to speak.

However, in a broader perspective, and in the *Confessions* as a whole, it would seem that thorns and briars are concerned not merely with sexual lust, but with the larger domain of the concupiscence of the senses in general. Thorns injure the flesh by scratching and piercing it and the resulting wounds can be the source of grievous infection. Likewise, in the moral order, the things of sense can have a similar effect upon the soul. By becoming attached to the things of this world, the soul therefore becomes wounded and suffers accordingly.⁴⁶

This idea of the soul's becoming torn and lacerated by attachment to the things of the present world finds notable expression in the fourth book of the *Confessions*. There, Augustine describes the sufferings he endured after the death of the friend whom he had loved so dearly. As a result, he rejects the soul's love of mortal things because "when it loses them, it is torn to pieces (*dilaniatur*)."⁴⁷ Again, in the same book, writing of the death of that friend and its effects upon him he confesses: "I was carrying about with me my soul all broken and bleeding (*conscissam et cruentam*) and not wanting to be carried by me."⁴⁸ Final-

⁴⁵ Job 31.38-40.

⁴⁶ Implied in many texts in the *Confessions*, but perhaps most explicitly stated in 3.1.1: 'Non bene valebat anima mea et ulcerosa proiciebat se foras, miserabiliter scalpi avida contactu sensibilium.' On the subject of the flesh and thorns, one is reminded of Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 *Corinthians* 12.7). However, for Augustine, the wording is 'stimulus carnis' which implies a wound indeed, but it is not seen as connected with thorns.

⁴⁷ 4.6.11.

⁴⁸ 4.7.12. The notion of the soul being torn and lacerated by the loss of a loved one as depicted here, reminds one of an association found in *Solomon* 2.2:

ly, he concludes of the love of transitory things: "these things go along their path toward non-existence, and they tear and wound (*conscindunt*) the soul with terrible longings."⁴⁹

In the perspective provided by the metaphor of the barren field, such evils would follow in the moral realm when the soul has lost its divine gardener. The thorns and brambles take over and there follow the scratchings and even bloody lacerations. For Augustine, it would seem that the location and source of these was that sixteenth year of his life which he spent in idleness and which is the principal subject of regret of the second book of the *Confessions*. The basic cause of these evils has already been noted in a passage from that book:

The only idea was that I should become 'cultured' though this 'culture' really meant a lack of cultivation from you, God, the one true and good landlord and farmer of this field of yours, my heart.⁵⁰

The importance of the metaphor of the barren field to Augustine is the converse of the importance which he attributed to the image of the cultivated and productive field. This, as it happens, is a metaphor which occurs with impressive frequency in his works. Even a preliminary investigation reveals some dozen occasions on which Augustine refers to the soul's need to "cultivate" God, or for the soul to be cultivated (like the soil) by God.⁵¹

One important source of this imagery is Augustine's beloved Paul, who speaks of the faithful as God's field:

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each shall receive his wages according to his labour. For we are fellow-workers for God. You are God's field.⁵²

As a lily among brambles (*in medio spinarum*)
so is my love among maidens.

Augustine expatiates upon this text on at least some half dozen occasions: *Epistola* 93 28 (9); *Enarratio in Psalmum* 99 8 & 12; *En. in Psalmum* 103 sermo 1, 11; *Sermo* 37 27 (17) and *De unitate ecclesiae* 35 (14).

⁴⁹ 4.10.15. One can perhaps be reminded by this text in the *Confessions*, of Gideon's act of scourging the elders of Succoth with thorns and briars (*Judges* 8.7 & 16).

⁵⁰ 2.3.5.

⁵¹ *Enarratio in Psalmum* (henceforth: *In Ps.*) 43.15; *In Ps.* 52. 8; *In Ps.* 55.17; *In Ps.* 104.40; *In Ps.* 143, sermo 11.6. With explicit mention of the faithful as God's soil to be cultivated: *In Ps.* 32.18; *Sermo* 47.30. With reference to God cultivating the faithful that they may be fruitful: *In Ps.* 145.11.

⁵² 1 Corinthians 3.7-9. Cf. Matthew 20.1-16.

The preachers of the Gospel are the workers in God's field of which the "earth" is the faithful. It is significant that the first part of the above extract is used by Augustine in his sermons on no less than eighteen times.⁵³ In general therefore, the whole analogy was very much in the eye of Augustine's mind. Again, considering the demonstrated importance of Paul to the *Confessions*,⁵⁴ it is no surprise to find that the same metaphor of the barren (or fertile) field is of some importance to that work.

Another aspect of the above passage from Paul is also of interest to a detail in the *Confessions*. When referring to the watering of the soil in the above text known to Augustine, the verb is *rigare*. It is noteworthy that the same verb is used in the *Confessions* also in regard to watering the ground:

You saved me . . . and brought me to the water of your grace, so that, when I was washed in this water, the rivers (*flumina*) that flowed from my mother's eyes, tears daily shed for me that watered the ground (*rigabat terram*) below her downcast looks, should be dried up.⁵⁵

This seemingly exaggerated allusion to Monica's tears even watering the ground would be a justifiable detail if Augustine had in mind the Pauline metaphor of watering God's field. As the events of the *Confessions* amply testify, Monica's tears helped render fertile once more, the field of Augustine's heart.

As a corollary from previous considerations, it could be concluded that since sin is so much associated in Augustine's imagery with wild vegetation of the barren field, that grace should therefore be associated with well-kept gardens.

Interestingly enough, such does indeed prove to be the case in the *Confessions*, where in a remarkable accord with the above hypothesis, the most memorable moments of grace are all associated with gardens.

⁵³ *Sermones*: 4 26 (25); 43 8 (6); 81 3; 104 4 (3); 145 6; 152 1; 153 1; 197 3; 224 3; 292 8; 376 3; *Enarrationes in Psalmos*: 21 (enarratio 2) 31; 36 (sermo 1) 2; 66 1; 87 13; 99 13; 113 (sermo 2) 12; 118 (sermo 32) 4.

⁵⁴ At a critical stage in his conversion, Augustine seized most greedily ('avidissime') upon the works of Paul in particular (7.21.27). Again, at the very climax of his conversion, it is through the reading of a text of Paul in obedience to a divine command that Augustine is converted (8.12.29). Finally, for a study devoted to this topic, the reader is referred to: M. Pellegrino, 'San Paolo nelle Confessioni di Sant'Agostino,' *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus* 1961 vol. 2 (Rome 1963) 503-512.

⁵⁵ 5.8.15. It is both striking and significant that this episode relating to Monica's weeping is recounted on at least one other occasion in the *Confessions* (3.11.19), where again 'rigare' is the verb used.

Yet, even prior to his conversion, it would seem that Augustine was drawn to gardens. Thus, when seeking consolation after the death of his friend, as recounted in the fourth book, he says of his heavy heart in that bereavement: "there was no rest for it anywhere—not in pleasant groves (*non in amoenis nemoribus*), not in games and singing, not in sweet-smelling gardens (*nec in suave olentibus locis*)."⁵⁶

If Augustine in his earlier life had been drawn to gardens in an attempt to soothe his grief, later too, when undergoing his most important spiritual experiences, he again finds himself involved with gardens. Thus, on two occasions in the eighth book, gardens form important backgrounds to spiritual conversions. The first of these (seemingly used to prepare the reader for Augustine's account of his own conversion) is recounted to Augustine and his friend Alypius by a certain Ponticianus. The story concerns two of his friends who were walking in the gardens (*in hortos*) near the walls of the city of Treves when they came upon a little house and in it found a book on the life of saint Antony.⁵⁷ They were deeply moved and converted on the spot by the reading of the simple story of that saint. Subsequently they were found by Ponticianus and another friend who had been walking "in a different part of the garden—*per alias horti partes deambulant*."⁵⁸ The two who had been converted, renounced all wordly ambition, remaining in the little cottage in the garden, while Ponticianus and his companion went back to their worldly occupations.

Later on in the eighth book, when the great climax of Augustine's much-examined conversion approaches, it is to a garden that he withdraws. This detail is repeated with insistence no less than three times in a short length of text: "there was a garden (*hortulus*) attached to our lodging . . . to this the tumult of my heart had driven me . . . so I withdrew *there*."⁵⁹ And it is in this same garden that Augustine is finally converted after he had thrown himself down on the ground and wept under a certain fig tree.⁶⁰

Finally, there is the famous "vision at Ostia" in the ninth book which has also been repeatedly subjected to scholarly examination.⁶¹

⁵⁶ 4.7.12.

⁵⁷ 8.6.15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ 8.8.19.

⁶⁰ 8.12.28. Cf. the excellent study of Vinzenz Buchheit, 'Augustinus unter dem Feigenbaum (zu Conf. VIII),' *Vigiliae Christianae* 22 (1968) 257-271.

⁶¹ Cf. the book of Paul Henry devoted to this topic: *La vision d'Ostie; sa place dans la vie et l'œuvre de saint Augustin*, Paris 1938. For other works devoted to the vision at Ostia, the reader is referred to p. 250 of *Fichier Augustinien* vol. I (Matières) Boston (Hall) 1972.

Augustine, with his mother and friends were travelling back to Africa after his conversion. They had gotten as far as Ostia and were resting after their journey and prior to the sea-voyage. One day, Augustine and his mother were quietly talking apart from all distractions and considering what the life of the saints in Heaven might be like. Suddenly they felt themselves transported in an ecstasy—being swept up even above the very heavens themselves, until they came to the place where ‘Thou feedest Israel.’⁶² It is significant that this intense spiritual experience is introduced by a detail which (yet again) related it quite definitely to a garden. Thus, Augustine writes of his mother and himself: “she and I were standing alone, leaning in a window which looked onto the garden (*hortus*) inside the house.”⁶³ So on yet another occasion in the *Confessions* a garden proves to be an important ingredient in the recounting of a profound religious experience.

As was intimated, there is most likely a strong personal basis in Augustine which explains his predilection for gardens and his strong aversion for wild vegetation. Also, as would be expected, his predilection for gardens has a strong biblical basis. In the first place there is the Garden of Eden from which Adam and Eve were expelled after disobeying God.⁶⁴ This event is contained in the book of Genesis, upon which Augustine wrote many commentaries. Again, in the case of Israel, the establishing of gardens is not only a sign of temporal prosperity, but also of divine benevolence:

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
And they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
And they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.⁶⁵

Actually, this is merely the converse of what has already been observed with regard to the many cases of thorns and briars in *Isaiah*. In the above citation, divine favour is manifested by the flourishing of fruitful gardens. In the examples from *Isaiah*, God’s wrath eventually produces fields of thorns and briars. The transformation from the former to the latter condition is described more than once in the Bible. Thus, one reads in *Amos*:

I smote you with blight and mildew;
I laid waste your gardens and your vineyards;

⁶² 9.10.24.

⁶³ 9.10.23.

⁶⁴ Genesis 3.23-24.

⁶⁵ Amos 9.14, Cf. *Isaiah* 51.3; *Jeremiah* 31.12; *Ezekiel* 36.33-6 & c..

Your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured;
Yet you did not return to me.⁶⁶

Finally, there is the most important source from Paul's metaphor of the faithful as God's field, as already observed. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Augustine compares the Church with its many different vocations in life to God's garden: "the garden of the Lord contains not only the roses of the martyrs, but also the lillies of the virgins, the ivy of married people and the violets of widows."⁶⁷ Such a picture is, generally speaking, very much compatible with the rôle of gardens in Augustine's *Confessions*, as can be appreciated from the previous considerations.

There remains one aspect of the barren field metaphor in the *Confessions* which would call for comment. This is the protracted emphasis upon fruitfulness in the thirteenth and last book of the work. Indeed, in the very first chapter of this book, Augustine addresses God using the idea of the barren field: "you are not like land which requires cultivation if it is not to be barren (*incultus*); it is not in that way that you need my worship."⁶⁸ Again, from the seventeenth chapter onwards are to be found some two dozen references to fruitfulness, almost exclusively in the metaphorical sense of the word. Ostensibly Augustine is there commenting upon various passages in the first chapter of Genesis. His exegesis is however, principally allegorical in character. Thus, for instance, when explaining the meaning of the various fruits of the earth in Genesis 1.29, he observes:

Now we have said that these fruits of the earth mean, in an allegorical way, the works of mercy which are produced for the necessities of this life by the fruitful earth.⁶⁹

The emphasis upon the fruitful earth which pervades this section of the *Confessions* stands in stark contrast to the barren field focused upon in the second book. Allegorically of course, the fruitful earth symbolises the faithful of the Church, as has been seen. Yet it can also be argued that Augustine had very much in mind his own particular case in this regard. From the barren field of the second book, he has, through the events of his life (outlined in the intervening books), been converted into the fruitful earth of the thirteenth and concluding book.

In this regard, it is arguable that in the thirteenth and last book of the *Confessions* Augustine's considerations are very much inspired by

⁶⁶ Amos 4.9.

⁶⁷ *Sermon* 304 2 (2).

⁶⁸ 13.1.1.

⁶⁹ 13.25.38.

gratitude for his return to the faith of his childhood, a belief which he had deserted when the wild thorny passions of his sixteenth year overran his soul. This gratitude is in the very opening sentences of the concluding book, beginning as follows: "I call upon you, my God, my mercy, who made me and did not forget me when I had forgotten you." Continuing with this theme of gratitude, the very last allusion to the barren field in the *Confessions* makes for interesting examination. This illusion is found towards the end of the thirteenth and final book, in the twenty-sixth chapter. Overtly, Augustine is referring to Paul's joy over the Philippians' return to the good works for which they were once famous.⁷⁰ Covertly, the allusion can be seen as being autobiographical in intent, for as Augustine says of Paul's joy: "he now rejoices because they have returned to those good works and he is glad that they have flourished again, as when a field becomes fertile once more (*tamquam revivescente fertilitate agri*)."⁷¹

In view of the demonstrated relevance of the barren field metaphor to Augustine's recount of his own conversion, the above introduction of Paul's joy and the image of the reclaimed field would seem to be of personal relevance to Augustine himself. The same too can be said of the prolonged emphasis upon fruitfulness in the thirteenth and closing book of the *Confessions*. However, whatever the future promised, it would seem that a profound realisation of the defectibility of human nature prevented Augustine from emphasizing the applicability of the reclaimed field to his own particular case. In the words of his favourite Apostle: "therefore let one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."⁷² Nevertheless, coming as it does at the end of the story of his own conversion, one can see the pre-occupation with fruitfulness as an ardent hope and prayer that he would indeed persevere in that condition until the end of his life, so that as the concluding words of the *Confessions* express it: *sic accipitur, sic invenietur, sic aperietur*. As the later events of his life show, this prayer was indeed granted him.

Leo Charles Ferrari
St. Thomas University and
The University of New Brunswick
Fredericton, N. B., Canada

⁷⁰ Philippians 4.15-18.

⁷¹ 13.26.40.

⁷² I Corinthians 10.12.