Apologia pro dissertatione sua:
Prefatory Remarks on Augustine & Belatedness

The working title for my dissertation as a whole is "Belatedness: Augustine on Transformation in Time & History." My goal is to explore the role that memory plays in our understanding of self-transformation on both the personal and historical levels. The writings of Augustine of Hippo, a North African bishop who died in 430 CE, serve for me as especially helpful resources for thinking through this troublesome intersection of time, change, and human experience. This is largely because Augustine is always relating his philosophical insights and theological commitments to the realm of lived experience and historical action. I've found this to be the case both in the *Confessions* (397-401 CE) and in the *City of God* (413-426 CE), as well as in later polemical treatises like *The Gift of Perseverance* (427-428 CE). Seldom is Augustine content to interrogate a complex subject without then using his findings to shed light on some of the dimmer corners of our worldly existence.

It might be easiest to give a broader sense of Augustine's background and my own angle of approach by briefly running through the dissertation's projected table of contents.

Roughly speaking, the sequence of chapters goes like this:

1. Time in Antiquity
    a. By the 390s, when Augustine began writing his *Confessions*, the topic of time had long been subject to scrutiny. For my purposes, I've whittled down the literature to two main lineages that conditioned Augustine's own approach to the question. The first of these is the Greek philosophy of time; the second is Paul's rhetorical use of words linked to temporal experience.
    b. Greek thought bore within itself a number of different accounts of time, many of which later found their way into the Roman intellectual world. Epicurus' temporal atomism came back in force with Lucretius (d. ca. 55 BCE), while the Stoic emphasis on present-mindedness found its way into the mentality of Marcus Aurelius (180 CE). But the trend that seems to have had the biggest influence on Augustine's thought was what's been called 'Neoplatonism:' a strange mix of Platonic and Aristotelian insights that's most closely associated with the third-century thinker Plotinus (d. 270 CE). Augustine, of course, likely imbibed much of that school of thought through the Latin interpretations of Marius Victorinus (d. mid-300s) and Ambrose (d. 397 CE).
    c. Still, I'm less interested in tracing out a textual lineage than I am in tracking certain questions about time that recur across this body of literature. Already in Plato's *Timaeus* we find time defined as a "moving image of eternity" (or the *aiōn*; 37C-D), an obscure claim which becomes the prooftext for a wide range of later definitions of time. Less often discussed is Plato's *Parmenides*, which is in my mind one of the earliest attempts to explore the problem of time as it relates to change and transformation. (See 156C-E) Book IV of Aristotle's *Physics* takes a somewhat different tack, anticipating many of Augustine's comments about temporal measurement with its alternative definition of time as the "number of movement with respect to before and after." (IV.xi.219b.2-3) The classical literature review rounds out with a brief treatment of the seventh essay in Plotinus's Third Ennead—

"On Time & Eternity"—which also anticipates Augustine in some ways, though not so universally as previous scholars have claimed.

d. Finally, I end the first chapter by hinting at how Augustine reshaped this philosophical discussion through his reading and appropriation of Paul's letters. If the Greeks were asking the question, 'What is time?,' Paul was more interested in asking, 'What time is it?' Augustine picks up on Paul's messianic rhetoric of time—think especially of a text like Phil. 3:11-13, with all its talk of forgetting what's behind and stretching out to what lies before—and transposes it into his own frame of reference, which is no longer defined in relation to an imminent eschaton. When Augustine, in the *Confessions*, turns to the language of stretching-out—*tendere*, *distentio*, *extentio*, *attentio*—it is difficult not to hear resonances of Paul's eschatological *epekteino*.

2. Time in *Confessions* XI
   a. Chapter 2 then attempts to show how Augustine's own account of time in Book XI of the *Confessions* both builds on and goes beyond these philosophical and pastoral precursors. Though many historians, philosophers, and theologians have commented on Book XI over the centuries, I still think it remains an enigmatic text for most. That's why I thought it best to devote an entire chapter to a close reading of Augustine on time.
   b. What that means is that I have to move through the entirety of Book XI rather patiently. The end result is, I hope, less a book report than a clarification of an uneven, sometimes obscure argument. More specifically, I had three main sub-goals in composing this chapter:
      i. First of all, I wanted to preserve the exegetical context of Augustine's argument by showing how his philosophical reflection develops organically out of his attempt to interpret Genesis I. Though this exegesis will continue through Books XII and XIII of the *Confessions*, already in Book XI we should take note of how seriously Augustine took the cosmological questions that arise out Scripture's more obscure passages.
      ii. Secondly, I wanted to clearly delineate the difference between our measurement of time and the nature of time itself, at least as Augustine saw it. Too often, readings of Book XI neglect to pay careful attention to the stages of Augustine's argument, blurring each move into a vague jumble of terms and concepts. This leads, for example, to the inaccurate identification of the threefold present with *distentio animi*, as if *distentio* produced some kind of extended present into which the past, present, and future could all fit. Instead, I try to show that *distentio* is for Augustine the "force and nature of time," an objective force that conditions human life, rather than being subject to our psychological capacities. (XI.xxiii.30) The threefold present can then be seen as our cognitive reaction to *distentio*, to the force of time that acts on us in advance.
      iii. Lastly, I wanted to show that Book XI does not at all end with an easy resolution of the problems of time and of the present. That would only be the case if we lazily confused Augustine's argument about temporal measurement with his account of what time itself is. As I said, this is the confusion I want to argue against. Instead of an easy resolution, Book XI leaves us with the sense that *distentio* is a force that lingers, continuing to disrupt our own temporal experience from within, never letting us have access to a stable ground of self-presence.

3. The Experience of Belatedness in *Confessions* IV & X
    a. It's that kind destabilizing *distentio* that I next try to apply to Augustine's characterization of human experience elsewhere. Without even leaving the confines of the *Confessions*, we can find Augustine developing his account of temporal experience in the other books of that work. Chapter 3, then, is meant to provide an interpretation of Augustine's claim in Book IV that a strange sense of belatedness afflicts our experience—we never quite feel like we've caught up with our own present moment; we're somehow always living in what's just past. By juxtaposing this with Book X's argument for the centrality of memory to human consciousness, I close by making the case that 'belatedness' can serve as a term of art, allowing us to trace a general theme of time, change, and memory throughout Augustine's work. If *distentio* is the force of time, then belatedness is our sense of what it's like to have that force pressing down on us as we live out our lives.
4. The Belatedness of Personal Transformation
    a. While Chapters 2 and 3 are meant to set up a framework for my reading of Augustine, the following chapters aim to provide exemplary case studies that can help us think through the consequences of Augustine's meditations on a more practical level. Chapter 4 sketches out the consequences of belatedness on the personal level. In Book VIII of the *Confessions*, we find Augustine crippled by anxiety about his apparent inability to experience conversation as a definitive moment of transformation in his life. The closer he seems to get to this punctual turning-point, the more he's thrown into upheaval in time. It just never seems to be that time, that 'now' of instantaneous change that will clearly mark out a before and after in Augustine's story.
    b. Though Book VIII ends on a fairly triumphant note, we can get a sense of how a personal sense of belatedness lingered in Augustine's thought by jumping ahead to a very late text: *The Gift of Perseverance*, published in the waning years of his life as a polemical attack on the so-called Pelagian stance of his enemies. To put it all too briefly: he held these opponents of his to be insufficiently appreciative of the sovereign role played by divine grace in separating the elect from the not-so-elect.
    c. But the way belatedness plays out in *The Gift of Perseverance* is this: Augustine wants to emphasize how even the apparent experience of conversion (with baptism and all the trimmings) in no way guarantees that a person has been truly transformed by the saving grace of God. The revelation of who's been changed and who hasn't is not something we presently experience. Rather, such change is only retrospectively revealed in the future—and not just in any future, but in the absolute future of the eschaton, the end of the world.
    d. So just as there is no present instant of time we live through, nor is there any present moment of transformation we live through. Instead, our life-experience is conditioned by *distentio* and belatedness. The only thing that overcomes the force of time and redefines our temporal experience is the end of time—the eschaton.
5. (also 6-7) The Belatedness of Historical Transformation
    a. The final three chapters of my dissertation will then aim to show how a similar logic of belatedness and eschatological deferral is at play in Augustine's view of history writ large. To show how this is the case, I'll have to work through several key texts from Augustine's massive *City of God*. The goal is not at all to recapitulate the entirety of that work in its wandering diversity, but rather to isolate key sections where Augustine's conception of history comes to the fore.

b. I won't say too much about this here, but the main thrust is this: just as we fail to live through identifiable turning points in our so-called present experience, so do we fail to encounter actual turning points in our broader historical present. Just as the idea of a present time is shown to be relative, so the idea of a 'present age' can be submitted to scrutiny. For Augustine, that means that our judgment of history, too, must await the deferred revelation of when things really change and when they don't. Our crude attempts to judge the present age as we live through it result from a simple failure to connect our insights into the character of time to our sense of history as it plays out in time.

Having said all that, I'd like to highlight Chapter 2 because it gives a good outline of the argumentative core of this whole project. If we can't get straight on what Augustine says about time, the present, and *distentio*, then we'll be sure to have trouble making sense of his later comments about the difficulty of comprehending the ways we change (or fail to change) as we live out our temporal lives.

I'd contend too that this project would mark a substantive intervention within the field of Augustine studies. Book XI of the *Confessions* is usually considered in isolation, as a kind of philosophical curiosity to be gawked at by onlookers. My goal here is to take Augustine's account of time out of its cage in the zoo and let it roam free across the wider range of his writings. So I'd hope that the project would contribute not only a more adequate analysis of Book XI itself, but also a broader synthesis of Augustine's thought on memory, transformation, and even eschatology.

Beyond that narrow corner of academia, however, I think this project could join in on some other lively conversations. Augustine's work—and our interpretation of it—can speak also to contemporary debates in the study of conversion, in critical historiography, and in the philosophy of time. Inside and outside the academy, temporality remains a topic that's not yet perfectly understood (to put it nicely). This relationship between time and self-transformation continues to serve up confusion to people who live in time but fail to comprehend the depths to which it conditions our experience of our own lives. This leads to an ongoing sense of uncertainty about what it means to live 'in the present,' or to live through a truly life-altering event, or to adequately identify turning-points in the history of the temporal world. Perhaps, by looking back to these questions as they arose in Augustine's works, we can begin to develop a new way of looking at the decisive roles played by time, change, and memory in our own lives.