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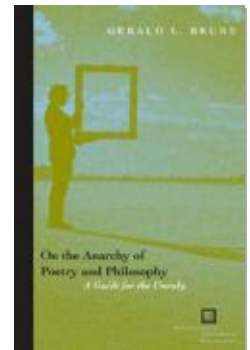
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The Senses of Augustine: On Some of Lyotard's Remains

For Jim Dougherty

Oh Lord, you have stricken my heart.

—*The Confessions*, 10.6

The Pagan. At the time of his death in 1998 the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard had begun writing what was to have been a substantial work on Augustine's *Confessions*. In the event he has left us only fragments—notes, paragraphs, *envois*, sketches, and two lectures stitched together to form a kind of monograph called “La Confession d’Augustin”: *the* confession, referring, as we shall see, to Augustine's confession of his love for God. Like all of Lyotard's productions, this posthumous assembly leaves us guessing as to what kind of writing it is supposed to be. In fact Lyotard was never much more than a writer of fragments (or, in his terms, rudiments, instructions, discussions). Like Sade and Balzac, or Sartre and Derrida, he was someone who could not stop writing even when he wanted to, but he was not monumental—call him a *low* modernist. He thought that writing or thinking should not be the construction of systems, theories, works, or conceptual worlds but simply “an affair of linking phrases [*une affaire d'enchaînement de phrases*],” supposing we know what phrases are (Di.130/D.86).¹ The idea is *not* to assemble phrases into wholes: no more “big talk.”² *Enchaînement* is rhizomorphous like grass, not arboreal like a tree.³ Lyotard preferred the address (*l'adresse*) to books, saying that “in the next century there will be no

more books,” which even now are produced to be sold rather than read (Di.13/D.xv). He said that the “genre” of *Le Différend* (1983) “is that of Observations, Remarks, Thoughts, Studies, and Notes which are relative to an object; in other words, a discontinuous form of the Essay” (Di.12/D.xiv). And he called his most systematic text “lessons,” or “a file of notes for the oral explication” of some pages of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*.⁴ He invented an original and useful definition of paganism: “When I speak of paganism, I am not using a concept. It is a name, neither better nor worse than others, for the denomination of a situation in which one judges *without criteria*. And one judges not only in matters of truth, but also in matters of beauty (of aesthetic efficacy) and in matters of justice, that is, of politics and ethics, and all without criteria. That’s what I mean by paganism” (AJ.33/JG.16).⁵ Substitute writing for judging and you can see that Lyotard was in this anarchic sense a pagan writer—and moreover he seems to have thought of himself as encountering in Augustine another pagan writer in just this sense of someone who does not proceed by applying criteria (laws, concepts, methods, rules, categories, distinctions, models, paradigms, master narratives, universals) but who exists in a state of *passibility*: “If we are in a state of passibility, it’s that something is happening to us . . . [and] what happens is not at all something we have first controlled, programmed, or grasped by a concept [*Begriff*]. Or else, if what we are possible to has first been plotted conceptually, how can it *seize* us? How can it test us if we already know, or if we can know—of what, with what, for what, it is done?” (In.121–22/I.111). “Passibility” is a neologism that puns on *passivity* and *possibility*, where passivity is not mere passiveness as opposed to activity but an openness to what happens (*se passer*), a disposition free of calculation, being “on guard,” plotting, grasping, eyes alert to the main chance. Passability is something like a condition of experience, or at all events experiences of a certain specialty (epiphanies, theophanies, encounters of the third kind). Living without criteria is not a state of privation; anarchy is a condition of possibility. Meanwhile Lyotard also linked up with Augustine as one pagan to another in the more familiar sense of being an ungodly creature, a vagrant of the flesh longing for “I don’t know what” (justice, *le tout autre*, the good beyond being). The pagan is a creature caught within the interminability of the *entretemps*, the meanwhile or caesura between the *no longer* and *not yet* in which, most famously, the Messiah is experienced as the imminent one who does not appear, or, as Lyotard says, one of those who can “only come by not arriving [*Il s ne*

viennent qu'en n'arrivant pas]" (Di.118/D.77). Lyotard's watchword is: "Is it happening [Arrive-t-il]? (the *it* indicating an empty place to be occupied by a referent)" (Di.120/D.79).⁶ The pagan is a creature of waiting, suffering, and supplication—a figure of hope rather than of faith, belief, or religious knowledge.⁷ These paganisms are where Lyotard's interest in Augustine lies. Without trying to match Lyotard's thought point for point I would like to explore and expand upon this interest, situating it where possible in its various literary and intellectual contexts.

Libidinal Theology. Lyotard had taken up Augustine once before, in *Economie libidinale* (1974), a zany book that, in the spirit of May '68, sought to graft Freud onto Marx in the interest of a more realistic, practical, and (how to say it?) sexier materialism. The main idea of a "libidinal economy" is that desire inhabits social systems in the form of drives or pulsions that bedevil organizations of power and money (not to mention institutions of knowledge). Whereas power and money are productive, at least for those in control, desire is anarchic, an energy that simply wants to spend itself (*jouissance*) and which cannot easily be converted to use, profit, or perhaps even pleasure. Power and money are rational but desire is not. In a libidinal economy return on investment is not guaranteed, and may not even be desired. Libido defeats control. In any case the idea here is that every social institution, practice, discipline, discourse, or relation is libidinal—a wellspring of sexual energies or "intensities"—and not just a logical system that can be justified (or not) in terms of its operations and results. To illustrate how the libidinal economy works Lyotard cites Augustine's polemic against Varro in book 6 of *De civitate Dei*. Varro had distinguished three types or dimensions of theology—natural theology, which is the province of philosophers; mythical philosophy, which is the province of poets; and civic theology, which is the province of the state, or indeed of the whole system of social and domestic administration, from control of the empire to what Foucault has called "care of the self."⁸ Augustine accepted the first of these theologies (how could a good Ciceronian do otherwise?) but ridiculed the theatricality of mythical and civic theology as the production of mere simulacra, images of fantastic beings, aphrodisiacs or narcotics for arousing and intoxicating the senses. Special effects (simulacra are not images of things but images in place of things). Pagan theology does not study or even worship the gods; it merely cultivates the pleasure of representing them. Against Augustine, Ly-

otard has (as I make them out: they are not easy to see) two repostes. One is: What could be more theatrical than the Trinity, in which the Son in his relation to the Father is “the *Simulacrum in itself*,” not an image of a being but the incarnation of what is otherwise than being (EL.87/LE.69)? The Son after all does not close down the Roman theater but upstages it (Golgotha), turning his incarnation into the most unforgettable icon of libidinal skin in the abject state of suffering, abandonment, and death. The second reposte is more to the point of Augustine’s *Confessions*. In place of Varro’s system, in which every human experience gives rise to a divinity, Augustine had appealed to the “omnitemporally real Present” of an invisible God, “the great Zero,” as Lyotard plausibly calls him: the No One who, appearances aside, does not abolish or repress the libidinal economy of Roman religion but appropriates it, focusing and intensifying desire, drawing it toward himself (if “himself” is the word) by the sheer force of his transcendence (EL.33–35/LE.8–10). A basic Platonic thesis is that desire exists not in the presence of the good but in its wake. Or, as the theologian Jean-Luc Marion says, our desire for God is coterminous with the infinity of his *distance*: the one is impossible without the other.⁹ In any case there is no separating theology from desire as if our relation to God could be merely philosophical or contemplative. The God whom we experience is exactly the one who withholds himself from appearance and apprehension, and who is most absolutely out of reach at precisely the moment when he visits us in the most libidinal way, turning us inside out as subjects exposed to his absence, leaving us to experience the absolute abjection of longing for what is untouchable, unnameable, unimaginable, unknowable, unthinkable, and deathly silent: God as the event of the good (the desirable) beyond being (*hyperousia*). (Lyotard would perhaps prefer: God as the *sublime*.) In this theology, as Marion says, “the intimacy of the divine coincides strictly with withdrawal [*le retrait*]” (IeD.183/ID.139). However we figure it, our relation to such a God is (as in *das Mystische*) outside cognition, outside the alternatives of propositions and negations, *but not outside desire*. Lyotard would say: neither positive nor negative but *libidinal theology*. Our relation to God can only be a relation of prayer (a psalm), which Lyotard describes neatly as “the carnal rhythm of call and abandonment [*rythme charnel d’appels et de derelictions*]” (CdA.111/CA.85).¹⁰

Augustine, Son of Ovid. The Libidinal Economy helps to explain why Lyotard’s interest in *The Confessions* is confined almost entirely to

book 10, the book of memory and concupiscence in which, before everything else, Augustine finally confesses his love for God—and *to him* (the modality of address, of prayer and praise, tells the whole story of *The Confessions*).¹¹ And confessing this he asks: “But when I love you, what do I love?”¹² The question sends Augustine on the great introspective journey in which at last he locates God in his memory (that “stomach of the mind” [10.14/C.191]). What does he remember of God? Not a presence but an irrepressible experience of the senses. Lyotard’s *The Confession of Augustine* begins here, citing 10.27, which he refers to henceforward as “the syncope” (CdA.33/CA.15):

Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely [*deformis*] state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud [*vocasti et clamasti*] and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent [*coruscasti, splenduidisti*], you put flight to my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours. (10.27/C.201)

A question Augustine does not ask is: With what *kind* of love do I love you, my God? Theologies of various stripes, whose obligation is to save the text according to the rule of faith, have never doubted the answer: *agapē, caritas*.¹³ Philosophy meanwhile allegorizes the text by saying that Augustine is just being poetic, after the manner of *The Song of Songs* or Socrates in the *Phædrus*: in reading the point is not to allow the letter to confound the spirit. Remember Augustine on signs. However, Lyotard the pagan reads according to the flesh, libidinally emphasizing the gender switch: “Thus the lover excites the five mouths of the woman, swells her vowels, those of ear, of eye, of nose and tongue, and skin that stridulates [to “stridulate” is to make a shrill grating or chirping sound by rubbing certain body parts together the way crickets do]. At present he is consumed by your fire, impatient for the return to peace that your fivefold ferocity brings him” (CdA.18/CA.2). Not to put too fine a point on it, Lyotard says (addressing God): “you [*tu*] took him as a woman”

(CdA.19/CA.3). And he insists on the image of sexual assault: “The flesh, forced five times, violated in its five senses, does not cry out, but chants, brings to each assault rhythm and rhyme, in a recitative, a *Sprechgesang*” (CdA.19/CA.3). We’ll come back to this *Sprechgesang*. One might try to negotiate between spirit and flesh by saying that if the theology of the passage is Christian, the psychology is nevertheless Ovidian—Augustine, after all, is Roman, not Greek or Hebrew. Ovid reposes like a *daimon* in the deep structure of Augustine’s theological experience—the allusions are plain enough. Eros in *The Metamorphoses* is violent and traumatic, a demonic invasion of the spirit through the senses—although where Augustine is synaesthetic, Ovid singles out the eye as our most vulnerable portion (cf. *The Confessions*, 10.35, where the eyes are the lustful agents of curiosity). Possessed by Eros, the victim is transformed by desire into an obsessive lover who in a Dionysian frenzy fixes his or her desire on the first creature who comes along—it doesn’t matter who: one’s father, brother, sister, a passing stranger, oneself (Narcissus). Eros treats all genders equally and is indifferently gay or straight. Anything goes: desire exposes in a twinkling the futility of every taboo, encouraging traffic between gods and mortals, where gods often take the form of animals in order to incarnate (and intensify) their desires. Of course theology’s point must be that God in his shrewdness has simply taken Augustine where he is weakest or most vulnerable: there the man sat, absorbed in the beauties of the world, and as he gazed or listened, sniffed or tasted, God entered him through his portals—eyes, ears, tongue; but then how else was he to get in? The main point, on Lyotard’s reading, is that he didn’t do it secretly, a thief in the night, behind the back the way ideology feeds into the unconscious: “Infatuated [*Engoué*] with earthly delights [this is Lyotard], wallowing in the poverty of satisfaction, the I was sitting idle, smug, like a becalmed boat in a null agitation. Then—but when?—you sweep down upon him and force entrance through his five estuaries. A destructive wind, a typhoon, you draw the closed lips of the flat sea toward you, you open them and turn them, unfurling, inside out” (CdA.18/CA.2). The violence of the invasion is the unmistakably Ovidian signature. Yes, says theology, but the difference between Augustine and Ovid is that now the lover is consumed by a desire for what cannot be seen, or heard, or touched; his fixations have been turned inward. To which the pagan replies, yes, that’s all very well, but the point is that, in contrast to modernity’s anthropology, with its Cartesian suspicion or evisceration of the body, Augustine’s senses have not been shut

down or obliterated (contrast Wordsworth's visionary experience, in which "the light of sense goes out" [*Prelude*, 6]); rather Augustine's *sensoria* have been reoriented, turned inward but not disconnected. Remember that flesh is in excess of the mind-body distinction. Unlike Descartes, Augustine in his ecstasy does not become angelic. His experience of God, whatever else it is, is an Ovidian experience—an experience registered or inscribed, however one subsequently allegorizes it, in the flesh:

But when I love you, what do I love? It is not physical beauty nor temporal glory nor the brightness of light dear to earthly eyes, nor the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs, nor the gentle odour of flowers and ointments and perfumes, nor manna or honey, nor limbs welcoming the embraces of the flesh; it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace when I love my God [*et tamen amo quandam lucem et quandem vocem et quendam odorem et quendam cibum et quendam amplexum*]—a light, voice, odour, food, embrace of my inner man [*interioris hominis*], where my soul [*animae*] is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is sound that time cannot seize, where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste of food no amount of eating can lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That is what I love when I love my God. (10.6/C.183)

Notice that the passage has the structure of *yes, but*. Spiritualized senses are on display in every Neoplatonic museum, but here they seem to have been more avidly incarnated. In any case the ecstasy of the spirit can only be experienced by the senses; the flesh is not renounced or transcended but appropriated, used more intensely than ever, brought to a pitch. As if only the flesh could be responsive to God's existence (but what else does the doctrine of the Incarnation teach?). As Lyotard says, "The confessing I [*le confessant*] looks for words and, contrary to all expectation, those that come to him are those that make physiology work to the point of pushing the body's sensorial and hence sensual powers [*les puissances sensorielles*] to the infinite. The inhibition that naturally overtakes him is lifted, it is metamorphosed into generosity [*prodigalité*]. To deliver the soul from its misery and death, grace does not demand a humiliated, mortified body; rather, it increases the faculties of the flesh [*le chair*] beyond their limits, and without end" (CdA.11–12/CA.11–12). Recall the

syncope: Your call shattered my deafness, your splendor routed my blindness, the taste of you makes me hungry: the senses are not there to be deadened but aroused, intensified.¹⁴ Turning inward, *conversio*, is not a turn away from the flesh but a turning of the flesh itself. The event, as the mystics will later attest, puts the torch to desire.¹⁵

The Temporality of the Flesh. The spirit is naturally restless, aggressive, omnivorous: it belongs to the temporality of the assertion, the syllogism, the dialectic, the concept (*Begriff*, from *greifen*: to grasp), the narrative, the declarative first person, the active voice, the *cogito*, the system. Its gender is (who needs to be told?) masculine. The natural state of the flesh meanwhile is torpor. Too late did I love you, says Augustine: *Sero te amavi* (10.27). The flesh belongs to the temporality of the meanwhile, in which time does not pass but pauses, meanders, drifts, sits, waits. The present is a hole through which the future drains away; meanwhile the past recedes into oblivion without anything having happened. So there is no story to be told. The rhetorical figure of the flesh is *distentio* (CdA.33–36/CA.15–18), to draw out, prolong, defer, temporize. As Lyotard says, “*Chronos*, at once and in its entirety, consists in delay” (CdA.35/CA.17); time is not logical but sexual, where hurry is pointless: “Upright resolutions, probity and the honest promise—the sexual lets all this go; it will pass” (CdA.38/CA.19). *Consuetudo*, languor, is its form of life (CdA.42/CA.22–23). Who inhabits the flesh? The flesh is outside identity, refractory to categories (hence neither masculine nor feminine but, like Dionysius, heterogynous). The flesh is not *I* but “the other of the *I*, the *ipse* [*l’autre du je, le soi*]” (CdA.38/CA.20): the *me* who wakes when the *I* sleeps, luxuriating in the concupiscence of an Ovidian theater: “Concupiscence waits for it to be too late, temptation lingers on, pleasure will come in a catastrophic rush, the *I* will have been able to do nothing to ward off the rout. This future anterior in the negative sets the future upon a powerlessness that is always already accomplished. And the *ipse* comfortably nestles its fatigue into this time of lifeless relapse” (CdA.44/CA.24). The *I* fasts, the *ipse* eats. Flesh is for eating and being eaten. The end of desire is not to be satisfied but to be consumed. “Drunkenness is far from me,” says Augustine. “But occasionally gluttony creeps up on your servant” (X.31/C205). Creeping is the modality of the flesh, which is spongelike, permeable, defenseless. Skin might conceal the *I* but it exposes the *ipse* to the world. The flesh is nonviolent in contrast to the *Geist*, whose modality is the *Aufhebung* in which the spirit sub-

sumes everything in its path, converting whatever is not itself (natural things, other people) into the production of the absolute ($I = \bar{I}$). Flesh's parody of the *Geist* would be Pantagruel with the world in his mouth. The flesh is *passable* and absorptive; it gives itself. ("Passability as the possibility of experiencing [*pathos*] presupposes a donation" [In.121–22/I.110–11].) Hence it is the natural site of suffering, punishment, and (as John Caputo says) sacrifice.¹⁶ Sacrifice for what or for whom? We slit its throat, burn it, consume it in tune with the economy of salvation, which is the model of Hegel's *Geistgeschichte*, whose future (possibly to our good fortune) never arrives. But in itself the flesh is outside of history, incapable of being narrated unless, as Lyotard observes, in a confession that says: "My own life is nothing but this: *dilatatio*, laxity, procrastination" (CdA.80/CA.56). The spirit moves; the flesh waits. "The *Confessions*," says Lyotard, "are written under the temporal sign of waiting [*l'attente*]" (CdA.96/CA.70).

The Event of Confession. In book 11 Augustine famously asks what time is and confesses his inability to answer. Or he fails insofar as he tries to grasp time conceptually, ontotheologically, which is to say from the standpoint of cognition and representation or according to the propositional attitude (and so he steps back: "I am investigating, Father, not making assertions" [11.17/C.233]). The present (presence) cannot be made visible. The *I* can no more grasp time than it can grasp God or, indeed, other people—or even mere things.¹⁷ As Emmanuel Levinas says, consciousness is called into question by what it seeks to grasp, and this event—this reversal of consciousness—is what he (Levinas) calls *ethica* (TeI.33/T.143). Better to ask: How does the *flesh* experience time? Not as a *mythos* or plot: not as the future receding into the past: not even as the evanescence of the now. Flesh experiences time as a singular event—something outside the routine of coming and going: an event that is not a link in a chain but a break, an interruption, an accident, a swerve, fall, or *Einfall* that causes the flesh to cry out: "What's happening?" (*Arrive-t-il?*) The event is a reversal or displacement of subjectivity. Lyotard here shows (as elsewhere) the influence of Maurice Blanchot, whose essay on "The Limit-Experience" (1962) has these lines: "It is perhaps given to us to 'live' each of the events that is ours by way of a double relation. We live it one time as something we comprehend, grasp, bear, and master (even if we do so painfully and with difficulty) by relating it to some good or to some value, that is to say, finally, by relating it to a Unity; we live it another time as something

that escapes all employment and all end, and more, as that which escapes our very capacity to undergo it, but whose trial we cannot escape.”¹⁸ A limit-experience is an experience in which we can no longer comport ourselves as cognitive subjects: it is an experience in which the I cannot sustain its self-possession or position as a disengaged punctual ego exercising conceptual control over whatever is presented to it. Experience in this sense is irreducible to cognition. *Le je* is turned into *le soi* (passability). To put it in our terms: here is an event in which the spirit takes flight, leaving the flesh to absorb the blow. Blanchot does not hesitate to call this fleshly experience “the disaster,” which is, however, not so much (or necessarily) a catastrophe as it is an event that interrupts both the continuity of the past and the arrival of the future.¹⁹ God’s visitation, his breaking and entering, occurs to Augustine in just this way, outside of history: not atemporally but according to the temporality of the event. Lyotard asks: “Where can an absolute event be situated or placed in relation, in a biography? How can it be related?” (CdA.22/CA.6). (“Time is disastrous?” [CdA.53/CA.33].) It cannot be made into a narrative or a memoir; it inscribes itself not in memory but in the flesh:

Not memory [*le souvenir*], then, but the said inner human [*mais ledit homme intérieur*], who is neither man nor inner, woman and man, an outside inside. This is the only witness of the presence of the Other, of the other of presence. A singular witness, the poem. The inner human does not bear witness to a fact, to a violent event that it would have seen, that it would have heard, tasted, or touched. It does not give testimony, it is the testimony. It is the vision, the scent, the listening, the taste, the contact, each violated and metamorphosed. A wound, an ecchymosis [a blotch or bruise], a scar attests to the fact that a blow has been received, they are its mechanical effect. Signs all the more trustworthy since they do not issue from any intention or any arbitrary inscription: they vouch for the event since they remain after it. Augustine’s *Treatises* abound in these analyses of semiotic value: the present object evokes the absent one, in its place. (CdA.23–24/CA.7)

Recall Lyotard’s account of the syncope: “The flesh, forced five times, violated in its five senses, does not cry out, but chants, brings to each assault rhythm and rhyme, in a recitative, a *Sprechgesang*” (CdA19/CA3)—“the confessant who is writing here is not a philosopher” (CdA.68/CA.45), nor is he even an autobiographer. He is a

psalmist (CdA.92–93/CA.66–67). Only the lyric, the apophatic language of the event (which does not know what is happening, can only say what it suffers) rather than the apodictic language of narrative (which knows in advance everything that takes place, sees it all from the standpoint of the end), can bear witness to the experience of the flesh, which interrupts or forestalls the possibility of narration. One could say that memory rather than history registers the event, not as continuity but as a repetition compulsion (what cannot be forgotten).

As recitatives accompanied by strings, poems in parallel hemistiches whose balance is sometimes broken with the rhythm of the *quînâb*, the short litanies move the body in minimal choreographic figures; one limps in jerks so as to deplore the infirmity of being unable to walk straight, offering this infirmity up. Savors, exhalations of the flesh [*effluves de chair*], touches of sound and gesture that make the blood of the community throb—a whole life astray [*égarée*] comes with the psalmody to beat the holy meditation, 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, through which evil holds the creature in its darkness, through which it comes to pass that divine lightning sets him afire.” (CdA.110–11/CA.84–85)

As Lyotard observes, Augustine’s *Confessions* is filled with echoes of the Psalms: quotations, paraphrases, allusions, plagiarisms: above all, an appropriation of the psalmic voice—the voice of the *cry*. *Souffrance, suppliance*. *The Confessions* are written in the (frequently destitute) grammar of the Psalms: the vocative—the call, the groan, the plea, the protest, the prayer, the hymn of anguish or praise. (“Confessing is not only about admitting one’s faults, it is also about praising. . . . There is a confession of praise” [CdA.109/CA.83]. As Jean-Luc Marion says, praise is the only discourse that can traverse without abolishing the distance that draws us close to God.²⁰

The Essence of Discourse. The vocative deserves some attention. In an essay entitled, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” (1951), Emmanuel Levinas asked “whether language is not based on a relationship that is prior to understanding”—that is, prior to the workings of language studied by logic, linguistics, and various philosophies of language, whose first principle, taken as given, is that the core of language is the proposition: *s* is *p*.²¹ Is there a region of language prior to cogni-

tion or the propositional attitude (a region that is not just prelogical or magical, as if sweeping everything into an undifferentiated whole)? To be sure, it is an indispensable task of language to frame representations and thus to make cognition possible; language grasps the world and objectifies its particulars by means of conceptual determination. “Language,” says Levinas, “belongs to the very work of truth, as a thematization and an identification in which being is as it were set, and appears.”²² Henceforward the world is phenomenologically *pour soi* (an object of intentional consciousness). But Levinas insists that prior to the work of truth there is our encounter with other people who cannot be approached by way of cognition and representation (who do not present themselves to me or for myself but require me to leave myself, being open or responsive to the other). “The human being is the only being I cannot meet without my expressing this meeting itself to him or her. This is precisely what distinguishes the meeting from knowledge. In every attitude toward the human being there is a *greeting*—even if it is the refusal of greeting” (En.19/EN.7). And even when I designate something by means of predication, I designate it *for* someone (TeI.231–32/TI.209–10). The proposition implicates the address; the appeal is prior to predication. As Levinas sometimes expresses it: *le Dit*, the Said, presupposes *le Dire*, Saying, which is a movement not of the I but of the “me” (*soi*)—outside myself *toward* and *for* the other, a movement of generosity or of desire that is not reducible to appetite. Saying is exposure.²³ Of course, I can regard the other as if I were invisible, at work behind the other’s back, a power of surveillance that sees the other in context rather than face to face. But doing this would mean getting (somehow) out of a prior situation in which the other faces me as a *who*, not a *what*: someone who exposes me to a greeting, to sociality, which is a relationship irreducible to understanding (understood as contextualization, conceptualization, idealization, the reduction of the other to the same). The model of Saying is that of the call and response, not “I speak” but “here I am” (*me voici*), as in the biblical event of election (AE.180/OTB.114: “The word *I* means *here I am* [*me voici*], answering for everything and for everyone”). Recall Lyotard’s pun: passability (*se passer* implies, among other things, a passage between myself and another). Levinas characterizes this situation with some audacity: “The relation to the other is therefore not ontology. This bond with the other which is not reducible to the representation of the other, and which invocation is not preceded by an understanding, I call *religion*. The essence of discourse is prayer”

(En.20/EN.7). It is the relation of address, appeal, apostrophe, or summons; it is a prophetic rather than discursive event: an interruption that changes the course of narratives rather than an account or portrayal from a narrative point of view. Levinas is quick to add that his use of the term “religion” here implies neither theology nor mysticism—on a certain view of mysticism as participation in a universal spirit.²⁴ However, what Levinas calls religion is actually close to what Jean-Luc Marion calls “mysticism,” or more accurately “the mystic” (*das Mystische*), which is a relation to alterity based upon a distance that cognition cannot traverse, *but desire can* (IeD.255–74/ID.198–215). Levinas says: “‘Religion’ remains the relationship to a being as a being. It does not consist of *conceiving* him as a being, an act in which the *being* is already assimilated” (En.21/EN.8). “Religion” here refers to a relation that is, like mysticism (or like prayer and praise), on the hither side of ontology or ontotheology, doctrine or belief; it is a *movement toward the other*, a relation of one-for-the-other in which the other is not a presence within my horizon but an event of calling or claiming that takes me out of position as a cognitive agent assembling the world before me. It is this region of religion as a relation to irreducible alterity—a relation without relation—that Augustine traverses in his *Confessions*. The modality of the *Confessions* is not that of predication and cognition but of appeal and apostrophe: the *Confessions* cannot instruct God about anything concerning which he does not already know everything. Confession is superfluous with respect to knowledge. Jacques Derrida has made this point in *Sauf le nom*, a dialogue on negative theology (or on negative theology as a kind of language) in which Augustine is identified as someone already speaking the language of Angelus Silesius: “When he [Augustine] asks (himself), when he asks in truth of God and already of his readers why he confesses himself to God when He knows everything, the response makes it appear that what is essential to the avowal or the testimony does not consist in an experience of knowledge. Its act is not reduced to informing, teaching, making known. Stranger to knowing, thus to every determination or to every predicative attribution, confession shares [*partage*] this destiny with the apophatic movement”—an *apophatic movement*, where *apophasis* is the figure of mystic speech, an utterance on the hither side of propositional discourse: speech which denies or disavows every conceptual determination that its use of words might precipitate, and which seeks (against all reason) to remain entirely within the modality of the address—the prayer, the *responsum*, the hymn of desire or praise that is

capable of traversing the distance to the other beyond being.²⁵ The apophatic movement (which corresponds to the Levinasian event of *le Dire*: Saying, the movement of one-for-the-other) is an event that, says Derrida,

remains at once *in* and *on* language . . . within and at the surface (a surface open, exposed, immediately overflowed, outside of itself). The event remains in and on the mouth, on the tip [*bout*] of the tongue, as is said in English and French, or on the edge of the lips passed over by words that *carry* themselves toward God. They are carried [*portés*], both exported and deported, by a movement of *ference* (transference, reference, difference) toward God. They name God, speak *of* him, speak *him*, speak *to him*, *let him speak in them*, let themselves be carried by him, make (themselves) a reference to just what the name supposes to name beyond itself, the nameable beyond the name, the un-nameable nameable. (SN.60–61/ON.88)

The name of God is, in this event, not the name of a being or an essence but the name of an address: a “vocative name,” as Jean-Luc Marion calls it.²⁶ A name that attaches not to God, who must remain anonymous, but to the lips of the one who is transported by it. I say the name not to identify God but to reach toward him, inaccessible as he is. Recall Paul Celan’s poem, “Psalm”:

Niemand knetet uns wieder	No one moulds us again
aus Erde und Lehm	out of earth and clay,
niemand bespricht unsern Staub.	no one conjures our dust.
Niemand.	No one.
Gelobt seist du, Niemand.	Praised be your name, no one.
Dir zulieb wollen	For your sake
wir blühen	we shall flower.
Dir	Towards
entgegen. ²⁷	You. ²⁸

Phrasings. Characteristically Lyotard’s *The Confession of Augustine* is heteronomous with respect to the rules of any genre. By turns it is, among other things, commentary, parody or mimicry, pastiche, digression, supplementation—and confession. What stands out is that in much of his text Lyotard speaks in Augustine’s voice or, more accurately, *with* Augustine’s voice, citing or reciting Augustine’s text (without quotation marks), weaving his own text or voice seamlessly into the original, and above all addressing himself to God, speaking

in asides to God as if behind Augustine's back, or sometimes as Augustine's ventriloquist, so that (even when constantly checking one's own copy of Augustine's *Confessions*) the reader of Lyotard's *Confession* cannot always be sure who is speaking, or who signs the confession. In a section of his text entitled, appropriately, "Sendings [*Envois*]," Lyotard asks:

Of whom are the *Confessions* the work, the *opus*? To put it differently, what are they working at, what are they setting into work, and what are they opening up, to what do they open the work?

The opening [*Confessions*, 1.1–4] gives the tone. This tone is a leitmotif, a guiding thread that relentlessly rivets my tone to the order of your omniscience. The introit of the work opens to your presence. This *invocatio*, the voice through which I call upon your voice to come and speak within mine, is repeated throughout the thirteen books, my voice recalls itself to your voice, appeals to it, like a refrain.

My work of confession, of narration and meditation, is only my work because it is yours. The life that it recounts, the conversion and the meditation that it relates are the work of your force, your *virtus*. It is your *sapientia*, your knowledge and wisdom, that grants me what I know thereof, as well as of what I am ignorant. (CdA.89/CA.65–66)

Who speaks? Who am I and who are you? The addressee is indeterminate: Augustine, God, No One, while I am an impostor or impersonator who takes up another's voice—the psalmic voice of invocation or apostrophe that Augustine himself impersonates at the outset of (indeed throughout) his *Confessions*—to say things that I have no capacity to speak on my own, *in propria persona*. This is Lyotard:

Who sings your praise when I sing it? How could the derisory I [*le moi dérisoire*] that I am, weakest of creatures, even muster within it the ability to praise you? How could your incommensurability be put into work, even with regard to a poem, into my finitude, how could your atemporality be put into duration, into the *passage* of melody? The very desire to praise you is already your work, and my disquiet (*inquiétude*) issues from the fact that what is relative is agitated by the absolute. Besides, how could the *invocatio* operate, be satisfied, while it calls you, you

the infinite, to come and inhabit me, I who am finite. How could I contain you, how could my work lodge you in the miniscule place (*locus*) that I am? (CdA.93–94/CA.67–68)

Who sings your praise when I sing it? In a sense, or in point of fact, no one. *The Confession of Augustine* is *une affaire d'enchaînement de phrases*: the *phrase* being the most beguiling and refractory of Lyotard's terms of art. (*Le Différend*, in which the term is in constant use, is filled with elaborate refusals to define the term [Di.106/D.68–69].) *Phrase* is the French word for "sentence," but in Lyotard's usage it is not a sentence. It is not even a grammatical concept, like the clause. It belongs to the pragmatic order of events rather than to the grammatical order of logical systems. One way to think of the phrase is in terms of Wittgenstein's idea that "to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life." "I confess" is not just a statement; it is a phrase, an *event* of language, that entails various forms of life—confessions of faith or feeling, criminal confessions, extracted confessions, false confessions, personal disclosures of every sort, the sacrament of penance, confessions of failure (I give up!), true confessions (a literary genre), autobiographical narratives, expressions of ignorance, acknowledgement of states of affairs, and so on, perhaps to no definite term. One cannot understand a confession from the outside but only by knowing how to do such a thing, which means understanding the situation that calls for such a thing, or what it is for. On Lyotard's theory a *phrase* is a "universe" that entails (1) something said (2) about something (3) from someone (4) to someone (Di.30–31/D.14). A phrase, Lyotard says, is a move in a language game, not the application of a rule but a piece of strategy or *phronesis* (LR.373). The pagan (from *paganus*, "a border zone" [Di.218/D.151]) is one who inhabits the boundaries of language games, not so much as one who transgresses the rules or regimens of phrases as one who links phrases together in something like an anarchic spirit ("It is necessary to link, but the mode of linkage is never necessary" [Di.52/D.29]). The pagan is someone at home nowhere but rather inhabits the in-between where linkages between phrases, language games, or forms of life are possible. So the pagan's task is the invention of new idioms in order to say what cannot be said within the genres and norms of available discourse. As a pagan writer Lyotard does not interpret Augustine but links his own fragments to fragments from Augustine's text, even as Augustine's text is itself *une affaire d'enchaînement*, phrasing and rephrasing the Psalms. Moreover, *The Confession of Augustine* enchains other texts be-

sides—Levinas’s ethics of alterity, Jean-Luc Marion’s writings on prayer and distance, and, perhaps most interesting, Jacques Derrida’s “Circonfession,” in which Derrida, a Jew who grew up on *la rue Saint-Augustin* in Algiers, takes up Augustine’s position and identity (links himself to Augustine) as a *piéd noir*, an alien within the Latin world, vigilant son of a mother more pious than he—and who, like Augustine, confesses, but perhaps no more straightforwardly than does Lyotard:

No point in going around in circles, for as long as the other does not know, and know in advance, as long as he will not have won back this advance at the moment of the pardon, that unique moment, the great pardon that has not yet happened in my life, indeed I am waiting for it as absolute unicity, basically the only event from now on, no point going round in circles, so long as the other has not won back that advance I shall not be able to avow anything and if avowal cannot consist in declaring, making known, informing, telling the truth, which one can always do, indeed, without confessing anything, without *making* truth, the other must not learn anything that he was not already in a position to know for avowal as such to begin, and this is why I am addressing myself here to God, the only one I take as a witness, without yet knowing what these sublime words mean, and this grammar, and *to*, and *witness*, and *God*, and *take*, take God, and not only do I pray, as I have never stopped doing all my life, but I take him here and take him as my witness, I give myself what he gives me, i.e., the *i.e.* to take the time to take God as a witness to ask him not only, for example, like SA, why do I take pleasure in weeping at the death of a friend, *cur fletus dulcis sit miseris?*, and why I talk to him in Christian French when they expelled me from the Lycée de Ben Aknoun in 1942 a little black and very Arab Jew who understood nothing about it.²⁹

Lyotard taught for many years in Algiers after the Liberation. He was one of the founding members of *Socialisme ou barbarie*, a radical group that during the 1950s sought a third way between communism and de Gaulle. Lyotard once confessed that at the age of eleven or twelve he “wanted to become either a monk (especially a Dominican), a painter, or a historian,” but was unable to decide and perhaps was still unable long after (p. 1). He added: “There is no monk who does not wonder whether God is turning his face or his back to us”

(p. 3). And again: “I think every writer or thinker carries in him or herself as a particular temptation the weakness or the possibility of ignoring that he or she is committed to an ‘I don’t know what’” (p. 12). The desire for “I don’t know what” is stronger than the religions that seek to give it definition. In the end, it is a desire that probably even God cannot satisfy. Lyotard might be imagined to be saying: the desire is a good in itself (the thesis of libidinal theology).

Deus Absconditus. Lyotard asks (in the voice of Augustine): “How could the *invocatio* operate, be satisfied, while it calls you, you the infinite, to come and inhabit me, I who am finite?” (CdA.94/CA.68). Like the ethical relation in Levinas’s philosophy, the psalm or apostrophe is not dialogical but asymmetrical—the other is always incommensurable with me; in the nature of the case, the other cannot answer the call that its very incommensurability has provoked.³⁰ Nevertheless, against all reason, or according to the law of desire, the other is inside my skin, closer to me than I am to myself, but outside my grasp (AE.181/OTB.114–15). “And if, after all, I wonder, as philosophers are wont, how I can know that it is *you* that I invoke, and not some idol, then I can respond that I do not invoke you because I know you, but *so as* to know you. The invocation is a question and search for you, you who have already found me” (CdA.95/CA.69). But the phrase of cognition is already scrambled by the event that inspires it—“you who have already found me.” Found me, he says (who says?), through the work of your preacher (Augustine or Christ): “*Praedicatus* through the ministry of your son, the preacher who has announced you, speaks in advance. You have wrought through him the *advance* of your presence. My work confesses this advance, strains to be acquitted of it. Its inquest disquiets, its restlessness holds in advance its *rest*, it rests upon your announced but still concealed presence, it has as its end the quiet of your direct presence, in the sky of sky, the heaven of heavens” (CdA.95/CA.69–70). Who am I when you are you? Imagine Lyotard, the self-confessed “pagan”—he has said that the pagan is the one who addresses no one when he writes: “We are without interlocutors” (AJ.21/JG.9)—imagine *him*, of all people, speaking in or through the voice of Augustine, putting himself into the phrase of confession to appeal to a God who has “found” him, *but only to abandon him*. To restlessness, *Unheimlichkeit*. As Lyotard says, a “second person” haunts *The Confessions*: the *tu* saturates the book with his silence.

A second person indeed hangs over, surveys the *Confessions*, magnetizes them, filters through them. A you [*toi*], nameless patronym of the Catholic community. You is the addressee [*destinataire*] of the avowal that I write. And yet you is not an interlocutor; you never begins to speak, you never calls me you in turn. I only hear of you from bits of phrases that are reported about your son, about your curses. I invoke you and call you as witness to the purity of my humility: you will never give me quiet, will never acquit me, your jealous dogs love me. My petition leaves you silent. Does it not merit some response? I am only of worth, I exist only through this entreaty, this supplication that is turned toward you, suspended before you. Your silence turns it into a form of torture. (CdA.100–1/CA.75)

In Lyotard's vocabulary, the psalm addressed to God is a transcendental instance of the *différend*, which is the word for a dispute or conflict between parties who speak incommensurable languages; more precisely, it is an impasse between two forms of life where there is no common language or single law that will allow the two to communicate and thus to resolve their differences. One could say that if the confessant's psalm is greeted by silence, it is because I can speak no language in which God could answer. In this sense negative theology would be an interpretation of the *différend* understood as "the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot be" (Di.29/D.13). There is no "metalanguage" that will overcome the incommensurability of the confessant and God:

In the differend, something "asks" [*demande*] to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases in the right way. This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence (and of pleasure which accompanies the invention of a new idiom), that they are summoned by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of information communicable through existing idioms, but to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist. (Di.30/D.13)

So let us (for now) think of *The Confession of Augustine* as an enchainment of phrases across the boundaries or limits of discursive regimes

(philosophy, religion, literature) in response to the *différend*. Call it an effort to institute a new idiom for what cannot be said—the peculiar, impertinent, equivocal (above all equivocal) idiom in which a voice that Lyotard shares with Augustine confesses his abandonment, his desire, and for all we know his pagan fidelity to “I don’t know what.”

You [*Toi*] the sole object of the writing and its sole content. If it is true that you thus saturate the entries and exits of the confession, you who confess and to whom I confess and about which I confess, then I am reduced to receiving nothing but the smallest share. This means little, reduced to nothing, to this nothing which seemed someone, this lure of someone who is no one [*ce leurre d’une personne qui n’était personne*]. I, the apparent subject of the confessional phrase, finds himself, rather loses himself, undone at all ends. And while he confesses his submission to lures, the desire for which continues to rage, while he disavows abject worldliness, he passes under an even more despotic authority [*un empire encore plus despotique*], he must accept and savor a quite different radical heteronomy under the law of an unknown master of whom he obstinately delights in making himself the subject. (CdA.102–3/CA.75–77)

Put it this way: the desire for God (*Toi*) splits the subject in two—into a first- and third-person singular (*je, il*), as if in the abjection of being abandoned by God, left to oneself, one were lost to oneself just as well. “Why did you abandon him?” (CdA.107/CA.81), Lyotard asks, referring, as everywhere in these pages, to himself as well as to Augustine, all the while knowing full well, as in Jean-Luc Marion’s analysis, that God is not God, nor we his lovers, under any other condition: “For God also tempts the soul, as if he was 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. Carry me away, convey me hither, set ablaze, subvert!” (CdA.113/CA.87). God is nothing if not libidinal.