

“Too Late Have I Loved You”: On The Powerlessness of Augustine’s Confession

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Abstract

It is well known that love is a central philosophical and theological consideration of Augustinian scholarship. We are also aware of the fact that the question of love in Augustine carries the specific Christian value of loving one’s neighbor which is constitutive of the Christian imagination of the social. But when we consider the problem of love in Augustine, we are faced with the equally singular structural problem of separating worldly love (*cupiditas*) from divine love (*caritas*). This is because, as Hannah Arendt has irrevocably demonstrated, the structure of divine love remains identical to that of worldly love which are both defined as desire or craving (*appetitus*).

How does one solve this structural riddle to differentiate between worldly love (*cupiditas*) which clearly remains ensnared in the immanent order, while *caritas* defines a transcendental love based upon a self-denying gesture which makes a desert of the world? More importantly, if divine love is always presupposed by an abandonment of the world, anticipating a terrible isolation for the individual, then how can one even begin to think of any religious society or collective on the basis of such self-denying otherworldly love?

The paper would take these questions as the point of departure to enter the discourse of love in St Augustine, in order to propose that the problem of love in Augustine is intricately conjoined with the transformative possibility of confession and the force of

truth it generates. We would try to argue that love in Augustine comes as an affective reality which on the one hand has the power to propose the mastery of a confessional subject, with confession itself being taken as a performative utterance. This is a moment of juridical foreclosure (thou shall love thy neighbor) of the affective reality of love. On the other hand, the Augustinian notion of love also has the *evental* tendency to arrive “too late” which in itself is meaningless because late is always too late. But it is this idea of belated love which declares the impossibility of all love to come, while carrying with it the trace of this impossibility.

The ‘eventness’ of confession is to capture this moment of divine love which befalls one as grace. To carry the trace of this indiscernible love is to manifest the impossible demand of another affect which befalls the individual destroying his/her mastery in order to produce a new locus of individuation. The paper would be a meditation on some such ever new moments of individuation brought about through the efficacies of certain delayed love stories.

Keywords: Object-Event, Performativity, Theatricality, Subjectivity, Temporality

The Broken Line

“Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you”(Augustine, 1998, p. 201). These words carry within them an ancient secret which is not exhausted in any signification. From the point of view of that secret, they are not the relived reminiscence of how one arrived at the destination or reached the place where the search is finally terminated. These words from Book X of *Confessions* belong to language insofar as they do not speak of anything; and insofar as they do not speak of anything, they do not belong to the one who speaks. One does not possess them because they do not denote anything. But the question may arise – why? Why do they not mean anything and why are they not, in the final analysis, attached to a body which speaks or even about a body?

A few lines later, Augustine writes: “You were fragrant, and I draw in my breadth 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” (Ibid n.d.). To “pant after,” to long “to attain the peace,” is to move forward along a straight line towards that which is still to come or that at which you are yet to arrive. To be late is also to be early. The words express a delay, which, at the same time is anticipation: the ‘lateness’ in its futural state. The one, who confesses these words, maintains himself in that instant, so that he can act out something which is still in the future and already in the past. It is this moment, *when* he confesses by expressing in language an expression which, denoting nothing, makes language possible. But again, the question arises how? We shall return to this problem of possibility of language and the problem of truth in a while. Let us pursue further, at least for a little while, this problem of a futural delay as a problem of time.

A divided time, a time which is always too late or too early, which belongs either to the past or to the future. A time of ‘either/or’ which does not merely put time out of joint by expressing this disjunction but also synthesizes it simultaneously into the moment of expression. This, however, is not the question of divine present. If God is the lord of *chronos* – God is *chronos* – who grasps time as the eternal present that subsumes what to us is the past and future, then divine present is “the circle in its entirety, whereas past and future are dimensions relative to a particular segment of the circle which leave the rest outside” (Deleuze, 1990, 150).

Interestingly enough, this divine experience of time is opposed to the experience of time that is exclusively theatrical. The actor in this sense is always anti-God because he also experiences time in the present, but his present is the instant, the most narrow, contracted moment through which he encounters eternity. It is that which divides linear temporality – temporality understood as the linear movement of a succession of ‘nows.’ The succession of ‘nows’ can never coincide with each other, thus making possible a straight line where each point or ‘now’ passes on to become the ‘now’ which is in the past and where the horizon of a future ‘now’ is always visible. The actor interrupts this

temporality by dividing up this line endlessly, by breaking up each ‘now; into a fractured moment – a “past-future” segment.

This infinite segmentation — infinite division of the present instant into past-future — is what is common to both acting and the Augustinian notion of time as *distention*. Instead of a profound experience of the fully present which extends itself to the past and future in divine time, time, in Augustine, rises up – or better – swells up in its unlimited past-future reflecting an empty present – hollowing out the present which only gives form to this void. As Deleuze says, “The actor belongs to the Aion” (Ibid n.d.) – so does the one who confesses, who also belongs to the straight line of Aion.¹ In this sense, for Augustine, the one who confesses always plays the role of the one who confesses. He has to be like the actor who revives his role at every instant because, like the actor, he cannot know any other life but that of the present moment. Thus, Augustine remarks, “My Lord, every day my conscience makes confession relying on the hope of Your mercy as more to be trusted than its own innocence. So what profit is there, I ask, when to human readers, by this book I confess to You who I now am, not what I once was” (S. Augustine, *Confessions* 1998, 180). But there is no character of the confessor which he can identify with. The role of the confessor is never that of a character but that of a *theme*. To play the role of the confessor is always to elaborate on the theme of forgiveness. This is the impersonality of the confessed events, the neutrality of the past remembered that can be recalled in memory without its corresponding passions – the sins of the past recognized as sins only in evoking them without passion – like so many singularities effectively liberated from the limits of individuals and persons, communicated in their neutrality. But, at the same time, recalling these moments in their impersonality individualizes the confessor as the confessor – like playing the role individualizes the actor as the actor. Thus, while playing out the role of the confessor, one acts out other roles, dividing oneself into these other roles somewhat like the present instant, which is divided into so many fragments of

¹ Deleuze in logic of sense distinguishes between two conducts of time. The Chronos which is continuous and circular and the Aion which is the broken line of segmented time (Deleuze 1990)

past-future in the actor/confessor's experience of time. This is how the actor and the confessor both "make truth" instead of reporting.

Between the Event of Confession and the Confession of Events

The event of confession and the confession of events have this relation. Like the actor, the confessor delimits the original event, abstracting from it only its form and its contour like so many singularities floating in a void. Augustine calls this memory which is the quintessential tool of the confessor, the stomach of the mind whose function is to reconstitute the event to be confessed. But the event of confession is not the events of the past denoted but the "object-event" (Deleuze 1990) as expressed or made expressible. Because it is offered in love, which is yet to come but for which one is already late, the present of confession abolishes itself, which gives it the value of the present. Confession finds its value in its own abolition, its own absence of confessing anything. This is the event structure of confession made possible because one can only confess that which is already known. "May I know You, who know me. May I be known as I also am known." (Ibid n.d., 179). In negating one's past – the confession of events – nothing negative is expressed from this point of view, unlike the recognition of sin as the demand of law.² Rather, the confessional event releases the purely expressible in its two halves. The past-future, as two halves which always lack each other, comes together as a disjunctive synthesis in the present, constituting the presentness of the event of confession – the "who I now am" – hollowing out any substance from the "I". The problem of the two halves lacking each other is paradigmatic of the relation between sin and grace. Only on the recognition of sin can grace arrive, while, without grace, one cannot recognize one's sin. The past can only be grasped on the basis of the future – a future which will only arrive if the past is grasped. Therefore, one half always exceeds the other by virtue of its deficiency, which also expresses a deficiency by virtue of an excess. If grace is an excess – a gift which befalls the faithful – then it befalls those who

² Law exists in so far as there is transgression. In so far as there is an action which is outside law, law can appropriate it negative to come into being. This is the negativity which is at the heart of law which Augustine recognizes and distances himself in his act of confession. In other words, confession is not merely a punitive action, a penitentiary act.

have confessed their sins and exposed their deficiencies. But such deficiencies can only be recognized by those who are “visited”³ by the excess of grace. It is this paradoxical structure of the event of confession which empties out the “I” of any content in the expression “who I now am”, voiding it out of every substance.

The actualization of the “I” as the confessional subject, which has “I” as its object of confession, can only function if we think of confession as a performative utterance. However, as long as the confessional subject speaks performatively, he does so under certain conditions and conventions. Complying with these conventional conditions gives the subject the ability or capacity to produce the event by speaking⁴. However, as Derrida so incisively points out, by becoming the master of the situation in complying with these conditions, the eventness of the confessional event is neutralized. While talking about the evental nature of confession, Derrida remarks, “Because I have the mastery of this situation, my very mastery is a limitation of the eventness of the event. I neutralize the eventness of the event precisely because of the performativity” (Derrida, *Composing "Circumfession"* 2005, 21). To become master of the event is to lose the newness of the event. In such a performative utterance the “I” is already constituted in the field of signification which presupposes the event.

It is true that there is a possibility of understanding *Confessions* through a certain performative lens. But such performativity of the event presupposes a subject produced as a result of the field of signification. Such subjectification is possible only when one abandons oneself to the demand of law – in other words, the law of signification precedes the event of confession. It is this field of signification which in turn produces the normative demand which the master-subject articulates through his capacity to speak of the event. Evidently this capacity to speak is not a free act in the true sense of the word but already presupposed by a field of signification.

³Derrida expresses the evental structure of the confession as a visitation which is absolutely unpredictable, as against an idea of invitation, which is determined by the intentionality of the host and thus, subsumed by the mastery of the subject. See (Derrida, *Composing "Circumfession"* 2005).

⁴ This is the basic point of J. L Austin’s concept of performative utterances. That these utterances only function within a field of already accepted meanings and norms. The performative function can come into play only when the normative field is already determined.

This forecloses the possibility of expressing your will towards that which unexpectedly befalls you. Confession in the historical sense — the sense in which Foucault examines it as a historical paradigm for the modern subject — always witnesses this foreclosure of the eventness of the event of confession by making it *a problem of will prior to the profession of faith*.⁵ From this point of view, one can will towards the knowledge of oneself during confession only by complying with certain conventions and conditions (norms and techniques). Thus, only by abandoning oneself to these conventions (laws of signification) does one paradoxically attain the capacity of exploring, discovering, and expressing the truth about oneself. Confession is reduced to the following of certain techniques of the self, such that one recognizes the self as a sinful object, which only *prepares* the self for its final transformation. In abandoning oneself to these conventions, one does not attain true purification but is purified for purification, so to speak. In giving yourself up to law, you become the master of the situation to the extent you can speak of the truth about yourself, which as a master-researcher you have searched for, discovered, and placed in front of the others.

Foucault's extraordinary analysis takes up this performative aspect of confession by examining precisely that line from Augustine's *Confessions* Book X which carries within itself the expressivity of the event. "*Qui facit veritatem venit ad lucem*" (to make truth inside oneself to get access to the light) (Foucault 2007, 171). Foucault is aware of the perfect circularity of the line. He who confesses – or makes truth within himself through confessing – comes to light. But one can only confess and thereby make truth in the light when he has been purified by the grace of God.

Foucault, however, treads another path – a pragmatic path of historical details to show how these two obligatory moments concerning the making of truth and the access to light become two separate and autonomous poles within the history of Christianity.

⁵Foucault identifies in confession a distinction which separates it from a simple profession of faith, thereby, distinguishing two poles through which the Christian subject is constituted historically: By the profession of faith which coincides with the sacramental moment, particularly of baptism, and by the making of truth which coincides with the confessional moment. Though they are intricately entangled at specific historical conjunctions, they are also distinctly conceived within the history of Christianity. Foucault traces the genealogy of this separation back to the patristic fathers particularly Tertullian. See note 15 of the previous chapter.

We would argue at this point that the eventual upsurge of confession in Augustine is precisely to keep this paradox alive. The separation of ‘making truth’ and ‘coming to light’ only forecloses the eventual possibility of confession by making it performative, which, in turn, becomes constitutive of the subject. The subject who, by abandoning himself to law, gains the power to speak of the event, thereby neutralizing the aleatory condition of the event. In Augustine, however, will and power are never mediated by law because law always actualizes itself as conscience – as a demand inherent to being, which radically exposes oneself to the gap between such a demand and its fulfillment. What conscience actualizes in the self by exposing the self in the presence of God (*coram deo*) is the incommensurability between law and its fulfillment, which in turn unconceals the abyss separating will from power. To be abandoned to law under such circumstances expresses the powerlessness of the individual, whose weakness becomes the condition of possibility – the site – for the event to befall. Yet the site never becomes the necessary condition for the event, which maintains its absolute unpredictability.

Impersonality of Forgiveness

While Foucault, in the final analysis, shows us how this state of abandonment is forced by the cunning of history to become constitutive of the techniques of the self – which produces the Christian subject as the confessional subject, Derrida travels the other path of deconstructing the confessional subject from the point of view of the event. By comparing the singularity of the confessional moment with the powerlessness evocative of the powerlessness of the child marked by circumcision, Derrida tries to preserve the eventness of the event of confession in his concept of “Circumfession.” He writes,

the event is absolutely unpredictable, that is, beyond any performativity. That where a signature occurs. If I so much insist on circumcision in this text, it is because circumcision is precisely something which happens to a powerless child before he can speak, before he can sign, before he has a name. It is by this mark that he is inscribed in a community, whether he wants it or not. This happens to him and leaves a mark, a signature on his

body. This happened before him, so to speak. (Derrida, *Composing "Circumfession"* 2005, 21)

However, we have tried to travel a slightly different path, reading a certain theatricality into the event of confession by comparing it to the problem of acting. We are trying to understand this eventness as a kind of counter-actualization, like that which simmers behind every moment of acting. The disjunctive synthesis of the instant is a way of bringing in proximity, of making a convergent series of the singularity of confession and that of theatre. The theatricality of confession is not merely its performativity, as we have tried to demonstrate. It is the singular relation to truth that makes confession theatrical, so to speak. Like theatre which, as Alain Badiou would say, “makes truth” (Badiou 2013, 104) in a singular fashion, gathering different possible forms of relations to truth, so does confession “make truth” by counter-actualizing different possible forms of actualization of what we have called ‘events’ confessed. This is what Augustine has in mind in *Book X* when he talks of the power of memory, which gathers particular affect-producing events by recalling them, while simultaneously disengaging them from their corresponding affects.

Confession makes truth only through this superficial method, bringing meanings out of their depths to the surface in order to make sense of them. Hence, you can ask for forgiveness for acts committed which you can no longer be the subject of. In fact, you can only ask for forgiveness when you are no longer the subject of that for which forgiveness is sought. As Derrida would write, “What is terrible in confession is that I am not sure that I am the one who can claim the mastery of or responsibility for what has been done, and I am not the one who can claim to be improving and to be good enough to repent” (Derrida, *Composing "Circumfession"* 2005, 25).

The depth of meaning produced through the actualization of an event has to be brought to the surface, has to be made impersonal and pre-individual, so that it can be offered to seek forgiveness. But, at the same time, seeking forgiveness does not guarantee redemption. Hence, to will for forgiveness does not coincide with the power to be forgiven. It is in this powerlessness that confession carries the trace of the event. The trace of the singularity that befalls can only be universalized through such

forgiveness because the moment the singularity of the event is expressed – the moment it enters language – it is available for all. It is not only my own sins for which I seek forgiveness, but for that which has scarred me always already, the wound which is before me. It is the condition of possibility for my confession in the first place, the singular trace of the event which is now made available for all. Forgiveness is the structure through which the singularity of the event of confession and its universal sense is made possible. It is this relation of a singularity which is made universal – through the disjunctive synthesis of an ‘asking for forgiveness’ when there is nothing to forgive – when one is not the master of one’s actions for which forgiveness is sought. It is something like the disjunctive synthesis of the actions of the actor who is not the master of the actions of his character, and yet, it is through him that such actions are performed.

If the event of confession coincides with the confession of events only by abolishing itself – which is to say, Augustine’s confession gives itself the value of confession only by abolishing that which is confessed – then we are again in the proximity of theatre, this time from the point of view of the event. This is because the counter-actualization of theatre is precisely based on its precarious nature. The ability of theatre to be called theatre – to give itself the value of theatre on the basis of its disappearance or absence – makes theatre into a singularity. Nevertheless, such a theatrical singularity, being directed towards an audience, ‘amplifies’ its own event for a collective, thus, becoming a universal purpose. In the case of theatre, this relation between its singularity and universality opens up the quasi-political dimension of theatre. In the case of confession, the relation between the singular trace of the event that is made universal in language comes to us only as a paradoxical search for an impossible forgiveness. This opens up the religious dimension of confession, where religion stands as an idea for a universal community.

“Making of Truth”

All this finally leads us to the question of truth. When we say that both theatre and confession radicalize the question of truth, we generally mean that both these modes of

expression have done away with the theoretical constative mode of truth. At the same time, as we have tried to demonstrate, neither the singularity of theatre nor that of confession speaks performatively of truth, thereby becoming the master of truth.

When Augustine in Book X of *Confessions* talks of “making truth” to “come to light”, he does not have in mind the reporting of certain true facts of his past. Because confession is always to confess what is already known, there is no question of recognition at work here. By the same token, it is absolved of any representative function in its general sense. When one confesses, one confesses nothing. At the same time, one does not confess oneself. One always confesses the other, as Derrida would say. (Derrida, *Composing "Circumfession"* 2005) Or as Augustine would write, “May I know as I also am known” (S. Augustine, *Confessions* 1998, 179) . It is because confession does not speak of anything which is not already known – “Moreover, you hear nothing true from my lips which you have not first told me” (Ibid n.d., 179) – in confessing, the self always ends up confessing the other. The taking-place of confession, which can have value only through its own effacement, relates itself to that which has taken place – the place itself – only by becoming its other.

When Augustine confesses the sins of his past, it is this self which he abolishes by speaking of it. Thereby, confession is always the other’s confession within the self which confesses. This is the reason why confession is always meaningless. Augustine does not confess because he desires to reach a reconciliation or redemption. He is always already redeemed by the grace of God actualized through Christ. Therefore, confession is not a process of transformation that has a *telos* or an end which produces reconciliation. In other words, confession is not therapeutic. Its theatricality is never cathartic. Confession, therefore, becomes nothing other than an esoteric speech, which brings to the surface that which sustains faith – namely hope. As we saw before, in Augustine, will and power are separated by the abyss of mortality, which can only be overcome by the event of grace that befalls man without him willing it. But, from the point of view of man, it is hope which gives shape to the fathomless gap, the void which separates man from God. Confession, therefore, is the making of truth in hope, or better, making of truth as hope. It sustains man between the event which has befallen and the

event to come (between the Christ-event and *parousia*). But to hope is to bear witness to that which cannot be witnessed. To remember in confession is, thus, akin to how Augustine speaks of the impossible function of memory when it confronts forgetfulness. “Yet in some way, though incomprehensible and inexplicable, I am certain that I remember forgetfulness itself, and yet forgetfulness destroys what we remember” (Ibid n.d., 194). To remember forgetfulness is to remember the abolition of memory that corresponds to the takingplace of confession (like the takingplace of memory), which in taking place abolishes the place itself – the place of confessed events (or the place of memory).

At the same time, Augustine writes that if confession is about praising God, and in praising God I call upon God, then, “How shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord? Surely when I call on him, I am calling on him to come to me. But what place is there in me where my God can enter into me?” (Ibid n.d., 3). The impossibility of the place becomes the condition of possibility of place to take place through the task of confession. For God to penetrate man or for man to be entered by God, there must first be the event of love which demands man to be worthy of that which befalls him. To make truth is to make the events which befall my life mine, to become equal to them such that I can release the truth which is their eternal secret. To be resigned to the eternal truth of the event which befalls me is to carry the trace of the wound, which can turn death on itself.

Augustine urges one not to hesitate “to die to death and to live to life” (Ibid n.d., 150). There is something like the theatre and its double in the intimate impersonality of death that is the source of the double accomplishment of Augustine’s confessions – its actualization and counter-actualization. Confession evokes the abyss of that present, to paraphrase Blanchot, which is emptied of its presentness, divided into the death of the past self and the hope for an impossible future self towards which man is not able to project himself. It is as if in death he always forfeits the power of dying, dissolving the “I” into the void, where he never ceases to die but never succeeds. This is the impossible task of making truth in the light of the event, which Augustine embarks upon.

As we have shown, making truth in confession is intimately related to the event of confession, which gives confessional truth its value outside any constative theoretical understanding of truth. It is this immanent mode of the production of truth as demanded by the event that gives confession a theatricality of its own – a theatricality which can, following Badiou, call an immanentist theatricality. Augustine's confession, which exposes itself to so many encounters, so many historical events – amplifying and dissolving them at the same time in his intimate and singular encounter with God – must be, in the final analysis, very similar to theatre, which is endowed with an equal power of simplicity.

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