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Black Sin: Confessions of a Melancholic

Abstract

Challenging Freud's contention that the origin of religion is the need for a protective Father – rather than an oceanic feeling of eternity – Augustine's *Confessions* (as I read it) indicates that such an oceanic experience generated the concept of original sin, in order to justify a theological procedure for returning to that ecstatic experience, thereby laying the foundation for Christianity. Kristeva's theory of melancholia facilitates our realization that Christianity springs from a wish for maternal fulfillment, a propensity to cling to the plenitude that occupies the void of *das Ding*. Augustine's melancholic subjectivity as it operates in his formation of Christianity allows us to grasp the psychosexual underpinnings of the concept of original sin, with its ironic capacity to compel belief in a purity of spiritual oneness. Through his analysis of *City of God* and *Against Julian* in *Confessions of the Flesh*, Michel Foucault not only underscores Augustine's obsession with sex but also suggests that the consumption of the forbidden fruit might "be understood in a sexual way." The Christian son/daughter therefore, ideally, fuses with the mother-Church to experience an oceanic state of completeness prior to sexual differentiation, an all-embracing fullness that enables a (Monica-inspired) victory – through evasion – over the Law of the Father, the disease of desire, and its concomitant lack. Although Augustine held psychoanalytic theory within his perceptual and conceptual grasp, he veers off personally as he imbibes mystical milk. Yet in doing so, he instigated two thousand years of Christianity: thanks to Augustine, Imaginary maternal protection can be enjoyed through the *jouissance* of an oceanic feeling, celebrated in dozens of Madonna del Latte paintings.

Keywords

melancholia, the oceanic feeling, the disease of desire, original sin, jouissance

I

At the start of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud famously confesses that he has not experienced the "oceanic," what his friend describes as "a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded" (Freud 2010, 24). The topic was raised since it was hypothesized that this feeling lay at the origin of religion. Freud jettisons his friend's notion that the oceanic feeling is the wellspring of religion, and also resists the idea that it is "primary" (Freud 2010, 25). He regards it, instead, as "strange," as failing to fit in "with the fabric of our psychology" (Freud 2010, 26) – to such a point (however) that he feels compelled to discover a psychoanalytic explanation for such an anomalous feeling.

Although Freud acknowledges a porous internal boundary between the ego and the id, he thinks that in general the ego "maintain[s] clear and sharp lines of demarcation" (Freud 2010, 26) from the external world, with a few exceptions. Love, for example, tends to melt the boundary between the beloved and the ego of the lover; some pathologies, too, threaten the border between ego and world.

Such considerations coax Freud to grant that the ego takes time to build its walls, since infants hardly discern a difference between their egos and the external world; an infant "at the breast" must learn painstakingly to do so. Eventually, an infant's only recourse is to scream in order to have what "he desires most of all, his mother's breast" (Freud 2010, 27). The pleasure principle yields to, or must negotiate with, the reality principle as the baby is forced to distinguish what is internal (the ego) from what is external (the outer world). Nonetheless, Freud now posits, the oceanic feeling may just prevail and thus be traced back to the early experience of oneness with the breast.

Still, the oceanic feeling, were it to linger, has nothing to do with the origin of religion, since, Freud claims, the origin of religion may be located in the infant's feeling of helplessness; it is a "longing for the father" that is "aroused by" a sense of vulnerability (Freud 2010, 35). And not only is a protective Father a way of obtaining a shield against suffering, but he also provides a path to happiness, "through a delusional remoulding of reality" (Freud 2010, 51).

And yet, in another swerve, religion appears to be situated on the side of the reality (rather than the pleasure) principle, since it demands restrictions. Ultimately, religion calls for submission. To receive its gifts, one must pay the price of a life of obedience. The idea that an

oceanic feeling is the cradle of religion might now seem to grant more satisfaction and so to meet one's needs even better.

II

If we turn to the last patristic and first medieval philosopher of Western Christianity, an "essentially conservative genius who recast the patristic tradition into the new pattern by which European Christianity would be largely shaped" (Outler 1913), we can, in fact, understand why the oceanic feeling just might be the genesis of at least one dominant religion, an emotional source that required paradoxically the magnification of sexual sin as a tremendous threat to purity. Augustine's *Confessions* reveals that an oceanic sense of eternity generated the concept of original sin in order to justify a theological procedure for returning to that ecstatic experience, tied precisely to that gratifying maternal breast that Freud locates as its source.

By defining Paradise as a place devoid of desire, designating lust anathema, and thrusting original sin on all of humanity, Augustine is able to rationalize not only reunion with his mother but also an oceanic conception of required Christian purity and oneness, epitomized by his climactic mystical experience in Ostia with his mother. Observing a garden outside a window of the cottage in which they were staying, Monica and Augustine converse – "in the presence of Truth." Together they soar, "higher yet by an inner musing, speaking and marveling at [God's] works," to the point that they exceed their own minds to "climb as high as that region of unfailing plenty where […] life is that Wisdom by whom all things are made." By encountering such Wisdom, conjoined, they enter eternal time. Descending from the heights of this euphoric experience, they leave "the first fruits of the Spirit bound to that ecstasy" (Augustine 2002, 163). Augustine enjoys the *ultimate* experience of the oceanic feeling, for not only does he have a sense of eternity, but he also immerses himself in the oceanic *with* his madly devoted, beloved mother – the very source of that feeling, according to Freud.

My aim is not simply to psychoanalyze Saint Augustine. His psychic life needs to be examined since *Augustine* made his case for various premises of Christianity on the basis of his personal rapport with sin and salvation. Ten of the thirteen books of the *Confessions* zero in on Augustine's life story, its exterior and interior. He quite deliberately

folds into his *Confessions* a detailed account of his mother's obsession with him and its both oppressive and enriching, but in any case powerful, impact. As Peter Brown clarifies in *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, "[w]hat Augustine remembered in the *Confessions* was his inner life; and this inner life is dominated by one figure – his mother, Monica" (Brown 1967, 17).

Monica's particular preoccupation with her son's sexuality, which over time was tantamount, for both of them, to corruption, inspired Augustine primarily in his development of the concept of original sin. A sexually robust Augustine is persuaded that sin lay "in his members" (Augustine 2002, 135). It was maternally pounded into him that his lust was poison – to the point that it became part of the proof that Augustine and all humankind bear the stigma of the initial sin committed in the Garden of Eden – a pristine realm devoid of lust/corruption. On his deathbed in 430, plagued by a fatal fever, Augustine was still suffering from anxiety over carnal desire. One of his sermons at this critical time urged his congregation "'to reach into the farthest corner'" of their hearts, to examine it carefully, to detect "'whether [they] are not moved by some physical desires, and are not caught in some law of the senses'" (Brown 1967, 436).

Augustine's lifelong phobic obsession with sex calls up Kristeva's psychoanalytic insight that "[d]epressed persons do not defend themselves against death but against the anguish prompted by the erotic object. Depressed persons cannot endure Eros, they prefer to be with the Thing up to the limit of negative narcissism" (Kristeva 1989, 20). Augustine thought that, even between a married couple wishing to beget a child, sex is corrupt, an evil that there was simply no way to bypass. Moreover, such human sinfulness becomes a sexually transmissible disease, as Steven Greenblatt cleverly conceives it, since Augustine also held the belief that the sinfulness of sex transfers sexual corruption from one generation to the next. In *Against Julian*, Augustine wages "war" against the "vital fire" that is the origin of concupiscence, "which not only does not obey at the decision of soul, which is the true life of the flesh, but for the most part rises up against the soul's decision in *disorderly and ugly movements*" (Augustine 1957, 130; emphasis added). Taking up this issue in *Confessions of the Flesh*, where Michel Foucault points to Augustine as establishing "the sexual ethic of Western Christianity" (Foucault 2021, 197), Foucault does not mince words: Augustine's emphasis is on Adam's "[v]isible

and unpredictable erection" (Foucault 2021, 265). Foucault targets Augustine as the theologian who manages "to place the sexual act at the center of the economy of the original sin and its consequences," insofar as "[o]ur being the products of our forebears' sex links us, back down through time, to the transgression of the first among them" (Foucault 2021, 273).[1]

In *The City of God*, the spiritual side of Augustine goes on a rampage. He begins Book XIV, section 16, by describing "the lust that arouses the lewd parts of the body" not only insofar as it takes over "the whole body externally but also [by] seiz[ing] the person inwardly." Such lust has the capacity to move "the whole man by combining and intermingling the emotion of the mind with the craving of the flesh," producing "a pleasure greater than any other bodily pleasure" – whose climax obliterates "almost all mental alertness and cognitive vigilance" (Augustine 2018, 303). And if sex is such poison, then one's escape or protection is to return to the mother who provides a feeling of purity and union with the universe, serving as a fortress of plenitude, precluding lack/desire.

Augustine's supposedly objective attempts to prove that sex emanates from original sin convey ironically that another explanation is warranted, exposing through their frailty that subjectivity is in full force. Begging the question, Augustine reminds his congregation of Adam and Eve's shame over being naked, prompting them to cover their genitals with fig-leaves. Original sin is transmitted from this very corporeal place. Quoting one of Augustine's sermons, Brown writes: "That was enough for Augustine: '*Ecce unde.* That's the place! That's the place from which the first sin is passed on'" (Brown 1967, 390–91). Augustine reinforces his "proof" by "appealing to his congregation's sense of shame at night-emissions" (Brown 1967, 391). Defending his

[1] Except for the Virgin Mary, no woman conceives outside of the law of sin. Even wedded couples who engage in sexual relations in the mildest, most modest way, solely to reproduce, do not evade such evil. Augustine gets into meticulous detail on this matter. Foucault, in *Confessions of the Flesh*, microscopically examines the possibility, according to Augustine, of married couples undergoing the sexual act in a way that tries to avoid concupiscence, attempting, we might say, to mimic how Adam and Eve *may* have done it. At one point Foucault even entertains the view that it was semen, rather than the physical act itself, that was impure. And yet, even if the sexual act were not "bad in itself," that did not mean it could be without limit (Foucault 2021, 250). It must be temperate, avoiding all untrammeled, imaginative excess. Two particular sexual activities that fail to avoid excess and turn the act into sick sin are even spelled out: "things done and pleasures taken that are not simply those required by the 'natural' sexual act, but which accompany it or prepare it" (so, at least, no foreplay or inventiveness) and "acts contrary to nature, which are exemplified by the use of a part of the wife's body that is not meant for that" (so no anal sex, for sure) (Foucault 2021, 251). The latter was especially forbidden.

targetting of sexuality in a letter to Count Valerius, Augustine refers to certain "facts": the "shame surrounding intercourse, the frequent condemnation of passion in ancient authors, even the manner in which men cover their genitals when alone" (Brown 1967, 392). In arguing with Augustine on original sin, Julian of Eclanum found it "disgusting" as well as "blasphemous" that Augustine's view fastened, "'as its most conclusive proof, on the common decency by which we cover our genitals" (Brown 1967, 390). But that the genitals have a mind of their own is central to Augustine's theology: "of all the appetites, the only one that seemed to Augustine to clash inevitably and permanently with reason," as Brown writes, "was sexual desire" (Brown 1967, 391).

Monica was adamant in her role as an obstacle to concupiscence, to the extremity of casting out Augustine's beloved mistress of fifteen years, to whom he was profoundly attached and who was the mother of his son. Augustine describes his mother's excruciating intervention: "My mistress was torn from my side [...] and my heart which clung to her was torn and wounded till it bled." At this point Augustine confesses that he is a "slave of lust" whose soul is "diseased" (Augustine 2002, 102). Given that God had built his temple and "the foundation of [His] holy habitation" in his "mother's breast" (Augustine 2002, 23), return to that breast was the sole path to spiritual health. Stigmatizing desire, the notion of original sin (then) served to justify, and catapult one back to, a pre-Oedipal spirituality of Imaginary *jouissance*.

In fact, probably the main thing readers who perused the *Confessions* long ago still recall is centered on a mother's breast. To illustrate that sin plagues us from our first days on earth, Augustine presents a scene of an envious baby who, though nonverbal, is "livid as it watched another infant at the breast" (Augustine 2002, 7). Surely Augustine could have proposed all sorts of instances of early corruption, but he typically gravitates toward the maternal breast. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* Jacques Lacan conceives the scene as summing up Augustine's "entire fate" (Lacan 1981, 116). I take Lacan to be implying that Augustine was forever trying to suckle at that breast – an implication that captures my sense of Augustine's dominant psychic impulse. Lacan suggests that what the older child envies is "the image of a completeness closed upon itself" (Lacan 1981, 116). Such compeleteness/satisfaction/*jouissance,* filling up the lack inherent in desire, is precisely what Augustine craved and, moreover, predicated Christianity on.

III

As I have indicated, the psychic urge to evade emptiness or lack as a way of remaining faithful to the maternal object points to melancholia. Early in *Black Sun*, in fact, Kristeva aligns the Church and melancholia in commenting that it is "the matriarchal weight of Christian orthodoxy" that "admits […] to a complicity with the grieving person when it does not beckon him or her into *delectatio morosa*" (Kristeva, 1989, 6). Medieval monks, Kristeva points out, promoted "sadness: as mystical ascesis […] it became essential as a means toward paradoxical knowledge of divine truth and constituted the major touchstone for faith" (Kristeva 1989, 8). What is more, the kind of ambivalence toward the maternal object that Kristeva claims characterizes the melancholic precisely pertains to Augustine. Melancholics both love and hate the maternal object. Loving it, they internalize it, desperately to cling to it. But hating it, they turn against themselves, since the "complaint against oneself would therefore be a complaint against" the mother (Kristeva 1989, 11). At a young age, Augustine confesses, "I abhor myself" (Augustine 2002, 138), knowing himself as "an evil thing" (Augustine 2002, 140). Kristeva's diagnosis fits Augustine snugly. She writes, "identification with the loved-hated other, through incorporation-introjection-projection, leads me to imbed in myself its sublime component, which becomes my necessary, tyrannical judge" (Kristeva 1989, 11).

Identification with the father enables the subject to accept the loss of the Thing, as it "initiates a compensation for the Thing" (Kristeva 1989, 13). But where such an identification is tenuous, as in the case of Augustine, the melancholy Thing is empowered and "interrupts desiring metonymy, just as it prevents working out the loss within the psyche" (Kristeva 1989, 14). (Think here of Monica's actual splitting up of Augustine's relation of metonymic desire with his mistress.) Augustine himself testifies that his father "did not overcome the influence of [his] mother's piety" (Augustine 2002, 11). Patricius (Augustine's father) was not only a pagan who was unable to compete with Monica for his son's attention but also died when Augustine was a teenager. Taking advantage of such paternal frailties, Augustine's mother "set about deliberately and systematically," as Stephen Greenblatt puts it in *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve,* "to drive a wedge between son and father" (Greenblatt 2017, 84), whereas, from a Kristevan viewpoint, the father ideally places a wedge between mother and child.

In an act of deceitful abandonment manifesting the negative side of his ambivalence, Augustine flees from his mother in Carthage, slipping away in the night on a ship as she awaits his return so that she may accompany him to Rome. Unstoppable, however, she later shows up in Milan, moves into his household, and paves the way for his crucial relationship with Ambrose. Monica's unexpected, unsolicited yet acquiesced-to visit further results in the relinquishment of Augustine's prestigious professorship in Milan, his move back into the country in North Africa for the sake of founding a community dedicated to God, and his being called to the priesthood as well as eventually rising to the position of Bishop of Hippo.

Such is the fulfillment of *Monica's*, not Augustine's, literal dream. Augustine relates one of Monica's dreams (rather than one of his own) in which "a bright youth" consoles her as she laments the "doom" of her son's soul, by urging her "to see that where [she is], there [Augustine] will be" (Augustine 2002, 44).[2] Augustine regards his later experience of "full certainty" about conversion and baptism as completion of the "rule of faith" that God had revealed to his mother long ago in "her dream about [him]" (Augustine 2002, 147). Mother and son are so excruciatingly close that he seems to share her unconscious. Augustine, to borrow from Kristeva's theoretical discourse on melancholia, "becomes the bearer of a jouissance fused with the archaic Thing, perceived not as a significant object but as the self's borderline element" (Kristeva 1989, 15). In other words, he reverts to being the babe at his mother's breast, where the line between them dissolves in a victory over lack/desire/corruption, in effect erasing original sin. The love of his life, as he was the love of hers, Monica instills in Augustine an antipathy to bodily desire that, I am suggesting, took the theological form of original sin – which in turn necessitated the grace of purity to overcome the obstacle (corruption) to a non-lacking, totally satisfying oceanic Kingdom at the end of time.

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva makes the unforgettable, stark pronouncement that "the loss of the mother is […] the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is our vital necessity" (Kristeva 1989, 27). Melancholics, however, disavow the negation of the maternal object, cancelling it out and collapsing "back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose,

[2] This expression from the dream strangely echoes Freud's famous line "where id was, there ego shall be."

to which they remain painfully riveted" (Kristeva 1989, 44).[3] During Monica's life Augustine was clearly unable to unglue himself from her; his very love for God became his way to avoid the loss of those he loved – Augustine tells God that "he alone loses none dear to him, if all are dear in Him who cannot be lost" (Augustine 2002, 54). But, upon Monica's literal death, which occurred a mere few days after the ecstatic spiritual event they shared in Ostia, Augustine was able to find his mother again in language – which, theoretically, commences with the negation of loss. The speaking being in a sense says, "'I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother,'" but "'no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her (that is the negation), I can recover her in language'" (Kristeva, 1989, 43).

This is a common process of mourning: upon psychically losing the mother and enacting negation, the subject may "retrieve her as sign, image, word" (Kristeva, 1989, 63). Kristeva's *Black Sun* mainly comprises examples of prominent artists – Holbein, Nerval, Dostoyevsky, and Duras – who undergo such negation, or at least struggle with it, through their various forms of art. Intellectuals, Kristeva also notes, as they work through a full psychic inhabitation of the maternal object by way of an articulation of it, are "capable of dazzling, albeit abstract, constructions" (Kristeva 1989, 64). What I wish to underscore about Augustine's transformation of the mother into signs is that, after her death in 387AD, he shifted from melancholia to what I discern as an ongoing or incomplete hyper-prolific, precarious mourning, which generated the dominant theological concepts and foundation of Christianity. During the forty-four years between Augustine's conversion in Milan in 386AD to his death in Hippo in 430AD, he produced an explosion of books, sermons, and letters that total fourteen volumes, the *Confessions* being composed just after Monica's death, in 397–98 – all set in motion as well as shaped conceptually by his relation to Monica.

That is, when Kristeva posits that the subject who negates the maternal object rediscovers her in representation, she does not expect the actual image of the mother to pop up. There is a curious literalness

[3] *Das Ding* is a tricky, paradoxical psychoanalytic concept, defined in Lacan as a kind of "object" of amassed primal *jouissance* that nevertheless accords with absence, a fullness that is simultaneously empty. It seems to be associated more closely in Kristeva with the mother, although Lacan too links *das Ding* with the initial Other or mOther, in locating her within *das Ding*.

in Augustine's transformation of his maternal attachment to the theological sign system into which he converts her – reinforcing my sense of the precariousness of Augustine's mourning. Mourning here seems to remain engulfed by melancholia, as Augustine carries the image of Monica into his negation. In the *Confessions*, he conceives the Church as "our spiritual mother" (Augustine 2002, 104). Peter Brown in his biography points to the stunning expansion of this conception: "The imagination of African Christians of the time of Augustine had become riveted on the idea of the Church" as "the '*strong woman*'." Augustine preached that it would not be "'decent [...] to speak of any other woman.'" The Catholic Church was "The Mother: 'One Mother, prolific with offspring: of her we are born, by her milk we are nourished, by her spirit we are made alive'" (Brown 1967, 207; emphasis in original).

And it was not as though the Motherly Church was paired with a Fatherly God. Augustine does not hesitate to liken his relationship to God also "to that of a baby to its mother's breast, utterly dependent, [...] the only source of life" (Brown 1967, 352). An enormous lactating breast, God too provides milk. Augustine tells the Lord that he drinks in the name of his "Saviour thy Son" with his "mother's milk" (Augustine 2002, 35). He is suckled on God's "milk and feeding on thee" (Augustine 2002, 47). He imagines that "the Word became flesh" so that God's wisdom, by which He created all things, "might become milk for our infancy" (Augustine 2002, 122). And, in a strange, psychoanalytically loaded description, Augustine, after acknowledging the Incarnation, writes that "thundering," Christ "called us to return to him into that secret place from which he came forth to us – coming first into the virginal womb, where the human creature, our mortal flesh, was joined to him that it might not be forever mortal" (Augustine 2002, 57).

IV

Given Augustine's apprehension of an Imaginary moment in the scene of the two babes vying for the mother's breast, his sense of a buried realm within his self that estranges him from himself, as well as his agonizing experience of an interminable trauma of separation from the maternal object, Augustine prefigures Kristevan psychoanalytic theory. And in so doing he passionately generates and

embraces Christianity (founding it on his oceanic experience with Monica) and thereby conflicts with Freud, who regards the need for a protective Fatherly God as the inception of religion.

Augustine is of course by no means alone in his wish to find solace in an Imaginary oceanic realm, wherein he suckles his God, as a way to access an Imaginary *jouissance*. After all, he instigated the triumphant form of two thousand years of Catholicism. It is thanks to Augustine that Imaginary maternal protection, even from a punitive God-the-Father who reacts to disobedience with expulsion from the Garden, can be enjoyed – a fantasy attested as well as sustained by dozens of artists in the form of the Madonna del Latte. I conclude with a single version – Leonardo's – since it is one of the most telling, insofar as baby Jesus conveys that you too can reap the Imaginary *jouissance* of such an oceanic feeling.

Fig. 1: da Vinci, L. (1490), *Madonna Litta*. [Tempera on canvas.] Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Permission: Art Resource, NYC

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