



# The Confession of Augustine (Cultural Memory in the Present)

*Jean-François Lyotard*

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## **The Confession of Augustine (Cultural Memory in the Present)** Jean-François Lyotard

This remarkable posthumous work by one of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century engages Augustine's *Confessions*, one of the major canonical works of world literature and the very paradigm of autobiography as a definable genre of writing.

Lyotard approaches his subject by returning to his earliest phenomenological training, rearticulating Augustine's sensory universe from a vantage point imaginarily inside the confessant's world, a vantage point that reveals the intense point of conjuncture between the sensual and the spiritual, the erotic world and the mystical, being and appearance, sin and salvation. Lyotard reveals the very origins of phenomenology in Augustine's narrative, and in so doing also shows the origins of semiotics to lie there (in the explication of the Augustinian heavens as skin, as veil, as vellum).

Lyotard's explication of Augustine is also a final survey of the entirety of the philosophical enterprise, a philosopher's profound reflections on the very basis of philosophy. He sees the *Confessions* as a major source of the Western—and decidedly modern—determination of the self and of its normativity, the point of departure for all reflection and the condition of possibility of all experience. Lyotard suggests that Augustine's "I," Descartes's "cogito," and Husserl's "transcendental ego" in essence or structurally say the same thing.

Lyotard aims at no simple ascription of Augustine's position. Instead, his text centers on what he takes to be Augustine's central confession: the repeated avowal of an essential uncertainty concerning the status of the faith confessed, of being in a sense already too late, of a difficulty in being no longer of this world while being in it all the same. Far from offering the foundation of all subsequent journeys to selfhood, Lyotard sees the *Confessions* as many evocations of a certain loss of self, of a temporality that is not given or recuperated all at once—or once and for all—but that time and again is lost or forgotten.

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