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Augustine and the silence of the sirens

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Augustine and the Silence of the Sirens

Burcht Pranger / University of Amsterdam

It is a truism to state that there are as many Augustines as there are interpreters or, in any case, schools of interpretation.¹ His work could be called an *opera aperta*, albeit in quite a different sense from the way this expression was meant by its inventor, Umberto Eco.² Eco's use of this phrase mainly concerned modernist works, such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, whose very structure allows the reader to find his way in the labyrinth of the artwork without ever arriving at—or, for that matter, departing from—one single, fixed level of meaning. The metaphor of the *opera aperta* opened up a peculiar combination of structure and randomness, the latter made even more mysterious by modernism's emphasis on austerity of form. While it cannot be denied that for Joyce the fact that every line and every word were meticulously planned and put in their proper place was the precondition for the emergence of riddles and clues, thus widening up the scope of language and meaning, for Augustine things seem to be quite different inasmuch as the flow and width of his discourse is in place right from the beginning. In his case, randomness seems to be part of the structure of the discourse itself, to the extent of beguiling Henri-Irénée Marrou—still the most prominent historian of Augustinian rhetoric—into accusing Augustine of a lack of rhetorical skills: "Saint Augustin compose mal."³ Fortunately, Marrou retracted this accusation in a later edition of his book:

I took for incapacity or indifference what was in fact conscious discretion, calculated flexibility, expressive deformation, brought about by adroit maneuvering. I took for barbarism or decadence what was in fact the supreme sophistication of an art that was completely in control of its own techniques and in search of subtle effects. To blame the rhetorician Augustine for "not knowing

¹ In this article, I summarize and elaborate on the argument made in my *Eternity's Ennui: Temporality, Perseverance, and Voice in Augustine and Western Literature*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 190 (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

² Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962).

³ Henri-Irénée Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, 4th ed. (Paris: Boccard, 1958), 61.

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how to compose" is like saying that Braque or Picasso were not able to draw a guitar in perspective. As far as they are concerned, they knew those laws as well as we do. For us, however, those laws no longer have the same flavor and wealth of meaning as they had for the contemporaries of Mantegna. Blasé as our nerves have become, they ask for more unexpected effects, newer combinations less reminiscent of the School of Fine Arts.⁴

One wonders whether this new appreciation of Augustine's style, being part of a *retractatio*, should have called for a revision on Marrou's part of Augustine's rhetoric at large. Yet such a revision could hardly have been expected from a scholar whose book on the subject had already been so utterly groundbreaking. At the same time, the seminal importance of Marrou's book may have gotten in the way of his drawing the consequences of his brief reconsideration of Augustine's style and searching not only for the rhetorical structure in its external guise but also for a more accurate assessment of the symbiosis of thought and form through an in-depth analysis of Augustine's work. Meanwhile, compartmentalized studies of Augustine have marched on without bothering too much about the rhetorical parameters, both formal and material, that might precondition any historical, philosophical, or theological approach. To consider just one example, we see that in his book *Was ist Zeit?* the German philosopher Kurt Flasch takes to task all those who attempt to read Augustine's *Confessions* as a document concerned with the historicity and existential nature of the human condition. Flasch aims his biting criticism at "Christian spiritualists, personalists, existentialists, semi-Bergsonians" and, more generally, "Proust-oriented meditators on inner-temporal experience."⁵ The presumed subjectivity lending the *Confessions* its individual and psychological flavor is wiped out by Flasch, so to speak, since, he argues, it is anchored in the "poor" notion of *animus* rather than in an individual *anima*. In Flasch's view, it is the "impersonal" *animus* that, "in activating the dimensions of temporality, is capable of holding together parts of a poem, while being clearly incapable of guaranteeing a sustained human identity, that being the privilege of the divine *Logos* as mediator between the one and the many."⁶ In this way, man can be saved from fragmentation in time, albeit fully so only in the afterlife—all the more reason to leave temporality behind and strive for eternity. As for Flasch, that is all there is to the *Confessions*, which implies that there is no reason at all "to put man in the center of the universe"; time should not be seen as something "subjective and

⁴ *Ibid.*, 665–66; my translation (unless noted otherwise, all translations are my own).

⁵ Kurt Flasch, *Was ist Zeit? Augustinus von Hippo: Das XI Buch der Confessiones; Historisch-Philosophische Studie—Text-Übersetzung-Kommentar* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1993), 222.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

internalized."⁷ In line with the general view of ancient philosophy, time remains primarily a cosmic, "objective" phenomenon, in the context of which *animus* functions not as a subjective constitutive principle of time but, rather, as the entity to which it is at once subjected and on which it operates. On the one hand, Flasch's stance can be called indicative of the compartmentalized approach of historians of ancient philosophy who, often not without a touch of condescension, tend to ignore the literary and religious dimensions of *Confessions*—and of Augustine's work at large. On the other hand, it would be unwise merely to counter Flasch's view with the argument that Augustine's *Confessions* is a personal, subjective, and thoroughly religious document, thus opposing one paradigm with another—which more often than not comes down to simply ignoring the previous one. Why would it not be possible to rise above the aporias of the paradigmatic confusion and accept, for instance, Flasch's elimination of subjectivity and existentialism while honoring the basically rhetorical nature of Augustine's work and thought? Proceeding this way would demand the establishment of a new poetics in reading *Confessions*; a poetics that would move within the parameters imposed by *Confessions* itself. Saying this, I could be accused of claiming to know exactly what those parameters look like. I don't. All I know is that what we have before us is a document whose language moves and seduces and, accordingly, cannot accommodate static characterizations of any kind.

This being so, the first question to be raised is whether we can pinpoint those mechanisms that keep Augustine's discourse moving, destroying in the process of reading any restful position for the reader and interpreter. In other words, what do the poetical principles look like that are responsible for the Augustinian pulse? Now, it would cause little surprise if I were to contend that the subsequent pairs eternity/time and memory/oblivion can be considered foundational notions for Augustine's thought. As for the first pair, eternity/time, that is precisely what in Flasch's view *Confessions* is about regardless of the literary and religious shape of the work (which he does not bother to take into account). Things would become a bit more complicated, however, if I were to add that memory/oblivion and eternity/time are also to be seen as constituting the poetical structure of *Confessions* in its entirety. This would, by implication, mean that also the notion of *confessio* itself intrinsically contains and governs the process of temporal remembrance—so intrinsically, in fact, that at no moment can the one, *confessio*, be detached from the other, temporal remembrance and oblivion. All of them coalesce in an ongoing rhetorical

⁷ Ibid., 224, 220.

performance as in an *unendliche Melodie*. As a matter of course, desire and gift are part and parcel of this complex; primordially so, one would be tempted to say, were it not for the fact that we are at once confronted here with a major hurdle in this entire complex, namely, that Augustine's notion of temporality rules out any sequential order and, consequently, prevents one from calling anything—gift no less than desire—primordial. Let us, then, briefly recall Augustine's concept of time as developed in *Confessions*. Central to that concept is the notion that time is present time that "passes in a point": "And who would deny that the present time lacks extension because it passes in a point? But yet the attention lasts through which what will be present moves toward absence. That is why future time, which does not exist, is not long. A long future, rather, is a long expectation of the future; nor is past time, which does not exist, long. Rather, a long past is a long remembrance of the past."⁸

So this much is clear: each and every aspect of time, whether future, present, or past, is inextricably intertwined with a present that, in its turn, is linked to focus and attention. As a result, time seems to operate in quite a vertical manner. How, then, can this vertical status of time be squared with more "horizontal" notions that underlie its verticality such as the *distentio animi*, the spreading out of the human mind in the *regio dissimilitudinis*? This very notion of *distentio animi*, which by a number of scholars is interpreted as Augustine's definition of time, suggests that the narrowness of time can be broadened up, ostensibly furnished with extension because it is in the mind that we are able to measure time. In fact, the *distentio animi* does not fare any better than time that "passes in a point," since it is no more capable of freeing itself from the overarching presence of the present, whose pressure in the extension of expectation and remembrance is felt at all times. Does not time in this guise of an extensionless present look very much like eternity? No, it does not, since the question of extension cannot be part of eternity's seamless nature and presence. On the other hand, the present can be seen as eternity's emissary, telling the mind distending itself in expectation and remembrance that the one and only object worth expecting and remembering is—and has been—always there, given, not to be acquired. That gift, to be bestowed on the confessing mind, also includes desire as, indeed, the happy life itself—or as its being refused.

⁸ Augustine, *Confessiones* 11.28.37, ed. Lucas Verheijen, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 27 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1983). Throughout this article, some English translations of this text are my own, as here, and some, as noted, will be from Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); hereafter citations of these works will be to the textual passage in the Verheijen Latin edition followed by the corresponding page-number citation of that passage in the Chadwick English translation.

If it proves to be the case that all human linguistic action has to pass through this narrow gate of the enduring attention of the present of the present, it seems hardly possible to render this vertical process in terms of narrative or, for that matter, extensive thought. Unsurprisingly, efforts have been made to soften Augustine's stance, for instance, by disentangling the *distentio animi* from the narrowness of the presence of the present and lending it an independent status. Thus Roland Teske believes he has solved the paradox of an extensionless present by introducing an extension beyond the present attention: "Augustine, it seems to me, implies that our present awareness must be extended or distended beyond the instantaneous present as a condition of our perceiving a temporal whole."⁹ It is hard to see, however, how this statement can be reconciled with Augustine's view that the present attention or awareness "passes in a point." Things look even more dramatic if one inquires into the possibility of telling a story under the aegis of this lasting attention that represents an eternal presence that does not let go. What, for instance, is left of desire if it is no longer allowed to stretch and reach out to—or turn away from—its object but is reduced to givenness throughout?

Paul Ricoeur, for one, has dealt with the paradox of Augustinian temporality and its exclusion of narrativity by supplementing it with the Aristotelian notion of emplotment. I have dealt elsewhere in more detail with Ricoeur's view on this matter.¹⁰ In this essay, I want to focus on Ricoeur's efforts to establish an approximation between time and eternity that is supposed to reveal the very source of the *Confessions'* semantic richness. Having shown how the *distentio animi* is concerned with producing "a hierarchy of levels of temporalization, according to how close or how far a given experience approaches or moves away from the pole of eternity," Ricoeur emphasizes the Augustinian "resemblance between eternity and time" by placing the soul's return from the *regio dissimilitudinis* under the aegis of the eternal Word:

It [the Word] elevates time, moving it in the direction of eternity.

This is the very movement that is narrated by the first nine books of the *Confessions*. And in this sense the narration actually accomplishes the itinerary whose conditions of possibility are reflected upon in Book 11. This book, indeed, attests to the fact that the attraction of the eternity of the Word felt by temporal experience is not such as to plunge the narration, which is still temporal, into a contemplation free from the constraints of time. In this respect,

the failure of the efforts at Plotinian ecstasy, renounced in Book 7, is definitive. Neither the conversion recounted in Book 8, nor even the ecstasy of Ostia which marks the culmination of the narrative in Book 9, ever eliminate[s] the temporal condition of the soul. These two culminating experiences only put an end to wandering, the fallen form of the *distentio animi*. But this is done in order to inspire a peregrination that sends the soul off again on the roads of time. Peregrination and narration are grounded in time's approximation of eternity, which, far from abolishing their difference, never stops contributing to it. . . .

Of course, when the dialectic of *intentio* and *distentio* is definitively anchored in that of eternity and time, the timid question that has twice been uttered ("Who will hold still. . . ?") is replaced by a more confident affirmation: "Then I shall be cast [stabo] and set firm [solidabor] in the mould of your truth" (30:40). But this firmness remains in the future, the time of hope. It is still in the midst of the experience of distension that the wish for permanence is uttered: "until [donec] I am purified and melted by the fire of your love and fused into one with you" (20:39).¹¹

It is hard to see how this passage could survive Flasch's criticism of "existentialist" readings. In spite of the intrinsic presence of eternity in time as outlined by Ricoeur in this passage, for me this presence is not intrinsic enough. By that, I mean that Ricoeur upholds a view of time and eternity that in fact grants each of them a separate existence whereby temporality represents the historicity of the human wanderings in the *regio dissimilitudinis* within the shifting presence of time from future to present to past as if that region had any subsistence of its own. As a result, despite Ricoeur's emphasis on approximation, there is the emphasis on the negative effect resulting from the confrontation between time and eternity: "Eternity is 'forever still [semper stans]' in contrast to things that are 'never still.' This stillness lies in the fact that 'in eternity nothing moves into the past: all is present [totum esse praesens]. Time, on the other hand, is never all present at once' (11:13). Negativity reaches it highest pitch here. In order to push as far as possible the reflection on the *distentio animi*, that is, on the slippage of the threefold present, it must be 'compared' to a present with neither past nor future."¹²

I agree with Ricoeur that this way of characterizing the present contains an enigmatic dynamism: "The soul 'distends' itself as it 'engages' itself." What I criticize is Ricoeur's tendency, in a manner that goes almost unnoticed in his elaborations on this very dynamism, to split the present into something that is intent on staying, on the one hand,

⁹ Roland J. Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996), 37.

¹⁰ M. B. Pranger, "Time and Narrative in Augustine's *Confessions*," *Journal of Religion* 83 (2001): 377–94.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–85), 1:28, 29–30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

and a subjective and movable intention, on the other: "It [the present] is no longer a point, not even a point of passage, it is a 'present intention' (*praesens intentio*) (27:36)."¹³ Of course, the dynamics of this intention asks for an assessment. In my view, however, this cannot and should not be done at the cost of diminishing the full force of the *praesens attentio*. Ricoeur's phrasing of temporality somehow suggests an independent status for temporal existence, detached from conversion and vision and gift. The same obtains for the approximation of time and eternity in which "peregrination and narration are grounded." To put it bluntly, the use of "approximation" might be misleading here. In my view, the *praesens attentio* does not allow for such approximation, because it keeps any extension and distention, however dynamically governed by *intentio*, firmly within the bounds of that present. And so I am back at the criticism I leveled at Teske for breaking up and duplicating the present by introducing extension into it.

This ambivalent view of temporality also explains why Ricoeur all of a sudden talks about the future, "the time of hope" (in the Pauline sense of stretching forward),¹⁴ as resulting from a *distentio animi* that is no longer "'distend[ing]' itself as it [is] 'engag[ing]' itself,"¹⁵ no longer part of that which is going to stay. As a result, this future appears disconnected from its present and, having turned into future *tout court*, ceases to be a present of the future, a *praesens futuri*. Ultimately, for Ricoeur, the negativity of eternity's presence versus time prevails, favoring a view of the *distentio animi* that, unlike the utopian and supra-temporal conversations and narrations within vision, conversion, and gift, opens up the possibility of giving shape to what he sees as the preconditions of time and narrative that owe more to the temporality of the *regio dissimilitudinis* than to the gift of destiny.

Appearances notwithstanding, my argument is still concerned with the nature of *confessio* as it comprises time and eternity, memory and oblivion, gift and refusal. By using "comprises," I mean in fact to raise the question of the seductive sonority of *Confessions*. In order to honor that sonority, we should start out by taking literally Augustine's ways of addressing himself to his Confessee throughout *Confessions*—from the "You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised" of the beginning to the "knocking on the door, the *pulsare, accipere* and *invenire*" of the end.¹⁶ At this point, my criticism of Ricoeur for opening up an independent past and future in the face of eternity may help to specify the temporal

nature of *confessio*. Whereas we—all of us as shaped by *Confessions*' after-life—may be inclined to take the work in its historical sense and look at its author as confessing and reflecting in hindsight on the vicissitudes of his sinful life, his conversion, his subsequent failure to live up to the integrity of the conversational moment, and his meditations on memory, time, and creation, *confessio*'s razor forces us to be more precise. The fact that the confessor's linguistic hands are tied to the permanent focus/*attentio perdurat* of the *praesens praesentis* would seem to wipe out the notion of hindsight and foresight—or, to put it more accurately—to confine it to the limited scope of the *distentio animi*. Instead, what we observe is a confessor whose mind, distending for all it is worth, is at no time allowed to detach his memories and hopes from eternity's pressure on the here and now.

What is left, then, of memory's scope and power? one might ask. How to handle the flow of memory and oblivion, the lengthy stretches of desire, the postponement of fulfillment, of the "tomorrow, tomorrow" versus the instantaneous pressure of the present: "Why not now? Why not now an end to my impure life in this very hour?"¹⁷ Only the veriticity of oblivion:

Sero te amavi, late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: *sero te amavi*, late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.¹⁸

Now, there is no denying that this text sounds utterly seducing, expressing longing and desire, falling short and finding fulfillment all at once. As such, it can be called representative of the pulse of the Augustinian language. Yet putting things this way would fail to do justice to the tight nature of *confessio* as it is governed by the tight notion of temporality: the "now" of conversion that, albeit shunned in a lengthy process of procrastination, is not capable of not being felt, heard, touched, and smelled at any moment. All that leaves us with an aporetic situation. While Ricoeur's approximation between time and eternity appeared still based on a linear concept of temporality whose vicissitudes lasted until

¹⁷ Augustine, *Confessiones* 10.12.28; Chadwick, 152.

¹⁸ Augustine, *Confessiones* 10.27.38; Chadwick, 201.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 21, 18–19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Confessiones* 1.1.1 and 13.38.53; Chadwick, 3 and 305.

final rest was to be found (thus allowing narrative discourse—such as the first eight books of *Confessions*—to be supplemented with Aristotelian plot, a concept alien to Augustinian temporality), this effort both to establish narrativity and to maintain the lure of eternity cannot be said to produce sonority, to appreciate, in other words, the full impact of the *sero te amavi*, the languor of loving late that dominates the Augustinian discourse in its entirety. But here one cannot have one's cake and eat it too: to apply a non-Augustinian concept of time to the first part of *Confessions* and to read books 10 and 11 on memory and time as separate treatises without any retrospective radiance. That is what I mean by the failure to produce sonority: this type of discourse is bound to fall flat.

All this raises the question of whether or not *Confessions* can be properly read at all. If the dividing lines between gift and desire, past and future, time and eternity, memory and oblivion are no longer what they seem to be, becoming quite evanescent when measured against narrative and discursive order, how does one read a discourse under the pressure of the present of the present that is in its turn under the pressure of eternity? Here Adorno's question, *Wie zu lesen sei?* becomes quite urgent. It would be another matter altogether to explain why reading the discourse of *Confessions* from the viewpoint of Augustine's own concept of temporality had to wait till the rise of modernism, although, on the other hand, we may tend to be misled by the Petrarchan tradition of reading *Confessions* and as a result neglect the earlier, monastic handling of Augustinian meditative texts, such as Anselm's, which may have been much closer to the original. However that may be, it is Hans Robert Jauss who, in his book on Proust, has spotted the potential of Augustinian time for understanding the "modern" novel and, by implication, Augustine himself. Paving the way for his treatment of Proust, Jauss assesses, in the first chapter of his book, Joycean temporality in *Ulysses*:

If we wish to express the principle of temporality in *Ulysses* in terms of a formal concept, we could say with Augustine: within the continuous flux of unarticulated consciousness, everything is only to the extent that it is present; the past as *praesens de praeteritis* [the present of the past], the present as *praesens de praesentibus* [the present of the present], the future as *praesens de futuris* [the present of the future]. All [manifestations of] time [*alle Zeiten*] are subjected to the movement, never to come to rest, of the actual flux of consciousness and are to flow into each other uninterruptedly: the past without any distance, modified and often also deformed, as a mere mirror; the present in a state of absolute contingency, acausal and without any specificity (without any reference to a hierarchy of meanings), as mere perception; the future entirely as empty projection, in the mode

of expectation, of mere intention or of passive desire, but never in the guise of a causal act of the will that would create a future for itself.¹⁹

Jauss's characterization of Augustinian temporality, with its emphasis on the actual flux of time within a consciousness that, being just present, refuses any and all distinctions outside this actual flux, can shed light on the way to gain access to Augustine's own handling of time and narrative.

Various features come to the fore. First, there is the formal aspect of time as present. Since its integral nature would seem to make time look like eternity, and since eternity has got everything to do with the "present of the present," it is important to keep the two apart while at the same time honoring their affinity. In its capacity of enduring attention, it can be reduced neither to a point nor to the uncertainties of historicity pure and simple: it passes in a point. Second, the absence of a *distinctio realis* of future, present, and past inside the flux of time eliminates any possible chain of cause and effect. Thus the will can never be seen to establish a future for its own sake, since such a move presupposes a distinctness that would never allow that future to turn into a *temps perdu* as if there were a real distance between past and future. Third, it would be wide of the mark to conclude from this "foregrounding" of temporality that the dimensions of the future and the past would be flattened. Rather, the contrary may be the case. Precisely in this prism of the present, "contingent events" break into myriads of presents, futures, and pasts. As for this "foregrounding" of time, what obtains for Joyce and Proust does so a fortiori for Augustine. Fourth, there is the issue of consciousness, for, far from floating in the air, time for Augustine is firmly embedded in consciousness: "All [manifestations of] time [*alle Zeiten*] are subjected to the movement, never to come to rest, of the actual flux of consciousness and are to flow into each other uninterruptedly." To put it in Augustine's own words: "So, it is in you, my mind, that I measure periods of time."²⁰ Quite. But to be able to establish a link between, respectively, life as gift, time as the shift between future, present and past, and a sustained arrogation of voice, no allowances can be made for even the slightest gaps between those manifestations of time and of consciousness as if consciousness could establish subjectivity and interiority for its own sake. In this respect, "subjected to the movement" may be too much said already. Only thus can the focus of the present reveal itself in the guise of utter acausality, a-

¹⁹ Hans Robert Jauss, *Zeit und Erinnerung in Marcel Proust's "À la recherche du temps perdu"*; *Ein Beitrag zur Theorie des Romans* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 56–57.

²⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* 11.27.36; Chadwick, 242.

specificity, and contingency, taking the remembrance of the past and the expectation of the future under its wings.

Now, one might ask whether *confessio* is up to its task of being the mouthpiece through which time and narrative—the story of sin, creation, and memory—are voiced. If supporting or clarifying elements such as familiar dividing lines between events and ideas or, for that matter, authorial, religious, or philosophical frames outside that life performance have gone, are we not left with an indivisible moment that, not unlike the *esse solum*, cannot be told in discursive terms? And what about the possibly seductive nature of this Jaussian, a-causal way of telling a story? Would its sonority not rather sound like Anton Webern's *Fünf Stücke für Orchester*? And could so fragmented a performance be seductive at all? Yes, it could. Let me just give one example of how the Augustinian *confessio laudis, peccati et fidei* could sound without the romanticism of a supportive narrative, melodic frame, and superimposed contents (such as faith or praise or sin that are, first, separated from and, next, projected back onto the performative *confessio* itself).

In book 10, Augustine starts out his reflections on remembrance—that lead up to the *sero te amavi*—by stating that memory and oblivion cancel each other out. Next, there follows a to and fro moving between partial memory and partial oblivion, just to culminate in the astonishing exclamation, thrice repeated, that this confessor has never forgotten his Confessee “since the day I learnt of you”:

See how widely I have ranged, Lord, searching for you in my memory. I have not found you outside it. For I have found nothing coming from you which I have not stored in my memory since the time I first learnt of you [*ex quo didici te*]. Since the day I learnt of you I have never forgotten you [*nam ex quo didici te, non sum oblitus tui*]. Where I discovered the truth, there I found my God, truth itself, which from the time I learnt it, I have not forgotten. And so, since the time I learnt of you, you remain in my consciousness [memory], and there I find you when I recall you and delight in you. These holy delights you have given me, in your mercy looking upon my poverty.²¹

All of a sudden, the fact that memory and oblivion cancel each other out, after having been toned down in the rhetorical quest for truth from the viewpoint of partial memory and partial oblivion, looks like being restored to full glory. “Since the day I learnt of you I have never forgotten you.” All now depends on the precise meaning of this temporal notion “since the day” and of its enchanting repetition. What day? And what is the nature of temporality’s intrusion in this passage into what seemed to be the “holy delights” of gently approaching truth and

God? What kind of liaison with the preceding reflections, bent on ever-deepening interiority, is being maintained vis-à-vis the reintroduction of exteriority in the guise of the *ex quo*? Or is “since the day I learnt of you” already deprived of exterior clock time? What kind of *coupure*, whether exterior or interior, is being applied here to memory’s vastness? If a *coupure* there must be, when and where does it happen?

Here, we come a bit closer to the seductive nature of Augustinian rhetoric. Deprived of clock time, the “since the day I learnt of you” turns into the magic of memory and oblivion. A-causally and counter-intuitively it is a world turned upside down. Memory and time (*ex quo*) function as *le marteau sans maître*, the “hammer of existence,” *esse solum*, that is ordered as well as given and is incapable of not being confessed and lived, the song that cannot be silenced and cannot disappear from memory and expectation. Oblivion is the silent performance of precisely that: the loss of sound, as a means of survival—in sinful forgetfulness—vis-à-vis that “beauty so old and so new” contained in the ultimate expression of time as present: the temporality of the *sero te amavi*. But what exactly is being expressed in the *sero te amavi*? Moreover, if this simultaneity of memory and oblivion is expressed, that is still not the same as the divine voice sounding on its own account. Here, we touch upon the ultimate enigma of *Confessions*: the hammer of existence, “Da quod iube, iube quod vis”/“Grant what you command and command what you will.”²² Who is able to withstand the lure—and violence—of that song that, as far as sonority is concerned, cannot be distinguished from the “beauty so old and so new”? One is reminded of Kafka here—the hammer of existence—and his story of the Sirens’ song:

Proof that inadequate, even childish measures may come to the rescue.

To protect himself from the Sirens, Ulysses put wax in his ears and had himself chained to the mast of his ship. Of course, all travelers before him could have done the same, except those whom the Sirens had already allured from afar, but it was known to all the world that such things were of no help whatever. The song of the Sirens could penetrate everything, and the passion of those who were seduced would have broken much more than chains and masts. But Ulysses did not think of that, although he may have heard about it. He had full confidence in his handful of wax and his chains, and in innocent joy over his little stratagem, he sailed out toward the Sirens.

Now, the Sirens have a still more terrifying weapon than their song, and that is their silence. And although, admittedly, it has never happened, it is conceivable that someone might have saved himself from their singing—but from their growing silent, certainly never. No earthly power could resist the feeling

²¹ Augustine, *Confessiones* 10.24.35; Chadwick, 200.

²² Augustine, *Confessiones* 10.29.40; Chadwick, 202.

of having triumphed over them by one's own strength and the subsequent ecstatic excitement.

And when Ulysses approached them, the powerful singers actually did not sing, either because they thought that this enemy could be vanquished only by their silence or because the look of bliss on the face of Ulysses, who was thinking of nothing but his wax and his chains, made them forget all about singing.

But Ulysses, if one may say so, did not hear their silence; he thought they were singing and that he alone did not hear them. For a fleeting moment, he saw their throats rising and falling, their breasts lifting, their eyes filled with tears, their lips half-parted, but he believed that these were accompaniments to the airs that sounded unheard around him. Soon, however, all this faded from his sight, fixed on the distance; the shape of the Sirens vanished before him, and at the very moment when they were nearest to him, he no longer knew anything of them.

But they—lovelier than ever—stretched their necks and turned around, let their frightful hair flutter free in the wind, and clung with their claws to the rocks. They no longer wanted to seduce; all that they wanted was to hold on as long as they could to the radiance that fell from Ulysses' great eyes.

Had the Sirens possessed consciousness, they would have been destroyed at that moment. But they remained as they were, except for the fact that Ulysses had escaped them.²³

It would be little respectful to Kafka and Augustine to make one-to-one comparisons between this passage and the Augustinian *confessio*. What I want to emphasize in quoting Kafka is his overwhelming power in raising questions of the efficiency and sonority of language. Here, the *vinculum consuetudinis*, the chain of tradition, underlying much if not all historical research, is particularly strong, supposing that at all times religious and Christian language has been audible, effective, and clear. About this issue, I have serious doubts. I am not at all sure about the meaning of Christianity's foundational texts, such as the letters of Paul and Augustine's *Confessions*, except for the fact that we can conclude from the course of history that they have shaped a major part of Western discourse—overwhelmingly so, to the effect that in reading, for instance, *Confessions*, our ears may be stopped with wax so as to prevent us from doing justice to the fullness of its sound.

If that is indeed the case, it is our historical duty to realize that the rhetoric of *Confessions* comprises both sound and silence to the effect that the fullness of voice can sound in such a way that it is possible to say about Augustine—and his reader—that he “did not hear [its] silence.” Is that perhaps the essence of the fact that what Augustine is looking for cannot but be a momentary gift and that the rhetoric of

this search in all its loudness comes down to shaping the fact that it cannot be ascertained, beyond the “speech act” of *confessio* itself, whether that which is given sounds or not? Saying this, we do not find ourselves in the realm of mystical silence. We are, rather, faced with the demands of rhetorical precision. For to establish the magic of a language of desire that is given—a language with the power of Kafka's hammer of the facts of life in the shape of the song of the Sirens—*confessio* has to be framed and shaped, dramatized and theatricalized. Consequently, the possibility has to be taken into account that the phrase “Ulysses did not hear the silence of the Sirens” is not the final word about the matter, just as the dialectic of speech and silence cannot be taken to function as an automatism.

Kafka himself brings up yet another corollary: “An appendix to this story has also been handed down. Ulysses, it is said, was so full of guile, was such a fox, that not even the goddess of fate could penetrate his inner self. Perhaps he had really noticed, although it is beyond human understanding, that the Sirens were silent and perhaps somehow opposed them and the gods using the aforementioned sham as a shield.”²⁴ Why not? Why should it not be the case that, ultimately, Augustine, while confessing uninterruptedly, has succeeded in having his Confessee not penetrate his heart? Who can tell? Once in the grasp of the seductive act of *confessio* as inextricably linked to the moment the confession is made and to the everlasting Confessee hovering over it, who indeed can tell? An angel to an angel? Yet this question regards the fullness of sound: “Only you can be asked, only you can be begged, only on your door can we knock. Yes, indeed, that is how it is received, how it is found, how the door is opened.”²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 1111.

²⁵ Augustine, *Confessiones* 13.38.53; Chadwick, 305.

²³ Franz Kafka, “Das Schweigen der Sirenen,” in *Sämtliche Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Surokamp, 2008), 11110.