

AUGUSTINE, TIME, AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS LANGUAGE

Saint Augustine's discussion of time (*Confessions* XI, ch. 14-31) is constantly interwoven with a discussion of the phenomenon of human language. In the early chapters of Book XI, he attempts a gloss of the first words of Genesis and distinguishes between God's Word uttered in an eternal instant that is before or beyond time and God's discursive speech, as when His voice was heard in the clouds saying: "This is my beloved Son" (Matt. 3:17). While the Word of God is silent and eternal, Augustine points out, God's discursive speech, like human language, is "speech with a beginning and an end."¹ In God's discursive speech, as in ours, each syllable can be heard before it dies away, the second following after the first and the third after the second, and so on until the last syllable dies away and gives place to silence (XI,6). Discursive speech is motion subject to the laws of time, whereas God's Word is not. Anyone comparing God's discursive speech to His eternal Word cannot help realizing that discursive speech is as inferior to the eternal Word as time is inferior to eternity; for discursive speech, like time, dies away and is lost, while the Word of God is above us and endures forever.

Augustine seems to be establishing an equation: time is to eternity as discursive speech is to the Word. He thinks it axiomatic to propose that time is but an inferior version of timelessness, as discursive language is a devalued version of God's still, silent Word. Like human discourse, time seems like a distension of a model which in its most perfect state is whole and one. Time and language are both signs and consequences of our corporeal condition: we are subjected to time in much the same way as we are confined by our serialized and frequently fragmented articulations. Stating the problem of time and language in Platonic and even Plotinian terms, especially in chapters 6 and 7 of Book XI, Augustine is assuming that both share a common inferiority, that of the part to the whole, that of the copy to the

1. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated with an introduction by R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961; rpt., 1974), Bk. XI, ch. 6, p. 258. All subsequent references to the *Confessions* in English will be to this translation. They will be indicated in parentheses in the text, with book and chapter reference only. References to the original text will be to Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 2 vols., texte établi et traduit par Pierre de Labriolle, Paris, "Les Belles Lettres," 1925. All references to the original will be designated as "Labriolle," followed by volume and page numbers.

model. One could add that, in these chapters at least, time and language are treated as if they were the *fallen* parts of a universal whole.²

Up to chapter 14 of Book XI, Augustine continues to consider these entities jointly and in negative terms. Discursive language he calls "motion subject to the laws of time" (XI,6); time he defines as an incapacity of the present instant to hold still (XI,11).³ It is not that he considers time and language as essentially or qualitatively different from their respective models but as hierarchically inferior, since in the eternal Word, "all is uttered at the same time, yet eternally" (XI,7). As we are condemned to toss about on the ebb and flow of past and future time, so are we condemned to the use of discursive language. Time and language have about them a common status of diminution and distension in space.⁴ Both are made up of parts that do not exist simultaneously, "but some must come as others go, and in this way together they make up the whole of which they are the parts" (IV,10). Language is a serialization of sounds (the metaphor implied is a spatial one), each syllable "giving way to make room for the next" (IV,10). Subjection to time, like subjection to language is a "just limit" that has been fixed for the senses of the body as a punishment for the soul (IV,11).

So long as Augustine considers time and language in Plotinian terms, he continues to perceive them statically and spatially; and so long as he persists in considering both these categories as fallen or devalued versions of "higher" models, he falls victim to the common fallacy of projecting them into an imaginary space. He therefore imagines, at first, that the relationship between eternity and time is analogous to that of the outside surface to an inside content (XI,1); that the relationship between the Word and human language is like that of the whole to the sum of its parts, or, again, of container to contents (XI,7). The past, present, and future he first considers as the three *divisions* of time, implying the image of a three-part surface (XI,14). He takes it as an axiomatic truth that any extension of an essence in time and space implies diminution of value.

But if Augustine seems to state the problem in Plotinian terms in the first fourteen chapters, he then proceeds toward a resolution with a penetrating empiricism that ultimately frees him from these categories. It has

2. On the matter of Augustine's Neoplatonism at the time he wrote the *Confessions*, and on his possible Plotinian conviction that we are fallen parts of a universal soul, see Robert J. O'Connell, "The Plotinian Fall of the Soul in St. Augustine," *Traditio* XIX (1963): 1-35; "The Riddle of Augustine's *Confessions*: a Plotinian Key," *International Philosophical Quarterly* IV, 3 (1964): 327-72. Cf. A. Hilary Armstrong, *St. Augustine and Christian Platonism* (Villanova, Pa.: University Press, 1967), pp. 5-6.

3. Labriolle 2:305: "Qui tenebit illud et *figet* illud, ut paululum stet et paululum rapiat splendorem semper stantis aeternitatis et conparet *cum temporibus numquam stantibus* et uideat esse incomparabilem. . . ."

4. *Confessions* XI, 26 (Labriolle 2: 320): "Inde mihi uisum est nihil esse aliud tempus quam *distensionem* . . . sed cuius rei, nescio"

already been noted that human discourse, as it issues syllable by syllable from the mouth and is perceived part by part in the ear, first appeared as a just limit that is due to our bodily condition (IV,11).⁵ But Augustine adds something further about discursive speech that will ultimately open new vistas: we want syllables to move forward, he says, so that we might hear the whole of what we and others have to say. We want a sentence to unfold so that we might grasp its unitary meaning, and we want to feel all the parts as one, because the unitary meaning gives more pleasure than any of the separate parts. That principle seems to apply to all forms of discourse, written and spoken. Though human discourse may be considered as an inferior version of God's perfect Word, that does not preclude a hierarchy of levels of perfection within human discourse itself. The unitary meaning of a sentence, for example, is prior in wholeness and in time to the syllables and sounds that make up the sentence;⁶ the unitary meaning of a familiar text which we are reciting, such as a psalm, is greater than and prior to any of its parts (XI,27-28).⁷

If it is true, then, that time and language both share such limitations as distension, discreteness and seriality, they also seem to share a common capacity for being condensed and regulated by the human mind; the human mind by its very nature proceeds toward a compression of these parts into a unity which in the final analysis is analogous to that of the original model. As Book XI unfolds (particularly chapters 14-31), a painstaking phenomenological description of the workings of his own mind draws Augustine ever closer to a positive intuition of the nature of time and language; and as he does so he finds himself conferring positive value upon these entities which he had earlier spoken of in purely negative terms. He also discovers that he must constantly have recourse to examples drawn from language in order to clarify the nature of human time, so closely are the two phenomena interrelated.

The need to analyze the problems of time and language jointly seems most compelling in chapters 27 and 28. Augustine has been searching for a unit with which time can be measured. We can measure the difference between long and short syllables, he says, and our minds tell us that one syllable is twice as long as another, even after the sound of both syllables has passed away. They no longer exist, and yet one can continue to measure them. I am therefore measuring something which remains fixed in my

5 Labriolle I:79: "Sed si ad totum comprehendendum esset idoneus sensus carnis tuae ac non et ipse in parte uniuersi accepisset *pro tua poena iustum modum*"

6 Augustine had already noted (Bk. IV, ch. 11) that the unitary meaning of a sentence precedes the parts and that the wholeness of a sentence's meaning gives greater pleasure than any of the parts (Labriolle, I:79): "Ita semper omnia, quibus unum aliud constat et non sunt omnia simul ea, quibus constat: plus delectant omnia quam singula, si possint sentiri omnia."

7 Labriolle, 2: 324: "Et quod in toto cantico, hoc in singulis particulis eius fit atque in singulis syllabis eius, hoc in actione longiore, eius forte particula est illud canticum"

memory. It is in my own mind that I measure time, it is not something objective. We can measure with our minds the duration of periods of sound and the duration of periods of silence: "Even without opening our mouths or speaking at all we can go over poems and verses and speech of any sort in our minds, and we can do the same with measurable movement of any kind. We can estimate that one poem takes proportionately more, or less, time than another, just as if we were reciting them both aloud. If a man wishes to utter a prolonged sound and decides beforehand how long he wants it to be, he allows the space of time to elapse in silence, commits it to memory, and then begins to utter the sound. It sounds until it reaches the limit set for it, or rather, I should not use the present tense and say that it sounds, but the past and the future, saying that it both has sounded and will sound" (XI,27).

In the course of this penetrating analysis it seems to dawn on Augustine that his statement of the problem of time and language earlier in the book had been vitiated by an "objective fallacy." He had been considering both entities as things quantifiable, hence divisible; he had been equating the past and future of time and language to positional relationships of points on an imaginary surface; and in so doing he had neglected a basic coordinate which is the unifying capacity of the regulating process of mind.⁸ His analysis of the crucial functions of expectation, attention, and memory in chapter 28 draws him to the conclusion that seriality of language and divisibility of time are both illusions based upon literally superficial approaches to these phenomena. If he had thought of time as having three divisions (XI,14), it is because he had imagined time as a divisible surface. If he had thought of language as a sequence of parts, it is because he had overlooked the prior unitary meaning of what is uttered, that wholeness which is already present before the sentence is uttered or the text written. Augustine has now been drawn closer to an intuition of time as the mind's ever present measuring of motion, and of language as the measurable unfolding of a unitary mental representation that is present in the mind before utterance. The following text represents a crucial moment in Augustine's reasoning:

All the while man's attentive mind, which is present, is relegating the future to the past. The past increases in proportion as the future diminishes, until the future is entirely absorbed and the whole becomes past. But how can the future be diminished or absorbed when it does not yet exist? And how can the past increase when it no longer exists? It can only be that the mind, which regulates this process, performs three functions, those of expectation, attention, and memory. The

⁸ *Confessions* XI, 27 (Labriolle 2: 322-23): "In te, anime meus, tempora metior. Noli mihi obstrepere, quod est; noli mihi obstrepere turbis affectionum tuarum. In te, inquam, tempora metior. Affectionem, quam res praetereuntes in te faciunt et, cum illae praeterierint, manet, ipsam metior praesentem non ea quae praeterierint, ut fieret."

future, which it expects, passes through the present, to which it attends, into the past, which it remembers. No one would deny that the future does not yet exist or that the past no longer exists. Yet in the mind there is both expectation of the future and remembrance of the past. Again, no one would deny that the present has no duration, since it exists only for the instant of its passage. Yet the mind's attention persists, and through it that which is to be passes towards the state in which it is to be no more. So it is not future time that is long, but a long future is a long expectation of the future; and past time is not long, because it does not exist, but a long past is a long remembrance of the past.

Since Augustine never disassociates time from language, he illustrates this "new" intuition of time as a regulating process of mind with an example drawn from the recitation of a familiar text:

Suppose that I am going to recite a psalm that I know. Before I begin, my faculty of expectation is engaged by the whole of it. But once I have begun, as much of the psalm as I have removed from the province of expectation and relegated to the past now engages my memory, and the scope of the action which I am performing is divided between the two faculties of memory and expectation, the one looking back to the part which I have already recited, the other looking forward to the part which I still have to recite. But my faculty of attention is present all the while, and through it passes what was the future in the process of becoming the past. As the process continues, the province of memory is extended in proportion as that of expectation is reduced, until the whole of my expectation is absorbed. This happens when I have finished my recitation and it has all passed into the province of memory. What is true of the whole of the psalm is also true of all its parts and of each syllable. It is true of any longer action in which I may be engaged and of which the recitation of the psalm may only be a small part. It is true of man's whole life, of which all his actions are parts. It is true of the whole history of mankind, of which each man's life is a part. (XI,27-28).

Augustine seems to have worked himself out of the dualistic dilemma that seemed to have been forced upon him at the start of Book XI by his Platonic or Plotinian conception of time and language as the fallen or inferior parts of a superior whole. Close empirical analysis of the mind has now convinced him that his earlier categorizations were both rigid and implicitly moral; introspection has demonstrated to him that the processes of expectation, attention, and memory serve to compress the illusory divisibility of time into an ever-present though ever mobile present. These same faculties confer to the parts of human speech the cohesiveness of unitary meaning which was already present before any of the parts were uttered. By the end of Book XI Augustine seems convinced that the problem of time and language must be resolved in terms somewhat different from the static, dualistic, and morally charged categories of Plato or Plotinus. He seems no longer compelled to reject time because it is inferior to eternity, or to devalue human language because its component parts once uttered pass away into oblivion. The unity that underlies both time and language, sharing by analogy something of the wholeness and the perfection of God's

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eternity and God's timeless Word, confers upon them a real however ambivalent value.⁹

Seriality, fragmentation, atomization are not, therefore the essential characteristics of time and language. In the first fourteen chapters of Book XI it might have seemed so; but as the book progresses Augustine has become convinced that syllables are the merely external trappings of language, and that the mind is able to retain that unity of representation and meaning which were already present before the first syllable was uttered. As to human time, more than an imagined surface or line divisible into past, present, and future, it is an ever present and attentive process of the mind which extends the province of memory while reducing the province of expectation. Language and time are best understood not as objective entities but as mental functions; it is the mind that retains and rescues both the unity that was virtually present when the process began and that is actually present as the process unfolds.

Once time and language are understood in this way it seems logically necessary that Augustine should write a book of *Confessions*. The setting to paper of a text of *Confessions* is the second movement of a rescue operation initiated by memory, which saves every action we have performed, every syllable we have uttered from the peril of dissolution. Georg Misch wrote of Augustine that he had had a far acute awareness than any other previous writer of texts of self-disclosure of the underlying oneness of human life.¹⁰ It seems to follow from Augustine's thinking about time and language at the end of Book XI that writing an autobiography is not an act of creation but of transcription, a scribal rather than an auctorial gesture. For in living out one's life one seems to be copying a text that already existed in the mind of God;¹¹ and in writing a book of *Confessions* one is rewriting a text already known, like the recitation of a familiar psalm (XI,28).

It is significant that Augustine was compelled to examine the problems of human time and human language together, and that he made such

9. On the notion of analogy in Augustine, see R. Gillet, "Temps et exemplarisme chez Saint Augustin" *Congrès International Augustinien*, 2 vols. (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1954), 2: 937: "Le temporel apparaît alors comme du divin un peu dispersé, et par là même, on comprend que, finalement, tout soit grâce. L'optimisme foncier de ces vues contaste avec les interprétations pessimistes de la doctrine augustiniennne, le jansénisme par exemple. En élargissant la formule, on pourrait dire que le temporel n'est que de l'éternité désagrée à la mesure de l'homme. Eternité dispersée, désagrée, mais non dégradée comme dans la conception nysséenne du temps."

10. *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity* 2 vols, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 2:633-34: "In contrast with this spontaneous and, in a sense, unreflective type of self-portrayal there are the *Confessions* of Augustine and also the great autobiographical documents of the eighteenth century, which, like the confessions, belonged to an epoch in which the individual had lost that natural confidence in action and judgment, and could only attain it by an intellectual effort. In such epochs the making of an autobiography depends on how the autobiographer understands his life as a whole, inquiring into its direction, its aims, its meaning."

11. *Confessions* XI, 1 (Labriolle 2: 296): "Cur ergo tibi tot rerum narrationes digero? Non utique ut per me noueris ea [for God knows the story already]"

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extensive use of examples drawn from language—syllables, words, sentences, lines, verses, psalms—in order to illustrate the phenomenon of human time. It is equally significant that extensive use of imagery drawn from language makes the writing of autobiography itself a logical if not wholly necessary thing. Disclosing oneself in a text seems as natural as living itself, since living is a disclosure of a “text” already whole in the mind of God, since language itself is a part by part disclosure of a unitary meaning already whole in our minds before utterance begins. The writing of the book of autobiography performs both an esthetic and an epistemological function: it recovers a unifying form that underlies our apparently disjointed existence from its very beginning, and it recreates the unitary meaning that precedes any of our utterances. With his *Confessions* Augustine had found the point of intersection between the timeless Word and human words, between what is already written and what is being disclosed. His book gave an unprecedented impulse and justification to all the subsequent literature of self-disclosure.

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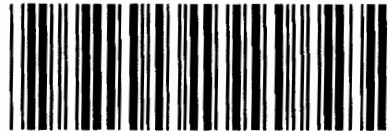
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