CHAPTER ONE

TIME, FOCUS AND NARRATIVE IN AUGUSTINE’S CONFESSIONS

1.1. Introduction

In this chapter I propose to address the following problem: what is the relationship, if any, between Augustine’s account of his conversion in the first nine books of the Conessions and his concept of time as discussed in book 11? If Augustine’s view with regard to the paradoxical status of time as at once being present and not present is to be universally valid, it is bound to obtain for narrative time as well. However, generally speaking, the poetics of narrativity, like Aristotle’s devices with regard to tragedy such as plot and the reversal of events (peri-
peiteia), seem to be based on a linear concept of time as a sequence of successive moments which would exclude the Augustinian, non-linear presence of time altogether.

Paul Ricoeur, in his Time and Narrative,1 has taken Augustine’s aporias with regard to time (how is time capable of being and not being simultaneously?) as the point of departure for his lengthy discussions of time and narration, ranging from Augustine and Aristotle to Woolf, Mann and Proust. The long and short of his discussion of Augustinian time is that it is unable to provide a would-be narrator with a plausible plot; reason why Ricoeur turns to Aristotle in an effort to supplement Augustine’s deficient concept of time with the less time-bound yet more structure-focused Aristotelian notions of plot and mimesis. The one thing Ricoeur does not do is apply his freshly established tools of narrative time to Augustine himself. As far as the narration of the Conessions proper is concerned, he leaves the aporia of time unresolved whilst turning to Aristotle for support at creating a concept of narrativity and time in which the one is not being eliminated by the other.

In the following I want to try my hand at the experiment of reading the conversion narrative in the *Confessions* from the viewpoint of the Augustinian concept of time as developed in book 11. In view of Ricoeur’s negative conclusions with regard to the possible contribution of time (as being and not being at the same time) to the development of plot, this looks like a risky undertaking. Yet, in my view, once we have accepted the premise that narrative time is part and parcel of time as developed in book 11, we cannot but take up the challenge to articulate what Augustine’s narrative looks like in terms of his own concept of time. In so doing, I do not, of course, pretend to give an overall assessment of the literary status of the *Confessions*. That problem is complicated enough. In addition to the narrative nature of the first nine books, there is the question of the change of compositional discourse in books 10 and 11 (dealing with memory and time respectively) and the more exegetical mood of the final books (12 and 13) fitting in with the Christian genre of the *Hexaemeron*, the discussion and praise of God’s creation. My contribution can be seen as an attempt to establish some interaction between some of those different levels. Whereas hitherto much of the literature on the *Confessions* is quite compartmentalised into philosophical, theological and autobiographical categories, I want to bridge some gaps between those different compartments and demonstrate how the polyphony of voices in the *Confessions* is both scattered and held together thanks to the manifestation of time as a simultaneous presence and absence.

By way of introduction, I begin with a modern author, Samuel Beckett, because, interestingly, he shares Augustine’s fate of being rejected by Ricoeur as a potential provider of a plausible plot. Just as Augustine’s concept of time is incapable of producing plot, so Beckett’s ‘plotlessness,’ as seen from Ricoeur’s viewpoint, is based on a confused notion of time.

But my ideas on this subject were always horribly confused, for my knowledge of men was scant and the meaning of being beyond me. Oh I’ve tried everything. In the end it was magic that had the honour of my ruins, and still today, when I walk there, I find its vestiges. But mostly they are a place with neither plan nor bounds and of which I understand nothing, not even of what it is made, still less into what. And the things in ruins, I don’t know what it is, what it was, nor whether it is not less a question of ruins than the indestructible chaos of timeless things, if that is the right expression.

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