

Time As A Psalm In St. Augustine

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If the Psalm prays, do you too pray; if it laments, do you lament; if it rejoice, rejoice with it; if it hopes, express your hope too; if it fears, do you also fear; for all things written herein serve to mirror ourselves.¹

Augustine follows a Platonic method in his treatment of time in *Confessions* XI. The 'in principio' of *Genesis* is the theme of the book and introduces the problem of the relation of time to the divine in a most direct way. The argument then centres on the problem that the present has no extension: "*praesens autem nullum habet spatium*" (XI, 15). The problem having been solved Augustine concludes that God's knowledge of time is far more wondrous and secret than that gained through these arguments but that we know better now what an eternal knowing of time might mean (XI, 31). In the *Enneads* (III, 7, 1) Plotinus outlines his approach: look to eternity, seeking the paradigm for time, but if one looks directly to time, through recollection one will be reminded of the world there, that is, of the nature of the eternal. And it will be clear from both approaches in what sense time is an image of eternity. In Augustine's text then we have these Platonic moments and in a wonderfully mature form.

But of course we have something more.² "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth": this is not a general introduction to the notion of eternity but rather a specific revelation in Augustine's view of the creation of the world by God and of the beginning of the historical revelation of that God. The scripture enables the argument to

¹ Fourth discourse on Psalm 30, *St. Augustine on the Psalms*, trans. S. Hebgin and F. Corrigan, Newman Press, New York, 1961, v. 2, p. 44. Translations from the *Confessions* are based on the Loeb, William Watts, for the most part. An earlier version of this paper was given at the XI International Conference for Patristic Studies, Oxford, 1991.

² Two recent treatments of the conversion from Platonism and the implications from understanding texts of the *Confessions* are: R.D. Crouse, "In Aenigmat Trinitas' (*Confessions*, XIII, 5, 6): The Conversion of Philosophy in St. Augustine's *Confessions*", *Dionysius* XI, 1987, pp. 53-62, and C.J. Starnes, *Augustine's Conversion*, (Wilfred Laurier University Press, Waterloo, 1990). The importance of mediation through song and the Mediator is well brought out by W.J.T. Kirby in "Time, Memory and Praise in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine", *Dionysius*, XVI. And for the importance of speaking in Plotinus' own treatment see Peter Manchester, "Time and the Soul in Plotinus, III 7[45], 11" in *Dionysius*, II, 1978, p. 116ff, and Frederic Schroeder, "Saying and Having in Plotinus", *Dionysius*, IX, 1985, p. 78ff.

begin from the side of the eternal and it enables the argument to assume in a direct way that time and eternity are. But as the beginning of the Christian revelation, it assumes a relation between the two which is not part of the Platonic argument. The difference is perhaps best put in the terms which introduce the book: "Your Father knoweth what you have need of before you ask" and "by the love of your love I do this" (XI, 1). The whole of the first chapter is a paradoxical assertion that God is totally beyond the temporal narrative realm and yet totally present, knowing and active in it. The question which leads to the treatment of time, "What did God do before he made heaven and earth?" (XI, 12) is ironic for as Augustine shows it is a mistaken question, and yet it is a 'high' [*alta*] one for it assumes that a clarity about the activity of the principle can be attained. "Your today is eternity" and "your years shall not fail" (XI, 12); these temporal terms are positive expressions of God's activity in Chap. 13 even though the point of the chapter is to mark off the treatment of eternity from that of time in Chap. 14.

So without having settled the sense of paradox in relation to this creator God Augustine goes through a careful examination of what is so ordinary as to be almost impossibly difficult (XI, 14). The argument concerning time really turns on the notion of the present and especially that it is without extension [*spatium*]. The argument is relentless in its pursuit of the contradiction that time must be continuous and extended, for inherent in it is the sense of the long and the short, of measure, of number, while at the same time only that truly is which is present and without any extension.³

Augustine follows the thought of the Neoplatonists that this contradiction in time can be most properly held together in the soul. In Chap. 21 he takes the past, present and future from an assumed externality, as extensions, to a single present. But now a present of things past, a present of things present and a present of things to come. There are these three times. The assertion that they are all in some sense present is the assertion that the Aristotelean contradiction between the continuous and the discrete will be overcome in some sense in the discrete - the all at once, the *simul*, the now.⁴ But a now which has three aspects and the measuring is the comparing and coming to some *ratio* within these aspects. But the subject of this measurement is, still, only an assertion. For the subject we have reached, the present, cannot be measured: "*nullum spatium non metimur*" (XI,21).

This is the enigma which begins chapter 22 and which causes Augustine to call on the name of Christ for enlightenment. "For this is my hope to contemplate the delight of the Lord". "Behold thou hast made my days old and they pass away, and I know not how." Four Psalms bring out the pain of the search and the faith of the searcher. Why is this chapter of prayer and Psalms placed here in the argument? I have referred to the Platonic

³ This opposition is central to the argument and not empirical simply. See the treatment of H.M. Lacey, "Empiricism and Augustine's Problems about time" in *Augustine*, ed. R.A. Markus, (Anchor, New York, 1972), pp. 280-308; and of Christopher Kirwin, *Augustine*, Routledge, London, 1989, who argues that Augustine is mistaken here. Augustine intends to unite the senses of existence, present and absolute, which Lacy divides.

⁴ Time is not made of points in Aristotle. See Peter Janich, "Augustins Zeitparadox und seine Frage nach einen Standard der Zeitmessung", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 54, 1972, pp. 169-186, and Gerard O'Daly, "Augustine on the Measurement of Time: Some Comparisons with Aristotelian and Stoic Texts" in *NeoPlatonism and Early Christian Thought*, ed: Blumenthal and Markus, Variorum, 1981, p. 172

character of the argument. Here is a chapter the Platonists would only partially understand.⁵ It comes at a time when the discrete and indivisible present must contain the continuous and drawn-out extensions of the past and future. Augustine is seeking such a present and suggests here that it is by scripture that he may find it - or at least he is suggesting that it is by scripture that he is able to seek it.

How does he seek it? He considers the proposal that time is the motion of the sun and moon and stars (XI, 23). But even in the consideration of it, while we speak, is not our speaking in time, so is there not a time prior to these motions? (XI, 23). And at the prayer of a certain man the sun stopped. There is then that which is present which is prior to the presence of motion in the heavens. Neither is time the motion of a body in general (XI, 24) for the comparisons of extensions must be inward rather than external. For two motions must be compared, or motion compared to a length of rest and this comparison depends upon that which is common to both. This leads to another invocation in Chap. 25 and the search in Chap. 26 for the object measured. Do we measure motion or also the time of motion? Speech again becomes the best image for the discussion - how we measure feet and syllables. "*Vox corporis incipit sonare*" (XI, 27), he begins with the voice sounding. The problem is to make it present and yet measurable. While it is sounding, passing from future to past? But where is the extension? Augustine is seeking an object of measurement which is one with the measurer. The contradiction between the indivisible present and the continuity of time is not to be resolved even by the infinite circular motions of the heavens.⁶

Augustine is stressing the voice so much in these chapters because it is the best approach to be made to the contradiction which grounds the temporal contradiction: that there is a distinction between the unified attention of the soul and the change and diversity which it considers. "Therefore neither future, nor present nor past, nor passing times do we measure, and yet we measure times" (XI, 27). There is no way to measure times but we do it, and then Augustine quotes from Ambrose "*Deus creator omnium*" (remembered also at the death of Augustine's mother in Bk. IX, 12). It is clear that this is an example to be used in the discussion. It is clear also that it is yet another invocation at this most difficult point in the argument. Augustine wishes to know what he is doing when he says the words but at the same time he wishes to know the God which is the subject matter of the words and his creation *in principio*. The verse and the argument lead to a consideration of what is truly present. Augustine measures "something in [his] memory" which remains (XI, 27). "In you, my soul, I measure times" he concludes from

⁵ The problems of the relation between Platonism and theurgy lie beyond the author and the scope of this paper. That speech itself becomes an important and questionable image for Plato and for the NeoPlatonists is clear. See for instance John Dillon, *The Golden Chain, Studies in the Development of Platonism and Christianity*, Variorum, 1990, p. 73 ff. Also see Frederic Schroeder: "Speech as declaration is located, not only in ourselves, but in the cosmos of which we speak." *Form and Transformation, A Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992, pp. 72-73. That theurgy has the unity of the two directions, from divine to human and from human to divine, which I find here in the psalm is well brought out by W.J. Hankey, "Augustinian Immediacy and Dionysian Mediation in John Colet, Edmund Spenser, Richard Hooker and the Cardinal de Bérulle," *Acts of the Kolloquium Augustinus in der Neuzeit. Von Petrarca zum 18. Jahrhundert'*, Wolfenbüttel, 1996 (forthcoming), p. 5.

⁶ Aristotle's solution, *Physics* VIII.

this argument. In the memory there is an object of measurement which although extended is all at once for the indivisible present. In the activities of the soul itself there is that which is a fitting object for the soul's measuring.⁷

Time then is the result of three activities of the mind: "*nam et expectat et attendit et meminit*" (XI, 28). Time is the measuring by the soul of its expectation, its attention and its memory. But this still seems externally asserted. We observe these activities in the soul and the observation and Augustine's thoughts upon them have shown that the problem of time is the problem of the unity of the soul's activities. But the unity is still implicit. "I am about to say a song that I know" (IX, 28). In the memory there is a completed whole which I will sing. Before I sing, my expectation has the whole of it. As I sing, the relation of expectation to memory changes. Until the whole is past. How are the three activities brought together in this example? One could answer "by the expectation". Or "by the singing". Or "by the memory". But the best answer is the song. Time is the relation of the parts and the whole in a song, and it is this relation of part and whole which causes the seeming contradiction between measurable time and the present now. This seems to be an even more external way to unify time than the motions of the spheres. But Augustine argues that, just as in the song, so too in the whole life of a man where the singing is his actions; and so through the ages of the sons of man where the singing is their lives.

So the song is the song of God in time and it is the relation of part and whole in all time, in the creation *in principio* which is the subject of Book XI. From the knowledge of the eternal God we have sought to know how He relates to the temporal. From the temporal itself and from its seeming contradictions we have come to see time as an aspect of the activity of soul and that activity to be an image of the whole activity of God in creation.⁸ Chap. 29 contrasts especially through Psalm 31 the contemplation of the eternal delights of God, neither to come nor to pass away. "But our years are mourning, we are torn until fused with God: "*donec in te confluum purgatus et liquidus igne amoris tui.*" (XI, 29).

We have understood something of time and the relation it implies but we are still caught between time and eternity. And Chap. 30 brings out that our understanding is, just as our temporal existence, to be absolutely contrasted with the divine. As I know a song, so too does God know time but not with the variety and distention; it is rather that we know God as the creator of mind and, through that, as the "*in principio*", takes on the content of the timeless creation of heaven and earth. But this negative conclusion the

⁷ Jean Guitton expresses this step toward an object of thought in the present as an "énergie spirituelle"; the instance is not an abstract limit but "un acte de l'esprit". *Le temps et l'éternité chez Plotin et Saint-Augustin*, Aubier, Paris, 1956, p. 187.

⁸ "Time must have a foundation which is permanent," John F. Callahan, *Four Views of Time in Ancient Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1948, p. 178. He stresses that time belongs to soul in a much more fundamental way for Augustine than for Plotinus. One way to understand this is the difference grace makes. Speaking of the presence of the "forgiving God" Jaroslav Pelikan argues "In that presence [confession] could become a way of coming to terms with the continuity of the self by including divine forgiveness within the continuity, and thus of putting the subjectivity of memory into the subjective-objective context of time." *The Mystery of Continuity*, University Press of Virginia, 1986, p. 26.

Platonists knew well. What is distinct here is the sense which ends this book and which will be fundamental for the next, that "the humble of hear are your domicile" (XI, 31). In the soul is found a positive image of the activity of God and the unity with that activity is seen to be possible here. But more, in the *Confessions* that unity is being brought about. At certain points within the argument, and here at the end, Augustine is singing songs that he knows, the psalms. As is brought out in the *City of God* (especially the treatment of the 89th Psalm in Book XVII) and in his commentaries, the psalms are songs to be sung.⁹ And they are to be sung because they are revealed. They are extended revelations of the "song of the lord"; that is, they are revelations about time. Here Augustine is using the psalms as inspiration and exhortation. The song we sing when we sing these psalms at the end of Book XI is not merely an adequate image according to our argument for the eternal "song" in God's creation.¹⁰ The psalms express that positive relation which the divine has to the soul, the true fullness of the present on which the certainty that time is a whole, of which this moment now is a part, depends. When Augustine quotes the psalms here the object of knowledge, what is referred to through the song, and the measure and thought of it have become one. We understand time through the image of the song and we are fully present in time through the revelation which it is. Time is a psalm as at this moment in the *Confessions* it is the calling to our true expectation. It is a first form in which, through Scripture, knowledge and its object are one, the final form of which will be the knowledge of the Trinity here implicit in the knowledge of the soul but explicit in Book XIII, where finally the contemplation of God through *Genesis* will be one with the contemplation of God through the confession of this individual life.

"You have begun to make us free" (XI, 1). Book XI is a consideration of this same act but as creation *in principio*. Both acts are in eternity and both are shown through time, like a song which has been learned, is known all at once and yet is stretched out. But when this is known, then the timeless and the temporal song become one in the form of a psalm, giving Augustine the whole in the very image he uses. This unified whole allows him to think the object in the image, an activity which the Platonists would judge to be folly.¹¹

⁹ The singing of psalms plays an important part in the argument of Book X, 33 for instance in the treatment of hearing and its sins. See also the distinction between song and psalm in the discourse on Psalm 4.

¹⁰ Chadwick brings out the importance of *De Musica* in Augustine and a hidden affinity (*Confessions* X, 49) to the soul. *Augustine*, H. Chadwick, Oxford University Press., 1986, pp. 44-45. The work is also related to Book XI by Robert J. O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine*, Harvard University Press, 1978, p. 94.

¹¹ Thus I find at this point and in the *Confessions* as a whole the total mediation of his relation to God, as James Doull brings out in "Augustinian Trinitarianism and Existential Theology", *Dionysius*, III, 1979, p 150.

