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Time and Narrative in Augustine's *Confessions*

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In this article, I will address the following problem: what is the relationship, if any, between Augustine's account of his conversion in the first nine books of the *Confessions* and his concept of time as discussed in book 11? If Augustine's view with regard to the paradoxical status of time as at once being present and not present is to be universally valid, it is bound to obtain for narrative time as well. However, generally speaking, the poetics of narrativity, like Aristotle's devices with regard to tragedy, such as plot and the reversal of events (*peripeteia*), seem to be based on a linear concept of time as a sequence of successive moments, which would exclude the Augustinian, nonlinear presence of time altogether.

Paul Ricoeur, in his *Time and Narrative* (hereafter *TN*), has taken Augustine's aporias with regard to time (how is time capable of being and not being simultaneously?) as the point of departure for his lengthy discussions of time and narration, ranging from Augustine and Aristotle to Woolf, Mann, and Proust.¹ The long and short of his discussion of Augustinian time is that it is unable to provide a would-be narrator with a plausible plot; for this reason Ricoeur turns to Aristotle in an effort to supplement Augustine's deficient concept of time with the less time-bound, yet more structure-focused, Aristotelian notions of plot and mimesis. The one thing Ricoeur does not do is apply his freshly established tools of narrative time to Augustine himself. As far as the narration of the *Confessions* proper is concerned, he leaves the aporias of time unresolved while turning to Aristotle for support in creating a concept of narrativity and time in which the one is not being eliminated by the other.

In the following, I want to try my hand at the experiment of reading the conversion narrative in the *Confessions* from the viewpoint of the Au-

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (hereafter cited as *TN*), 3 vols., trans. Kathleen Maclaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–85). This was originally published as *Temps et Récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983–85).

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gustinian concept of time as developed in book 11. In view of Ricoeur's negative conclusions with regard to the possible contribution of time (as being and not being at the same time) to the development of plot, this looks like a risky undertaking. Yet, in my view, once we have accepted the premise that narrative time is part and parcel of time as developed in book 11, we cannot but take up the challenge to articulate what Augustine's narrative looks like in terms of his own concept of time. In so doing, I do not, of course, pretend to give an overall assessment of the literary status of the *Confessions*. That problem is complicated enough. In addition to the narrative nature of the first nine books, there is the question of the change of compositional discourse in books 10 and 11 (dealing with memory and time, respectively) and the more exegetical mood of the final books (12 and 13) fitting in with the Christian genre of the *Hexameron*, the discussion and praise of God's creation. My contribution can be seen as an attempt to establish some interaction between some of those different levels. Whereas hitherto much of the literature on the *Confessions* is quite compartmentalized into philosophical, theological, and autobiographical categories, I want to bridge some gaps between those different compartments and demonstrate how the polyphony of voices in the *Confessions* is both scattered and held together thanks to the manifestation of time as a simultaneous presence and absence.

By way of introduction, I begin with a modern author, Samuel Beckett, because, interestingly, he shares Augustine's fate of being rejected by Ricoeur as a potential provider of a plausible plot. Just as Augustine's concept of time is incapable of producing plot, so Beckett's "plotlessness," as seen from Ricoeur's viewpoint, is based on a confused notion of time. Beckett writes:

But my ideas on this subject were always horribly confused, for my knowledge of men was scant and the meaning of being beyond me. Oh I've tried everything. In the end it was magic that had the honour of my ruins, and still today, when I walk there, I find its vestiges. But mostly they are a place with neither plan nor bounds and of which I understand nothing, not even of what it is made, still less into what. And the things in ruins, I don't know what it is, what it was, nor whether it is not less a question of ruins than the indestructible chaos of timeless things, if that is the right expression.²

Substitute man for God—although even that is not really necessary in view of the affinity between God and the soul—and we have a description of Augustine's state of mind in the *Confessions*. But "state of mind" sounds too easy, as if the *Confessions* offers us straight access to the depths of Augustine's unquiet soul. Neither Beckett's reflections nor Augustine's

² Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (1959; reprint, London: Calder & Boyars, 1966), p. 41.

confessions should one-dimensionally be seen as pieces of biographical psychology. Yet that is the way the *Confessions* has in fact been read from Petrarch up to the brilliant accounts of modern interpreters such as Peter Brown and, most recently, Garry Wills (that is, minus the notions of one-dimensionality).³ And, to bring the hermeneutical problem full circle, what legitimate objection could we make since it is with Augustine that the quintessentially Western psychology of introspection—up to and including Molloy's ruminations—is supposed to have begun?

"A place with neither plan nor bounds," "the indestructible chaos of timeless things, if that is the right expression:" Beckett's words can somehow help us at least to discern the nature of the problems that confront us when reading the *Confessions* in its entirety rather than from an exclusively autobiographical, philosophical, or theological point of view. All we have to do is mirror Beckett's ruminations against the timeless eternity of God—as discussed in book 11—and we face the following problems. As Augustine himself makes very clear, the fact that the world is created out of nothing is one of the great discoveries he wants to confess to God. So, whatever his past problems may have been, in principle the concept of creation settles them all (Manichaeism, etc.). It is only on the condition that questions such as the one regarding "timelessness" of evil and matter be answered that a new problem can be tackled—one that is all the more serious for being a quintessentially Christian one—and that is the intrinsically temporal nature of creation. Being temporal means that creation must have both a "plan and bounds." And far from being timeless, things are supposed to be alive and kicking *in* time. That means that they are basically destructible, created out of nothing, and on their way back to nothing the very moment they have run their course and cease to be sustained by divine providence.

I. MEIJERING, SORABJI, AND RICOEUR

The Augustinian paradox and aporia resulting from the confrontation between time as the guarantee of plan and bounds and the indivisibility of time as the elusive yet ineluctable moment of the present is well known, as is Augustine's tentative solution of seeing time as a *distentio animi*, the spreading out of the soul in the region of dissimilitude as the present expectation of the future, the present memory of things past, and the present intuition of things present (*contuitus*) (*Confessions* 11.20.21).⁴ But, as

³ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967); Garry Wills, *Saint Augustine* (New York: Viking, 1999).

⁴ This is the general view. I shall argue below that Augustine's concept of time is first and foremost linked to the *attentio animi*, i.e., that part of the mind's activity that, being concerned with the present, seems the most timeless one. Reference citations to Augustine's *Confessions*

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Richard Sorabji and others have indicated, the solution of the availability of past, present, and future all at once as *distentio animi* has the paradoxical effect of making time look like eternity.⁵ According to Sorabji, "time is frozen for inspection, and available altogether."⁶ This is, Sorabji adds to his observation, not quite in accordance with Augustine's intentions. Time is as different from God as is creation. Neither is time unreal. Put in terms of the *regio dissimilitudinis*, it is, "with its distractions, all too real." "All too real" is indeed the issue on which the problem hinges. For this "reality" of past and future, seemingly pleasant though mostly painful as it is, is killed, cut short, contracted by the present, and thus overruled by another reality that appears either to be underlying it or to invade it from the outside. Yet, as Augustine maintains against all odds, future things are, albeit in expectation, and past things are, albeit in memory, "and who would deny that the present time lacks extension because it passes in a point (*quia in puncto praeterit*)? But yet the attention [intention; Ricoeur's translation] lasts (*sed tamen perdurat attentio*), through which what will be present moves towards absence" (*Confessions* 11.28.37).

In my view, the confrontation in this passage between the lack of extension in a pointlike present and the duration of attention brings to the fore one of the major problems we face in assessing not only the nature of time but also the story and structure of the *Confessions*. I propose to approach this problem in a circuitous way. First, I shall turn to the illuminating commentary on this passage by E. P. Meijering. Next, I shall discuss the views of Paul Ricoeur, whose *Time and Narrative* takes Augustine's aporias regarding time as its point of departure. Finally, I shall deal with the aporias resulting from Ricoeur's effort, with the help of Aristotle's concept of plot, to go beyond Augustine. In so doing, I shall explore the possibility of Augustine's narrative and plot being an intrinsic part of his concept of time (and vice versa).

First, then, Meijering's commentary on *Confessions* 11.28.37:

Für die Gegenwart gebraucht Augustin hier zum ersten Mal das Wort *punctum*, das sowohl, Punkt' wie auch, Augenblick' bedeutet. . . . Er will hiermit die Unteilbarkeit und die fastige Nichtigkeit der Gegenwart ausdrücken. Auch Aristoteles vergleicht das Jetzt mit einem Punkt (stigmè), *Phys.* 220a 9 ff. Siehe P. F. Conen, *op.cit.*, S 103 ff. Bei Aristoteles soll das Jetzt teilen und einen, wie der Punkt die Linie teilt und eint, und damit u. a. die Kontinuität in der Zeit garantieren. Augustin gebraucht wohl das Wort, Punkt', aber nicht die von Aristoteles darin verbundenen Gedanken, namentlich nicht die Ausführungen zum Jetzt, das als Grenze Zeit und wiederum nicht Zeit ist. Wohl sagt Augustin von der

appear in the text in parentheses. Unless otherwise indicated, translations into English are by Henry Chadwick (*Saint Augustine, Confessions* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999]).

⁵ Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum* (London: Duckworth, 1983).

⁶ Sorabji, p. 30.

ganzen Zeit, sie sei und sei nicht. (To characterize the present, Augustine here uses for the first time the word *punctum*, which means "point" as well as "moment." With the help of this notion, he wants to express the indivisibility and the near-nothingness of the present. Aristotle, too, compares the now with a point (stigmè), [*Physics* 220a.9ss]. For Aristotle, the 'now' is supposed to divide and to unite, just as the point divides and unites the line in order, thus, among other things, to guarantee the continuity in time. Admittedly, Augustine uses the word "point." He does not, however, follow Aristotle's further reflections on the "now," which for him, as a liminal concept, both is time and is not time. What Augustine does say about time in its entirety is that it is and it is not).⁷

The difference between Augustine and Aristotle is clear. Whereas Aristotle has a sequential concept of time in which the now is a point on a line and as such part of a continuum, for Augustine, the existence of time is, ideally speaking, a matter of either/or. The fact that this either/or cannot be realized is part of the aporia of time and of the exile of the human soul, not living properly, but through the *distentio animi*, stretched out, backward in memory and forward in expectation. That is why Meijering correctly refers to time as being and not being at once. One of the implications of this Augustinian view is that there can be no before or after. There is no actual succession of moments that can be measured analogous to the way we measure movement. So Augustine's *punctum* as contamination of point and moment is not the beginning of something else; it neither divides nor unites the present. The *punctum* is indivisible and reflects the "near-nothingness of the present."

So far so good. What we have here is a precise exposition of Augustinian aporia regarding time. Meijering, for his part, wisely avoids solving the problem. But nor does he bother to ponder the possible implications of this aporia for the concept of time and extension in the *Confessions*, or for that matter in the very act of *confessio*, itself. He contents himself with noticing that "Augustine, in book 11, primarily speaks as a mystic who would like to overcome his temporal existence through a union with God."⁸ But does so rash a conclusion do justice to the *Confessions* and, it should be added again, to the extended act of *confessio*? And does it do justice to Augustine's great discovery of the world as being created out of nothing, that is, of being a place with plan and bounds and the destructible order and breadth of temporality? Does it do justice to the concomitant notion of sin? Besides, labeling Augustine in book 11 as a mystic

⁷ E. P. Meijering, *Augustin über Schöpfung, Ewigkeit und Zeit: Das elfte Buch der Bekenntnisse* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), p. 99; my translation. See p. 75 for his quote from Augustine, *En. in Ps.* 38, 7: "quod me difficilior et periculosius perturbat et est et non est, nec esse possumus dicere quod non stat, nec non esse quod venit et transit."

⁸ "Augustin spricht im elften Buch der Bekenntnisse primär als Mystiker, der seine zeitliche Existenz in seiner Einwerdung mit Gott überwinden möchte" (Meijering, p. 115).

would postulate—on the level of narrative time, yet time—a linear process leading up to that mystical speech, or, for that matter, leading up to the mystical vision of Ostia in book 9, presupposing a presence of before and after that would be ill at ease with Augustine's concept of time proper. It would be naive to assume that the indivisible moment of mystical experience as expressed in terms of the *ictus cordis* in book 9, because of its very indivisibility and timelessness, would stop at the vision proper. The very fact that, for Augustine, time is and time is not implies that the pressure of eternity on the present, however remote and elusive and however incisive, is all-pervasive. In other words, whatever mystical moments and reflections may occur in the *Confessions*, they are incessantly sent back and recycled into the ongoing story of confession, which, for all its paradoxical incapacity to express the indivisible *punctum* of the present, lingers between remembering, forgetting, and expectation. If Augustine does have his mystical moments in the *Confessions*, they do not cease to be part of this very process of procrastinating the present through memory, oblivion, and hope (*cras, cras* [tomorrow, tomorrow]).

As Paul Ricoeur has made abundantly clear, his discussion of the Augustinian aporias of time owes a lot to Meijering's commentary.⁹ Like Meijering, Ricoeur also turns to Aristotle to contrast the unsolvable paradox of *attentio* and *distentio* with the Aristotelian extension of "before" and "after." Hence, Ricoeur takes his argument further, adding to the *distentio animi* the Aristotelian concept of *mythos*/plot. For Ricoeur, it is emplotment as the (re)organization of time that is supposed to complement the elusiveness of the *distentio animi*. Emplotment, in turn, is realized through a threefold mimesis: prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. Of those three, configuration is the pivotal one through which the narrative, taking its lead from a given sequence of events, is shaped and is given its proper narrative time, finally to be refigured by the reader. Storytelling is the ultimate safeguard against the threat of death and eternity (both reflecting time without extension). The intricacies of Ricoeur's analysis need not concern us here. In an endlessly refined and lengthy exposition, Ricoeur explores countless "figurations" of narrative time. Here I would like to focus on two issues. First, there is the fact that, despite Ricoeur's liberal treatment of unlikely manifestations of time—allowing, for instance, for the modernist experiments with time, it is the Aristotelian view of succession (before and after), however reshaped, and possibly reversed, in the mimesis of con- and refiguration, that for him is the *non plus ultra* of temporality. Second, in accordance with this stance, there is

⁹ Ricoeur, *TN*, 1:231, n. 1: "My study owes a great deal to E. P. Meijering's scholarly commentary."

for Ricoeur an upper limit to what can and cannot be properly called temporality.

First, consider the Aristotelian insistence on the permanence of before and after against the absence of succession in Augustine:

On the one hand, from an Aristotelian point of view, the breaks by which the mind is able to distinguish two "instants" are enough to determine a before and an after solely by reason of the orientation of movement from its cause to its effect. In this way, I can say that event A precedes event B and that event B follows event A, but I cannot for all this affirm that event A is past and event B future. On the other hand, from an Augustinian point of view, the future and the past exist only in relation to a present, that is, to an instant indicated by the utterance designating it. The past is before and the future is after only with respect to this present possessing the relation of self-reference, attested to by the very act of uttering something. It follows from this Augustinian point of view that the before-and-after—that is, the relation of succession—is foreign to the notions of present, past, and future, and hence to the dialectic of intension and distension that is grafted to these notions (TN, 3:19).

As we see, both Aristotle and Augustine have a problem. "The dynamism of movement alone," which is inherent to the notions of succession, cannot generate the dialectic of the threefold presences of past, present, and future (TN, 3:21). As far as Ricoeur is concerned, combining the notion of succession with the concept of emplotment can solve that problem. Plot can be added to succession without eliminating it in the process, for "the act of emplotment extracts a configuration from a succession" (TN, 1:66). But Augustine is in greater trouble, since "the distention of the soul alone cannot produce the extension of time" (TN, 3:21). For this aporia there seems to be no solution at hand.

Not unrelated to this aporia is the second issue I proposed to discuss, the upper, or rather, lower limit Ricoeur imposes on the "hierarchization of temporality."¹⁰ It is not the case that anything goes. For instance, "rejecting chronology is one thing [as in the older form of modernism, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce]; the refusal of any substitute principle of configuration is another [Beckett]" (TN, 2:25). As for Beckett, Ricoeur agrees with Frank Kermode's characterization of him in *The Sense of an Ending* as "the perverse theologian of a world which has suffered a Fall, experienced an

¹⁰ Ricoeur, TN, 1:86. Ricoeur uses the phrase to denote a limit upward, toward eternity and fixity, but, in an elegant passage, he acknowledges that an upper limit is directed toward death as well: "The most serious question this work may be able to pose is to what degree a philosophical reflection on narrativity and time may aid us in thinking about eternity and death at the same time." Here I could not agree more.

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Incarnation which changes all relations of past, present, and future, but which will not be redeemed" (*TN*, 2:26).¹¹

In the end, his insistence on a discordant concordance notwithstanding, Ricoeur's is a desire for harmony: "What seems unsurpassable in the last analysis is the reader's expectation that some form of consonance will finally prevail. The expectation implies that not everything will be a peripeteia, otherwise peripeteia itself becomes meaningless, and our expectation of order would be totally frustrated . . . Frustration cannot be the last word" (*TN*, 2:25). What Ricoeur means to say is that an overkill of "peripeteia" (the sudden reversal of circumstances) may turn into the opposite of what it is supposed to represent: plot. "Everything being a peripeteia" would transform plot into plotlessness. And, evidently, in Ricoeur's view, it is Beckett's writings with their random course of fragmented speech that are the epitome of plotlessness. But, then, without forcing an anachronistic (sic!) link between Beckett and Augustine, one might ask: Is Kermode's description, applied to Augustine, so far off the mark?¹² Talking, for the sake of convenience, about time in terms of before and after, is not the failure to be redeemed and, in a later stage, the failure not to sin, one of the great poetical drives behind the *Confessions*? Is not sin the answer, however misdirected, of creation both to eternity and to the "indestructible chaos of timeless things"? Thus, sin would, perversely, echo the temporality of creation. That seems the only condition on which sin as the (failed) hallmark of temporality may transform into the "realized eschatology" of conversion, happiness, and beauty. In other words, as I shall illustrate in the following, that seems the only condition on which indivisible time, that is, time that wipes out "sooner" and "later," can materialize as the *sero* of the *sero te amavi*. In a split second, that *sero* is an ultimate sigh not unlike the cathartic whispering of the tragic "alas, alas."¹³

By describing Augustine's discussion of time in book 11 as a quest for mystical union, Meijering has left, as far as time is concerned, the bulk of the *Confessions* unaccounted for. If ever there was someone who could be expected to amend for that failure, it was Ricoeur. In view of the title

¹¹ Here Ricoeur quotes Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 115.

¹² Beckett, on his part, has positive things to say about Augustine. Defending his friend James Joyce against attacks regarding the newness and incomprehensibility of *Work in Progress* (the sketches of what was to become *Finnegans Wake*), he refers to Augustine's *intentio* as an indication of the performativity of language. "When the sense is dancing, the words dance . . . St. Augustine puts us on the track of a word with his '*intendere*'." Samuel Beckett et al., *Our Examination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (1929; reprint, London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 14.

¹³ "Sigh" because it has its pendant in the sighs at the end of Racine's tragedies: (e.g., "Hélas . . ." [*Bérénice*]).

alone, *Time and Narrative*, it would be hard to imagine that a discussion of the role of time in the *Confessions* would not extend to the narrative of the first nine books, or, for that matter, to the confessional narrative as such. And, in his opening chapter on Augustine, Ricoeur has indeed a beautiful passage about the first nine books as "time's approximation of eternity," about the two peak experiences, the conversion in book 8 and the ecstasy in book 9. That moment of ecstasy "puts an end to wandering, the fallen form of the *distentio animi*" just "in order to inspire peregrination that sends the soul off again on the roads of time" (*TN*, 1:29).¹⁴ Yet, amazingly, he declines to raise this history of the soul to the level of plot or plotlessness. This may be understandable considering the fact that the issue of plot is being reserved for Aristotle as a necessary supplement to the "implosive," and therefore deficient, nature of Augustine's concept of time. Yet this omission regrettably cuts Augustine off from narrative time. True, in a footnote Ricoeur poses the question as to the relationship of the whole of book 11 with the narration of the first nine books of the *Confessions*, promising to address that problem in the next volume when dealing with the theme of repetition.¹⁵ But in volume 2 that discussion is conspicuously absent. In fact, the very moment Ricoeur had introduced the Aristotelian concepts of plot and mimesis as a supplement to Augustine's aporias of time in volume 1, he had drawn the rather harsh conclusion already that time and narrative will never meet: "Indeed, as has been said, Augustine's paradoxes of the experience of time owe nothing to the activity of narrating a story. His key example of reciting a verse or a poem serves to sharpen the paradox rather than to dissolve it" (*TN*, 1:52). If this is true—which I believe it is, at least within the boundaries of a definition of "story" in terms of succession—it would have been quite interesting to know more about Ricoeur's assessment of narrative time in the "story" of the *Confessions*. As things stand, Ricoeur passes over the story of Augustine's life and conversion in silence, leaving it to itself, "unredeemed," to paraphrase Kermode's typecasting of Beckett.

A possible objection against my desire for connection may be that, in book 11, Augustine is doing philosophy, asking himself tough, systematic questions. In any case, that is the way philosophers and theologians such as Sorabji, Meijering, and, to a certain degree, Ricoeur have approached the matter. But, in my view, things are more complicated than that. Whatever the difficulties may be in assessing the true nature of the *Confessions*, so much is clear that the entire work is shaped explicitly as narrated time, including the reflections on time itself. Consequently, the aporatic circu-

¹⁴ See also *TN* (n. 1 above), 2:30, for a discussion of the pivotal role of eternity as a deepening of temporality.

¹⁵ *TN*, 1:234, n. 26.

larity resulting from the question “what is time?” in book 11 is not only a philosophical aporia. It also bears on Augustine’s overall project to tell his “lived” experience in and about time to God. In other words, by addressing God—that being the one repetitive, “linear” continuity of the *Confessions*—Augustine introduces not only the elusiveness as well as the density (the lack of extension) of the present in his “story” but also the verticality and the unfathomableness of eternity. Needless to say, this unusual shape of “linearity” as “curvilinear” generates an unusual kind of narrative.

The present is far from being eternity (would that it was!), and eternity is far from being present: that might be a way to describe the *Confessions*.¹⁶ But it is precisely the complex nature of the *Confessions* (since it is the story of sin) that makes the opposite hold true as well. For, although not living up to its true nature of indivisibility and being spread out in the guise of the *distentio animi* instead, the present is a pointlike moment that lacks extension. And, as for eternity, it is present in its flashlike vertical disguise, in the rare moments of “mystical” experience, but also structurally. For each time Augustine addresses God—and he does so all the time—he evokes the newly found source of his life. Yet, by nature of his timelessness, that same addressee of his prayers is also the black hole in his remembering mind, in his prayer, his thought, and his narrative. And on the part of man himself, the shakiness of his sinful state prevents him from meeting unfathomable eternity with the fixity of a realized present. His is the inability to “make the human heart still, so that it can see how eternity, in which there is neither future nor past, stands still and dictates future and past times” (*Confessions* 11.11.13).¹⁷

Is it possible to get some grip on this rather confusing state of affairs in which time is and is not? Is it possible to mould those disparate elements into a story of sorts? As for Ricoeur, he is pessimistic with regard to the chances of blending time and narrative in this particular case. Augustine’s handling of time “owes nothing to the activity of narrating a story.” The example of the poem (Ambrose’s *Deus creator omnium*) is a case in point. But, in my view, it is precisely as reciting a poem that Augustine confesses his life—and not only his life, but also the life and times of creation—to God.¹⁸ Admittedly, this confessional story is not organized

¹⁶ The dilemma is brilliantly summed up by Garry Wills: “So there is no ‘present’ as such. And yet, paradoxically, we know the past only as a *present* memory and the future only as *present* anticipation. There is, then, no real present and nothing *but* real present. The mind brokers this odd interplay of times in a no-time” (Garry Wills, *Saint Augustine* [New York: Viking, 1999], pp. 90–91).

¹⁷ Chadwick, trans. (n. 4 above), p. 229.

¹⁸ Oddly enough, Ricoeur admits to so much (*TN*, 2:22), reflecting on the poetical possibilities of this passage.

according to the principle of succession (before and after) required for narrative time. In that sense, it is indeed plotless. There is no Aristotelian instant that divides and unites the now just as a point divides and unites a line, thus guaranteeing continuity in time. For Augustine, the winner takes all, that is, the one poem, measured, extended, and contracted by the *distentio* and *intentio animi* and attached as it is to its unfathomable source creates room for a story without beginning or end and, in a sense, "with neither plan nor bound" yet being intrinsically temporal. In Ricoeur's view, this would be a contradiction in terms since the *distentio animi* is incapable of "producing the extension of time."

II. TIME, NARRATIVE, AND EMPLOTMENT

Yet, before I turn to my own version of the "narrative" reading of time, Ricoeur deserves another round of attention. Decisive though his expulsion of the Augustinian narrative from time may be, his analysis of Augustine's text is so full of nuances that the subtle game of *intentio* and *distentio* comes tantalizingly close to an Augustinian emplotment of sorts.¹⁹

Let us, then, reconsider the text from the *Confessions*, book 11 and examine Ricoeur's commentary in the process:

Et quis negat praesens tempus carere spatio, quia in puncto praeterit? sed tamen perdurat attentio, per quam pergat abesse quod aderit. non igitur longum tempus futurum, quod non est, sed longum futurum longa expectatio futuri est, neque longum praeteritum tempus, quod non est, sed longum praeteritum longa memoria praeteriti est. (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 towards 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). (11.28.37, my translation)

To understand this text—insofar as that is possible—we must first know how the *intentio* or *intentio* has come into being. It happens through the impression (*affectio*) that reality (*res*) leaves behind in the mind. In a remarkable passage, Augustine for once does not address God in his confessional manner but his very own mind: "It is in you, my mind, that I measure my stretches of time (*tempora*) . . . The impression that passing things make on you, and that stay in you when they have gone, that is what I measure as present, not the things which were transitory aimed at causing that impression" (11.27.36).

If the mind next wants to measure time, it measures this *affectio*, which, as in the example of a psalm learned by heart, is present in its entirety.

¹⁹ See n. 16 above.

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That is the *attentio* that lasts (*perdurat*). But if we read the passage “*Et quis negat*” from the point of view of the suggested continuity (*perdurat*), it is full of contradictions. First, there is present time that lacks extension and is pointlike. How does a point last? It does so as *attentio* through which the present moves toward absence; in other words, through which the extension of the soul (*distentio animi*) materializes. But if we would be inclined to take “materialize” as really extensive (e.g., as a long future or a long past), it at once shrinks, vanishes, so to speak, into the size and guise of expectation and memory. What, then, is a *long* memory or a *long* expectation but another contradiction in terms?

Ricoeur is right in pointing to the circularity of this argument and, it must be added, to its enigmatic attractiveness. “Have we any other means,” he asks, “of expressing the connection between *affectio* [i.e., the impression of *res* on the mind such as a psalm] and *intentio* [i.e., the attention that keeps the psalm present in the mind but is also on the verge of extending into the process of measuring the psalm by lengthening and shortening that which it attends to], outside of a progressive dynamization of the metaphor of the spaces traversed by expectation, attention, and memory?”²⁰ The answer is negative. “In this respect, the metaphor of the transit of events through the present seems unsurpassable” (*TN*, 1:21). Such is the price Augustine has to pay for his resolving the aporia of measurement: “the soul ‘distends’ itself as it ‘engages’ itself—this is the supreme enigma” (*TN*, 1:21). At the same time, this answer, as a “living metaphor”—an allusion to Ricoeur’s own *métaphore vive*—is valuable, indeed an “inestimable discovery”: “Augustine’s inestimable discovery is, by reducing the extension of time to the distention of the soul, to have tied this distention to the slippage that never ceases to find its way into the heart of the threefold presence—between the present of the future, the present of the past, and the present of the present. In this way he sees discordance emerge again and again out of the very concordance of the intentions of expectation, attention, and memory” (*TN*, 1:21). “Slippage” is a nice characterization of the paradox of an attention that lasts in spite of the fact that it belongs to a pointlike present without extension. Each and every separate phase of the resulting *distentio* can be imagined—the spreading out of the mind into expectation and remembrance—but the process in its entirety cannot. It is like watching a conductor’s baton go up and down. That the eye can observe, and that the mind can articulate. But the conducting itself, that is, the very moment the baton “hits” the sound or, for that matter, orders it to come out, cannot be grasped. All the spectator can see is the going up and going down. And yet the musi-

²⁰ I leave aside the concomitant problem, discussed by Ricoeur, of passivity and activity. See *TN*, 1:21.

cians know. In the process of measuring, expanding the past and shortening the future, their *attentio* (to the conductor's "timeless" yet "distensive" beat) produces the present, no sooner, no later.

Ricoeur's admiration for Augustine's speculations on time is unreversed. The "fragile example of the *canticus* recited by heart" (TN, 1:22) itself opens up vistas of perspective for the "potentialities of narrative," the more so since Augustine extends the example of the poem-psalm to all its parts, on the one hand, and to all of life and all of history, on the other. Yet, as we have seen above, Augustine's paradox of time, though underlying Ricoeur's quest for the nature of narrative, will not do. The *distentio animi* itself cannot produce the extension of time. It even "serves to sharpen the paradox rather than dissolve it." Nothing is being "owed here to the activity of narrating a story" (TN, 1:52). As a result, there is something flawed about the entire project. The speculations on time may be profound, but they fail in producing the temporality of narrative. There clearly is an insufficiency here that has to be supplemented by the concept of emplotment: "It is to this enigma of the speculation on time that the poetic art of emplotment replies. But Aristotle's *Poetics* does not resolve it all. It puts it to work—poetically—by producing an inverted figure of discordance and concordance" (TN, 2:21–22). But does one really need an Aristotle-like theory of emplotment, however liberally applied, to account for Augustine's concept of (narrative) time? Somewhere in *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur claims to proceed in an ascetic way. It is precisely here, I think, that some kind of asceticism could be of use. In other words, in my view, we do not need an external poetics at all that would bridge the gap between Augustinian time and narrative. Augustine's own ideas of time suffice to lend the narrative the width it needs to survive as narrative.

III. LONG EXPECTATION, LONG MEMORY

Anticipating my conclusions I want to state that for Augustine the dynamics of temporality and narrative are to be found in the "*sed tamen perdurat attentio* (and yet attention lasts)" rather than, as Ricoeur and others suggest, in the *distentio animi* proper. Admittedly, the *distentio animi* witnesses to the fact that the human soul lives in sin, in the *regio dissimilitudinis*, alienated from both its Maker and itself. And understandably, the same human soul longs for deliverance from this distorted kind of temporality and reaches out "to the palm of vocation," extended, not in the manner of distention but *secundum intentionem* (*Confessions* 11.28.39). However, Ricoeur is right in pointing out that the distention of the soul is incapable of producing the extension of time. As a result, there seems no way of avoiding an unsolvable paradox.

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To tackle this problem, let us first repeat Sorabji's phrasing of this aporia. Like Ricoeur, he holds that "past, present and future are all available at once as distention in the mind," creating "the paradoxical effect of making time look like eternity. Time is frozen for inspection, and available altogether."²¹ Although, like Ricoeur, Sorabji emphasizes too much the element of distention, his elegant way of putting it provides us at the same time with the means to crack the problem, "inspection" being the key to the solution. It is the human mind itself and, more in particular, memory, that "inspects," that is, phrases and rephrases, the experience of time. But memory being the basis of it all, it is not the distention of the soul that comes first but "the attention that lasts." Just as remembrance and expectation are tied up to the present, so memory in its purest disguise is the actualization of the present. It is the undivided possession of the entire psalm or poem: *attentio quae perdurat*. But what about Sorabji's objection that this looks too much like eternity? And conversely, what about Ricoeur's need for an emplotment that can "produce an inverted figure of discordance and concordance," which, in other words, is no longer caught in the vicious circle of discordant concordance and can tell the story of what is going on between distention and attention?

As I see it, Ricoeur is right in pointing to the circularity of the process of "discordance emerging again and again out of the very concordance of the intentions of expectation, attention and memory" (TN, 1:21). But that does not imply that Augustine "reduces the extension of time to the distention of the soul" (TN, 1:21). The notion of "slippage," so brilliantly introduced by Ricoeur, is, in my view, not tied to distention, but rather to attention, to duration (of sorts), and, therefore, to time. And it is precisely this difference that opens up possibilities for an Augustinian poetics of time and narrative.

But what does my notion of slippage, related as it is to the *attentio quae perdurat*, look like? Using the Augustinian device of procrastination, let us first turn to another work from another period in order further to define this notion, to Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*. In the opening passage, Stepan Verkhovensky, the father of the novel's "great sinner" and a rare intellectual in a provincial town, is introduced as follows: "Nevertheless he was a most intelligent and gifted man, even, so to say, a scholar, though, as far as his scholarship was concerned, well, in a word, his scholarship didn't amount to much, to nothing at all, I think." This is what John Jones, in his illuminating commentary, calls a "slippage sentence": "A scholar. Not much of a scholar. Really no scholar . . . Only negation. Not even negation. Nothing."²² Compare this slippage of the provincial

²¹ Sorabji (n. 5 above), p. 30.

²² John Jones, *Dostoevsky* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), p. 270.

intellectual to the bishop of provincial Hippo, sitting in his room or on his porch, reflecting on what he now is (book 10) and making up the balance of his "converted" life. He has come a long way—and that is what he is talking about in the *Confessions*—"long," as we shall see, being a key concept. But both what he now is and what he once was are far from being an orderly succession of events. It is neither a story of a successful conversion, nor a story of ups and downs, nor even a tragic account of utter failure. In a sense, there are neither plans nor bounds. Addressing himself to God, the source of being and the embodiment of eternity, Augustine cannot but blur distinctions between sooner and later, before and after. Tied to timeless eternity, the present as lacking extension is all there is left. As such, it reveals itself as the black hole in the heart of human existence, as the ever-present and ever-evasive moment that cannot be grasped.

Yet the intensity of this enigmatic present "*quia in puncto praeterit*/that passes in a point," is such as to evoke the drama of slippage. Take Dostoevsky's opening sentence. It does not tell a story of succession. But, in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of a "polyphonic novel," an astonishing number of voices can be heard simultaneously.²³ Thus the statement embraces and reflects the entire novel. Wittily presenting the gliding scale of Verkhovensky's talents, it mirrors the dark things to come; or, for that matter, the dark things being there or already having been there, up to the point of nihilistic destruction. As far as emplotment is concerned, thanks to this simultaneity, it is, in a sense, over and done with on the spot.²⁴

Back to Augustine and the "slippage" of *attentio*, the following scene may be illustrative:

When I am sitting at home, a lizard catching flies or a spider entrapping them as they rush into its web often fascinates me. The problem is not made any different by the fact that the animals are small. The sight leads me on to praise you, the marvelous Creator and orderer of all things; but that was not how my attention first began (*non inde intentus esse incipio*). It is one thing to rise rapidly, another thing not to fall (*aliud est cito surgere, aliud est non cadere*). My life is full of such lapses, and my only hope is in your great mercy. (*Confessions*, 10.35.57)²⁵

This, then, is a moment frozen for inspection albeit directed downward rather than upward. Is the passage telling a story, for instance, the story

²³ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *La poétique de Dostoïevski* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970).

²⁴ Ricoeur, *TN*, 2:96–97. Ricoeur is of two minds with regard to the question whether Dostoevsky's poetics can still be called narrative: "By sliding from the mimesis of action to the mimesis of characters, then to that of their thoughts, feelings, and language, and by crossing the final threshold, that from monologue to dialogue, on the plane of the narrator's as much as the characters' discourse, have we not surreptitiously substituted for emplotment a radically different structuring principle, which is dialogue itself?" (*TN*, 2:97).

²⁵ Chadwick, trans., p. 213.

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of Augustine's converted life? I do not think so, not, at least, in terms of plot. It does, however abound with "slippage." First, there is the frozen moment of Augustine watching a lizard or a spider: the *intentio*. Next, this "innocent" glance is broken down and revealed as a lapse into the web of the senses. In fact, Augustine was not "really" looking; he was not looking at all. "Only negation, not even negation, nothing." Now it could be asked: what is so special about this notion of slippage? What else does it come down to but another manifestation of the *distentio animi*? That, however, is not how time and narrative work for Augustine. Let us once more recall the image of the conductor beating the music. Upbeat and downbeat can in a sense be distinguished, but they cannot be pinned down. They cannot be "frozen," since the timeless moment in which they meet generates both the simultaneity of sound and voices and the continuity of melody (going up and down). Rather than the slippage itself, it is the *intentio* or *attentio* representing this moment, however perverted, that conditions the slippage and sets it into motion. As a consequence, the negative effect of slippage (resulting into "nothing") is not mere negativity. And much less is it a kind of negativity mitigated by a positive element. It is the power of simultaneity, (as, e.g., in Dostoevsky's passage, the simultaneous sounding of voices, and its strong expressionism that make the lapses of slippage so dramatically negative. They keep being sustained, as long as they last, by the actual, denser notion of time: the extensionless present of the moment.

In my view, this is what Augustine means by saying that time is and time is not. The existence of time cannot be thought without the split second of *attentio*. Life seems to consist of *cito surgere* and *cadere*. But that is not accurate enough, sounding too much like a story with a plot, with succession of before and after. From the point of view of Augustine's "plotless" notion of time and narrative, it is more accurate to say: *cito surgere* is one thing and *non cadere* another. Yes, that makes life more circumstantial, less full of plots, including what Kermode has called "the fixity of plot." But that is what time is about. In between *cito surgere* and *non cadere* lies the timeless moment of the conductor's hitting the sound: *attentio*. Hence, it extends into the distention of music. That is how time works: *sed tamen perdurat attentio*. The entire piece of music continues being present in the conductor's mind.²⁶ And if his attention lasts, he can make time "long," lengthen it (and, by implication, shorten it) and produce an "equal mu-

²⁶ The expression is John Donne's, and it is used by Vikram Seth as a motto for his novel, *An Equal Music* (London: Phoenix House, 1999): "And into that gate they shall enter, and in that house they shall dwell, where there shall be no cloud nor sun, no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light, no noise, nor silence, but one equal music, no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession, no foes nor friends, but one equal communion and identity, no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity." Tim Parks, in his review of that novel, elabo-

sic." *Longa expectatio* and *longa memoria*: that is the most adequate way of expressing that time is and time is not. But, besides being adequate, it is also most enigmatic. For the pointlike present and the grip of simultaneity exercised by the present deprive memory and expectation of any length whatever, turning a long memory into a contradiction in terms. Yet, this is exactly how Augustine's notion of time, and of time and narrative, works. His confessions *coram deo*, being about procrastination, delay, hesitation, and lapses, are shot through with the present and, even, with eternity. Together they constitute time. "*Sero te amavi* (late have I loved you)." The *sero* says it all. In it, the *longa expectatio* and the *longa memoria* meet. Together they bring about the simultaneity of "equal music." It is no wonder this special kind of plotless poetics contains an explosive power of negativity, not unlike the suspense of a well-conducted piece of music that becomes more fragile as the conductor's hold (time and timelessness!) appears stronger. Beckett, then, whose "circumstantial" way of writing was a bridge too far for Ricoeur, is not so far off the Augustinian mark when Molloy's alter ego, commissioned to find Molloy and report about him, concludes his quest as follows: "But in the end I understood this language. I understood it, I understand it, all wrong perhaps. That is not what matters. It told me to write the report. Does this mean I am freer now than I was? I do not know. I shall learn. Then I went back into the house and wrote, 'It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows'/It was not midnight. It was not raining."²⁷

rates on the Donne quotation; see "Sentimental Education," *New York Review of Books* 46, no. 12 (July 15, 1999): 20–23.

²⁷ Beckett, p. 189. For an interesting discussion of temporality and finiteness in Beckett, see Wolfgang Iser, "The Pattern of Negativity in Beckett's Prose," in *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 140–52. Beckett's rejection of fiction is described as "the infinite retention of the self within this insurmountable finiteness" (p. 151).