Call #: BR65.A62 2005 c2


Volume:

Issue:

Month/Year: 2004

Pages: 68-92 PLUS ACCOMPANYING NOTES

Article Author: Hent de Vries

Article Title: "Instances: Temporal Modes From Augustine to Derrida and Lyotard,"

Note:

WARNING CONCERNING COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS
The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted materials.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research". If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use", that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

Patron Information

Name: Hent de Vries
Username: kdevrie1
Status: Faculty
Department: Humanities
Email: hentdevries@jhu.edu
Delivery Method: Electronic Delivery

Transaction #: 684631
Instances

Temporal Modes from Augustine to Derrida and Lyotard

Hent de Vries

la conversion ne se dit que de l'instant (conversion takes place only in the instant)!

Here, I would like to articulate a simple question. What happens if we add the reflections on time in Augustine’s Confessions to the historical dossier from which Derrida’s interrogations of the topoi of temporality—from “Ousia and grammat” to Shibeoloe—take their lead? How would the Confessions register among the classical sources—Aristotle’s Physics, Hegel’s Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften (Encyclopædia), Husserl’s Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstsein (The Phenomenology of Inner Time-Consciousness), Heidegger’s Sein und Zeit (Being and Time)—that form the horizon for the figures of temporality (the temporal modes, not so much the existence or in-existence of time) that Derrida has indefatigably explored? What if “Circumfession” (“Circumfession,” in English), together with texts such as “Sauf le nom” and Mémoires d’aveugle (Memoirs of the Blind), performs the singular task of reinscribing Augustine into the philosophical drama acted out between Aristotle and Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger (reinscribing, because for most of these authors, including Derrida, the Confessions was a reference all along)? To propose this would mean to raise the question of temporality—quid enim est tempus, what, then, is time?—only obliquely, given that in “Circumfession” it is never addressed directly, discursively, as such and in these terms, but is instead addressed poetically, rhetorically, in an indirect and testimonial vein—in other words, confessionally, and, in a sense to be determined, circumfessionally.

In suggesting this, I am not implying that the turn to Augustine should be ascribed to some biographical or autobiographical peculiarity on Derrida’s part. He is not the only contemporary thinker to have rediscovered Augustine—especially the meditations on time in the Confessions—with a certain delay and belatedness, in retrospection, and to have reinscribed him into a text that, given its confessionnal mode, is replete with retractions. Indeed, “Circumfession” is not the only text to be punctuated with reconsiderations that redirect our attention to singular motifs, all of them announced but not all of them addressed—or confessed—before.

As I will indicate (without being able to reconstitute the relevant context in its entirety), Jean-François Lyotard has testified to a similar confession, conversio, retractatio, and, as we shall see, spiritual exercise, all circling around the motif of a circumcision of the heart with “an incision,” as he puts it, “from within.” In his latest writings, notably La Confession d’Auguste (The Confession of Augustine) and Misère de la philosophie (Destitution of Philosophy), we find a parallel turning to these theological archives, whose rhetorical and argumentative, figurative and semantic potential had so long seemed inaccessible to, and irrelevant for, philosophical reflection and the “honor of thinking.”

In passing, let me note that, mutatis mutandis, the same could be said of Jean-Luc Nancy, who in a recent project entitled “La Déconstruction du christianisme” (“The Deconstruction of Christianity”) covers, albeit indirectly, much of the same ground. In fact, some instances of the temporal modes I discuss are most clearly expressed in Derrida’s ongoing philosophical conversation with Nancy, especially in the central chapters of Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy (Touching, Jean-Luc Nancy). But let me concentrate here on the texts I mentioned at the outset and raise my simple question: What does it mean when Lyotard thinks of confession—here, “conversion”—in light of a peculiar temporal mode and asserts that “conversion only takes place in the instant,” that is to say, can only be spoken of in terms of an instant (la conversion ne se dit que de l’instant), instantaneously, as it were? I would like to trace this motif in some detail, not least because here we touch upon a topos central both to Derrida and to a whole tradition of spiritual exercises.

I will proceed in three steps. First, I will distill some elements from Derrida’s “Circumfession” that set the stage and will sketch out some premises of my argument. Derrida’s version of “conversion,” I believe, entails a similar “instant.” Second, I will dwell for a moment on the work of Pierre Hadot, whose interpretation of the tradition of spiritual exercises will present a foil against which I want to situate the alternative logic of the instant in Derrida and Lyotard. And third, I will give a summary reading of Lyotard’s The Confession of Augustine.

Derrida’s “Circumfession”

Just as the citation in the opening lines of “Circumfession”—ur confitement Deo scienti, “why we confess to God, when he knows (everything about us)—forms part of the historical dossier, but not the literal text, of Confessions Book XI (it is the title, Derrida reminds us, given to its first chapter by the seventeenth-century
translator Robert Arnauld d'Andilly), the Confessions' literal question Quod enim est tempus? (What, then, is time?), although not explicitly mentioned in Derrida's text, seems omnipresent there. And yet, for the "duration of these few pages [pendant le temps de ces quelques pages]," Derrida writes, "Circumcision" follows a different "rule" (32/34). That rule can be rephrased as follows. Instead of addressing the concerns of the Confessions (or its question of time) head on, these pages aim to investigate—to circumnavigate and produce (or create, ex nilo, miraculously and testimoniably, as it were)—the very possibility of the future, past, and present "event." The text—literally, the subtext—of "Circumcision" is oriented toward the invention of "unpredictable things" (31/32, a phrase given in English in the French text).

This does not mean that no further reference to Confessions Book XI is given, let alone that the question Quod enim est tempus? (What, then, is time?) is simply absent. On the contrary, there is, for example, the passage in which the confessor implores: "And speaking before you, confiding in you at present [my italics] what in another period I called my synecdoche, telling you the story of my stories, I ask munquad... cum tua sit oeternitas, ignoras, quae tibi dico [since eternity is Thine, O Lord, dost Thou not know what I am saying to Thee? (XI, i, 1)], why it takes me the time that you give me, and cui ergo tibi tot rerum narrationes digero [Why, then, do I tell Thee the detailed story of so many things?] (ibid.), not for the truth, of course, nor the knowledge of it, non utique ut per me noueri ea, sed affectum meum excitum in te et eorum, qui haec legunt [certainly, not for Thee to learn them through me, but to arouse my feeling of love toward Thee, and that of those who read these pages (ibid.)] (75-76/74-75). But somewhat surprisingly, the implied temporal mode of these isolated motifs, taken directly from Book XI—Augustine's meditation on time—never becomes thematic as such.

The "unpredictable things" that "Circumcision" elicits and puts to work consist, first of all, in singular motifs (rather than motifs of some general category called "singularity"), which escape the formalization—beyond all idiom and independent of any citation—so aptly aimed at by the dates (the dactylic and, as it were, already being dated, indeed, outdated, too late) of Bennington's "Derridabase." The text at the top of the page with the God's eye point of view "presupposes a contract" and "a number of rules of composition"; it attempts to "describe," according to "pedagogical and logical norms... if not the totality of J. D.'s thought, then at least the general system of that thought... by turning it into an interactive program which... would in principle be accessible to any user" (1/3).

In the text at the bottom of the page, by contrast, Derrida—in "fifty-nine periods and periphrases written in a sort of internal margin between Geoffrey Bennington's book and work in preparation [January 1989—April 1990]" (vii)—agreed to "show how any such system must remain essentially open." The shared "interest" of the two authors resides in the "text" and the "proof"—a spiritual contest of sorts—of this very "failure" (1/3). Derrida, so the arrangement went, would thus "write something escaping the proposed systematization, surprising it" (ibid.). This and nothing else, Derrida writes, is the "exercise [exercise] with and in which G.

and I are indulging," its "rightful dimension" being "a whispering, the aparté of a confessional where we are in for nobody, changing skin every minute [à chaque instant] to make truth, each his own, to confess without anyone knowing, why one would wish to know or to make that known, like a gift confession must be from the unconscious, I know no other definition of the unconscious" (233/216-17).

This reference to the unconscious explains why the confession revolves not only around an always still to come but equally around the vacant spot of an always already having taken place and passed away. The confession, the circumcision, is a response, a "postscriptum," as Derrida writes in "Sauf le nom." (In the libidinal parable of Lyotard's Confession of Augustine, it is the aftereffect of an "advance blow"; we will come to that.) It is, Derrida says of Augustine,"

as if the act of confession and of conversion having already taken place between God and him, being as it were written (it is an act in the sense of archive or memory), it was necessary to add a post-scriptum—the Confessions, nothing less)—addressed to brothers, to those who are called to recognize themselves as the sons of God and brothers among themselves... But the address to God itself already implies the possibility and the necessity of this post-scriptum that is originally essential to it. Its irreducibility is interpreted finally, but we won't elaborate on that here, in accord with the Augustinian thought of revelation, memory, and time."

"Circumcision" makes good upon that claim. Or so it seems, for the departure from Augustine's thought is no less obvious.

Drawing on the resources of the Confessions, Derrida undermines a format—that of formalization—which he does not hesitate to call an outright "theologic program [theologicum];" (30/30). (It is also a cosmic-geologic program. We will come to this in a moment, not forgetting that "Geo" is the nickname given to his mother, "Georgette" [261/242], and that the earth, "the origin of the earth" [266-67/247], plays an important role throughout Derrida's text.) Formalization is a "theologic program" because, like God, it pretends to see and oversee all there is (to say, to write, to confess). Thus, in "Circumcision" as in Glas, one version of Absolute Knowledge, of Savoir absolu, SA —here with the help of Saint Augustine—is played out against (or substituted for) another—another knowledge, another savoir, another having self, another having, relating to, oneself, s'avoir. This time the encounter happens in the space of a sublinear text (as in Survivre ["Living On"], in Parages), rather than in between two columns (as in Glas). The difference matters little. The format could just as well have been that of a polylogue (as in Voiles [Voiles], in which "Un ver à soi" ["A Silent Worm of One's Own" speaks to Cixous's text Savoir in yet a different vein] or another—equally unpredictable—format still to be invented among so many inventions of the other (one recalls that Inventions de l'autre ["Inventions of the Other"]) is the subtitle of Psyche.

Derrida does not simply deny some "presence" of an Absolute Referent—or addressee, address, and addressee. But this "presence" is affirmed only paradoxically, aporetically, in a virtually hypothetical and indeed confessional, circumessional
mode, whose specific temporal mode—but also experience, trial, experiment—should give us pause. In it, interestingly, the modern phenomenological procedure of *epoché* and the destruction of the natural (or naturalist) attitude toward the world—in Husserl's view a "conversion" in its own right—seems intertwined with the ancient tradition of spiritual exercises. Derrida writes:

I am trying to disinterest myself from myself to withdraw from death by making the "I," to whom death is supposed to happen, gradually go away, no, be destroyed before death come to meet it, so that at the end already there should be no one left to be scared of losing the world in losing himself in it, and the last of the Jews that I still am is doing nothing here other than destroying the world on the pretext of making truth, but just as well the intense relation to survival that writing now is, is not driven by the desire that something remain after me, since I shall not be there to enjoy it in a word, there where the point is, rather, in producing those remains and therefore the witnesses of my radical absence, to live today, here and now, this death of me, for example, the very counterexample which finally reveals the truth of the world such as it is, itself, i.e., without me, and all the more intensely to enjoy this light I am producing through the present experiment of my possible survival, i.e., of absolute death, I tell myself this every time that I am walking in the streets of a city I love, in which I love, on whose walls I weep myself. (190–92/178–79)

Less than a series of unforeseen motifs—for example, tears, blood, a brother, another (hidden, given, unwritten, secret) name (83–84/81–82), a "white" and "immaculate" or "virgin talith," etc. (84/82, 245–46/227–28)—the "unpredictable things" at which "Circumfession" aims concern, first of all, a "possibility," not least the possibility (or possible actuality) of calling this "possibility" many limitless names (that is to say, infinitely and with infinite respect, but also necessarily improper ones, as if *euphemy*—the discourse of apophatic and kataphatic speech—and *blasphemy* were just two sides of the same coin, tossed up in the chance game of a derigormen writing).

Not an abstract temporal structure, but a nonformalizable, nonsystematizable, and in that sense, each time singular—instance is at issue here, one that is testified to (and thus instantiated) in multiple ways. Unlike the "Being" that, according to Aristotle (and with him Heidegger), "say"—or, in Heideggerian parable, "gives"—itself in manifold ways, instances do not let themselves be gathered under one heading ("Being," "Truth," "Time") whose meaning (Sinn) could be spelled out by metaphysics, ontology, or even "thought." Nor are the motifs in question mere empirical occurrences (events, actions, words, or gestures), of which ontic or historical discourse could determine the cause, the effect, and the referent (the sense or *Bedeutung*). The ontological, like time, is multiplied, disseminated, and singularized beyond recognition—counterexemplary. Derrida writes:

"only write here what is impossible, that ought to be the impossible-rule" (10–11–77), of everything G can be expecting of me, a supposedly idiomatic, unbroachable, unreadable, uncircumcised piece of writing, held not to the assist-

tance of its father, as Socrates would say, but to my assistance at the death of a mother about whom I ask to *en ennai* before witnesses, for if G. contests me, it is in the sense of the witness who, through countersigning attestation, confirms the logic of the counterexample, by daring to kill the quotation marks, without quoting me, calling me back to the moment when, like twelve years ago, I did not yet know what circumflexion means, "is there one for the moment it is just a word with which I want, in a more or less continuous way, but why, to do things, to tell stories." (194–96/181–82)

What is evoked is thus the "possibility" of an event—past, present, or future—deemed to escape "absolute knowledge" no less than its functional equivalents (archives, programs, databases, Derridabases, and the like). Not this or that event is at stake here—not even the singular instances mentioned earlier (tears, secret names, and the like)—but, if one can say so, the eventhood, even the eventuality of the event. As with the uniqueness of the eventfulness—which is also the absoluteness of experience or, at least, of the conditions and limitations of its possibility—analyzed by Jean-Luc Marion in *Étant donné: Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of the Gift), the event in question entails the "possibility" (not the reality or "effectivity") of a revelation whose paradoxical form of donation resembles the irruption, ex nihilo, of the miracle. Not that the event is a miracle, but what we have come to term—for good and for ill—a miracle is the best (most adequate or most articulately) figure for it. Indeed, like the miracle, the general structure of the event remains "undecidable" with respect to the situation—and situatedness—of its occurrence and thus, as it were, "without an adequate cause" of any kind. In suggesting this, Marion comes close to Alain Badiou's analysis of the singularity of the event, forcefully presented with reference to "religion" in his *Saint Paul: La Fondation de l'universalisme* (Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism). As we shall see, his position also resembles that of Lyotard, for whom pure obligation cannot cause or regulate the actions it prescribes. In the section entitled "Ethical time," which concludes the chapter "Obligation" in *Le Dérivé*, Lyotard writes: "Causality through freedom is immediate, that is, without mediation, but also without recurrence. Its efficiency is instantaneous [my italics], pure will obligates and that's all. It is but 'beginning'...". That it comes to pass at all—or happens and is testified to—is nothing less than a miracle. Derrida says as much when he writes, in "Demeure," his reading of Blanchot's *L'Instant de ma mort* (The Instant of My Death):

any testimony testifies in essence to the miraculous and the extraordinary from the moment it must, by definition, appeal to an act of faith beyond any proof. When one testifies, even on the subject of the most ordinary and the most "normal" event, one asks the other to believe one at one's word as if it were a matter of a miracle. Where it shares its condition with literary fiction, testimonial-
Consequently, one must associate the miraculous with "the fantastic, the phantasmatic, the spectral, vision, apparition, the touch of the untouchable, the experience of the extraordinary, history without nature, the anomalous."14 Derrida does so consistently, pointing to monstrousity, the possibility of the worst, which remains forever the condition of the best.

This possibility, we said, has an irreducibly temporal dimension. "Circumcision," albeit indirectly, explains in what sense. Not only does Derrida state that "one date is enough to leave the geologic program behind [our place]" (250/230), but the possibility of the event has, he writes, everything to do with "a sort of compulsion to overtake [doubler] each second . . . , double [dédoubler] it rather, over-printing it with the negative of a photograph already taken with a 'delay' mechanism," more precisely, "the memory of what survived me to present me at my disappearance, interprets or runs the film again, and already I catch them out seeing me lying on my back, in the depth of my earth, I mean, they understand everything, like the geologic program, except that I have lived in prayer, tears and the imminence at every moment [à chaque instant] of their survival, terminable survival from which 'I see myself live' translates 'I see myself die.'" (39–40/40–41).

We find this figure of a "doubling" of each second—a temporal procedure that in biblical exegetical parlance might find its counterpart in allegory15—in Lyotard as well, and I will return to it later. For now, suffice it to note that what escapes the cosmo-geo-onto-theo-logic program is, in the wording of "Circumcision," nothing "except that I have lived in prayer, tears and the imminence at every moment [à chaque instant], etc. To be more precise, to have lived in prayer and tears is to have lived in an 'imminence at every instant'—speaking, like Augustine, with the mother in the 'imminence of her death' (193/180) in a "terminable survival" that converts the gift of life into a gift of death, a giving oneself death, or at least a seeing oneself, while alive, as dead and vice versa. Again, it is a topos Lyotard will repeat in The Confession of Augustine: "What was taken for life dies in it, and from out of this death there shines forth true life . . . This classic inversion of the dead and the living weaves its motif through the whole of the Confessions, as is the case in the writing of the revelation, in the Psalms, Exodus, Genesis, in John and Paul." (8/25).

But then the cosmo-geo-onto-theo-logic program is also de- and reprogrammed on the screen (the skin, the sky) of an alternative personal computer and propelled—projected—far ahead of itself. In Derrida's words: "I write to death on a skin bigger than I . . . caelum enim plicabitur ut liber et nunc sit pelles extenditur sup' nos . . . sicut pellem extenditum firma mentum libri tui [for 'the heavens shall be folded together as a book,' and now it is stretched over us like a skin. . . . Thou hast stretched out the firmament of Thy Book like a skin (XIII, xx, 16)]." (229–31/213–15). This works also in the opposite direction, since there is a no less permanent "violence of the void through which God goes to earth to death [se terre à mort] in me, the geologic program." (272/252). Indeed, from early on, Derrida continues, "the unforgettable power of my discourses hangs on the fact that they grind up everything including the mute ash whose name alone one then retains, scarcely mine, all that turning around nothing, a Nothing in which God reminds me of him, that's my only memory, the condition of all my fidelities" (273/252–53).

Plunged into the "history of penitence, from repentance to regret and contradiction, from public avowal with expiation to private avowal and confession" (86/84)—a history he may have learned in part from historical studies such as Jean Delumeau’s L’Aveu et le pardon: Les Difficultés de la confession XIIle-XVIIIe siècle (Confession and Pardon: Difficulties of Confession from the Thirteenth to Eighteenth Centuries)16—but confronted especially with Augustine's work at "the delivery of liturgy confessions, i.e., at a form of theology as autobiography" (86–87/85), the author of "Circumcision" from here on raises a simple dilemma. Confessing the sin or the guilt of "letting my mother go or letting her down, already burying her under the word and weeping her in literature" (262/243), he wonders whether—in the presence of agony and scars (and hence possible death)—one can still be interested in "writing or literature, art, philosophy, science, religion or politics" (87/85). He wonders whether one’s sole concern should not rather be the "memory and heart, not even the history of the presence of the present" (ibid.), philosophy’s or ontology’s sole concern from Aristotle through Hegel, up to Husserl and Heidegger. And then: "I wonder what I am looking for with this machine avowal, beyond institutions, including psychoanalysis, beyond knowledge and truth, which has nothing to do with it here" (87/85); "machine avowal," unlike Augustine (or so it would seem at first glance), for "since the computer I have my memory like a sky in front of me, all the succor, all the threats of a sky, the pelliculat simulacrum of another absolute subjectivity, a transcendence" (228/212).

In other words, the "anamnesis" (72/72) of "Circumcision," even where it recalls specific dates—and they are numerous!—circles around "the impassibility of a time out of time" (80/78). That might be said to figure an "immortal mortal," an all too "human inhuman, the dumb god the beast" (80/78), in short: a "contretemps" (65/65), a "no-time lapse" or "absolute lapus," whose specific mode—to avoid the terms "modality" and "structure" here—is, again, far from obvious.

This would seem to be the task that "Circumcision" sets out to fulfill in its attempt to invoke "my religion about which nobody understands anything" (154/146): namely, to "open again the wound of circumcision, analyze that form of secret, the 'my life' which is neither a content to be hidden nor an inside of the solitary self but hangs on the partition between two absolute subjectivities, two whole worlds in which everything can be said and put in play without reserve, with the exception not of this fact but of the bottomless state of the other world, I write by reconstituting the partitioned and transcendent structure of religion, of several religions, in the internal circumcision of my life" (228–29/212–13). Such writing, even where it digests itself "to the blood" by reading others, is singular and idiomatic, not to say indexical and idiosyncratic. As it engages "several religions," it nowhere becomes ironic or ecumenical, let alone syncretistic. Indeed, we read: "You never
write like SA, the father of Adeodat whose mother is nameless, nor like Spinoza, they are too marranes, too 'Catholic' (250/231).

But it can engage "several religions" only because it belongs to—at least—two "times" at once. Both temporal and historical, the movement of faith—conversion, confession—"is" at the same time not of this world, eternal, the annulment of time, and the transformation of its ordinary concept. Faith marks the instant in which time, after having gone through a painful preparation, touches upon eternity, "consecrates time," and "begins a new time." 15 Derrida says as much when he speaks, in Donner la mort (The Gift of Death), of a temporality of the "instant," which, paradoxically, belongs to an "atemporal temporality," to an ungraspable "durée" that is incomprehensible and can only be affirmed. 16

Spiritual Exercises?

To better situate this motif—or rather, to comprehend its incomprehensibility, the reasons for its unintelligibility—we should briefly contrast "Circumfession" with the tradition of spiritual exercises that runs from Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman antiquity through Augustine, Ignatius of Loyola, Descartes, and Pascal up to the early Wittgenstein and, perhaps, the later Foucault. What are spiritual exercises, and what concept of time—who are they?

As Pierre Hadot argues in his Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique (translated under the all-too-vague title Philosophy as a Way of Life, a title that has now also made its way back into French with the recent publication of a series of interviews with Hadot under the title La Philosophie comme manière de vivre 17), the tradition of spiritual exercises is intimately linked with the attempt to establish—and live—"the value of the present instant." 18 As Hadot recalls, the spiritual exercises sought to realize a "state of attention" through a variety of techniques, all revolving around "intense meditation on fundamental dogmas, the ever-renewed awareness of the finitude of life, examination of one's conscience, and, above all, a specific attitude toward time." 19 They consisted in "practices that could be of a physical nature, such as regimes of alimentation, discursive practices, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive ones, as in contemplation, but that were all destined to operate a modification and transformation in the subject that practiced them." 20

In the spiritual exercises "attention and vigilance presuppose continuous concentration on the present moment, which must be lived as if it were, simultaneously, the first and last moment of life." 21 As Marcus Aurelius writes in his Meditations: "Let your every deed and word and thought be those of one who might depart from this life this very moment." 22

But this cosmic consciousness, "the consequent dilution of our self throughout the infinity of universal nature," 23 the "vision of totality"—here, of life—could take different forms. Thus, Hadot notes: "For the Epicurean the thought of death is the same as the consciousness of the finite nature of existence, and it is this which gives an infinite value to each instant. Each of life's moments surges forth laden with incommensurable value: 'Believe that each day that has dawned will be your last, then you will receive each unexpected hour with gratitude.' 24 Whether starting out from a meditation that expands on "life" or that starts out from "death," the intended result would be the same: locating infinite value in each singular instant.

Instances
famous dictum of Bergson's ("Philosophy is not the construction of a system but the resolution, taken once and for all, to look naively into oneself and around oneself") and, on the contrary, at least two different conceptions of "mode of life"—and, consequently, two different views of its temporal mode and its "formative effect"—are at stake here.

The question why this is so brings us back to that of the "instant," the now, the punctual, the point, the moment, the present *hie et nunc*, whose presentness, indivisibility, linear succession, and, as it were, topicality—as one of the tradition's most important philosophemes—Derrida has incessantly queried. From his earliest writings onward, the motif of the instant is not analyzed as that of the "instance of discourse"—to be distinguished from the "entire theory on the sign and on the differential relations between signs"—and the "sentence," the "moment" at which, as Benveniste has argued, "language is poured back into the universe" (reversed à l'univers). Nor is the instant confounded with the "muscular time, with beginnings, breaks, and completions" that Gaston Bachelard evokes in his *L'Intuition de l'instant* (the first chapter of which was translated as "The Instant" in an interesting collection *Time and the Instant: Essays in the Physics and Philosophy of Time*). When the instant is said to have "no duration," let alone "temporal flow," its being "fragmented" or "structured" is neither a "failing" nor due to its "contamination" by "action" and "space" (as Bergson seems to have thought). From the purported essentiality of the punctum (analyzed in *Psyche*, in the essay on Roland Barthes), not to mention the *nunc stans* or the "living present," to the "artifactuality" and "actvirtuality" characterized by a singular temporality, a "deconstructed actuality," of sorts, the motif of the instant is, on the contrary, incessantly displaced. The distance traversed runs from the instant that is the supposedly basic—and indivisible—unit of the linear time of sequenced and synthesized presences, to the instant that is not so much "infinitely divisible," reducible to the mathematical notion of an "infinitesimal instant," but—even more paradoxically and aporetically—"toujours en instance," "always in abeyance," or better, "always pending," as "Demeure," citing Blanchot, reminds us.

But what would "always" mean here if not an altered—generalized—singularity (or singularism) of sorts: a *nunc stans* in a new guise, the unexpected, unpredicted, coincidence (if we can still say so) of heterology and tautology, of repetition and of repetition of the same? For one thing, it would mean that "the constancy of God" in life is, in "Circumfession" and elsewhere, omnipresent but "called by other names," so that the confessor could just as well "pass for an atheist" (155/147), for the last (*le dernier*) in the sense of the most just, as much as the least of confessors.

Before articulating a similar motif in Lyotard, let me briefly address one further central question raised by Hadot's work that will help me to situate Derrida's (and Lyotard's) meditations on Augustine more clearly. How does all of this relate to the Christian understanding of the ancient tradition of spiritual exercises, its specific rendering of one of its central motifs—namely, the "remembrance of God"—and its subsequent systematizations? In order to answer that question, it

Before spelling out what this means, I should point out that the central motif of a "vision of totality," the sense of "fusion with the Whole [fusion avec le Tout]" that Hadot identifies with the mystic-cosmic experience, cannot be found in either Derrida or Lyotard—or can it be found in the Greek and early Christian authors who began the tradition of spiritual exercises. In several contexts Hadot acknowledges having found it in Romain Rolland, whose invocation of the sentiment *océanique* also made its way into the opening pages of Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Civilization and Its Discontents).

But what exactly "is" the instant? Elsewhere, in *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (What Is Ancient Philosophy?), the tradition of spiritual exercises is said to differentiate between two ways of defining the instant, that is to say, the present. Thus, for example, the Stoics put forward, on the one hand, an "abstract" and "mathematical" understanding of the present in terms of a mere or virtual "limit between the past and the future." According to this interpretation—familiar also from the skeptical argument found in Book XI of the *Confessions*—there could be no present time, since time is "infinitely indivisible" and thus reducible to an "infinitesimal instant."

Following a second definition, on the other hand, the present would be conceived "in relation to human conscience: it would thus represent a certain weight, duration, in correspondence with the attention of the lived conscience [la conscience vécue]." This distinction corresponds to the opposition that Bergson, in *La Pensée et le mouvant* (The Creative Mind), sees between "the present as a mathematical instant that is nothing but an abstraction and the present that has a certain weight [épaisseur], a certain duration [durée] that more or less defines and delimits my concentration [attention]."

Only the second version of the "living present [présent vécu]," Hadot claims, could constitute the horizon of the concentration on the here and now aimed at by the spiritual exercise. The two interpretations would thus emphasize the *désist et le intention animi*, respectively. On Hadot's reading, the tradition of spiritual exercises privileges the latter.

At this point, one can easily see how Derrida's motif of the instant would necessarily point elsewhere and do so—for all its meditative quality, technique, and (I dare say) spirituality—in quite a different way. If the platonic philosophical theme expressed in Montaigne's "Philosophizing Is Learning How to Die"—and this source (not some communitarian virtue ethics in the sense of Alisdair McIntyre, Charles Taylor, or Martha Nussbaum) forms for Hadot the "indirect contact with ancient philosophy"—is, as he asserts, "connected with that of the infinite value of the present moment, which we must live as if it were, simultaneously, the first moment and the last," then this concern seems also that of "Circumfession." But the differences between the two exercises (as well as that of Lyotard) should not be neglected. To live the present instant "as if it were the first or the last" is not quite the same as linking onto "phrases" (Lyotard) or "singular dates" (Derrida) whose occurrence is neither first nor last. What is more, there is no parallel in Derrida or in Lyotard for the "naïveté" that Hadot takes from a
is useful to recall Hadot's periodizations and formalizations—which are based on a methodological historiographical link between philology and philosophy, Hellenism and Christianity, the Greek and the Latin (inspired by Pierre Courcelle and others)—however schematic they might seem. In his view, “Christianity's acceptance of spiritual exercises had introduced into it a certain spiritual attitude and style of life which it had previously lacked. . . . In the very process of performing repetitious actions and undergoing a training in order to modify and transform ourselves, there is a certain reflectivity and distance which is very different from evangelical spontaneity. Attention to oneself—the essence of prosche—gives rise to a whole series of techniques of introspection.” These should be distinguished from the evangelical message concerning the announcement of an eschatological event called ‘the Kingdom of Heaven’ or the ‘Kingdom of God.’

But things are more complicated than this formulation suggests. Although there was a “permanent survival of certain philosophical spiritual exercises in Christianity and monasticism”—exercises whose “reception” introduced a “particular tonality” into Christianity—there was also a tendency among the faithful to “Christianize their borrowings as much as possible.” As Hadot goes on to explain, “they believed they recognized spiritual exercises, which they had learned through philosophy, in specific scriptural passages. . . . Through monastic literature, prosche was transformed into the ‘watch of the heart,’ under the influence of Proverbs, 4:23: ‘Above all else, guard your heart.’ Examination of one’s conscience was often justified by the Second Letter to the Corinthians, 13:3: ‘Examine yourselves . . . and test yourselves.’ Finally, meditation on death was recommended on the basis of First Corinthians, 15:31: ‘I die every day.’

Yet Hadot leaves no doubt that these rationalizations were allegorizations, at best. The methodological and historiographical link between the philological and the philosophical (or theological), Hellenism and Christianity, the Greek and the Latin, is at once intrinsic (and close) and loose (at an infinite remove, as it were). Hadot thus concludes that “it would be a mistake to believe that these references were enough, all by themselves, to Christianize spiritual exercises. The reason why Christian authors paid attention to the particular biblical passages was that they were already familiar, from other sources. . . . By themselves, the texts from scripture could never have supplied a method for practicing these exercises. Often, in fact, a given scriptural passage has only a distant connection with a particular spiritual exercise.”

How does this link between precedent and present present or represent itself in Derrida and, as we shall soon see, in Lyotard? Although their respective reappraisals and retractations are not strictly identical, and although their works are marked by a parallel turn to religion—which is a turning around of religion, in its own right—that leaves intact an initial difference (and, indeed, ultimate differend) in their reassessments of Augustine. I will risk some general hypotheses here. To begin with, in both authors we find similar strategies of appropriation by distancing. Each of these strategies submits its absolute and dissolved referent (in Derrida, the theologene “God,” Absolute Knowledge, SA, Saint Augustin; in Lyotard, the arrièreet: “is it happening? of des il y a, of a pluralized Erreignis) to a certain epoché, rendering it hypothetical (virtual, indeed, possible) to the point of absence—one is tempted to say, indifference. Thus, Lyotard says of Augustine: “How could conversion give him light? It exempts him from nothing, it makes everything ring false, the illusory and the true” (55/79). And a little earlier in the text: “With a touch, with a fragrance, with his cry, God perhaps (or is it the devil?) immerses the creature in his presence rather than prizing it therefrom. From the dazed look of daily life, his visit remains hardly discernible, a voice emerging from the next-door garden. . . . several clues strewn among habitual signs, almost without our knowing, we poor readers” (54/78). I will return to this below.

The privileged instance—itself violent—thus seems (somewhat violently) suspended, always kept pending, held in abeyance. Perhaps this is what it would mean, “Circumcision” suggests, to “take the most careful account, in annamnesis, of this fact that in my family and among the Algerian Jews, I scarcely ever said ‘circumcision’ but ‘baptism,’ not Bar Mitzvah but ‘communion,’ with the consequences of softening, dulling, through fearful acculturation, that I’ve always suffered from more or less consciously, of unavowable events, felt as such, not ‘Catholic,’ violent, barbarous, hard, ‘Arab,’ circumcised circumcision, interiorized, secretly assumed accusation of ritual murder” (72-73/72-73), etc.

Derrida’s retractations consist here in providing postscripts that enable him to rearticulate, that is, allegorize, the relationship between the testimonial—or the confessional—and the more abstract, formal, or structural investigation into the possibility, the condition, and the condition of possibility of the event, not least in view of its temporal dimensions or modes. What is more, in this latest retractation the ties with the first and most orthodox of all theological aspirations are not only severed but, equally, reaffirmed, in a singular testimony that knows no identifiable self that would give itself the law: “Here I am, peripheral and transiently, only the series of the 59 widows [the fifty-nine periods and periphrases that make up “Circumcision”] or counterexemplariness of myself, the first to have received from very high up the order” (255/236-37), a “phantom or prophet charged with a mission, heavily charged with a secret unknown to him, the sealed text of which would be in his pocket, commenting on it until he has no breath left for the 59 nations” (257/238). And yet someone—some “one”—who directs himself toward “you,” “in the singular”: “when he says ‘you’ in the singular and they all wonder, who is he invoking thus, who is he talking to, he replies, but you, who are not known by this or that name, it’s you this god hidden in more than one, capable each time of receiving my prayer, you are my prayer’s destiny, you know everything before me, you are the god (of my) unconscious, we all but never miss each other, you are the measure they don’t know how to take and that’s why they wonder whom, from the depth of my solitude, I still address, you are a mortal god, that’s why I write, I write you my god” . . . , to save you from your own immortality” (263-64/243-44).
Lyotard’s *The Confession of Augustine*

A similar itinerary, I believe, can be traced in the writings of Lyotard, from at least *The Differend* to his posthumously published *The Confession of Augustine*. Here as well, we find a condemnation of the presentness for which Augustine—and Husserl, one of Augustine’s most avid readers and an early point of reference for Lyotard—supposedly stands. In the words of *The Differend*:

> Augustine’s God or Husserl’s Living Present is presented as the name borne by the instance [instance] that synthesizes the nows. It is presented, though, by means of the phrases in which it is presented, and the now of each of these phrases then remains to be synthesized with the others, in a new phrase. God is for later, “in a moment (dans un instant);” the Living Present is to come. These only come by not arriving. Which is what Beckett signifies. Time is not what is lacking to consciousness, time makes consciousness lack itself.¹³

These passages should, of course, be read against the four other explicit references to Augustine in the book, especially in the “Aristotle Notice,” which revisits—and revises?—some arguments put forward by Derrida, especially in “Ousia et grammè,” in *Marges de la philosophie* ("Ousia and Gramme," in *Margins of Philosophy*). But I will leave that for now.

The whole chapter from which this discussion in *The Differend* emerges, “Presentation,” is devoted to exploring an alternative—in Lyotardian parlance, phrastic—model for understanding time well beyond (or before) its metaphysical determinations in light of some “present instant [l’instant présent].”¹⁴ “Time,” Lyotard writes, “takes place with the before/after implied in phrase universes, as the putting of instances into an ordered series.”¹⁵ Time would thus be the instance that synthesizes—or rather, pretends to gather—the “nows,” that is to say, instances, while forgetting its character of being itself only an instance, just another phrase, in turn.

Yet time is not only tied to the serial punctuation of phrases, each of which constitutes a virtual mini-cosmos—a singular universe—of its own. Time is also placed against the backdrop, not so much of an infinitely expanded memoria or a finite—recounted, narrated—historia, but of an oblivion that is irrevocable and, as it were, essential to the very possibility and operation of recollection (hence presentation or, indeed, confession) as such. Lyotard writes: “The presentation entailed by a phrase is forgotten by it, plunged into the river Letho...” Another phrase pulls it back out and presents it, oblivious to the presentation that it itself entails. Memory is doubled by oblivion [or, rather, doubles itself by oblivion, La mémoire se double d’oubli]. Metaphysics struggles against oblivion, but what is whatever struggles for oblivion called?¹⁶

This motif of oblivion returns in Lyotard’s posthumous work *The Confession of Augustine*, based on two lectures given in 1997, only one of which was separately published,¹⁷ and supplemented with a number of “working texts,” fragmented paragraphs, sketches, and “Fac-similes.” There confession is analyzed as what struggles against oblivion, but confession—and precisely this is Augustine’s confession,

...this time in the singular!—is also what (unwittingly? sinfully? blasphemously?) contributes to oblivion and, as it were, constitutes it from within: “What a way, indeed, of asserting the fact that he is worth nothing! He had to write to save himself from oblivion, and yet through writing he forgets himself” (29/49). A little later in the book’s title essay, Lyotard notes that, forgetting himself, the “first person author” is thereby precisely “the work of time: he is waiting for himself to arrive... postponing the instant of presence for all times” (36/56). More precisely still, the distance, the *distentio*, increases or widens as the confessions unfold and intensify: “distentio recurs, returns in the quick of confessive writing. The delay that this writing seeks to fill in... is not to be caught up. The very time taken for the proclamation of the instant of your actuality to be written down, the time taken to go through the delay again, to obtain pardon for misspent time...—confession aggravates the belatedness of this time lost in gaining time over time” (28/48).

It is as if Lyotard’s Augustine were anticipating the paradoxical structure of the idea of the Infinite, of metaphysical desire, that Levinas finds in the spiritual exercise of Descartes’ Meditations. Yet Lyotard’s turn to this motif—of a desire that deepens, infinitizes, as it approaches the desired—goes hand in hand with a return to the libidinal—economical perspective of his early years.¹⁸ In his rendering: “The ipse [or the self, le soi] shall not have, does not have, and did not have what it desires. It lacks being, and drugs its privation in temporal mode. It lives a mortal life, it survives, outlives itself, arranges it such that it is never on time for its objects, it temporeizes. Temporality is its settling down, to ipse [au soi], its way of getting on with the unaccomplished, with custom, with the deferment of the act. The times decline deception, time bows and relinquishes [or resigns, résigné] presence” (32–33/53).

But the present instant is not only (increasingly) postponed, it has always already passed. Futurity and pastness collapse into each other to the point—a virtual point, an instant, once again—of becoming indistinguishable, nothing real, mere modulations of spirit. Lyotard writes:

> Augustine complains that the present flies so rapidly from future to past that the slightest pause is excluded... So much so that none of the temporal states in which a sign is successively presented truly is. Writing fails off between two abysses.

> Modern phenomenological thought has made these analyses famous. The temporal instances are not beings but modes according to which an object is presented to consciousness. Augustine says: to the mind, *spiritus*. He respectively names waiting, attention, and memory, the presence to mind of the future, of the present, and of the past. Annihilating acts of intention since they set up their object, diversely but constantly, as absent: not yet there, no longer there, and the there now of the present, ungraspable. Weak tensions in the night of non-being, subsiding into it. (44–45/67–68)

In the unfinished notes—the “Sendings/Envios”—added into the “Notebook [Cahier],” the critical perspective on the “synthesis of the nows” formulated in *The Differend* seems to have been slightly modified. Almost approvingly, Lyotard makes
the confessor now say: "Of me, you know everything, having made me in an instant, having established in an instant the plan of my terrestrial journey and my peregrination (my pilgrimage) through the peripetia of events, acts, and passions" (66/92). What is different is the suggestion that this instance—the "presence" forever delayed, waited for, to come—is rendered in a peculiar (and, as we shall see, highly paradoxical) way. It is praised, not through jubilation but mournfully, hardly in high spirits but almost mechanically, not theologically but nearly topologically—"theotopologically"—as is testified by the Confessions' last two books (XII and XIII), which speak of the "Heaven of Heavens" and the "Bible as Firmament," respectively (and do so well before this becomes a central topos in Hölderlin, the later Heidegger, Levinas, and Nancy):

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? . . . How could I contain you, how could my work lodge you in the minuscule place (locus) that I am? In truth, it is the space of my work, a space-time that inhabits the atemporality and aspatiality that you are, this sky that is not of the skies of the earth, but the "sky of the skies, the heaven of the heavens."

To inhabit is still to say too much since the sky of skies is a non-place and a non-time. What my life and my work inhabit, my bios and my graphé at once, are the mystery of your creation. It is not you, but your work, this originary mystery through which, from nowhere and from time immemorial to time immemorial, time and space have been generated. Through the enigma of your appearance and withdrawal, through this "skin" that you have stretched and drawn like a veil between yourself and the world of creatures, you nevertheless diffuse your power and your knowledge. You effuse (effundies) over us; your "presence" in your work, and so in mine, in my life and my book, has neither place nor moment, it is the presence of an effusion. You do not disseminate yourself in your creation, you gather it (collectio). My confession is not only the recital of the gathering of my life under the law of your work, it is this recollection that is due to you. (68–69/93–95)

Neither an emanation nor a dissemination but a gathering, without place or moment, the temporal mode of this confession is that of a delayed present, the presence of an effusion—an instant in abeyance, always pending (en instance) — and thus, strictly speaking, an a- or non-, or counter-temporality of sorts. Measured against the collectio of the Other, the confession of the self is "a step that never advances [le pas qui ne passe pas]," following the signs of the "other time, without duration, the other field without horizon" (15/33).

Another section of the notes, entitled "Umbilical of Time," explains why this must be so. Like Beckett's oeuvre, as had been noted in The Differend, the Confessions, Lyotard says, "are written under the temporal sign of waiting. Waiting is the name of the consciousness of the future. But here, because it is a question not only of confessing faith in an end that awaits, that lies 'in sufferance,' but of confessing the self [or itself, se confesser], of displaying the sufferance of what has been done, waiting must go back through the past, climb back to its source, the upstream of this faith." (70/96, trans. modified). The narrative, the "temporal intrigue" and "story of my life [récit de ma vie]" that follows and that "gives to the succession of events the place that is their due," as historical "facts" and "in their literal sense" (71–72/97), has a strange effect. As Lyotard observes: "Chronology reduced to itself is pure nothing, appearance and disappearance, passing away [passage]. The past is what is no longer, the future is what is not yet, and the now has no other being than the becoming past of the future." (72/97–98)

In consequence, Lyotard sees, the temporal mode of the confession is not only that of the evanescence of the instant, of presence, of the present instant. The reverse perspective is valid as well: "The chase after the future through the past that drives and troubles the Confessions is only possible if, in the evanescence of these times, something withholds, is maintained, immutable" (72/98). Beyond the "non-time" of the "evanescence," the "transitivity of finite being"—which is a "nonbeing," of sorts—there lies another time, an immutable time, the Time of all times, the Time of our lives, whose "hidden semiotics" (16/34) Lyotard introduces as follows:

The plot of confessional narrative [L' intrigue du r écit confessé] is only possible if the event doubles up [or doubles itself, se double] with another meaning, called "allegorical" by exegetes, if the gossip, things as they are given, also constitute signum. It is conversion, then—since it gives us the ability to read signs in works, to read a little of divine writing in the writing of the bios—by means of confession as a journey that goes backward so as to move forward. The narrative plot, which ties together times in themselves of no import, rises up from a point of time that is not in time, from a point from which time deploys its threefold move to nothingness, but which is itself never destroyed.

It is the exploration of this uncanny anchoring of what happens in what does not pass by that is the concern of the entire end of the Confessions. (72–97/98)

The end of the Confessions, from Book IX and the death of Monica onward, is therefore devoted exclusively, Lyotard suggests, to sounding out the "point from which this narrative is made possible." The "epiphany of the consciousness of time" comes to substitute for the relating of "external events" (73/99), topologically, theotopologically, as it were. But this movement is traversed again in the opposite direction:

The agitated movement of things is succeeded by the dizziness of the soul meditating on the peaceful umbilical of this movement, the motif of which will be resumed by Descartes with theCogito. The prose of the world gives place to the poem of memory, or more exactly the phenomenology of internal time. The whole of modern, existential thought on temporality ensues from this meditation: Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre. (73/99) 

But again, in Lyotard's reading, in their very modernity these reflections on time—articulated in terms of a distantio animi, apperception, temporal ecstasies, tem-
porality, historicity, finitude, and freedom (the differences among these temporal
modes matters little)—find their ultimate ground in a permanence, an umbilical,
an anchoring, a necessity, an atemporality and infinity of sorts:

The past is no longer, the future is not yet, the present passes by, but as things
(open). And yet, I am aware of their nothingness, since I can think them in
their absence. There is therefore a present of the past, and this present, as long
as I think it, does not pass. It is this present that Husserl will call the Living
Present, oddly. In Augustine, this present, immanent to internal consciousness,
this umbilical, from which signs become readable to me, this present, then, is
like the echo in temporality of the divine Present, of his eternal today.

So autobiography (if it is one) changes into cryography—thelast books of
the Confessions devour this encrypting of the atemporal in the temporal, the
Word become flesh and single out within the three temporal ecstasies in
which it has been sacrificed and, as it were, dispersed, the kernel of permanence
in which they are recollected. (73–74/99–100)

It is the assumption of this “umbilical”—namely, the presence of a permanent presence
whose echo we capture—that is no longer accepted by either Lyotard or Derrida.
Their confessions, which are “echographies,” encrypt a different “atemporal
in the temporal”; their spiritual trials and experiments solicit another response in
which all reference—to addressor, addressee, and address—is hypothesized to the
point of indeterminacy and—almost—irrelevancy. Indeed, “there can be no witness
of this blow that . . . abolishes the periods, the surfaces of the archive. The
tables of memory fail to dust, the blow has not passed” (8/24–25). Or again: “In
truth, the blow is a cut, in the sense of n-dimensional space theory. An n-dimen-
sional space-time folds around the naturally three-dimensional volume of the
body” (10/27). This leaves us with a difficulty because, as Lyotard adds: “To conceive
the logic of these transformations of space, Augustine cannot rely on Dedekind
and Poincaré geometry” (10/27). In sum, the visitation precedes and exceeds (if
such temporal and spatial metaphors are still appropriate here) the conditions of
the possibility of experience in general. “The soul, cast out itself in its home, out
of place and moment, intrinsically, what could it place, fix, have memorized of
an avatar that abolishes the natural conditions of perception and therefore cannot
be perceived as an event?” (6/22). The soul would be deprived of its very “power
to gather together the diversity of instants in a single length of time [en une seule
durée]” (ibid.). As a result of the absolute visit, the soul—the “soul–flesh,” Lyotard
writes—enters a “phantom state”; it “invites a fairy-story [conte de fées], a fable,
not a discourse. . . . the rhythms of poetry” (6/23).

The “presence” of which Lyotard speaks in his reading of Augustine is thus
even more convoluted than it would seem at first glance. He characterizes time as
“disastrous” (33/53), as a lacking or “privation” (32/53) of and in being (rather
than as Being’s horizon and meaning, as Heidegger had claimed). Yet tied as it
is to a conception (the fissuring and filtering) of a minimal “hope,” as the final
words of the published part of our text confirm—we will come to that—time, the

presence, is posited as a postulate—a mystical postulate—and an originary afirma-
tion of sorts. Everything would come down, for us, to perceiving the difference be-
tween this affirmation and the naïveté of which Hadot, and before him Bergson,
speak with so much fervor. We are dealing here with two articulations—two tem-
poral modes—of finite humanity against the foil of an infinite Other, two artic-
ulations whose essential indeterminacy is all that matters. In Lyotard’s words: “Here
lies the whole advantage of faith: to become an enigma to oneself, to grow old,
hoping for the solution, the resolution from the Other” (55/79).

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 quest and
search for you, who you have already found me. After all, if I believe that it is
you who are in fact looking for yourself in my confession, it is because you have
been preached, and because I believe this preaching. Pseudo-Saint-Sauveur, in that
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 con-
fesses this advance, strives to be accepted of it. Its inquest disquiet, its rest-
lessness holds in advance its rest, it rests upon your announced but still con-
cealed presence, it has as its end the quiet of your direct presence, in the sky of
skies, the heaven of heavens. It has as its end its own end, the end of works, the
vision of glory: as its end its becoming an angel. (69–70/95–96)

And a little further, in the fragment entitled “Contretemps”:
You are ahead of me, I run after you, caught short by your nimbleness, to re-
cover all this time dissipated outside you. Much must be endured, so as to
shorten duration; much given out, dispersed, so as to gather together. He writes
on the run to recover your love, to obtain remission for the evil times, his hand
lifted from the sequestered goods of pagan origin, forgiveness for heresy.

The confession chokes at this pace. The breathless writing in which worldly
life is rectified does not suspend this life’s duration, it prolongs and repeats it.
To confess the delay redounds to the passive order of delay, and increases it.
Even to proclaim that I am yours, I must still be me, only be me. And that you
alone are being and the sign, it must still be me who signs the confession.

But who says that it must be? Who, then, is hurrying me on?” (82–83/108–09)

A definite answer to this question cannot be given, but this at least is certain:
“You, the Other, pure verb in act, life without remainder, you are silent. If he en-
counters you, he explodes, time also, without trace. He calls that ‘god’ because
that is the custom [la coutume] of the day, theology also being a work of custom
[consistéude]” (36/56–57). And again, while the “dreadful delay that makes the crea-
ture run after its truth in vain” and “accursed time in which the encounter with
the absolute is incessantly put off” are never “abolished” (12/53) throughout the
Confessions, throughout life, all this does not exclude “hope”—the most Chris-
tian of hopes. While life is “nothing but this: disentente, laxity, procrastination”—
in a word, “loss of time, time of loss” (56/81)—and while each further confession
add more to sin. 62 it is, paradoxically, the infinity in the delay that allows for some hope: “So night thickens, feebly streaked by the small light of hope” (ibid.). There will always have been “a highly discreet, not to say impish, signaling of the absolute [une signéletics bien discrète, pour ne dire malicieuse, de l’absolu]” (16/54), “episodic flashes,” “precarious moments of clarity.” 63 “Weumble our way through the traces left by the absolute that you are; we spell the letters” (40/62–63).

For all the loss of time, there is nonetheless a “credit over time,” and Lyotard concludes that it is “considerable: however slender it be, this hope overtums time’s course with something like an advance blow, the torsion of tomorrow in today. Listen: for by hope we are already saved” (56–57/81). He concludes by writing: “What I am not yet, I am. Its short glow makes us dead to the night of our days. So hope threads a ray of fire in the black web of immanence. What is missing, the absolute, cuts its presence into the shallow furrow of its absence. The figure that zigzags across the confession spreads with all speed over life, over lives. The end of the night forever begins” (57/82). These are, as it were, his last words—the close of the last text he completed for publication.

A similar—not identical, but similar—hypothesized positng, postulation, and affirmation dictates the performatives, the “perverformattes,” that make up the “periods” and “periphrases” of “Circumcision.” As we have seen, the “constancy of God” in life—in my life,” Derrida writes—is called here “by other names;” by an infinite series of nonsynonymous substitutions, “the omnipresence to me of what I call God in my abosled, absolutely private language being neither that of an eyewitness nor that of a voice doing anything other than talking to me without saying anything” (155/46–47). This paradox of “omnipresence” as an infinite and almost infinitesimal possibility of the instant, of singular instantiation, alone—a paradox, I have argued, that is central to, but also differently articulated in the tradition of spiritual exercises—that explains the possibility, indeed the necessity and the imperative, of a belonging without belonging, of being the one who confesses always the last, that is to say, too late, but of being also the one who confesses the least and, perhaps, who knows, the most.

DERRIDA’S RESPONSE TO HENT DE VRIES

I was, as usual, full of admiration listening to you. If anything, I will just point to some marginal, peripheral points. For instance, the question of spiritual exercises. I would argue that “Circumcision” in its own way is also an exercise, not a spiritual exercise, but nonetheless there is something of an exercise in it. From two points of view: on the one hand, because for a long time I was dreaming of writing a great book on circumcision. In this context, when I had to write something after Geoff’s “Derribase,” I had to do something. I tried to train myself to do something with the technical apparatus that I mentioned earlier, an exercise on the computer. What could I do? It was just childish exercise. That’s one point of view—“Circumcision” is not a spiritual exercise, but a technical exercise. On the other hand, there is the attention paid to genre, the history of the literary genre entitled “con-

fessions,” the literary history of “confessions” from St. Augustine’s opening to Rousseau, that’s also an exercise. In other texts which are going to be published, I pay attention to this history of genre, that is, of an exercise. That needs to be said.

Then, secondly, Lyotard and Bataille. Of course, there would be a lot to be said, a number of common premises between Lyotard and myself. This is French history, as you realize—the publication of Lyotard’s text on Augustine after his death and so on. We share a lot—but we are very different. We have different histories, different backgrounds, but common premises, among which is phenomenology. Bataille has a thinking of the instant, what he calls sovereignty, the ecstasy of sovereignty. It has to do with the instant of the erotic experience of the sacred, laughter, bursts of laughter, that’s the instant. When he distinguishes his own interpretation of sovereignty from Hegel’s, it’s sovereignty without mastery. I would question this, but nevertheless there is, between his concept of the sovereignty of Inner Experience and the question of the instant, something which could be interesting for us here. When he refers to Heidegger—since Heidegger is one of our common references here—he also denounces in Heidegger the professor. He owes a lot to Heidegger as well, but the difference between Nietzsche and Heidegger for him is that Heidegger is Herr Professor, with the seriousness that we alluded to this morning.

Now, the question of phenomenology, which is also something we share with Lyotard. None of these things could be intelligible without a common implication of epoché. All this is (for me, at least) written under epoché, everything, which means a number of things. First, the fictional structure of “Circumcision” under epoché. That is, it’s an “as if,” and what I’m interested in is, after the reduction, the noetic-noematic meaning of what’s happening, because the suspension of the thesis of belief is part of the game. So, there is an epoché here, which means some fictionality, which means some spectrality too. I have been very interested, as you know, in what Husserl says about the noema, which is the non-real component of consciousness. I tried in some footnote somewhere to connect this non-reality of the noema with the spectral, with spectrality. And all this is implied in my own way of writing “Circumcision,” among other things. Also, because of this, the exemplarity, the exemplary structure of these things. On the one hand, circumcision—I insist on it—is absolutely unique. It’s not circumcision in general; it’s my circumcision, a unique mark on my body, and it is irreplaceable. But on the other hand, in many texts—in “Circumcision” and in “Shibboleth,” for instance—I insist on the fact that circumcision is not only Jewish. It’s everywhere; it’s an exemplary structure of every human experience, of every living experience, so to speak. I associate circumcision with incision, the cut, the mark—so it has, it wants to have, an exemplary structure. This would be impossible without some phenomenological reduction. So it is at the same time unique and exemplary, something I tried to do also in Monolingualism of the Other.

One more word—about cosmology. You are right in your answer to the question of place, of topology. Nevertheless, we did have time. I would try to show that in “Circumcision” there is some reference not only to the cosmos, but to the earth, which comes back again and again. La terre is being referred to in “Geoff” and the geologic, in the name of my mother “Georgette,” in the reference to George, to geo. There is a constant reference to the earth, which comes back again and again until the end, until the very moment of the publication on earth. So there is everything you said but, in addition to this, the earth, the place, Geoff, the geological, the mother, Georgette. That’s the “perver-formative.” I’m not sure that when you mentioned the perver-formative that everyone understood what you were referring to. “Perver-formative” is a word that I coined in The Postcard to refer to a
perversion of the performative. This causes what Werner Hamacher says also about the a-formative, so all of this is, of course, perverted-formative.

I want to thank you.

NOTES

2. Jean-François Lyotard, The Confession of Augustine, trans. Richard Beardsworth (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3/19. All further references to this work (apart from its publicity text, which was not included in the English translation) will be given in the body of my text, with the page number of the English translation preceding that of the French original.
4. Lyotard, La Confession d’Augustin, “Prière d’insérer.”
6. Not book 9, as the English translation has it.
12. Ibid.
13. Indeed, the following is not a bad circumstantial allegory: “I unmask and de-skin myself while sagely reading others like an angel, I dig down into myself to the blood, but in them, so as not to scare you, so as to indebt you toward them, not me” (“Circumfession,” 240/222–25).
19. Ibid., 268.
20. Hadot, La Philosophie comme manière de vivre, 67.
22. Ibid. See also the quote from Marcus Aurelius in Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 84 and 132.
23. Ibid., 104. See also Pierre Hadot’s inaugural address at the Collège de France (where he accepted the chair in the History of Hellenistic and Roman Thought in 1983), entitled Éloge de la philosophie antique (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2001), translated as “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” Philosophy as a Way of Life, chapter 1.
24. Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 91, 93 and 96.
25. Ibid., 122 n. 161.
26. Ibid.
27. Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 273, my italics.
28. Ibid., 266.
29. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 8, 54; 9, 32; cited in Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 99; see also the translation by C. R. Haines (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 227 and 251, respectively.
34. Hadot, La Philosophie comme manière de vivre, 9.
35. Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 96.
36. Hadot, La Philosophie comme manière de vivre, 268.
59. In this context, one should mention yet another parallel to Descartes, one concerning the motif of creation. In Meditations on First Philosophy, Descartes writes: “a life-span can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others, so that it does not follow from the fact that I existed a little while ago that I must exist now, unless there is some cause which as it were creates me afresh at this moment—that is, which preserves me. For it is quite clear to anyone who attentively considers the nature of time that the same power and action are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment of its duration as would be required to create that thing anew if it were not yet in existence. Hence the distinction between preservation and creation is only a conceptual one, and this is one of the things that are evident by the natural light. I must therefore now ask myself whether I possess some power enabling me to bring it about that I who now exist will still exist a little while from now. For since I am nothing but a thinking thing—or at least since I am now concerned only and precisely with that part of me which is a thinking thing—if there were such a power in me, I should undoubtedly be aware of it. But I experience no such power, and this very fact makes me recognize most clearly that I depend on some being distinct from myself.” (The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, vol. 2, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 33–34).

60. Lyotard, The Confession of Augustine, 31/51–52. “The overall balance is actually disastrous. The I can try as it likes to reassure itself, putting finishing touches to the lucid taxonomy of memories. The contents of memory, however, all that can happen to the I as in the course of life, reverberate with a chaotic dynamic that concedes, displaces, topples over their images into each other, disfigures them endlessly. Behind the guardian of time, supposed to watch over its order, under the wing of memory, the work of the drives persists in turning languid the seizure of events. The clear phenomenology of internal temporality covers over a strange mechanic, a grammar of the ways in which concurrence conjugates essential frustration.”

61. Cf. ibid., 27/47: “the sin of time, delay. The encounter with the act is missed from the beginning. The event comes before writing bears witness, and writing sets down the very event has passed. Confession reiterates this condition of childhood measured against the scale of full presence: I will have been small with regard to your greatness, You, you who had no childhood, you are not transported into the oscillations of too soon and too late.”

62. Cf. ibid. 56/80: “This delay from which I suffer, of which I am ashamed, that I confess to you, that I attempt, writing my confession, to make up, that I will never make up all the time that I write in time—this delay is but further drawn out by the time of confession, of writing and proclaiming.” A little earlier in the text, this motif is related to that of “indifference” (hypo mel), of which we spoke earlier, as well as to the paradoxical logic of the more is less, less is more that defines the structure of all (metaphysical and liberal) desire: “The delay that throws the confessing I into despair is not due to a failure in its chronology, no chronos, at once and in its entirety, consists in delay. Even the shattering visit of the Other, even the incarnation of grace, if it ever truly arrives, from the fact that this visit subverts the space-time of the creature, it does follow that it removes this creature from the hurried, tight course of regrets, remorse, hope, responsibilities, from the ordinary worries of life. But it is even worse than that. Delighting with your presence in such sudden ecstasy, he feels more in dissociation from himself, cleaved, alienated, more uncertain of what he is than he is usual” (ibid., 17–18/35–36).

63. Cf. ibid., 40/63 – 64: “To the children of sin, the word reaches them obscured, and
the supreme light from which it emanates is absorbed into our eyes in episodic flashes, in these precarious moments of clarity whose successive appearance, like linear sequences discourse, we pursue. The true book is closed to us, the book of your truth, one in face-to-face, all at once. Undoubtedly, if we saw and heard the dazzling clamor of your wisdom without any filter, if we received it all at once, it would contort our faces, would unfix the orbit of our eyes, would turn us into a white-hot firebrand, subsiding quickly into ashes. The book in the form of the firmament filters the formidable presence of the author. Chased out of the paradise of your intimacy, we are left for memory by you the collection of your works, the world, a text of which we form as much a part as its readers. Decipherable decipherers, in the library of shadows.

Shedding Tears Beyond Being

Derrida’s Confession of Prayer

John D. Caputo

I simply place my fingers or lips on it, almost every evening . . .
I touch it without knowing what I am doing
or asking in so doing, especially not knowing
into whose hands I am entrusting myself,
to whom I am rendering thanks. But to know at least two things
—which I invoke here for those who are foreign
(get this paradox: even more ignorant, more foreign than I)
to the culture of the tallith, this culture of shawl and not of veil;
blessing and death. (V, 46/44–45)

Beyond Being

The resources and strategies of negative theology, its “detours, locutions and syntax” (Marg., 6/6),
have always fascinated Derrida, and that is because for Derrida, as for negative theology, our desire beyond desire is for what lies “beyond being,” to use a venerable expression from Christian Neoplatonism. But what lies “beyond being” for Derrida is tears, prayers and tears, tears shed beyond being (V, 42/40), prayers sent like sighs beyond being, truth, and knowledge. That produces, on the one hand, a remarkable proximity of his work to negative theology, even as, on the other hand, it opens up an abyss between him and negative theology. I will develop this contrast by drawing the unlikely and disconcerting portrait of Derrida as a man of prayer.

In “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” (1985), Derrida remarks that, faithful to a fault to the title of his essay, he has indeed avoided speaking of something essential. In this essay on negative theology that takes its point of departure from