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Inside Augustine¹

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For Jim Wetzel

Abstract: This article, which is an adaptation of a lecture delivered at Villanova University in the Fall of 2015, proposes a reading of Augustine’s *Confessions* (*conf.*) with the assistance of the notions of absorption and theatricality. The very use of those notions is meant to counterbalance the readings generated by our overfamiliarity with Augustinian interiority. By replacing interiority with a concept that, heretofore, is alien to the Augustinian vocabulary, it becomes possible to block facile access to mystical interpretations of *conf.* on the one hand, and to embark upon the (admittedly challenging) task of reassessing the nature of “confessing” on the other. This new reading demonstrates the difficulties involved in approaching the confessor fully involved in his act of sustained confessing. A comparison is also made with the notion of absorption in the visual arts. Just as spectatordom becomes problematic vis-à-vis a painting whose personae look inward rather than outward, so too the position of the reader vis-à-vis a text whose confessing creator uninterruptedly addresses his Confessee demands a redefinition of the reader’s role and place in the process.

Introduction

Sometimes even detectives do stupid things. Thus in the episode “Masonic Mysteries” of the series *Inspector Morse*, our detective, who, like most if not all

1. This article is an edited version of a public lecture delivered on October 28, 2015, at Villanova University, where I was the Thomas F. Martin Saint Augustine Fellow for 2015. I would like to thank Fr. Allan Fitzgerald and Anna Misticoni as well as all the board of Villanova’s Augustinian Institute for their hospitality and support.

detectives, lives a semi-celibate life, in this case trading the vacancy of partnership for his love of classical music, takes a would-be girlfriend to the weekly rehearsal of his choir. While rehearsing Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, he hears, through the sound of music, someone scream in the adjacent room. He runs into it only to find the lifeless body of the lady friend. In a reflex he takes up the knife lying next to the body, thereby making himself complicit in the crime. After the arrival of his colleagues, he leaves the room and sits down despondently at the foot of the staircase. Battered to the point of inward paralysis by the nightmare of unprofessionalism come true, he remotely hears some ladies on their way out of the building wishing him goodnight, to which he distractedly replies—muttering to *himself* rather than to the ladies already out of sight—: “Goodnight, ladies, goodnight, sweet ladies.”

Foolishly, when watching this episode many years ago I prided myself on recognizing that this line came from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. However, much later I learned that Eliot is in fact quoting Ophelia's last words from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. After her singsong of incomprehensible verse, all of which suggests madness to the bystanders, Ophelia whispers before leaving the scene and subsequently drowning herself: “Good night ladies, good night sweet ladies, good night, good night.”²

Serendipity notwithstanding, in this threefold appearance of “goodnight, ladies” three moments converge in bringing out one shared moment of “absorption,” a concept that will prove eminently suitable for characterizing Augustine's language in *Confessiones* (*conf.*). More to the point, it is this moment of absorption that my title phrase “Inside Augustine” is intended to suggest. By taking this very notion as my own poetical tool to get inside *conf.*, my aim is, by way of experiment, to temporarily bracket common descriptions of *conf.* and replace them, in a “shock and awe” operation of sorts, by little bombshells, borrowed from thoroughly un-Augustinian semantic fields. Once triggered, they will reveal a slimmer and rejuvenated shape of a book whose form and size has grown far beyond all proportion. In my view, the obesity of *conf.* is caused by three misconceptions regarding Augustine's own poetical motives. For, unless he succeeds in grasping a single poetical motive, the reader is doomed to get stuck in fragmentary characterizations which, in themselves, are not capable of accounting for the book's dynamics. This is true however seamlessly glued together they may figure in the afterlife of *conf.* and however valuable and, in a sense, true those fragments qua fragments may be. First, *conf.* is misunderstood if it is read as a narrative, as a story, or as a conversion story. For, not only does such a reading ignore the fact that the books on memory, time, and creation remain unaccounted for, but such a reading also, if one is engrossed in the

2. *Hamlet*, 4.5.111–112.

plot of the (conversion) story, causes one to miss the point that, in deconstructing the success of his conversion in book 10, Augustine himself does not seem to have been a great believer in plot. The second misreading consists of seeing *conf.* as an account of the self's development from extraversion to introspection. Prospectively following Wittgenstein, however, Augustine does not offer his reader a clear distinction between exterior and interior. How could he? As a result, his famous cry in *De uera religione*: "do not move outwards but turn into yourself,"³ does not make much sense as long as one is not capable of discerning and distinguishing the contours of inner and outer or to pinpoint the moment at which one is on one's way in or out; that is, as long as "inner" and "outer" have not become part and parcel of *confessio* proper. In the absence of such a confessional comprehensiveness, the categorizing of life's events, whether they belong to sin or to grace, as either interior or exterior, would result in a cognitive mess. Thirdly, it seems misleading to read *conf.* in exclusively religious terms as "*confessio peccati, laudis et fidei* (a confession of sin, praise and faith)," if that reading presupposes an independent and, hence, Pelagian subject—in that case, the confessor-narrator—who is able to establish what exactly constitutes sin, praise, faith, and grace.

"Goodnight, Ladies" As a Convergence

In order to get to the promised fresh characterization of *conf.*, we have to make quite a detour—one which we, in fact, started already with Inspector Morse's bafflement. What, then, do I mean by the three appearances of the "goodnight ladies" converging? First, all three of them are epiphanic moments of time; second, these moments are processed through memory; and, third, their combined appearance can be called absorption and immersion (literally so in Ophelia's case). Let us first have a look at Morse. Apart from being a playful insertion by the writers of the series showing off their knowledge of Shakespeare and/or Eliot, the scene is arresting, not for the intertextuality—about which I could not care less—but for its extreme, unexpected subtlety within the straightforward and unambiguous literary parameters of the detective genre. This pacific moment of calm in the midst of the hectic business of solving crimes draws the viewer's attention to a man talking to himself in a soliloquy (of sorts) that absorbs in the process the initial response to floating goodnight wishes from outside. Another subtlety: the memorial muttering is twofold. We observe Morse distractedly yet almost effortlessly lifting the "sweet ladies" out of the depth of his traumatized mind while at the same time making an outward appeal to the cognizant viewer to catch the emotional effect, the epiphany,

3. *Vera rel.* 39.72 (CCSL 32: 234): "noli foras ire, in te ipsum redi."

of this memorial moment. I myself am a case in point. Despite being hopeless at remembering a plot, this scene has long since stuck in my mind.

With Eliot's "goodnight, ladies" we squarely remain within the realm of absorption. Among the many things *The Waste Land* is taken to mean, its scattered speech stands out. Throughout the poem we hear voices whose speaking subjects are far from fixed or even present or, rather, at once present and absent and, for that reason, seemingly free-floating, while being interspersed with hints, clues, and sounds delivered by other voices up in the air. If it corresponds to anything, it is to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* with its fast changing rhythms and its scattered references to Russian folk music. Yet, for all the similarities, there is a basic difference in the shape of the loud and relentless outward drive of Stravinsky's music versus the delicate withdrawn movements of Eliot's halting words. Absorption versus theatricality. It is in that vein that we come across his "goodnight ladies." Preceded by an oblique reference to Shakespeare: "O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag"—which in fact refers to a well-known popular song—the passage ends, like Morse's, dreamingly, the words eventually fading into night:

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.

Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.⁴

Time and memory in the guise of the night language of absorption take us back to Augustine. In the meantime, we have learned that, after Morse and Eliot, it is not so easy to leave the realm of epiphany and poetry. What about Augustine? To answer that question, Eliot is quite willing to help us out. Within the scattered and absorptive language of *The Waste Land*, Augustine too makes his appearance:

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

O Lord Thou pluckest me out

O Lord Thou pluckest

burning⁵

4. T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company: 1964), 58.

5. *Ibid.*, 64.

“To Carthage I came (*ueni carthaginem*)”: those are the opening words of book 3 of *conf.*, a book which tells how Augustine moved from the provincial Thagaste to Carthage the capital, just like an aspiring nineteenth-century young Frenchman with a dime to spare—or, for that matter, penniless—would move from his provincial native town to Paris, the city of lust and pleasure.

I came to Carthage and all around me hissed a cauldron of illicit loves. As yet I had never been in love and I longed to love; and from a subconscious poverty of mind I hated the thought of being less inwardly destitute. I sought an object for my love; I was in love with love, and I hated safety and a path free of snares.⁶

Eliot’s Augustine pretty much seems to accurately reflect *conf.* to the letter—although the gist of my article is (and will remain) to question “the letter”—with the “To Carthage I came” and, still to the letter but more ambivalently, with the “burning” which at once may mean “burning with lust” and “burning with the desire to love God”: “My God, how I burned, how I burned with longing to leave earthly things and fly back to you” (*conf.* 3.4.8). There is a sense in which Eliot could look like spanning, with a stroke of genius, the entire arc of *conf.* by moving from the ambiguous ‘burning’ to divine predilection (or predestination) with the “O Lord thou pluckest me.” But, alas, this sounds too good to be true. If we take a closer look at Eliot we have to admit that what looks like an arc breaks down on the spot: the fourfold “burning” is telling us this already. Like the fourfold “good night, ladies,” it is up in the air. Next, following the breakdown, the personal nature of “thou pluckest me out” is diminished into a minimal—or, for that matter, widened out into a general—“thou pluckest” only to be finished off with another floating “burning,” almost violently so in its suspense.⁷ The aforementioned arc is no longer in sight.

The next question we face is, of course, whether what holds true for Eliot also holds true for Augustine. In my view, it does. Just as Eliot does not leave for one moment the poetry of absorption, so Augustine, in opening a new chapter with ‘To Carthage I came,’ does not for one moment leave the language of absorptive

6. *Conf.* 3.1.1 (CCSL 27: 27; trans. H. Chadwick, *Augustine. The Confessions* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 35): “ueni carthaginem, et circumstrepebat me undique sartago flagitiosorum amorum. nondum amabam et amare amabam et secretiore indigentia oderam me minus indigentem. quaerebam quid amarem, amans amare, et oderam securitatem et uiam sine muscipulis.”

7. “Thou pluckest me” is another reference to *Conf.*: 10.34.53 (CCSL 27: 184): “sed tu euellēs, domine, euellēs tu;” which itself refers back to 10.34.52 (CCSL 27: 183): “et erigo ad te inuisibiles oculos, ut tu euellās de laqueo pedes meos.” Cf. Ps. 25:15 (= 24:15 Vulgate): “My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net” (RSV). I owe this reference to Mark Vessey, whose (alas, unpublished) paper “Augustine in America: Migratory Histories,” delivered in April 2006 at Green College, University of British Columbia, deals extensively and elegantly with the “To Carthage then I came” line as well as with Eliot and Augustine generally.

soliloquy which implies that there is no moment at which he can be caught telling the bare facts.

To get a better grip on this problem, we have to be more precise about the meaning of absorption and soliloquy. Thus far I have used the two concepts more or less interchangeably, although the one seems to express a state and the other a flow. At first glance, absorption would look more pictorial while soliloquy is by definition exclusively concerned with sound. True enough, a painting cannot be a soliloquy, and vice versa, yet they do converge in being capable of pulling off the act of turning inwards which, be it vision or sound, ignores or cuts off the spectator and his alias, the reader. They are on their own, up in the air. If that is indeed the case, Augustine's opening statement in book 3 "To Carthage I came," can no longer be read as a merely "historical" or narrative communication. In one way or another it should be assessed as being part of what I would like to coin as "free indirect speech," that is, the peculiar language of Augustine's *conf.* in which he, paradoxically, applies the full arsenal of his rhetorical skills in addressing the reader while at the same time changing that mode of address by ignoring the latter in favor of his self-created absorption and immersion in "catching" his Confessee. Consequently, if the reader hears or reads anything, it—and here the visual comes in—takes on the shape of observing and witnessing the spectacle of the confessor confessing, just as we have dimly seen and heard Inspector Morse talking to himself, the scattered voices of *The Waste Land* talking to each other, and Ophelia immersing herself in her singsong.

As for soliloquy, the literary critic James Wood has explicitly linked it, as it should be, to memory as it manifests itself in the "simultaneity of absentmindedness and presentmindedness." Wood calls this "the [mnemonic] paradox of redundancy, in which we have unnaturally to forget what we would naturally remember in order to learn something new." Clearly, this ongoing tension between remembering and forgetting wipes out any sequential or causal-temporal narration as in the "factual" reading of "To Carthage I came." Instead, the confessing mind is fully engaged in the mnemonic act—a double act in fact—of both searching to remember *and* staging itself as searching to remember; a process that, according to Wood, finds its origins in "dramatic soliloquy" whose "origins lie in prayer." Thus the confessional presence is persistent:

Inasmuch as Shakespeare's soliloquies are addressed to the audience, we become God by proxy, the Delphic oracle that never replies. Soliloquy may be seen, then, not merely as an address, but as speech with an interlocutor who does not respond—as blocked conversation and blocked intention. Again, this may flow from the frustration of wishes: for merely to speak to God is to be frustrated by

His silence. This aspect of prayerful consciousness is obviously present in the novel in the form of epiphany and the solitary fantasy; what is Proust's madeleine but a secularised communion wafer, the Host by which the worshipper begins to examine himself?⁸

As for absorption, at first sight its *visual* nature would seem markedly different from soliloquy. Yet, in my view, the opposite holds true, and this becomes immediately clear if we *look* at Inspector Morse's muttering "goodnight ladies," the muttering as it were being absorbed by the picture, or vice versa. The difference no longer matters. And, though it may be true that in many an absorptive painting we see people often dumbstruck or on the brink of speaking or, indeed, speaking for what it is worth, so is inspector Morse, and so is Eliot all the way through *The Waste Land*, and so is the confessing Augustine.

It is the art critic and art historian Michael Fried who has published widely on the theme of absorption and, its counterpart, theatricality. Initially, Fried developed his theory based on art criticism in a specific historical period, the eighteenth century, and a specific view on the matter, that of Diderot, in particular the latter's abhorrence of theatricality. Conversely, absorption as such, as Fried admits, has an older history and a longer afterlife. This is not, however, the place to get into the intricacies of that problem. For my argument it will suffice that both absorption and theatricality are in play regardless of any period. This is certainly the case in Augustine. But let us first listen to what Fried himself has to say about absorption:

The Diderotian easel painting (or *tableau*) seeks crucially to establish the supreme fiction or ontological illusion that the beholder does not exist, that there is no one standing before the canvas. It does this principally in two ways: through the persuasive representation of figures so deeply absorbed in what they are doing, feeling and thinking that they appear oblivious to anything else, including the beholder's presence before the canvas, and by means of an ideal of pictorial unity according to which all elements in the painting are perceived as motivated by a single dramatic imperative (one might say: as absorbed in or by that imperative) so that the beholder instinctively feels that they cannot be other than as they are . . . the tableau is concerned solely with its own internal necessities, devoid of the least hint of theatricality. At the same time, equally crucially, the *tableau's* thematic and compositional closure upon itself is understood as arresting the actual beholder before the work and, indeed, as transfixing him or her with a new intensity. The tension between these linked imperatives—at once to deny and (thereby) to transfix the beholder—is in the end unresolvable.⁹

8. James Wood, "Rambling," *London Review of Books*, June 1, 2000, p. 3.

9. Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1–2.

In contrast to a painting being closed in on itself stands the move outward, the theatricality Diderot detested, whether in drama or painting. As Fried puts it: “in Diderot’s writings on painting and drama the object-beholder relationship as such, the very condition of spectatordom, stands indicted as theatrical, a medium of dislocation and estrangement rather than of absorption, sympathy, self-transcendence.”¹⁰

On a basic level it would not be hard to point to numerous absorptive scenes in *conf.* Think of the young Augustine learning the meaning of words by intensely and watchfully figuring out how, in adult speech, sound and body language interact. Augustine watching Ambrose being immersed in silent reading (double absorption), Augustine absorbed by inner turmoil in the Milanese garden, Augustine drawn, almost, into the *esse solum* during the vision at Ostia, Augustine grief stricken at Monica’s death but suppressing his tears with the help of those shed by his son (thus replacing his voice with the *uox pueri*: inverted absorption), Augustine sitting in his room absorbed, again, in musings about his failed conversion. By Augustinian absorption, I do, however, mean more than these things. It is the very language of *conf.* itself that is comprehensively “closed in on itself, motivated by a single dramatic imperative, concerned solely with its own internal necessities,” and, as such, “devoid of the least hint of theatricality.”

Two “Fried-like” Test Cases

In the following I propose to track Fried-like traces of absorption in two passages from *conf.*: first, Augustine’s agony preceding his conversion and, second, the famous scene of Alypius’s absorption in and by the theatre.

In discussing Augustine’s agony I will invoke Fried’s help in order to deal with the question of whether the wildness of agony so vividly described by Augustine can still be categorized as absorption. Or, should we brandish it as sheer theatricality, as, *prima facie*, would seem to be necessary? What about Augustine’s language in this respect? “Finally in the agony of hesitation I made many physical gestures of the kind men make when they want to achieve something and lack the strength. . . . If I tore my hair, if I struck my forehead, if I intertwined my fingers and clasped my knee, I did that because to do so was my will.”¹¹ All this as a prelude leading up to the well-known analysis of different wills that scatter the willing person to

10. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 104.

11. *Conf.* 8.8.20 (CCSL 27: 126; trans. H. Chadwick, *Augustine. The Confessions*, 147): “denique tam multa faciebam corpore in ipsis cunctationis aestibus, quae aliquando uolunt homines et non ualent . . . si uulsi capillum, si percussi frontem, si consertis digitis amplexatus sum genu, quia uolui, feci.”

the point of his being “neither wholly willing nor wholly unwilling. So I was in conflict with myself and was dissociated from myself.”¹² Where I particularly need Fried’s support is in pointing out that, appearances notwithstanding, absorption is not merely about the stillness of inward turning for reasons of resignation, grief, or meditation. Absorption may also include the outer symptoms of fight, agony, and violence.

In his *The Moment of Caravaggio*—as we shall see, “moment” being the key to both violent and peaceful absorption—Fried discusses at length Caravaggio’s painting of Narcissus looking in the water just to be confronted with the reflection of his own image. The paradox of this painting is that it seems to represent the epitome of absorption—stillness in the extreme—while at the same time telling the gruesome story of someone metamorphosed into a prisoner of his own self: stifled agony. That condition as well as the resulting inner struggle is made crystal clear by Narcissus’s literary creator, Ovid:

Oh, I am he! I have felt it. I know now my own image. I burn with love of my own self; I both kindle the flames and suffer them. What shall I do? Shall I be wooed or woo? Why woo at all? What I desire, I have; the very abundance of my riches beggars me. Oh, that I might be parted from my own body! And, strange prayer for a love, I would that what I love were absent from me! And now grief is sapping my strength; but a brief space of life remains to me and I am cut off in my life’s prime.¹³

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus soon dies leaving in his stead only “a flower, its yellow centre girt with pedals.” As for Augustine, we can safely assume that he is not the inventor of the language of agony. Although leaning heavily on Paul for the execution of his ponderings, he knows Ovid’s tormented language of love well enough also to be able to explore and shape the tormented language of grace. Yet the question remains whether Augustine, like Caravaggio, succeeds in painting the absorption of divided wills rather than playing out the theatricality of agony. That, in my view, Augustine does indeed succeed is precisely due to his handling of absorption which puts him, in spite of his familiarity with Latin culture, more in Caravaggio’s than Ovid’s league. Ovid narrates the story, Caravaggio paints the moment: *The Moment of Caravaggio*. It is my contention that Augustine paints the moment as well. Perhaps, we have been seriously misled by history’s focus on the moment of conversion represented by the picture of Augustine sitting under the fig

12. *Conf.* 8.10.22 (CCSL 27: 127; trans. H. Chadwick, *Augustine. The Confessions*, 148): “nec plene uolebam nec plene nolebam. ideo mecum contendebar et dissipabar a me ipso.”

13. From Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; quoted in Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*, 134–135.

tree with Paul's *Letter to the Romans* in front of him and the child's voice chanting: "tolle lege, tolle lege" ("pick up and read!, pick up and read!"). This seems to be an undivided moment of double absorption. Be that as it may, that is not Augustine's moment of Caravaggio. Read as an isolated passage, it is theatrical to the core. But, meanwhile, have we forgotten that Augustine's *conf.* is about confessing and staging the confessor to confess uninterruptedly: the confessing confessor? Like another Narcissus, Augustine has long since been "imprisoned" in his own confession. In terms of time, that means that each and every moment of confessing is tied up to the unseen and silent Confessee whose intimidating, yet absent, presence is hovering over each and every confessional speech act, forcing the confessor's memory out of the complacency of narrative suspense into the final coming out, coming out of oblivion into the present or presentness.

To conclude this section, let me illustrate how Augustine, with the help of memory and time, brings about an absorption untainted by the dislocation and estrangement of theatricality—location and presentness being the key concepts here.

Prior to the nadir of solitary despair, Augustine cries out to his friend Alypius:

Then in the middle of that grand struggle in my inner house, which I had vehemently stirred up with my soul in the intimate chamber of my heart, distressed not only in mind but in appearance, I turned on Alypius and cried out: "What is wrong with us? What is this that you have heard? Uneducated people are rising up and capturing heaven (Matt. 11:12), and we with our high culture without any heart—see where we roll in the mud of flesh and blood. Is it because they are ahead of us that we are ashamed to follow? Do we feel no shame at making not even an attempt to follow?" That is the gist of what I said, and the heat of my passion took my attention away from him as he contemplated my condition in astonished silence. For I sounded very strange. My uttered words said less about the state of my mind than my forehead, cheeks, eyes, colour, and tone of voice. Our lodging had a garden.¹⁴

If ever a writer succeeded in "writing" a painting, it is Augustine in this scene. "The gist of what I said"—an expression Augustine tends to use when describing

14. *Conf.* 8.8.19 (CCSL 27: 125; trans. Chadwick, *Augustine. The Confessions*, 146): "tū in illa grandi rixa interioris domus meae, quā fortiter excitaueram cum anima mea in cubiculo nostro, corde meo, tam uultu quā mente turbatus inuado alypiū, exclamo: 'quid patimur? quid est hoc? quod audisti? surgunt indocti et caelum rapiunt, et nos cum doctrinis nostris sine corde ecce ubi uolutamur in carne et sanguine! an quia praecesserunt, pudet sequi et non pudet nec saltem sequi?' dixi nescio qua talia, et abripuit me ab illo aestus meus, cum taceret attonitus me intuens. neque enim solita sonabam. plus loquebantur animum meum frons, genae, oculi, color, modus uocis quā uerba, quae promebam. hortulus quidam erat hospitii nostri."

an ultimate experience, for instance in the vision at Ostia—creates room for putting in the spaciousness and perspective of painting, and this results in something that is almost a still life. After first turning on Alypius with his outcry in order to next take “his attention away from him” as his friend, Augustine “contemplating [his] condition in astonished silence” is nothing but action as stasis. All the painter has to do to intensify this picture is to bring agitated speech (“what is wrong with us?”) to a halt and replace it pictorially with an image that freezes the scene on the spot: Alypius’s “astonished silence” versus Augustine’s “forehead, cheek, eyes, color, tone and voice,” turned away from his friend. Far from being theatrical, this is, again, stifled action, “driven by a single dramatic imperative and closed in on itself.” In the end, it is the confessional self-enclosure which prevents theatricality from creeping in. But what about the real drama that transfixes the reader/spectator? To discern the real drama, we should heed the markers of space and temporality: the intimate chamber of the heart lifted up to the surface by the prolepsis of “our lodging had a garden,” the garden of conversion mentioned long before the actual conversion takes place. For, to get to that garden the reader has to work his way through a good deal more agonizing. And yet he knows that place already! This (pictorial) infrastructure of space is matched by temporality. Thus Augustine’s outcry to his friend about their lagging behind where uneducated people rush in, is part of the overall retardation, “the not yet,” “not now,” “tomorrow, tomorrow” (do we hear Eliot here?), all of it seemingly the stuff of theatricality. But nothing is further from the truth. Spatial and temporal distention are overarched by the one single moment of time that governs past and future as well as delay and acceleration: the present of the present—the moment of presentness that does not allow for one single break in the spatio-temporal act of confessing. As a result, we are compelled to face *the moment*, that is, a scene of overall absorption under whose wings singular scenes of high drama on the verge of theatricality such as “Augustine versus Alypius” turn into absorbed pictures “driven by a single dramatic imperative.” “Goodnight ladies, goodnight sweet ladies.”

The second passage I want to discuss will bring up some more complications inside the notion of absorption as I have used it thus far. This time we are dealing first and foremost with Augustine’s friend Alypius, whom we have met already in the previous passage, “framed” and focalized by confessing Augustine. Although at heart fond of the gladiatorial spectacles, Alypius claimed to detest that kind of theatre, quite in line with his upbringing in ancient (Stoic) philosophy so characterized by self-control and self-reliance. What follows is a kind of *pari*, a private bet on Alypius’s part that, once he has allowed himself to be dragged to the theatre by his friends, he could handle the situation and stay aloof: “I shall be as one not there,

and so I shall overcome both you and the games,” so he boasts to his friends. He keeps his eyes shut, but, when a man falls in combat, his ears cannot resist the roar of the crowd and so he opens his eyes, losing his inner bet on the spot.

He kept his eyes shut and forbade his mind to think about such fearful evils. Would that he had blocked his ears as well! A man fell in combat. A great roar from the entire crowd struck him with such vehemence that he was overcome by curiosity. Supposing himself strong enough to despise whatever he saw and to conquer it, he opened his eyes. He was struck in the soul by a wound graver than the gladiator in his body, whose fall had caused the roar. The shouting entered his ears and forced open his eyes. Thereby it was the means of wounding and striking to the ground a mind still more bold than strong, and the weaker for the reason that he presumed on himself when he ought to have relied on you. As soon as he saw the blood, he at once drank in savagery and did not turn away. His eyes were riveted. He imbibed madness. Without any awareness of what was happening to him, he found delight in the murderous contest and was inebriated by bloodthirsty pleasure. He was not now the person who had come in, but just one of the crowd which he had joined, and a true member of the group which had brought him. What should I add? He looked, he yelled, he was on fire, he took the madness home with him so that it urged him to return not only with those by whom he had originally been drawn there, but even more than them, taking others with him.¹⁵

In his classic study *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Erich Auerbach has highlighted this passage as an example of a budding realism which, over and against the formal categorization of Roman and Greek literature, emerged out of the Christian worldview, and which began with the acknowledgement of Alypius’s loss of self-control. True, Augustine does not betray his classical training; for instance, here he carefully includes the triad “he looked, he yelled, he

15. *Conf.* 6.8.13. (CCSL 27: 82–83; trans. Chadwick, *Augustine. The Confessions*, 100–101): “ille clausis foribus oculorum interdixit animo, ne in tanta mala procederet. atque utinam et aures obturauisset! nam quodam pugnae casu, cum clamor ingens totius populi uehementer eum pulsasset, curiositate uictus et quasi paratus, quidquid illud esset, etiam uisum contemnere et uincere, aperuit oculos et percussus est grauiore uulnere in anima quam ille in corpore, quem cernere concupiuit, ceciditque miserabilius quam ille, quo cadente factus est clamor: qui per eius aures intrauit et reserauit eius lumina, ut esset, qua feriretur et deiceretur audax adhuc potius quam fortis animus et eo infirmior, quo de se praesumpserat, qui debuit de te. ut enim uidit illum sanguinem, immanitatem simul ebibit et non se auertit, sed fixit aspectum et hauriebat furias et nesciebat et delectabatur scelere certaminis et cruenta uoluptate inebriabatur. et non erat iam ille, qui uenerat, sed unus de turba, ad quam uenerat, et uerus eorum socius, a quibus adductus erat. quid plura? spectauit, clamauit, exarsit, abstulit inde secum insaniam, qua stimularetur redire non tantum cum illis, a quibus prius abstractus est, sed etiam prae illis et alios trahens.”

was on fire.”¹⁶ Gone, however, is the unity of style; this is replaced by Augustine professionally showing off his rhetorical skills on the one hand and using *sermo humilis* or “the low style” on the other. Low style, which, in classical Latin, was used mainly in comedy—that is, to bring one as close as possible to ordinary language—is, for Auerbach, the vehicle to establish a direct approach to reality. In contrast to the classical authors, what we see in Alypius is “the ardor of dramatic human struggle [the text] represents. Alypius is alive and fights. By comparison, the characters [Ammanianus and Pammachius, pagan authors discussed by Auerbach in the previous passage] are static shadows and reveal nothing of a life within.”¹⁷ Stylistically, the suggestion of realism is shaped by the sustained use of the parataxis, borrowed from biblical language: “He opened his eyes, he was struck . . . he saw the blood, his eyes were riveted, he imbibed madness.” In Auerbach’s view:

This would be impossible in classical Latin. It is unquestionably the Biblical form of parataxis—just as the content (the dramatization of an inner event, an inner about-face) is avowedly Christian. *Et non erat ille qui uenerat, sed unus de turba ad quam uenerat* [He was not now the person who had come in, but just one of the crowd which he had joined]; this is a sentence which in form as in content is unimaginable as a product of classical antiquity; it is Christian and, more specifically, Augustinian; for no one ever more passionately pursued and investigated the phenomenon of conflicting and united inner forces, the alternation of antithesis and synthesis in their relations and effects. And he did so not only in practical contexts (as in our case) but also in connection with purely theoretical problems, which under his hands become drama.¹⁸

There is no denying that we have “a representation of reality” here as announced in the subtitle of Auerbach’s *Mimesis*. But where does that leave absorption? Auerbach himself leaves no doubt that, for him, realism and absorption coincide, the inner forces going out and the outer forces going in. In fact, throughout his tracing of an increasing sense of realism in European literature, he does not stop at the nineteenth-century “realistic” novel, but at the epitome of absorption and soliloquy, Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. In my view, Auerbach is to be recommended for this daring conclusion of realism’s materialization. But why do we not feel entirely at ease with calling this exceedingly realistic scene of Alypius’s immersion into the theatre absorptive? Why do we still feel some distance from Inspector Morse’s “goodnight, ladies” and Eliot’s “To Carthage I came . . . burning burning”? Not

16. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. William R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 70.

17. *Ibid.*, 70.

18. *Ibid.*, 71.

because of the violence as opposed to resignation, which in the case of Alypius is no less scenic than Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* and the *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*. Somehow, in Auerbach's reading, the access seems too direct, adding, paradoxically, a touch of theatricality to an absorptive scene.

Let me illustrate the "gap" that I sense with a scene from Colm Tóibín's novel *Brooklyn*. In it, an Irish girl who lives in Brooklyn and is all on her own starts going out with a kind and gentle Italian boy—clearly no *macho*—who, for once, persuades her to join him and his brothers at a Dodgers game. The brothers warn the girl in advance: in the theatre of the game this gentle boy will change altogether. And so it happens. Once the game starts, it is all excitement and shouting and cheering. Tony is "wrapped up in the game" ignoring the girl altogether, leaning out over her to have a better view of the action. Yet the girl somehow experiences this ceasing of attention for her as reassuring rather than alarming. "Tony was so wrapped up in the game that it gave her a chance to let her thoughts linger on him, float toward him, noting how different he was from her in every way. The idea that he would never see her as she felt she saw him now came to her as an infinite relief, a satisfactory solution to things."¹⁹ What a splendid double absorption, the one all outward-bound framed by the other in the guise of soliloquy! Perhaps Tóibín, who, like most, if not all, Irish men of letters, knows his Augustine, finishes off where Auerbach stops, thus removing any possible taint of theatricality. But so does Augustine. It is not enough to hear his condemning voice as a *subauditur* in describing the theatrical downfall of his friend Alypius. Surely, "describing" is the wrong word here, for that would mean an interruption of the confessor confessing. So, if we were to paint this scene, Alypius's absorption would not suffice. In one way or another it should include the confessor as well, not ostentatiously, with pen in hand but, like the quiet Irish girl, sitting next to his shouting friend, who is, in turn, ignoring and leaning out over the confessor, completely absorbed in his overall confession: "Good night ladies, goodnight sweet ladies."

Conclusion

So, where does all this leave the reader, listener, observer? As we have seen, Fried himself admits to the insolvability of the problem. On the one hand, he defines absorption in the strongest possible terms as the "supreme fiction of ontological illusion that the beholder does not exist, that there is no one standing before the canvas." On the other hand, he keeps open the possibility of the absorbed painting "arresting the actual beholder before the work and, indeed, as transfixing him or

19. Colm Tóibín, *Brooklyn* (New York: Viking, 2009), 165.

her with a new intensity.” This distinction is not as absolute as it seems. In the first option, the fact that the observer severed from the painting is an illusion does not mean that the “transfixed beholder” of the second option is a fact.

Let us momentarily return, then, to the kernel of Diderot’s anti-theatrical stance as described by Fried in its wider implications:

But it seems clear that starting around the middle of the eighteenth century in France the beholder’s presence before the painting came increasingly to be conceived by critics and theorists as something that had to be accomplished or at least powerfully affirmed by the painting itself; and more generally that the existence of the beholder, which is to say the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld, emerged as problematic for painting as never before.²⁰

Historically circumscribed as this Diderotian criticism may be, Fried is too passionate about its implications to be able to stop his meditations then and there. As he cannot leave Caravaggio alone, he traces the problem of absorption and anti-theatricality even further into (his great passion) modernist art. Thus in his essay “Art and Objecthood” he takes modern “theatrical” art to task, accusing it of catering to the space and time of the observer; this is a stance that can only end in what he calls literalism, that is, objecthood stifling in time, “the duration of experience,” precisely the thing that theatricality is about. For Fried that means handling the art object in a literalist fashion, indulging “the letter that killeth.” This literalism stands in contrast to (modernist) art “because [there] at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.” “I want to claim,” Fried continues, “that it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theatre.”²¹

Taking our leave of Fried, let us have one last look at Augustine. Of course, in his case, the denial of readership or audience would seem fully counter-intuitive. And although, in my view, we do have to act counter-intuitively in approaching Augustine, we can only do so after having confirmed that the magic of his rhetoric is fully in place and that, as Catherine Conybeare has put it so nicely, *conf.* is a work social to the core and, above all, a song.²² But who is the listener to this wordy song, who is the observer of this absorbed painting? Who is, confessionally speaking, up to following the confessor? If we stay loyal to Augustine, it cannot be just anyone,

20. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 93.

21. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” in *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–173; here 167.

22. Catherine Conybeare, “Reading the *Confessions*,” in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 99–113; here 99.

at least not an indiscriminate anyone. It has to be a reader who, before being able to read, due to absorption's presence inside the book and its author, is cut off by the book, severed by the painting. In Augustinian terms, it has to be a non-Pelagian reader; that is someone capable of leaving the confessor alone in order to make room for the presentness of soliloquy and absorption. Surely, since "non-Pelagian" means non-literalist and non-theatrical, this picture of the reader standing before the door waiting to catch the right confessional moment to get inside does not make for easy reading. Or, as Fried puts it, "we are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace."²³ If, however, that moment happens to come true, the reader, rather than bridging gaps between text and self, is transfixed so as to take in:

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

O Lord Thou pluckest me out

O Lord Thou pluckest

burning

23. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 168.