

LYOTARD AND AUGUSTINE'S 'CONFESSIONS'

French philosophy has always paid extensive attention to Augustine. Not merely does he play a role in the tradition, in Descartes, in Malebranche and Pascal, and in our time in a classically academic manner in such authors as Courcelle, Gilson, Guitton, Marrou and Verheyen, he also plays a role in more independent thinkers such as Ricœur, Todorov and Lacan¹. Remarkably, however, he has also come to occupy an important place in the works of such post-modern authors as Derrida² and Lyotard. This is not only to be ascribed to the fact that they too were born in Algeria or spent some time there – Algeria being the place of Augustine's birth and monastic life, as well as the seat of his episcopacy – but also to the fact that the contemporary discussion on the significance of religion in philosophy which they set in motion, continues to return to Augustine³.

Here we shall limit ourselves to Lyotard, and then even only to his very last work. It remains a noticeable and curious fact that at the end of his life he worked on a book about Augustine, which has been published under the title *The Confession of Augustine*⁴. The book contains a collection of loosely connected notes and sketches based on his own reading, in which he recognizes Augustine as a soul mate and a 'post-modern' thinker 'avant la lettre'. This is noteworthy, because in Lyotard's preceding work Augustine regularly appears as the figure whom he fiercely opposes. When rereading Augustine towards the end of his life, Lyotard's judgment is much more positive. What does Lyotard appreciate in Augustine? And does he do him justice?

In what follows I wish to arrive at an assessment of the manner in which Lyotard reads Augustine. As a point of departure I shall take the difference between the thought of Augustine and that of the

¹ For example : Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit* I and III, Paris, Seuil, 1983, 1985; Tzvetan Todorov, *Théories des symboles*, Paris, Seuil, 1985; Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire* 1, Paris, Seuil, 1986.

² Jacques Derrida, George Bennington, *Jacques Derrida (Deridabase et Circumcession)*, Paris, Seuil, 1991.

³ E.g. the meetings at Villanova University, Pennsylvania: God, the Gift (1997); Questioning God (1999) and Confessions (2001). See: John Caputo, M. Scanlon (eds.) *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, Indiana Univ. Press, 1999; John Caputo, M. Dooley (eds.) *Questioning God*, Indiana Univ. Press, 2001 and John Caputo, *Religion*, London, New York, Routledge, 2002.

⁴ Jean François Lyotard, *La confession d'Augustin*, Paris, Édition Galilée, 1998; translated by R. Beardsworth as: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, Stanford University Press, 2000 and translated into Dutch as: Jean-François Lyotard, *Augustinus' belijdenis*, Baarn, Agora, 1999.

Platonists as found in the *Confessions*. Especially with regard to the experience and appraisal of time there seems to be a noticeable difference. This appears to be a good starting point from which to assess Lyotard's interpretation of Augustine. Lyotard will pay quite a bit of attention to the phenomenon of the immediate and the ecstatic experience of time. In so far as in so doing Lyotard pays less attention to temporality, humility and humanity, he appears to display similarities to the 'platonic' mode of thought. Augustine asserts that Platonists did not see the way of incarnation, the way of Christ. This also seems to be the case with Lyotard. Lyotard is of the opinion that Augustine's *Confessions* 'failed'. Is this judgment correct? Questions concerning his psychoanalytic approach and his idea that the absolute does not lend itself to representation, may also be asked. And yet his manner of reading Augustine remains interesting, in particular when he allows himself to be guided by the language of the *Confessions*, and when he seeks to 'read [his way] into' Augustine's text.

Plotinus and Augustine compared

To answer the question whether Lyotard has well understood what confession is for Augustine, and which role time plays therein, we shall briefly address the difference between Augustine's view and the one of the Platonists⁵. According to the Neo-Platonist Plotinus (ca. 204-270), time has to do with the 'distension' (*diastasis*) of life, that is to say, the life of the soul, which in transforming moves from one life to the other, in contrast to immutable eternity remaining in a state of rest⁶. In Augustine as well as in Plotinus there is talk of a reversal, of a movement from the outside inwards as well as upwards. Yet they differ in their assessment of time. Plotinus does not deny time and the world of the senses. These are, however, understood as a 'trap', or as an 'incident' – through which the balance with the eternal is violated. In Plotinus the soul must make an effort to 'return' as fast as possible to the immutability and unchangingness of the eternal. This view entails that time is a retarding, delaying factor for this return (*conversio*). In the spiritual perspective time must make way for the immutable. Equally, that which happens in time, history, is ultimately not important for Plotinus, and in no way of service to eternity. In his view history and the inner man stand apart, one external the other internal.

⁵ See also: Guido Mertens, *Augustinus over de mens*, Brussels, 1965, 105 ff.

⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.7.11.41.

Hence Plotinus's Neo-Platonism is a contemplative mysticism that pursues the ideal of an evasion of, or escape from, the temporal-historical.

Augustine arrives at a diametrically opposed standpoint. To be sure, immutability, stability and balance are also his goal. But, as he says in book VII of the *Confessions*: 'the way is the difference'. Because Augustine heard Ambrosius, because he read St. Paul and St. John, because he knows that the Bible speaks about the difference between the Creator and creatures, for him this entails that man has been granted the freedom to increase the distance between itself and the Creator, but also that man may seek and find a way to return to God. For Augustine this is a path that is chosen out of one's free will, desire and love, and pursued through time – a path in which one may recognize the Grace of God. This thought, radically different from Plotinus, is made possible through the incarnation, the fact that God became man, by which a way to return is possible; a God-given way to open oneself and admit human weakness, to convert, confess one's past, and sing God's praises.

The manner in which Augustine conceives of confession and practices it, demands time. Through time one is able to find the way back to eternity. As such it provides the space for confession. This, because to confess is to sing the Lord's praises, to tell the story of one's life, and to confess, that the distance between God and man has been increased by one's own actions. And there is the possibility to return. Especially the turn from pride, that places one's own will at the center, to humility, the path shown in Jesus' humanity. Christ's way is human, and almost contemptible in the eyes of the philosophers of the time. In Augustine one does not find the rejection of the temporal that Platonists tend towards, but rather an appreciation of temporality, corporeality and humanity, because the Word became flesh. The aim is not to reach God as quickly as possible, through turning within and in immutable ecstasis. Rather, in the confession is reflected the human struggle with sin and confession, an adventure that takes time.

Lyotard's initial critique of Augustine

In the above we have been able to focus sufficiently on the question what confession is for Augustine, what role time plays in it, and how he differs from the Platonists on these points. We have done so in order to be able to address Lyotard's reading of Augustine. As we already remarked, initially Lyotard offers stiff resistance to Augustine. We find Lyotard's initial critique of Augustine in *La condition post-*

*moderne*⁷. Postmodernism primarily entailed the end of all great narratives, that is to say it entailed that we no longer recognize any self-contained system, unity, final goal or progress, in order to make way for a plurality and undo the lack of appreciation of minorities. And Augustine was exemplary as someone who projected such a great narrative of unity, with a clear beginning and end. Already earlier, in his *Economie libidinale*⁸ Lyotard criticized the rejection of lust, drive and sexual desire (indicated by Freud as libido), which can, supposedly, be found in Augustine's work. Hence he was of the opinion that when Augustine says that "My heart is restless until it finds rest in You", this neutralizes and teleologizes desire, and makes libido domitable and seemly. According to Lyotard, it is reprehensible to allow reality to be dominated by one principle. Augustine controls and commands from out of an obsessive-compulsive 'point Zéro': the logos⁹. According to Lyotard, the reduction of reality centered on one point is something that does not do justice to reality and ultimately reduces it to nothing: once the point of reference is lost, only nihilism remains. With some exaggeration he then adds: Not Nietzsche but Augustine is the great nihilist.

After such forceful criticism it is surprising that at the end of his life Lyotard intensely worked on a book about Augustine. One important aspect which contributes to the elucidation of this fact is Lyotard's deep involvement with aesthetics. In order to understand pieces of art, he analyses the aesthetic experience in great detail, that is to say, not only where beauty is concerned, but also all that has to do with sensory perception. From his notes it is clear that he was primarily touched by Augustine's close attention to sensory perception. This is already reflected in the first quote: "Thou callest and criest aloud to me; thou even breakedst open my deafness: thou shinest thine beams upon me, and hath put my blindness to flight; thou hast most fragrantly blown upon me, and I draw in my breath and I pant after thee; I tasted thee and now do hunger and thirst after thee; thou didst touch me and I even burn again to enjoy your peace"¹⁰.

How does Lyotard read Augustine?

If we now address the way in which Lyotard reads Augustine in more detail, in the first instance we do so with attention to three

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, Paris, Minuit, 1979.

⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *Économie libidinale*, Paris, Minuit, 1974.

⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Économie libidinale*, Paris, Minuit, 1974, p.17.

¹⁰ Augustinus, *Conf.*, X, xxvii, 38 and Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.1.

points. First, Lyotard interprets the *Confessions* in light of his own opinions of *anima-animus*, second, he does so with a strong focus on trance, the ecstatic experience, and third, he does so with his own concept of time, which he calls syncopated.

To begin with, one important aspect in view of which Lyotard reads Augustine, is the opposition of *anima* and *animus*. Lyotard often uses this opposition in his own work, for example to clarify the aesthetic experience, and he has his very own interpretation of the terms *anima* and *animus*¹¹. He juxtaposes *animus* (spirit, thought) to *anima* (soul, sensory receptivity). And he is of the opinion that: "The soul can be touched by sensory perception (...) *anima* exists only as affected being. No matter whether the sensory perception is pleasant or horrific (...). The soul is nothing other than the awakening of the affective capacity, and this capacity remains unused if something like a timbre, color or smell is missing, if there is no sensory experience that stimulates it. The soul does not touch itself: only what is other touches it 'from the outside'. Here, to exist is not the same as the existence of a consciousness involved with its noematic correlate, or the being of an enduring substance. To exist means: to be awakened by sensory experience from the nothing of insensitiveness"¹². For Lyotard *animus* has a negative connotation: it is the spirit that can become a system. It is representation in time, space, and concept, or the system one finds in Hegel, the intellectual synthesis in Kant, or the critique of representation found in Freud and Heidegger. It is the spirit that appears to know itself and works with nice and clean oppositions: in or out, before or after, all or nothing. The *anima* breaks through this, and demands sensitivity for all that does not fit into the clean-cut categories of time, space, and concept.

But is Lyotard right to 'read' this opposition of *anima* and *animus* 'into' Augustine? Lyotard interprets the *anima* as 'being touched', 'penetration' and 'incarnation' and argues that the body (*corps*) is transformed into 'flesh' (*chair*), a flesh of the soul (*âme-chair*). *Anima* is lived experience in the flesh, pure receptivity, without distance or distinction, whereas *animus* is cognitive distinction and thinking within the frameworks of representation. Sometimes he indicates the distinction between *animus* and *anima* as the distinction between 'what' and the mere 'that'. For his own thought the distinction between *anima* and *animus* appears to be quite fruitful, but it

¹¹ This must also strongly be distinguished from the use Jung makes of these terms.

¹² Jean-François. Lyotard, *Moralités postmodernes*, Paris, Galilée, 1993, p.147.

seems ill-suited for understanding Augustine. What he has seen is Augustine's extensive attention to sensory experience, but such a distinction between *anima* as the sensitivity for naked existence and *animus* as spirit or mere thought, does not occur in Augustine. Augustine makes a much less strongly distinguished use of the terms *animus* and *anima*, sometimes even confusing them, and not in the sense that Lyotard attaches to them. Clear proof for this is that he refers to time as a *distensio animi*, and hence a sensation to which the *animus* is subjected.

Second, Lyotard accentuates in Augustine the moment of trance¹³. When Lyotard says: "The inventio, the encounter with, the discovery of God, does not take place in the stores of memory, such apprenticeship exceeds the mind"¹⁴, this seems to be confirmed by Augustine's words "Thou wert more inside me than my inmost part; higher than my topmost part that I could reach"¹⁵. Lyotard interprets this as follows: The encounter with God lies beyond opposites such as internal and external. He speaks of a 'primal scene' which suddenly overwhelms us. "Limits are reversed, the inside and the outside, the before and the after, these miseries of the mind"¹⁶. These statements are bothersome because limits fall away here. The highest is at the same time the lowest. This happens in trance. In trance there is presence in absence, what comes to the fore is what withdraws. In view of the fact that the trance cannot be initiated, it also can never stop. And this cannot be expressed in any other way because the absolute does not fit into time, space or concept. As a figure of speech, the oxymoron is correctly identified at this point: it is that figure of speech in which contradictory terms encounter each other, in which there may be talk of: the intimate stranger, the distant proximity, remaining transitivity, the absent presence.

Lyotard is right in claiming that in Augustine there is talk of that which goes beyond us. Is it not the case that the "Thou wert more inside me than my inmost part; higher than my topmost part that I could reach" can be understood from the "Late did I learn to love You, You were inside me and I desperately looked for You outside"? For does Lyotard pay sufficient attention to the way from the outside to the inside and upwards? When Lyotard says that "there is no room in memory for the encounter with God" he falls short of the path that

¹³ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.51.

¹⁴ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.51.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Conf.*, III, vi, 11.

¹⁶ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.53.

Augustine travels in the *Confessions*. In the first book the question is asked: "Where are You?" and at the end of a page-long journey of inquiry Augustine describes what memory is. Memory is an enormous space and the place in which he asks himself the question whether he once again brings God into himself and remembers Him. This, therefore, occurs in memory, and only afterwards does he ask: "Where then have I come to know You? In me, or in You above me?"¹⁷ And the answer is: In You above me! The recognition that God is to be found above me, does not so much reflect a trance experience, but is rather what we would call today the fruit of a patiently executed phenomenological analysis, a path on which Augustine knows himself to be put and drawn by God.

Third, in his reading of the *Confessions* Lyotard primarily has an eye for a rather specific temporal experience. For Lyotard, time is like a 'beat' or 'fissure' or 'break-in'. When Augustine says: "Too late did I come to love You", Lyotard interprets this as a syncopated experience of time. The Greek *sugkoptoo* means to clash together, break into pieces, shorten. Just as in the silent measure before or after a syncopation in music, something can here be intimated in the absence of the too early or the too late. Lyotard mainly sees the a-temporal in the temporal. The not-being of a past that no longer is, of a future that is not yet, and of a present that knows no other being than that of becoming the past of the future. The race towards the future is primarily described as a restlessness. Rightly, Lyotard also perceives this as a certain restlessness and problematization of the account of Augustine by himself. The reflection upon one's own inner self is one which "will be resumed by Descartes with the *Cogito*". Augustine's turn to memory has been determinative for "the phenomenology of internal time. The whole of modern existential thought on temporality ensues from this meditation: Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre"¹⁸.

Of course, Lyotard is right to say so, yet his description of time that, properly speaking, is nothing, or merely a fissure or break-in or something that is only perceivable in the silent measure before or after it, falls short. For we have seen that when Augustine asks what time is¹⁹, he answers that we measure time with the *animus*, and this with the immense reservoir of memory: with it we recall memories and through it there exists an awareness of time. Time is a 'distension' (*distensio*) of the 'spirit' (*animus*). Time is not a fissure, break-in or

¹⁷ Augustine, *Conf.*, X, xxvi, 37.

¹⁸ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.73.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Conf.*, XI, xiv, 17.

nothing, but it is collected in memory and anticipation and measured in the now of actual experience.

In the foregoing, I have already raised some questions with regard to the opposition between *anima* and *animus*. Maybe they can now be formulated more poignantly: Lyotard holds that time cannot be thought. He argues that memory and future are measured with the *animus*, and he only ascribes the uniqueness of the singular to the *anima*. The *animus* measures time with memory and future. And, according to him, it is precisely this to which the actual does not lend itself. The actual is singular, and as such cannot be grasped by the *animus*. The being touched in the *anima* is a sudden break-in that cannot be brought back. It is true that the loss of an intense moment has to do with the temporality of desire. The *anima* mourns the loss of the actual by which it was touched at a syncopated moment. The rest is 'deception', disappointment because it has been taken from me. The actual is like the taste of food. Just try to explain the taste of honey when you are not actually tasting it. Lyotard then concludes: it is a 'too late'. Augustine, however, conceives time in extension of desire and its transformation. Lyotard's concept of time has not enough eye for the temporality of desire. Only the immediate impact counts and it cannot be retrieved. For Augustine, however, there is time for a difficult and long-lasting process of conversion and transformation.

Why, according to Lyotard, 'confession' fails

Lyotard argues that for Augustine 'confession' (*se confesser*) fails. After all, radical conversion, as radical devotion, presupposes activity and passivity. Augustine is constantly aware of a certain disintegration and inability (*distentio*) as well as a certain frustration and lack of will (*consuetudo* = force of habit or love of ease). However, according to me, Lyotard does not see that what Augustine addresses is a way of confession as a transformation of desire. And this being the case, is Lyotard not proven wrong when he argues that confession fails because of time, rhetoric, and because it wishes to posit as present what withdraws?

Lyotard observes that writing takes place in time, and therefore, according to him, is always post factual. "He writes in order to write away from himself the past, and hence also the past of the writing he is occupied with, when he writes his past away from himself"²⁰.

²⁰ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.50.

Confession, for Lyotard, has therefore failed, whereas for Augustine it is precisely confession which activates and changes desire, in which he finds back his proper orientation.

Furthermore, according to Lyotard, confession also fails, because Augustine considers eloquence for eloquence's sake prideful, while at the same time continuously relapsing into his old habits of the rhetorician to garnish his text with refinements. Again and again he bows his head to the demon of eloquence and aesthetics. I think that he does so in order to do all he can to sing God's praises, though Augustine accuses himself of self-praise. A reading of the beginning and end of any chapter of Augustine's *Confessions* suffices to become enthralled by the beauty of Augustine's language and composition, especially if one writes it down in visual verse form.

Finally, confession is supposed to have failed, because it wishes to posit as being present what withdraws. Today this is referred to as the problem of representation. Lyotard's reading is influenced by psycho-analysis in which there is also often talk of the unconscious or a primal scene which does not allow itself to be represented. In the tradition too, one has already for a long time been acquainted with the problem of the representation of the absolute. Both of these aspects we shall now address in more detail.

A psychoanalytic reading

Lyotard's discussion of Augustine is influenced, to a large degree, by the work of the French psychoanalyst Lacan (1901-1981). The unconscious, according to Lacan, is primarily 'language' not at our disposal. If Augustine wishes to confess his entire life before God, he must also come to the realization that man is inhabited by something immemorial. Before the spirit could register it, his life already began. Of his cries as a baby, his jealousies, his sadness, he does not know much about, when he attains consciousness. He himself says that he knows these things through what he has been told by others – Lacan speaks of the '*discours de l'autre*'. Parents and others tell us what and who we were, when we did not yet know that we were. Man is the product of the language and writings of others. Augustine goes further than that, and says: "These are questions I must put to you for I have no one else to answer them. Neither my father nor my mother could tell me...Where could such a living creature come from if not from you my Lord? Can it be that any man has skill to fabricate himself?"²¹

²¹ Augustine, *Conf.*, I, vi, 7.

We are the product of discourse, spoken as well as written text. As Lyotard says: "Subject of the confessional work, the first person author forgets that he is the work of writing"²². If an author thinks of himself as the source and origin, confession and conversion become undone, since a mortal author in so doing places himself on the throne of the Most High. But is this the case with Augustine? I do not think so. On the contrary, confessing bears witness to being directed toward that which goes beyond us, and Augustine himself points to the fact that confession may fail because of the misdirection of desire in the different forms of lust: the lust of the flesh, of the eye, and of pride (*concupiscentia carnis, concupiscentia oculorum, and superbia*).

At this point, the question of how religious pathos is mixed with sexual drive also plays a role. According to Lyotard, the sexual appears stronger since it manifests itself more easily. And this appears to be confirmed, when we also read in Augustine that the dream, for example, is ambiguous for him: He is never certain whether his pleasure comes from God or from his sexuality: "For my will was perverse (*perversa*) and lust (*libido*) had grown from it, and when I gave in to lust, habit (*consuetudo*) was born"²³.

In the eyes of this reading as colored by psychoanalysis, the meaning of the significance of the signifiers of language is the next datum that makes confession difficult. Not only are signifiers ambiguous because of the entanglement of the religious and the sexual; whenever Augustine's despair at attaching significance becomes too much for him, he is apt to see an indication of God in the smallest things. He sees a sign of God in a song sung 'tolle lege', in Ambrose who sits reading in silence, in the story of the conversion of Abbot Anthony, and in incidental Bible passages in which he recognizes the hand of God. The absolute keeps itself discreetly hidden; is it not a sign of *hubris* to isolate a few instances of the absolute? Lyotard asks critically. Anyone who in confessing praises God for His hand in his life, has not yet relinquished his own authorship.

According to Lyotard this has to do with the inevitability of forgetting. Conversion necessarily goes together with forgetting. The encounter knocks a hole into memory and causes a shift in the representational coordinates of space and time. It has already been forgotten as the great 'primal trauma'. I cannot tell *what* has happened, I cannot even tell *that* something has happened, and yet there is still the uncanny (*unheimliche*) feeling that one has forgotten 'something'. I

²² Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustin*, p.36.

²³ Augustine, *Conf.*, VIII, v, 10.

am made restless by the impossible memory of a necessary forgetting. This 'primal forgetting' can be compared to the experience of one's own back. I cannot rid myself of it. Neither can I take stock of it. Forgetting torments me and only becomes more unbearable when, like Augustine, I resolutely make it my task to confess all, and to surrender my entire life completely to the absolute Other. How to confess what primordially has already been forgotten? For Lyotard confessing is something that cannot be conceived of as being temporal or as being intentional. For Augustine, however, that is exactly the case.

If we give Augustine an unprejudiced reading, he does, however, appear to be aware that language is not always at his disposal, but also that in this awareness he recognizes God's Grace, which is always already at work in him. For Augustine argues: where sin is at work it comes from the human being, where grace is at work it has to be ascribed to God. Perhaps Augustine proceeds much more scrupulously in his investigation of the sexual drive than we would these days consider sound; his intention is to emphasize God's active power. Where the ambiguity of signifiers is concerned: Augustine has relinquished authorship. In his quest for God's proper place he does not situate Him in memory, but above and beyond memory. Where forgetting is concerned; it is certainly the case that in antiquity more stress was placed on remembering than we currently place on forgetting (Freud, Nietzsche, Levinas, Chrétien, Henry and others). But here too, it appears that the basic difference between Augustine and Lyotard is a question of time. Lyotard constantly speaks of confession coming too-late, and an irredeemably lost moment, whereas in Augustine there is talk of a reading back, in which life is received as a gift that in remorseful conversion can be turned into a song of praise.

The opening lines of the fifth book: "Receive here the sacrifice of my confessions, *de manu linguae meae*, from the hand of my tongue, which thou hast formed and stirred up to confess upon your name"²⁴ are also quoted by Lyotard²⁵. Just as in any authentic sacrifice, confession signifies a reciprocal gift to him who was the first to give and shall always remain giving. Lyotard suggests a reciprocity that leaves undetermined whether the sacrificant or God is the author of the sacrifice. Lyotard does not seem to know, Augustine however does know. There is talk of a Thou, which reveals itself to the heart that loves Him, as Merciful, rather than as absolute.

²⁴ Augustine, *Conf.*, V, i, 1.

²⁵ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.26

Representation of the absolute

In the Dutch version of Lyotard's little book about Augustine, in his epilogue²⁶ Doude van Troostwijk goes to great length to point out that the absolute 'explodes' the structures of representation. Augustine's *Confessions* deal with what is unimaginable or un-representable. How can the un-representable announce itself in the representable?

Lyotard describes the phrase (sentence, expression) as a space suspended between four instances: on the communicative axis, the sender and the receiver; and on the semantic axis, referent and meaning. What happens when God is put under discussion? First an example: when Augustine discusses his childhood, he 'establishes' a communicative situation in which the instance of the sender (*destinateur*) as well as that of the receiver (*destinataire*) are on the communicative axis. This because he himself is speaking, and that first and foremost for himself. Further, on the semantic axis, the communicative situation also deals with himself: as object (*référént*), if any meaning (*signification*) is attached to it. This entire semantic system is brought into disarray, when, to his astonishment, Augustine discovers that he is not the author of himself when talking about his childhood. He is *sub-ject* in the etymological sense of the term: from the beginning on he is subject of the sentences spoken about him. Augustine understands this in light of the beginning of the gospel of John, in which there is talk of the word (logos) which was in the beginning. In this manner he arrives at a point beyond any human phrasing; the point the logos occupies is absolute, it is the primal phrase by which we are created. Lyotard concludes: the phrase which makes human language possible, is itself not possible in human language. The confessant wishes to be thorough, to leave no stone unturned. The confessant wishes to utter the absolute phrase, that primal phrase. According to Lyotard it is for this reason that Augustine continuously appeals to a 'Thou'. It is an *invocatio*, to allow the only author of creation to enter into one's own speaking. With this *invocatio* Augustine is said to head for *aporia* or the failure of all confession.

When the Creator with his primal phrase is invited to assume his place in the phrase of the confessant the phrase-universe 'collapses'. The 'Thou' whom Augustine addresses, is after all, the proper sender. The opposition sender-receiver implodes or explodes. In this case one may equally speak of an explosion or an implosion, because

²⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *Augustinus' belijdenis*, Baarn, Agora, 1999, p.101-140.

everything falls apart or crumbles inward. The difference becomes indifference or indistinctiveness. On the communicative axis the absolute phrase is without direction: beginning and end are collapsed. Also along the semantic axis confusion arises: the entire life must be confessed and sacrificed. If the referent (the object), is the 'Thou' or the 'absolute', then the referent is the same as the sender and the receiver. At the same time this also results in the implosion or explosion of meaning. Because if everything is in all, nothing can signify anything other than itself. This then is the fusion of the four poles of the phrase-universe into indifference. An *aporia* or end of the articulated phrase. For the subject this means that as soon as confession succeeds, the ego disappears like snow under the sun. Or as Doude van Troostwijk remarks: "He who digs a pit for the absolute, falls in it himself"²⁷.

In my opinion I have to state that such an approach does not do Augustine justice. Such a semiotic concept of language is rather instrumentalist. The technical model of sender and receiver, meaning and referent, is not suitable to capture all the nuances of Augustine's words about what is in his heart. For Augustine, language ultimately has to do with the Word that was with God in the beginning. Luckily, the claims concerning Augustine's concept of language which Wittgenstein made in his *Philosophische Untersuchungen*²⁸ are not repeated. Wittgenstein quotes the passage in which Augustine describes the acquisition of language in terms of words being the reflections of things. There, Wittgenstein opposes much more his own naïve concept of language, which he advocated in the *Tractatus*, than in anyway doing Augustine justice. Just like the beginning of the gospel of John, Augustine speaks about what precedes mankind. As it speaks in us, we share in God's Word through which we were created. But he does not do so by conceiving of language as an instrument, nor by conceiving of it in terms of the absolute. His question concerns how God is active in our finite and sinful life. It is indeed an *invocatio*. But not because the confessant wishes to be thorough and leaves no stone unturned. The confessant does not want to utter the absolute, primal phrase. It is precisely not the path of *hubris*, but that of humility, temporality, and humanity which he wishes to pursue. It is for this reason that Augustine continuously appeals to a 'Thou'. Something curious is happening when Lyotard, in order to do Augustine as much justice as possible, adopts that use of words.

²⁷ Ibidem, p.133.

²⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, 1953.

What is interesting in Lyotard's reading of Augustine

Enthralling about Lyotard's interpretation is that he first and foremost demands attention for the act of reading. Particular stress is placed on attention to tone, the melody and music in the reading; subsequently that he has recognized the lament and praise in Augustine's psalms, and finally, that he goes up in reading himself into Augustine's text to such an extent, that his own text sometimes turns into prayer.

In his *Retractationes* Augustine says the following about his *Confessions*: "They have to awaken man's understanding and heart for God (*excitant humanum intellectum et affectum*). They caused this to come about in me when they were written down, and they affect me that way again when I read them"²⁹. This is what confession brings about in himself. To read is a type of receiving. For Augustine this receiving goes together with joy and hope. This rejoicing can hardly be read in Lyotard's text. Lyotard³⁰ has pointed out that God has placed the firmament above us like the scroll of a book which has been given to us to read. "[...] You have spread out the heavens like a canopy of skins, and these heavens are your Book[...]"³¹ One could make a study of the theme 'reading' in the *Confessions*. Augustine often deals with reading, think only of what his reading of Cicero's Hortensius, and later his reading of the books of the Platonists meant for him, and that in his conversion the words of the song were decisive: *Tolle Lege* (Take and Read). Lyotard has provided valuable approaches for such a study, for example when he speaks about Augustine as an author. "Is it not thou and thou alone, O our God, so demands the confessant, is it not thou who has made us that firmament of authority of the divine scripture to be over us? *Firmament* – a firm support, this is what the sky of skins also constitutes, the support of a breviary dedicated by the author to the edification of mortal beings"³². And Lyotard continues: "For this book remains, while one after the other, Moses, David, John and Paul, who came to spread and augment the word of the Holy, have disappeared. The ephemeral being of their lives highlights *a contrario* the perpetuity of your message as well as its increase. *Auctoritas* is the faculty of growing, of founding, of instituting, of vouchsaying"³³. *Auctoritas* is etymologically connected

²⁹ Augustine, *Retractationes*, II,2.

³⁰ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.37.

³¹ Augustine, *Conf.*, XIII, xv, 16.

³² Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.39.

³³ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.39.

to *augeo* (Lat.) and *auksanoō* (Gr.), to make grow, augment, enrich. "And yet, we from below, can scarcely read these signs that are still too high, still too dazzling. In like manner, birds of the night, barn owls, screech owls take fright, with their nictitating eyelids, a third skin, an added layer of film, lowering over their pupils, without impairing sight, so as to protect against the full shock of the sun. Little is to say that the eyes of your creatures blink, they are veiled, adapted to the night of sin, they decipher in bits. We mumble our way through the traces left by the absolute that you are, we spell the letters. In truth, Augustine explains, we read because we do not know how to read"³⁴. According to me, when Lyotard then says that "The true book is closed to us, the book of your truth, one in face-to-face, all at once", he once again goes too far in his wish to have immediate knowledge or an ecstatic experience. Lyotard allows us to see that this might be somewhat different in Augustine when he speaks about reading in a 'kenoary'; derived from the Greek word 'kenos': empty, a reference to the theological problematic of 'kenosis'; the 'emptying' of God in becoming man, up until and including death on the cross³⁵. Finally, Lyotard quotes in this context Augustine, that passage in which he plays with the words: "They read, they choose, they love" in Latin *legunt, eligunt* and *diligunt*. "They read it without cease, and what they read never passes away. For it is your own unchanging purpose that they read, choosing to make it their own, and cherishing it for themselves"³⁶. In this passage reading appears similar to the playing of music. Lyotard compares the *Confessions* with the score for an orchestra. The text demands duplication and repetition from the reader in order to bring it to life. Duplication here in the sense of hermeneutic variation, or to recapture in reading. And in the end, the performance of a piece of music is concerned with the tone that constitutes the music or the confession. This cannot be grasped in fixed or programmed frameworks. Lyotard speaks of the tone which one hears as 'vibration' or 'stridence' (a high pitched almost imperceptible tonality). A vibration that gives you the feeling: 'now it will happen'. Lyotard elucidates this with a quote from Malreaux: "The voice of the others you hear with your ears. Your own voice you hear with your throat"³⁷. My throat is the only throat in which my voice can resound. I cannot hear the voice of the other in my own throat. I am not in his or

³⁴ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.40.

³⁵ Phil. 2,6 vv.

³⁶ Augustine, *Conf.*, XIII, xv, 18.

³⁷ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, 3, 45f, 55, 67, 84

her body. And yet there are exceptions. Malreaux mentions the rough shouts of soldiers in the trenches. This inhuman, animal scream, fuses the throats together. In anxiety my throat sounds like that of others. I would like to add, that in his analysis of music Lyotard deals primarily with hearing the vibrations of fear and rough animality, whereas in Malreaux also in love can such a universal-singular voice resound. Also in love does the tone of the other resonate in my throat³⁸. Does Lyotard also hear that tone in Augustine? We shall come back to this point.

Lyotard primarily sees in Augustine's *Confessions* a compulsion to recidivism. He speaks of a musical string that is being touched, a string that is so unique that it has never been played and will never be played again. This is traumatic³⁹ like an incurable wound that keeps smarting. One wants to return, recidivate, to still have the missed experience. But that is not possible. In an infinite movement, writing circles around the irrecoverable. It seems to be like the criminal who must always return to the place of doom: recidivistic. According to Lyotard, the philosophical passages are not seeking to construct, but to deconstruct the knowable in favor of what cannot be known. In writing Augustine traces for himself the impassable path to that 'poverty in spirit', which according to biblical promise is blessed. His autobiography does not aim to reconstruct the course of his life, but rather aims to attach himself to the vibrations that resound therein.

We have already seen that Lyotard had listened to music, and to contemporary syncopated music in particular. From the *Confessions* we know that music indeed plays a great role for Augustine, albeit that he is mainly moved by plain song in the church. He is an advocate for song, but at the same time cautions that beauty might distract from content⁴⁰.

Lyotard pays special attention to the psalms, and points to their Jewish roots⁴¹. The praise of the greatness mentioned above is sung in terms that go back to Hebrew. The Hebrew *Tehillâh* is glory, praise. The psalms are the lamentations and praises, they are the psalmody that disrupt and weave themselves into the rhetorical-philosophical as well as the narrative flow of the argument. Lyotard says of them: "A whole life astray comes with the psalmody to beat the holy medi-

³⁸ Cfr. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p.189-190. Translated as *The Visible and the Invisible*, North Western University Press, Evanston, 1968, p. 211.

³⁹ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p. 31, 54.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Conf.*, X, xxxiii, 50.

⁴¹ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p. 83

tation, the wise argumentation, the upright narrative, to interrupt the clear string of thoughts and tie it to the other, the red and black fiber of the flesh"⁴². Although this hardly comes to the fore in Lyotard's text, I find it striking that next to the lamentation (qînâh) one may also listen to joy. He concludes his piece on the psalms with "When I called upon thee, thou heardest me, god of my righteousness, thou hast enlarged me in my distress. With the same breath the voice shivers with fear and burns with hope"⁴³. In his fascinating essay "Time as a Psalm in St. Augustine", A. M. Johnston⁴⁴ has demonstrated that the singing of the psalm is the fundamental thought on the basis of which Augustine conceives of time. In this we are not only supported by the past that precedes us and the future that we anticipate. It is also the space in which God can become present in our temporality.

Corporeality and humility

In iconography Augustine is pictured with a book and a burning heart. In the *Confessions* Lyotard has discovered Augustine's burning heart. And as we have seen, his manner of reading reveals a number of aspects that may, in this day and age, surprise us. For example his attention to sensory perception. Yet here too, the difference between Augustine's view and that of the Platonists remains elucidating. When in Book VII of the *Confessions* Augustine recounts how he came to be impressed by the Platonists, he mentions this in order to say that they have shown him that God must not be thought in corporeal fashion. Under the influence of the then predominant opinion, such as the Stoa and Manicheism, he first thought of God as a fine substance. But with this the story does not come to an end. Augustine, for example, reads in St. Paul about the humility of God, and then demonstrates that the Platonists did indeed see God's sublimity, but failed to gain insight into His deepest depths, that they had a view of truth, but did not know the way to it. "But I did not read in them that the Word was made flesh and came to dwell among us. Though the words were different and the meaning was expressed in various ways, I also learned from these books that God the Son, being himself, like the Father, of divine nature, did not see, in the rank of Godhead, a prize to be coveted. But they do not say that he dispossessed himself, and took the nature of a

⁴² Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.85.

⁴³ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.86.

⁴⁴ A.M. Johnston, Time as a Psalm in St. Augustine, in: *Animus. A Philosophical Journal for Our Time*, vol. 1, 1996.

slave, fashioned in the likeness of men, and presenting himself to us in human form; and then he lowered his own dignity, accepted an obedience which brought him to death, death on a cross,..."⁴⁵. Similarly, in the books of the Platonists, there is no talk of grace or love. "For was I not without charity, which builds its edifice on the firm foundation of humility, that is, on Jesus Christ? But how could I expect that the Platonists' books could ever teach me charity?"⁴⁶. Augustine writes about how much effort it costs him to learn to bow his stubborn neck before Holy Scripture, before the Sacraments (Baptism and Eucharist) and before Jesus' simple humanity and death upon the cross. All this then leads to the question, whether the aspects of humble humanity and grace receive their sufficient due in Lyotard's interpretation, because his understanding of being-touched is sometimes too fast and too immediate, to do the temporality in which God is active in man justice.

A methodological consideration

In order to disagree with Lyotard, however, one must take into account a distinction he made in one of his most important works, *Le différend* from 1983. He distinguishes a 'difference' (*le différend*) from a 'litigation' (*un litige*). To use his own words: "In contrast to a litigation (*un litige*), a difference (*le différend*) is a conflict between at least two parties that cannot easily be adjudicated, in view of the lack of a law that is applicable to both trains of argumentation"⁴⁷. Lyotard gives the example of an inhabitant of Martinique, who can of necessity only at a French court of law lodge a complaint about being considered a French citizen. He does this, only to be told that the court cannot admit his claim. Hence it could well be that we are judging Lyotard from a frame of reference that might not even understand what he is talking about. He says that the predominant orders have the tendency to ignore all that is not at home in their own logic, to impose silence upon it, repress it and even liquidate it. That orders are intrinsically totalizing, Lyotard, as well as thinkers akin to his thought, such as Levinas and Derrida, considers as being fundamentally at work in language. Fortunately he provides another indication: where he understands speaking as a sequence of sentences. As soon as someone speaks, one has to choose how to connect to what is spoken

⁴⁵ Augustine, *Conf.*, VII, ix, 13; cfr. Phil. 2,6ff.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *Conf.*, VII, xx, 26.

⁴⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *Le différend*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1983, p. 9.

(silence is also a form of connection). Because every expression (*phrase*) is ambiguous, connection irredeemably means choice. Normally every choice is guided and mediated by the genre, the type of discourse spoken. After all, every speaking occurs within the context of a particular genre (comparable to what Wittgenstein calls a language game). And for a large part these genres determine what may and may not be said, such as is apparent in the example of the (French) jurisprudence, in which the claim of an inhabitant of Martinique cannot be admitted. Interestingly enough, Lyotard, being aware of this, attempts to assume the genre, Augustine's style and manner of writing in his own texts on Augustine. The genre of Augustine's *Confessions* is that of prayer and confession. Confession is a song of praise of God, the accounting of one's own life, and the admission of guilt before the Lord. What happens if one tries to assume such a genre? What is at stake is whether Lyotard does Augustine justice. And are we doing justice to Lyotard when we ask if something special occurs when he appropriates the genre of prayer and confession?

It is interesting that with regard to the problem of understanding one another correctly, Lyotard demands attention to the genre. In particular because Lyotard's genre is itself rather extraordinary. By, as it were, inscribing himself into the style of Augustine's *Confessions*, Lyotard endeavors to respond to the intention of that work. He himself, for example, adopts addressing himself to a "Thou". And sometimes he also adopts *the genre of prayer*. What is happening here? He quotes passages without quotation-marks; sometimes it seems like blatant plagiarism. Augustine is not cited and brought to attention, he is brought into the text. The repetition of what the other articulated, serves as the reanimation of this irrecoverable tone. Lyotard inscribes himself to such an extent that, as it were, he has heard Augustine's ex-citation with his own throat, in order to feel it himself once again – and then he not only listens to despair, but also to hope.

This leads to the question: if you read a text as a prayer, do you pray? In either case, Lyotard has discovered a congenial spirit in Augustine. It is the spirit and soul of someone who has been touched, taken hostage, alienated. Taken hostage by that which remains alien and absent. And in the textual fragments with the titles *Laudes*⁴⁸ and *You*⁴⁹ (*Toi*), Lyotard's own text almost turns into prayer. How can a

⁴⁸ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.56.

⁴⁹ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.75.

text like the following be understood differently? "For God also tempts the soul, as if he were fond of proving its weaknesses rather than kindling its virtue. The imprint that he has stamped into it, almost by surprise, and that leaves it divided within itself, exerts such influence that the soul continues to sigh for the return of ecstasy, henceforth devoted to this visiting and condemned to repetition like a sinner slave to his or her worst inclinations. Carry me away, convey me hither, set ablaze, subvert!"⁵⁰ And therewith Lyotard has read Augustine well, and apart from his continuous leaning towards an immediate ecstasis, has come quite close to him.

In conclusion

As we have seen, Lyotard's last remarks on Augustine's *Confessions* are certainly not without problems. In the above we encountered the fact that with his own conception of *animus* and *anima*, his pronounced attention to *trance* and immediate experience, Lyotard appears to interpret Augustine incorrectly. Compared to the tenets of the Platonists, Augustine devotes attention to the process of conversion, which takes time, and he is not so much concerned with communing with celestial thoughts, as with how conversion receives its form here among the people in the world and in history. The incarnate thought of Augustine is juxtaposed to the thought of Lyotard, which syncopatedly knows of the too late, the immemorial and irrecouperable, thereby properly speaking not being oriented. Namely, one is not even able to say that it revolves around that which cannot principally be remembered, because one would still know too much what it would be about. Precisely there where confession seems to have failed for Lyotard, Augustine regains the correct orientation in the desire of confession, that is to say, in the accounting of one's life, admitting guilt, and singing God's praises, recognizing therein the work of God's grace and love.

Lyotard's contribution is nevertheless of interest. Especially with regard to the choice of genre and style. He has inserted himself into Augustine's genre, into the style of prayer and confession. But it is impossible to conclude that he then actually prays and confesses. Therefore his contribution is mainly interesting because of an element which cannot be determined. As has already been said: If one is to disagree with Lyotard, one has to take into account the distinction between a difference (*le différend*) and a litigation (*un litige*)⁵¹. In the

⁵⁰ Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.87; Augustine, *Conf.*, X, xxvii, 38.

conversation between Lyotard and Augustine there is apparently talk of irreconcilable contexts. Hence it could be that we judge Lyotard from a frame of reference which does not understand what he is dealing with. Conversely, it could be that he reads things in Augustine which do not even approach what actually motivated Augustine. To give an example of the former: like other French thinkers (Levinas, Derrida, Marion and others) Lyotard pays a lot of attention to the *impossible possibility*. And perhaps this attention for what is indeterminate, failing, traumatizing, this *maybe* which again and again remains an open question, is *the* way to indicate the transcendent or what religion deals with. When you have lost your way, when you achieve a state that supercedes your own powers, when you are confronted with something more powerful than yourself, when you have lost your footing, then you are confronted with the possibility of the impossible with which religious awareness is concerned. And it is this *disruption* that Lyotard identified in Augustine.

Conversely, it could be that Lyotard did not know what Augustine really dealt with, but he was able to reproduce that which moved Augustine the most by immersing himself in the genre of prayer. It is worth the effort to follow Lyotard's reflections on Augustine, in order to see that Lyotard's work is not merely the proponent of a relativistic pluralism, but motivated by the quest for truth. It is the truth of which Augustine has said: "The answer You give is clear, but not all hear it clearly. All ask You whatever they wish to ask, but the answer they receive is not always what they want to hear. The man who serves You best, is the one who is less intent on hearing from You what he wills to hear than on shaping his will according to what he hears from You"⁵².

Aerdenhout

Bert BLANS

⁵¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Le différend*, Paris, Minuit, 1983, p. 9.

⁵² Augustine, *Conf.*, X, xxvi, 37.