

IN PRIORA EXTENDENS ME: CONFSSIONES,
IX.X.23-25

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“Augustine is for me the Prince of Mystics, uniting in himself, in a manner I do not find in any other, the two elements of mystical experience, viz. the most penetrating intellectual vision into things divine, and a love of God that was a consuming passion.”¹ Thus Dom Cuthbert Butler in a commanding book of 1922. Not everyone would agree with him, and some readers of Christian mystical literature would give the palm to John of the Cross, Theresa of Ávila, or one of several others, Thomas Aquinas not being an outrider.² Dom Cuthbert’s book is entitled *Western Mysticism*, though we are not to suppose a contrast with the mysticisms of Buddhism and other Eastern religions. He is concerned entirely with the Latin West, and the adjective in his title serves to exclude Orthodoxy.³ Not that he proposes a

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¹ Dom Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: The Teaching of Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life*, 2nd ed. (1926; New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 20. The book was originally published in 1922 and then a section entitled “Afterthoughts” was added for the 1926 edition. It is worth noting that at first Dom Cuthbert did not think of including Augustine in the book: “It was an afterthought to include St Augustine,” he writes in the Preface (xi).

² See Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³ See Butler, *Western Mysticism*, 88. I presume that Dom Cuthbert also wishes to exclude Eastern Catholicism from consideration.

comprehensive survey of the mysticism of all Latin Christianity, for by “western mysticism” he means that of “Cassian, Gregory, and Bernard,” finding that “St Augustine’s mysticism stands somewhat apart” from theirs.⁴ The Prince stands to the side of his people. Of course, Cassian’s teaching draws deeply from Eastern Christianity, and one might point out that the Eastern Church veers away from lauding individuals and their experiences.⁵ The Orthodox would be unlikely to use an expression such as “Prince of Mystics,” and might also question the completeness of the “two elements.” But let the claim stand, let the criteria not distract us, and let us focus sharply on Augustine.

Dom Cuthbert is thinking of passages in eight texts: *De animæ quantitate* (387-88), 74-75; *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (392-422), xli; *Confessiones* (397-401), VII. xvi. 22, IX.x.23-25; *De Genesi ad litteram* (401-15), xii; *Contra Faustum Manicheum* (404) xxii. 52-58; *De videndo Deo* (*Ep.* 147) (413-14); *De civitate Dei* (413-27), xix.1, 2, 19 (413-27); and *Sermones*, ciii, civ (dates uncertain). Other texts could be cited, especially with respect to one or another aspect of *contemplatio*: *De Ordine* (386-87), II. ii. 51, *De musica* (387-91), VI. xii. 36-37, *De Genesi adversus Manicheos* (387), I.xxv.43, and *De trinitate* (399-422/26), i.17-18, 31 all come to mind. Taken together, these texts span Augustine’s mature life as a Christian and establish a wider range than Dom Cuthbert’s “two elements” suggests. They pass from a delineation of the seven levels of the soul and further gradations of rapture and vision, to testimony of direct experience of God, to a meditation on the passage from the visible to the invisible, to pondering the various merits of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, to making a case for the leisure to engage in contemplation, to reflection on whether we shall see God with the eyes of the flesh, and to the statement that the sole reason for philosophizing is devoting oneself to the ultimate good.⁶ Yet Dom

⁴ See Butler, *Western Mysticism*, 130.

⁵ See Vladimir Lossky, “Theology and Mysticism in the Tradition of the Eastern Church,” *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. Members of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius (London: J. Clarke, 1957), 20-21.

⁶ See, in order, Augustine, *The Greatness of the Soul*, in *The Greatness of the Soul, the Teacher*, trans. Joseph M. Colleran, Ancient Christian Writers (New York: The Newman Press, 1950), 104-6, 109, along with *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* in *On Genesis*, ed. John E. Rotelle, intro., trans. and notes Edmund Hill, The Works of Saint Augustine I/13 (Hyde Park, NY: New

Cuthbert devotes sustained attention to only two passages: *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, xli and *Confessiones*, IX.x.23-25. The former includes a fundamental piece in the history of *contemplatio*, and the latter has become a major text in the history of what we moderns call “mysticism.”

I wish to offer a commentary on the latter text, knowing all too well that I am far from being the first to do so: It is one of the most celebrated yet most intensely debated short documents in the history of Christianity.⁷ I begin by drawing attention to a distinction entertained by Dom Cuthbert in his choice of texts and his discussion of those he selects, namely that between “mystical experience” and “contemplation.” It will send me back to some of the other passages that he lists. Are “mystical experience” and “contemplation” different ways of saying the same thing? Or are

City Press, 2002), 465, 470, 494, 499; *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. and notes Maria Boulding, The Works of Saint Augustine III/16 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), 240, 244; *Confessions*, trans. and intro. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 170-72; *Answer to Faustus a Manichean*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, intro., trans. and notes Roland Teske, The Works of Saint Augustine I/20 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), 333-39 and *Sermons*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. and notes Edmund Hill, The Works of Saint Augustine III/4 (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1992), 76-87; “A Book on Seeing God,” *Letters 100-155*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. and notes Roland Teske, The Works of Saint Augustine II/2 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 319-49; *City of God*, 7 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960-72), VI, trans. William Chase Greene, 107.

⁷ See, in particular, A. Mandouze, “L’extaste d’Ostie’, possibilités et limites de la méthode des parallèles textuels,” *Augustinus Magister: Congrès International Augustinien, Paris, 21-24 Septembre 1954* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1954), 67-84, and *Saint Augustin: L’aventure de la raison et de la grâce* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1968), Paul Henry, *The Path to Transcendence: From Philosophy to Mysticism in Saint Augustine*, trans. and intro. Francis F. Burch (1938; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1981), Suzanne Poque, “L’Expression de l’anabase plotinienne dans la prédication de saint Augustin et ses sources,” *Recherches augustiniennes*, 10 (1976), 186-215, Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), ch. 7, J. J. O’Donnell, ed., *Augustine, Confessions*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), III, 122-37, and Jean-Luc Marion, *In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), ch. 7.

they quite different things? Or is it that “mystical experience” is the end point, for some, of “contemplation”? I leave these questions to resonate for a while, as I do the question at the heart of the commentaries I have mentioned: The character of the experience, if it is one, that Augustine and his mother appear to have had. Is it Christian, Neo-Platonic, or somehow both at once? Yet rather than be guided by questions that come from reflections by other readers of the text, I shall take my cues from the text itself, and seek to rephrase, if need be, and answer the questions in the light of what it reveals of itself.

The piece begins, as is well known, with a reference to Monica, Augustine’s mother. The preceding pages have recalled her childhood, her weakness for wine, her marriage, and her widowhood; and this evocation of her entire life is introduced by her death (“my mother died” [IX. viii. 17]) and, within only a few words, by an allusion to Augustine’s birth or, better, double birth (“into the light of time. . . into the light of eternity” [IX. viii. 17]) and to what *he* can give birth (“whatever my soul may bring to birth” [IX. viii. 17]), which includes the *Confessiones*, his other writings, and their immense heritages. Now, in the scene to which he turns, there is just mother and son, albeit a son who has already styled himself as a mother. Like all the *Confessiones*, the passage is addressed to God, and the reader is placed in the awkward position of overhearing someone else’s prayer. What do we hear when we listen in to Augustine’s prayer? We pick up his testimony of significant events in his life, and in this paragraph we apprehend two entwined testimonies, one about his mother’s death and another about his long desired ascent to God who, he has come to realize, is the God of Jesus Christ:

The day was imminent when she was to depart [*erat exitura*] this life (the day which you knew [*tu noveras*] and we did not). It came about, as I believe by your providence through your hidden ways, that she and I [*ego et ipsa soli*] were standing leaning out of a window overlooking a garden. It was at the house where we were staying at Ostia on the Tiber, where, far removed from the crowds, after the exhaustion of a long journey, we were recovering our strength for the voyage [*ubi*

*remoti a turbis post longi itineris laborem
instaurabamus nos navigationi]. (IX. x. 23)*

At least three journeys are mentioned here, with two others in play, one of which will soon become the focus of the narrative.

Two journeys have already taken place, one is anticipated, and another was not known at the time being recalled. God knew it then, as Augustine freely acknowledges, and Augustine knows it now as he dictates his story, preparing to give it his full attention. Monica and Augustine have traveled to Ostia from Milan, where he had been baptized, and so we are quietly reminded of an earlier journey, Augustine's conversion from Manichaeism to Catholicism (which itself bespeaks a difficult journey from pride to humility). Now mother and son are waiting in Ostia, the port of Rome, before returning to their home in northern Africa where they intend to work for the Church. ("We looked for a place where we could be of most use in your service; all of us agreed on a move back to Africa" [IX.viii.17].) That voyage across the Mediterranean will not take place for Monica, for she will depart on another journey, from this life to the next, and before she does so she and her son will take another path, one that centuries later Bonaventure will call *itinerarium mentis in deum*, the mind's journey into God.⁸

Augustine credits God with arranging for Monica and him to meet alone (Chadwick does not translate *soli* here), apparently by chance, in their house by a window that overlooks a garden. The location is significant: If the window suggests light streaming in, the garden discreetly evokes paradise. Having leisure, and being undisturbed, they are free to talk as delicately prompted by the connotation of window and garden, and as led by the Holy Spirit:

Alone with each other, we talked very intimately
[*conloquebamur ergo soli valde dulciter*]. "Forgetting
the past and reaching forward to what lies ahead"
(Phil. 3:13) [*praeterita obliviscentes in ea quae ante
sunt extenti*], we were searching together [*inter nos*]
in the presence of the truth which is you yourself.
(IX.x.23)

⁸ See Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in deum*, trans. and intro. Philotheus Boehner, Works of Saint Bonaventure, II (Saint Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1956).

Again Augustine stresses that he and his mother are alone: this time *soli* is translated. This is a scene of searching, though we are not permitted to examine it closely, as we are in, say, Gregory of Nyssa's dialogue with his sister Macrina, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.⁹ There we see a Christian Platonic dialogue that recalls Plato's *Phaedo*.¹⁰ The conversation between mother and son begins in the presence of God, now lauded as "the truth," and who serves in the narrative as the guarantor that they will not stray into error. Augustine alludes to Paul's recognition of his imperfection and his desire to be perfect, his single-minded focus on stretching into the future: "forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before" [τὰ μὲν ὀπίσω ἐπιλανθανόμενος τοῖς δὲ ἔμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος] (Phil. 3:13b). The prize Paul seeks is "the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14b). We tend to associate this "reaching forth" with Gregory of Nyssa, especially with his homilies on the Canticle, yet it is also central here for Augustine.¹¹ Both Monica and he have put their pasts behind them, and strain towards what is to come: Less the journey to Africa, and their anticipated work for the Church, than for being eternally with God in Kingdom come. Their intimacy is only an index of a greater closeness to come with God and so with one another as well.

Already in their conversation they have crossed from life to death or, better, from earthly life to eternal life. Twice born, Augustine anticipates coming into the fullness of his second birth. It is an active expectation, requiring intense mental concentration:

We asked what quality [*qualis*] of life the eternal life of the saints [*vita aeterna sanctorum*] will have, a life which "neither eye has seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man" (1 Cor. 2:9). But with the mouth of the heart wide open,

⁹ See Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. and intro. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Of course, Augustine also inherited from Plato in this regard. See in particular *De magister*.

¹¹ See Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. and intro. Casimir McCambly, pref. Panagiotes Chrestou (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987).

we drank in the waters flowing from your spring on high, “the spring of life” (Ps. 35:10) which is with you [*sed inhiabamus ore cordis in superna fluenta fontis tui, fontis vitae, qui est apud te*]. Sprinkled with this dew to the limit of our capacity, our minds attempted in some degree to reflect on so great a reality [*ut inde pro captu nostro aspersi quoquo modo rem tantam cogitaremus*]. (IX.x.23)

Mother and son are engaged in a conversation, one apparently oriented by question and answer in lieu of an exchange of opinions, about the nature of eternal life with God (and not about the immortality of the soul such as was conducted by Gregory and Macrina), yet as reported the discussion immediately touches a limit. Nothing about the life of the saints in heaven has been revealed, as Paul points out in his first letter to the Corinthians. We do not know if the Scripture was quoted in the conversation or was added in the report of the colloquy. (Augustine says a little later about a related topic, “I said something like this, even if not in just this way,” which inclines us to minimize the difference between event and report.)¹² Certainly Augustine and Monica drink the waters of life in order to reflect on the great reality: the *ut*-clause gets lost in the translation. But if Scripture is part of their conversation, it is not rooted in it. No attention is given to what Jesus says in the Gospels about heaven. In fact he says very little about what the life of the saints is like; his concern is how to live now so as to bring on the Kingdom and please God and not what life will be like with God. Yet Augustine and his mother do not begin by gathering what Scripture says about heaven as a place of joy and reward (Matt. 25:13-30), a Kingdom of justice (Luke 16:19-31), and a community without marriage (Luke 20:35). No reference is made to Jesus’s powerful saying, “In my Father’s house are many mansions: if [it were] not [so], I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). Nor do they start by citing any Scripture about the general resurrection.

¹² Augustine, *Confessions*, IX.x.26. O’Donnell maintains that the Scriptural quotations are “adduced as commentary ex post facto,” although he gives no warrant for this view. See O’Donnell, *Confessions*, III, 124.

Instead of beginning with revealed Scripture, or even with the nature of sanctity, Monica and Augustine go in search of *idipsum*, Itself or Selfsame, which Henry Chadwick translates a little too boldly as “eternal being itself,” words that carry more freight than the Latin will bear alone, as we shall see. *Idipsum* bears some relation with the One of Plotinus that is beyond all categories and consequently unable to be described. It is this general Neo-Platonic orientation that suggests that the son takes charge of the conversation, using Neo-Platonism as the vehicle of Christian truth, but we are to remember how in *De Ordine* (386-87) Augustine encourages Monica to take part in philosophical discussions, saying first to her “There were plenty of philosopher-women in ancient times, and I rather like *your* philosophy” and then, later, to the reader, “no other person seemed to me fitter for true philosophy.”¹³ In their conversation they become receptive to the “spring of life [*fons vitae*]” which is with God.¹⁴ Here sprinkling does not allude to the rite of asperges in which, outside Eastertide, during the principal Sunday mass, the altar, priests and congregation are sprinkled with holy water while part of Psalm 51 (50) is intoned (*Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo et mundabor*). That ritual was developed no earlier than the eighth century. Yet reciting the psalm at the foot of the altar before mass is a tradition that Augustine probably knew, and in his exegesis of Psalm 51 (50), written a decade after the *Confessiones*, he interprets hyssop as humility. “You will be sprinkled with hyssop, because the humility of Christ will cleanse you.”¹⁵ There is a difference between the human power of reasoning and the humility of Christ, and the conversation between Augustine and Monica falls between the Neo-Platonic and the ecclesial by virtue of Augustine’s newfound humility and purity after his baptism. Humility and cognition are not opposed to one another. “Sprinkled with this dew . . . our minds attempted in some degree to reflect on so great a reality [*tantam cogitaremus*].” Mother and son are actively trying to understand:

¹³ Augustine, *On Order*, trans. and intro. Silvano Borruso (South Bend, IN: St Augustine’s Press, 2007), I. xi.31, II.i.1.

¹⁴ On the spring of life, also see Augustine, “Exposition of Psalm 41,” 2, in *Expositions of the Psalms 33-50*, and *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, XII.xxvi.54.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms 33-50*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. and notes Maria Boulding, *The Works of Saint Augustine III/16* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), 420.

cogitaremus is the first-person plural imperfect active subjunctive of *cogito*.

Augustine underlines that the event befalling him and his mother is conducted by way of a conversation, one that seems to have a teleology running through it:

The conversation led us towards the conclusion [*Cumque ad eum finem sermo perduceretur*] that the pleasure of the bodily senses, however delightful in the radiant light of this physical world, is seen by comparison with the life of eternity to be not even worth considering. Our minds were lifted up [the Latin, however, is *erigentes*] by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself [*nos ardentiore affectu in idipsum*]. Step by step [*perambulavimus gradium*] we climbed beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself, where sun, moon, and stars shed light on the earth. We ascended [*ascendebamus*: imperfect] even further [*adhuc*: to that point] by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at your works [*ascendebamus interius cogitando et loquendo et mirando opera tua*] (IX.x.24)

This ascent is not simply intellectual, for their minds are raised by affection for God, here seen by way of *idipsum* rather than truth or beauty. It is orderly and gradual; they rise “step by step,” and their wonder if what they have seen in their ascent (and not, as Chadwick’s translation suggests, at the heavenly beings, which have been surpassed).

This is not the usual way in which contemplation takes place, since it does not characteristically occur by way of conversation or—as it seems in the report of the conversation—so quickly. Robert Grosseteste tells us that mystical theology is “the most secret talking with God,” yet here we have a conversation that is in principle at least entirely public.¹⁶ Also we should not think of “step by step” recapitulating the seven levels of the soul as elaborated in *De quantitate animæ*, written in Rome after Monica’s

¹⁶ See Robert Grosseteste, “Commentary on *De Mystica Theologia*,” in *Mystical Theology: The Glosses by Thomas Gallus and the Commentary of Robert Grosseteste on “De Mystica Theologia,”* ed., trans. and intro. James McEvoy (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 65.

death, as well as in *De vera religion* and *De musica*.¹⁷ If anything, the two already have reached stages four and five, self-purification and possession of purity, and so begin the ascent with the sixth stage, “the ardent desire to understand truth and perfection.”¹⁸ It seems that the dialogue facilitates the speed of ascent, and perhaps it indicates that neither partner dominates the colloquy. The intimacy of mother and son, the dynamic between a modestly educated woman of deep faith and a richly educated convert, along with the humility of both mother and son, appear to be conducive to the rapidity with which they climb beyond the stars.

The passage invites comparison with one in Book VII of the *Confessiones*. There Augustine tells God that “you brought under my eye some books of the Platonists [*quosdam platonicorum libros*], translated from Greek into Latin” (VII.ix.13), most likely including some writings by Porphyry, Iamblichus and a handful of Plotinus’s *Enneads* translated into Latin by Marius Victorinus.¹⁹ Shortly after, we find Augustine in Milan attempting ascents by way of Neo-Platonic reflection, passing from the visible to the invisible:

I asked myself why I approved of the beauty of bodies, whether celestial or terrestrial, and what justification I had for giving an unqualified judgement on mutable things, saying ‘This ought to be thus, and that ought not to be thus’. In the course of this inquiry why I made such value judgements as I was making, I found the unchangeable and authentic eternity of truth to transcend my mutable mind. And so step by step [*atque ita gradatim*] I ascended from bodies to the soul which perceives through the body, and from there to its inward force, to which bodily senses report external sensations, this being as high as the beasts go. From there I ascended to the power of reasoning to which is to be attributed the power of judging the deliverances of the bodily senses. This power, which in myself I found to be

¹⁷ It is worth noting that Bonaventure comments on the seven steps in his *Itinerarium mentis in deum*, intro., trans. and commentary Philotheus Boehner, Works of Saint Bonaventure (Saint Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1956), II. 10.

¹⁸ Augustine, *The Greatness of the Soul*, XXXIII.lxxv.

¹⁹ See Augustine, *City of God*, vol. III, trans. David S. Wiesen, VIII.xii.

mutable, raised itself to the level of its own intelligence, and led my thinking out of the ruts of habit. It withdrew itself from the contradictory swarms of imaginative fantasies, so as to discover the light by which it was flooded [*ut inveniret quo lumine aspergeretur*]. At that point it had no hesitation in declaring that the unchangeable is preferable to the changeable, and that on this ground it can know the unchangeable, since, unless it could somehow know this, there would be no certainty in preferring it to the mutable. So in the flash of a trembling glance it attained to that which is [*et pervenit ad id quod est in ictu trepidantis aspectus*]. (VII.xvi.23)

By philosophical questioning conducted in solitude Augustine raises himself to a momentary gaze at “that which is” [*id quod est*]. Plainly, Plotinus’s *Enneads*, I.vi (“On Beauty”) is a touchstone here. “But about the beauties beyond,” Plotinus writes, “which it is no more the part of sense to see, but the soul sees them and speaks of them without instruments—we must go up to them and contemplate them and leave sense to stay below” (*Enneads*, I. vi. 4).²⁰ *Enneads*, V.i.4 may also be an inspiration: “If someone admires this perceptible universe, observing its size and beauty and the order of its everlasting course . . . let him ascend to its archetypal and truer reality and there see them all intelligible and eternal in it.”²¹ Equally likely to have had an effect on Augustine is Porphyry’s advice “to fly from the body” in his letter to his wife, Marcella.²²

Yet, as Augustine says, “I did not possess the strength to keep my vision fixed. My weakness reasserted itself, and I returned to my customary condition” (VII.xvi.23). It is intellectual ascent without the aid of divine grace to keep him safe in his weakness. Indeed, we have been warned of this failure. With hindsight,

²⁰ A. H. Armstrong, ed., *Plotinus*, 6 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), vol. 1, *Enneads*, I.vi.4.

²¹ Armstrong, *Plotinus*, vol. 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), *Enneads*, V.i.4.

²² See Alice Zimmern, ed. and trans., *Porphyry, the Philosopher, to his Wife, Marcella*, pref. Richard Garnett (London: George Redway, 1896), 10. For a discussion of the likely influence of Porphyry on Augustine that considers earlier arguments on the issue, see Pierre Hadot, “Citations de Porphyre à propos d’une recente ouvrage,” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes*, 2 (1960), 204-44.

Augustine found that the books of the Platonists came with a shadow cast over them: “First you wanted to show me how you ‘resist the proud and give grace to the humble’ (I Pet. 5:5), and with what mercy you have shown humanity the way of humility in that your ‘Word was made flesh and dwelt among’ men (John 1:14)” (VII.ix.13). Even more to the point is the probing question he asks of himself, “Where was the charity which builds on the foundation of humility which is Christ Jesus?” (VII.xx.26). And, finally, he tells God (and us) what is *not* in the Platonic books: “Those pages do not contain the face of this devotion, tears of confession, your sacrifice, a troubled spirit, a contrite and humble spirit (Ps. 50:19), the guarantee of your Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 5:5), the cup of our redemption” (VII.xxi.27). Despite all these caveats, though, Augustine acknowledges that the Christian God led him to the Platonic books: “With you as my guide . . . ,” he writes (VII.x.16).

Similarities between the event at Milan and the description of what happened at Ostia will be perceived, especially the use of *aspergeretur* and the “trembling glance” at that which is, which will interest us later. The ascent at Ostia, however, is fundamentally of a different complexion than the events at Milan. It is Christian, oriented to love of God and neighbor, life in the Kingdom, not purely intellectual speculation. As late as *De civitate Dei* Augustine tells us of the Neo-Platonists, “they have declared that the light that illumines the intellects of men in all things that may be learned is this selfsame God [*ipsum Deum*] by whom all things were made.”²³ Differences between Ostia and Milan include the fact that the former is a *conversation* (and that Monica’s lifelong faith is needed for Augustine to encounter God as life and love), the *theme* of the conversation (sanctity and *idipsum*), and that Augustine has a newfound *humility, purity and love* after baptism, that act of dying into Christ.

If affect impels the ascent, the two participants are taken to the highest levels by “internal reflection,” “dialogue,” and “wonder.” The dialogue is the medium of the ascent; it triggers internal reflection that is fuelled by wonder at creation, and its alternation of question and answer doubtless provides the steps and accounts for how Augustine knows of his mother’s internal reflection. If we are reminded of the ascent evoked in the

²³ Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.vii.

Symposium, 210a-212b and of Plotinus's flight to the One (*Enneads*, VI.ix.9), we are also checked to think that, unlike the mystical tradition spawned by Socrates's friend, the seer Diotima, and the solitude of Plotinus's ecstasy, Augustine's model of ascent involves two people, not just an isolated soul enraptured by God. It will generate a tradition of dialogic mystical treatises, in which Love and Reason (among other couples) ascend to God through discussion.²⁴ We may not know how this dialogue between mother and son is conducted, but we know in advance that it will be one of Monica's last, and that it is pivotal for Augustine's remaining life. Does Monica have any inkling of her coming end, or does the fever come quite out of the blue and carry her away without any prior symptoms? We do not know. All that we know is that this is one of the mother and son's last conversations, which adds to the pathos of the scene.

In the sentence that follows the evocation of reflection, dialogue and wonder, the Latin is more dramatic than Chadwick's elegant English translation; the entry into the mind and an immediate transcendence of human cognition is put in the one sentence:

. . . and we entered our own minds. We moved up beyond them [*et venimus in mentes nostras et transcendimus eas*] so as to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel eternally with truth for food [*in aeternum veritate pabulo*]. There life is the wisdom by which all creatures come into being, both things which were and which will be. But wisdom itself is not brought into being but is as it was and always will be. Furthermore, in this wisdom there is no past and future, but only being, since it is eternal. For to exist in the past or in the future is no property of the eternal [*nam fuisse et futurum esse non est aeternum*]. (IX.x.24)

Mother and son mentally climb beyond the heavens, ascend "even further," and so enter their own minds only to transcend them. After so many centuries since the *Confessiones* was dictated this remains an arresting sequence of thought, and its peculiarity is not

²⁴ See, for example, *A Mirror for Simple Souls*, trans. Charles Crawford (London: Gill and Macmillan, 1981).

softened by the young Augustine's belief, shared with Plotinus, that "we have God inside" and his co-ordinate injunction, "Return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth."²⁵ When one goes past the planets and the stars by way of thought one truly enters into oneself: There is only mind that remains, it seems. But no, for one can be raised higher than mind and attain to the divine realm. It is as though one must find the eye of the soul in one's mind before one can see God. Yet none of this ascending to the heights is attained individually; throughout, Augustine is plain that it is achieved mutually, and in doing so he registers his distance from Plato and Plotinus and also, unknowingly, marks a difference in advance from Christian mystics to come. As though to underline the difference between his experience and those of the pagan philosophers, Augustine turns to a biblical image, the feeding of Israel: "I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and [in] a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel" (Ezech. 34:14). Over a decade later, in 414, Augustine will pause in a sermon to make a stylistic flourish around this verse, "This is feeding Christ, this is feeding for Christ, this is feeding in Christ, not feeding oneself apart from Christ" [*Illoc est Christo pascere, hoc est in Christo pascere, et cum Christo pascere, praeter Christum sibi non pascere*].²⁶

The eternal is not stretched across time from past to future but is beyond all temporal determinations. Once again, Augustine distinguishes the insight that he and his mother share from the speculations of Greek philosophers. Christianity gives the hope of eternal life (a quality) and not immortality (a duration), such as one finds discussed so movingly in the *Phaedo*.²⁷ God transcends his creation, including its temporal reach. This divine transcendence fiercely attracts mother and son:

²⁵ Augustine, *De Musica liber VI*, ed. and intro. Martin Jacobson (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 2002), 99, and "Of True Religion," in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. and trans. John H. S. Burleigh, The Library of Christian Classics, VI (London: SCM Press), 262. Also see Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.vi.9.

²⁶ Augustine, *Sermons, II: (20-50) On the Old Testament*, trans. and notes Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle, The Works of Saint Augustine III/2 (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1990), 46. 30.

²⁷ See Plato, *Phaedo*, 69e-72d, 72e-73a, 82d-85b, 100c-104c.

And while we talked and panted after it, we touched it in some small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart [*attingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis*]. And we sighed and left behind us “the firstfruits of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:23) bound to that higher world, as we returned to the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an ending. But what is to be compared with your word, Lord of our lives? It dwells in you without growing old and gives renewal to all things. (IX.x.24)

It will be noticed that the episode, which for ease of discussion I have divided into two, begins with an emphasis on mind (*venimus in mentes nostras*), just like the ascent we have considered in Book VII, and yet it ends with a stress on the heart (*ictu cordis*). There has been a qualitative change in orientation. The Christian God calls forth love, not only reason. It will also be noticed how Augustine conceives God, simply and barely as *id ipsum*. The man who found himself not long before in “the region of dissimilarity [*in regione dissimilitudinis*]” (VII.x.16) seeks salvation in the Selfsame. In calling God *id ipsum*, nothing is predicated of him, and certainly there is no metaphysical sense of being in play here, such as is suggested by Chadwick’s translation as “eternal being itself.”²⁸ The statement is apophatic, concerned only with the deity’s nature being eternally beyond all change, and so worlds away from the dynamic conception of God that Aquinas will develop in concert with divine immutability, namely, God as event.²⁹ In Aquinas’s words, God is *ipsum esse subsistens omnibus modis indeterminatum*,

²⁸ Maria Boulding renders the expression “*That Which Is*,” which is preferable to Chadwick’s translation. See Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans., intro. and notes Maria Boulding, ed. John E. Rotelle, The Works of Saint Augustine I/1 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 227. William Watts is a reliable translator in this regard: he renders *id ipsum* as “Self-same.” See Augustine, *Confessions, Books IX-XIII*, trans. William Watts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), 49. The same is true of E. B. Pusey’s version. See his *The Confessions of S. Augustine*, rev. from a former translation, Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1838), 173.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a q. 9.

wholly undetermined self-subsistent being (in the verbal sense of the word).³⁰

Not that Augustine is always shy of associating God and being. In *Confessiones* VII we have already read, “And you cried from far away: ‘Now, I am who I am’ (Exod. 3:14) [*immo vero ego sum qui sum*]” (VII.x.16). A more explicit linking of *idipsum* and *sum qui sum* may be found in Augustine’s exegesis of Psalm 121:

What is Being-Itself? That which always exists unchangingly, which is not now one thing, now another. What is Being-Itself, Absolute Being, the Self-Same? That Which Is. What is That Which Is? The eternal, for anything that is constantly changing does not truly exist, because it does not abide—not that it is entirely nonexistent, but it does not exist in the highest sense. And what is That Which Is if not he who, when he wished to give Moses his mission, said to him, *I AM WHO AM* (Ex. 3:14)? What is That Which Is if not he who, when his servant objected. *So you are sending me. But what shall I say to the sons of Israel if they challenge me. Who sent you to us?* (Ex. 3:14), refused to give himself any other name than *I AM WHO AM*? He reiterated, *Thus shall you say to the children of Israel, HE WHO IS has sent me to you* (Ex. 3:14). This is Being-Itself, the Self-same: *I AM WHO AM. HE WHO IS has sent me to you.*³¹

Quid est *idipsum*? Quod semper eodem modo est; quod non modo aliud, et modo aliud est. Quid est ergo *idipsum*, nisi, quod est? Quid est quod est? Quod aeternum est. Nam quod semper aliter atque aliter est, non est, quia non manet: non omnino non est, sed non summe est. Et quid est quod est, nisi ille qui quando mittebat Moysen, dixit illi: *Ego sum qui sum*? Quid est hoc, nisi ille qui cum diceret famulus ejus, *Ecce mittis me: si dixerit mihi populus, Quis te misit? quid dicam ei?* nomen

³⁰ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a, q. 11, art. 4, *responsio*. On Augustine’s use of *id ipsum*, see Marion, *In the Self’s Place*, ch. 7.

³¹ Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms, 121-150*, trans. and notes Maria Boulding, ed. Boniface Ramsey, *The Works of Saint Augustine III/20* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004), 18.

sum noluit aliud dicere, quam, *Ego sum qui sum*; et adjecit et ait, *Dices itaque filiis Israel, Qui est, misit me ad vos*. Ecce *idipsum, Ego sum qui sum, Qui est, misit me ad vos*.

Here the deictic *idipsum* is quickly coded to what Étienne Gilson called “the metaphysics of Exodus”: God’s self-revelation to Moses of himself as unconditioned being, *Qui est*.³² Note, in particular, the rhetorical question, *Quid est ergo idipsum, nisi, quod est?*, which we may render in English as “What therefore is Itself unless I AM WHO I AM?” And consider also his remarks on naming God in *De Trinitate* VII:

. . . it is impious to say that God subsists to and underlies his goodness, and that goodness is not his substance, or rather his being, nor is God his goodness, but it is in him as in an underlying subject. So it is clear that God is improperly called substance, in order to signify being by a more usual word. He is called being truly and properly in such a way that perhaps only God ought to be called being [*unde manifestum est Deum abusive substantiam vocari, ut nomine usitatore intelligatur essentia, quod vere ac proprie dicitur; ita ut fortasse solum Deum dici oporteat essentiam*]. He alone truly is, because he is unchanging [*Est enim vere solus, quia incommutabilis est*], and he gave this as his name to his servant Moses when he said *I am who am*, and, *You will say to them, He who is sent me to you* (Ex. 3:14). But in any case, whether he is called being, which he is called properly, or substance, which he is called improperly, either word is predicated with reference to self, not by way of relationship with reference to something else. So for God to be is the same as to subsist, and therefore if the trinity is one being, it is also one substance [*Sed tamen sive essentia dicatur quod proprie dicitur, sive substantia quod abusive; utrumque ad se dicitur, non relative ad aliquid. Unde hoc est Deo esse quod subsistere, et ideo si una essentia Trinitas, una etiam substantia*].³³

³² See Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 51-52.

³³ Augustine, *The Trinity*, VII. iii.10.

God is not a substance, since that would mean there is a difference between his goodness and his being. No, God is an essence; and this is to say a good deal more than that God is *idipsum*. The ascent at Ostia appears not to be guided by a metaphysical notion of being, though Augustine's reflection on it, and his later theological insights into the divine essence, are touched by metaphysics, even if it is not the substance metaphysics of modern philosophy.³⁴

Let us return to the text under discussion. In Latin one says *ictu oculi* to mean "in the blink of an eye," and one should keep in mind in this passage short and impulsive acts such as a stroke, blow or thrust when thinking of how the heart reaches the divine. Both mother and son are enabled to touch the divine, apparently as one. *Attingimus*: it is the first person plural present active indicative of *atingo*, from *ad* + *tango* ("touch"). Mother and son touch or reach out to make contact with the divine. Indeed, *atingo* can signify "taste" when put in the context of eating and drinking. Much of the western tradition of "mystical experience" will follow Augustine here, preferring the lexicon of touching and tasting to that of seeing, even though sight is a "theoretical sense," as Hegel says, and thereby gives us access to knowledge.³⁵ In contrast, touch and taste give us experience that is pre-theoretical. Monica and Augustine have momentarily reached outside or beyond time and space, have touched the divine word, and now return to the time of ordinary words, including those remembered in the *Confessiones*. They do not return entirely the same, however: they are partly bound in their higher nature to the Kingdom.

Yet the allusion to Paul's expression "the firstfruits of the Spirit" is not straightforward and needs to be read in the context of Paul's letter to the Romans:

For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only [they], but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit [*ἀπαρχὴν τοῦ πνεύματος*], even we ourselves groan

³⁴ For Marion, by contrast, Augustine is not engaged in metaphysics at all; indeed, metaphysics is a modern discourse, with an onto-theio-logical structure as diagnosed by Martin Heidegger. See his *In the Self's Place*, ch. 7.

³⁵ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I, 38.

within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, [to wit], the redemption of our body. For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, [then] do we with patience wait for [it]. Likewise, the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. (Rom. 8:22-26, KJV)

Even here, as Origen points out in his commentary on Romans, we have several options to weigh. “Firstfruits of the Spirit” could mean having the Holy Spirit, as distinct from ministering spirits, or it could mean having the highest gifts of the Holy Spirit, or it could mean Christ himself.³⁶ When he comes to comment on Rom. 8:23 in his *Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans* Augustine will focus on the resurrection: “For this adoption, already established for those who have believed, was accomplished only spiritually, not physically. For the body has not yet been remade by that heavenly transformation, as the spirit has already been changed through the reconciliation of faith, having turned from its errors to God. Therefore, even those who believe still await that manifestation to come at the resurrection of the body.”³⁷ This gloss comes years later than the *Confessiones*, to be sure, and it converges with the eschatological emphasis of *De videndo Deo*. Monica and Augustine have been adopted spiritually but not yet physically; each awaits the resurrection from the dead, and we know, even if Augustine

³⁶ See Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., trans. Thomas P. Scheck, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 104 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), II, 74-76. It is worth mentioning that for Aquinas the “first fruits of the Spirit” refers to the Apostles, because they had “the Holy Spirit before others and more abundantly than others, just as earthly fruit which ripens earlier is richer and more delicious,” *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*, trans. F. R. Larcher, ed. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón (Lander, Wyoming: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 225.

³⁷ Paula Fredriksen Landes, ed., “Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans,” 53, in *Augustine on Romans: Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Chico, CA: Scholar’s Press, 1982).

and Monica in Ostia do not, that Monica has a shorter time to wait than her son.

Mother and son stretch beyond themselves, if only for a moment, when they touch *idipsum*. (Inevitably, we recall Phil. 3:13, the tutelary spirit of the passage, while acknowledging that we pass from ἐπέκτασις to ἔκστασις.) Stretched out beyond themselves, separating senses and soul, as Plotinus says, they have a foretaste of eternal life; it is a death of sorts, though one that is transitory, before eternal life, and before any resurrection. While Augustine evokes other moments of bliss in the *Confessiones* (“an extraordinary depth of feeling marked by a strange sweetness”) he never again speaks of such things in the first person, except, in all likelihood, to reflect on this event.³⁸ He may well have been recalling the event when he defined “ecstasy” in *De Genesi ad litteram*, “When, however, the attention of the mind is totally turned aside and snatched away from the senses of the body, then you have what is more usually called ecstasy. Then whatever bodies may be there in front of the subject, even with his eyes wide open he simply does not see them at all, or of course hear any words spoken aloud.”³⁹ Certainly the conversation seems to stop for a while—they fall silent and then both sigh—before returning to talk, of all things, about silence, which, because they speak in sentences, requires that they follow a temporal structure. (Distention, the temporal stretching of the soul, which is the contrary of ἐπέκτασις and ἔκστασις alike, will become an important motif of *Confessiones*, XI.) It is the twin traits of touching God and ecstasy that have made *Confessiones*, IX.x.23-25 a primary reference point for Christian mysticism, even though its dialogic nature makes it eccentric within that corpus.

Who or what do they touch? What is *idipsum*? If at first sight it seems to be only a Latin version of the rather chilly Neo-Platonic One, we should think twice. Like Augustine, we should read the Psalms in the Vulgate (that is, the *Iuxta Septuaginta* and not the *Iuxta Hebraicum*): *in pace in id ipsum dormiam et requiescam* [“In peace in the self same I will sleep, and I will rest”](Ps. 4:9). It might be said by way of objection that a biblical allusion from one of Augustine’s favorite psalms—see *Confessiones*, IX.iv.8-11—could well have been added here, as elsewhere, when composing the text, while the experience itself could have been Neo-Platonic. This is

³⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, X. xl. 65. Also see Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.vi.4.

³⁹ Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, xii.12.

possible in theory, though it is anachronistic to distinguish Neo-Platonism and Christianity so strictly in this age. To do so would render Gregory of Nyssa, for one, quite unintelligible. Augustine has changed before the ascent at Ostia: He has been baptized and approaches the ascent with newfound humility, purity and love. In reacting to this suggestion, it will be critically observed that if *idipsum* is understood to be the Christian God there is nothing said by Augustine by way of confessing the triune nature of this God. The experience would not be fully Christianized in its telling. We may readily concede that there are aspects of the text that leave no doubt about its Neo-Platonic provenance, even if one does not agree with Paul Henry that the entire conversation is “unquestionably Plotinian in mentality.”⁴⁰ For we may reasonably ask “Whose mentality?” Augustine’s would be only part of an answer, since the ascent occurs by way of a conversation and may well have been enabled by it; and while Augustine had probably read several of the *Enneads* his mother had not. We do not hear the conversation, for like Henry Mayhew’s reports of conversations in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) we are given only a digest of it by the author, and Monica’s voice is occluded. It is easy to conceive her having a Christian experience brought about by piety and next to impossible to imagine her having a Neo-Platonic experience spurred by the desire for intellectual ascent. Yet the experience of mother and son as related is one and the same. I shall return to this issue in a moment; the concept of “experience” in play here needs closer attention.

Augustine, we must remember, had sought Neo-Platonic ascent twice or thrice by himself in Milan and had found it frustrating because he was not converted to a better life by it. He fell back into old habits. There is no good theological reason why

⁴⁰ See Henry, *The Path to Transcendence*, 29. Also see Mandouze, *Saint Augustin: L’Aventure de la raison et de la grâce*, 697. O’Donnell argues that the ascent at Ostia was “not different, not uniquely better, not a denial of the excellence of Platonic mysticism, but better,” *Confessions*, III, 128. I think this judgment misses the role of Monica in the ascent and also fails to take into account the newfound humility and love of Augustine associated with baptism. Martha Nussbaum is closer to the mark when she stresses the difference between the Neo-Platonic and the Christian ascents. See her “Augustine and Dante on the Ascent of Love,” *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 61-90.

he cannot ascend to God by way of beauty in preference to being or truth. Plotinus understands that they are co-ordinate, and neither the medieval nor the modern Church would disagree with him.⁴¹ However, it must be acknowledged that at Ostia Augustine approaches God with affect transformed by humility, purity and love, having been baptized into Christ, and touches him as the unchanging Selfsame rather than as beauty or truth. Perhaps the hope of eternal life with the unchanging Word of God gave him the ardor that he needed and that he could not find any longer in *Enneads*, I:6. So we should take care not to think of *idipsum* too dryly; Augustine and Monica are concerned with the quality of *life* with God, the Kingdom itself, and the ascent is cued by Augustine's rebirth as a Catholic and Monica's vivid sense of a new start for her son. At any rate, the Neo-Platonic books, it seems, do not supply the content that Augustine needs and only provide an intellectual impetus for ascent. They are themselves a step on the way.

The intellectual interest of the Platonic books is testified in the *Contra Academicos* (386-87) written at Cassiciacum, a text that is closer to the date of Augustine's conversion than the *Confessiones* (397-401). In the passage of *Contra Academicos* that chiefly interests me, the newly converted Augustine exhorts his benefactor Romanianus to remember that when he left his son, Licentius, and friends after a visit to Milan they still yearned after philosophy, though perhaps not as enthusiastically as they might have done. This is φιλοσοφία, of course, and not "philosophy" in the modern sense of the word that bespeaks one or more contrasts with "religion" or "theology." In the ancient world φιλοσοφία and its Latin translation *philosophia* was precisely the love of wisdom, and it converged on many questions that we would now call religious. Augustine burned for this love on reading Cicero's now lost *Hortensius* as he tells us in *Confessiones* III and VIII.⁴² When Plotinus writes on the One he is doing φιλοσοφία, and when the young Augustine wishes to devote himself to writing on all the *artes liberales* as a Christian he proposes to spend his life engaged in *philosophia*.⁴³

⁴¹ See Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.vi.6.

⁴² See Augustine, *Confessions*, III.iv.8 and VIII.vii.17.

⁴³ See Augustine, *The Retractedions*, trans. Mary Inez Bogan, *The Fathers of the Church*, 60 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press,

Let us stay with *Contra Academicos* for a moment longer. Burning only with a moderate flame after Romanianus's departure, the young men around Augustine nonetheless continued their studies:

But lo! when certain books full to the brim, as Celsinus says, had wafted to us good things of Arabia, when they had let a very few drops of most precious unguent fall upon that meager flame, they stirred up an incredible conflagration—incredible, Romanianus, incredible, and perhaps beyond even what you would believe of me—what more shall I say?—beyond even what I would believe of myself . . . Swiftly did I begin to return entirely to myself [*Prorsus totus in me cursim redibam*]. Actually, all that I did—let me admit it—was to look back from the end of a journey, as it were, to that religion which is implanted in us in our childhood days and bound up in the marrow of our bones. But she indeed was drawing me unknowing to herself. Therefore, stumbling, hastening, yet with hesitation I seized the Apostle Paul. For truly, I say to myself, those men would never have been able to do such great things, nor would they have lived as they evidently did live, if their writings and doctrines were opposed to this so great a good [*huic tanto bono*]. I read through all of it with the greatest attention and care.⁴⁴

So we hear of another journey, one going back in time, from adulthood to childhood. A reading of the Neo-Platonic books leads Augustine to the Catholicism of his childhood, but not without a reservation. Does Christianity cohere with the insights of Plotinus and Porphyry, which he takes to be “so great a good”? He checks by reading Paul's letters with care and finds that the Christians and the Neo-Platonists essentially agree.⁴⁵ In fact Christianity magnifies the truth apparent in the Platonic books: “And then, indeed,

1968), I.v.6. Also see Augustine's estimation of the value of the liberal arts, *On Order*, II.ix.26.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Against the Academics*, trans. John J. O'Meara, Ancient Christian Writers (New York: Newman Press, 1951), 69-70.

⁴⁵ Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.ix.14.

whatever had been the little radiance that had surrounded the face of philosophy before then, she now appeared so great” that it would astonish even Romanianus’s adversary (whoever he may have been) and turn him to philosophy.⁴⁶ Accordingly, Augustine seeks to have Romanianus study philosophy in *Contra Academicos* and then, in *De vera religione* (390-91), urges him to become a Christian. The persuasion was successful: He converted to the faith in 396.

Later, in *Confessiones* VII.xxi.27, Augustine will rebel against the books of the Platonists, and even later, in *De civitate Dei* (413-27), he will give a more nuanced view of the Platonists who led him to read Paul with attention. For while the Platonists hold that there is the one true God they also mistakenly affirm that there are other gods who merit worship.⁴⁷ In the *Confessiones*, however, the emphasis is on the congruence of Neo-Platonism and Catholicism with regard to essentials: An entirely characteristic “Christian Platonism” of the day.⁴⁸ To say whether the experience at Ostia is Neo-Platonic or Christian is to sever something that cannot be neatly divided, although, to be sure, there are distinctions that can and should be drawn, including that between pride and humility, impurity and purity, as already noted more than once. One of the most important of these distinctions turns on the very idea of “experience” in this context. In what sense, if any, does the ascent at Ostia result in an “experience”? It appears, as we have seen, that it is a shared event, and no attention is given to any significant disparity between what the mother and the son undergo. Plainly, the encounter cannot be an empirical experience of any sort, and Augustine is clear that he and his mother stretch out from space and time in order to touch the deity.

As early as *De Ordine* Augustine had pondered the encounter with God, though then it was in terms of vision. “Great God, how will those eyes be!” he exclaims there.⁴⁹ Vision characterizes the ascents in Milan. Now, in Ostia, the experience is registered by way of hearing. The soul has ears as well as eyes. We think of Plotinus: “we must let perceptible sounds go (except in so far as we

⁴⁶ Augustine, *Against the Academics*, II.ii.6.

⁴⁷ See Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.xii-xiii.

⁴⁸ See, for example, R. Arnou, “Platonisme des Pères,” *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, XIII, 2258-2392.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *On Order*, II.ii.51.

must listen to them) and keep the soul's power of apprehension pure and ready to hear the voices from on high."⁵⁰ Yet we also think of faith, recalling Paul, "So then faith [cometh] by hearing" (Rom. 10:17). Augustine reflects on the linguistic consequences of this extreme situation of hearing God at Ostia in a paragraph that is a sentence of 183 words, a *tour de force* of Latin prose. It begins:

Therefore we said: If to anyone the tumult of the flesh has fallen silent, if the images of earth, water, and air are quiescent, if the heavens themselves are shut out and the very soul itself is making no sound and is surpassing itself by no longer thinking about itself, if all dreams and visions in the imagination are excluded, if all language and every sign and everything transitory is silence—for if anyone could hear them, this is what all of them would be saying, "We did not make ourselves, we were made by him who abides for eternity [*qui manet in aeternum*]" (Ps. 79:3, 5)—if after this declaration they were to keep silence, having directed our ears to him that made them, then he alone would speak not through them but through himself. (IX.x.25)⁵¹

Only if there is complete silence in all possible modes can one hear God speak directly and not through creation. But what is this divine speech?

We would hear his word [*ut audiamus verbum*], not through the tongue of the flesh, nor through the voice of an angel, nor through the sound of thunder, not through the obscurity of a symbolic utterance. Him who in these things we love we would hear in person without their mediation [*ipsum sine his audiamus*] (IX.x.25)

⁵⁰ Armstrong, ed., *Enneads*, V.i.12.

⁵¹ Proper ascription of Scriptural allusions in the *Confessiones* is a difficult business. Chadwick is not always in line with what scholarly commentators (especially O'Donnell) indicate. It is important to note, for instance, that *qui manet in aeternum* is a quotation of Sirach 18: 1, a key proof text for the Creation in patristic Christianity.

We are told how we would *not* hear God's word but not how we *would* hear it, despite the profound silence that makes it possible to hear it.

Yet Augustine has already heard this voice in his soul, in the understanding, as he goes on to say, not mentioning any of the senses:

This is how it was when at that moment we extended our reach and in a flash of mental energy attained the eternal wisdom which abides beyond all things [*sicut nunc extendimus nos et rapida cognitione attingimus aeternam sapientiam super omnia manentem*]. (IX.x.25)

We have passed from *attingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis* to *rapida cognitione attingimus*, from the heart to the mind, though we should not suppose that Augustine is claiming a theoretical knowledge of God in the latter remark. Of course we remember the Neo-Platonic ascent from earthly beauty to the beautiful of book VII with its conclusion: "So in the flash of a trembling glance it attained to that which is [*et pervenit ad id quod est in ictu trepidantis aspectus*]." Yet there is no trembling in the Christian ascent, despite the warning that rings in Christian ears, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31, KJV). Needless to say, there is no mention of hearing anything, either through the senses or the "spiritual senses," and in fact that would be impossible, for Augustine has stretched beyond space and time in order mentally to touch God. His experience of the divine is strictly an experience without world. What could this possibly be?

We find the word *experientia* very rarely in Augustine, yet it orders his testimony and his theology from just behind the text.⁵² Often enough in the *Confessiones* he reflects on experiences he has *had* (stealing pears, for example), but here in Ostia he tells us of an experience that he *cannot have* in the sense of retain it on its own terms. This is not to say that he and Monica are not active at the critical moment: "we extended our reach," he writes. Instead, it is to emphasize that the experience cannot be contained in their minds. They approach the deity in a sudden thought that takes

⁵² See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 7 vols., I: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 284.

them outside space and time, yet this “flash” cannot be brought back fully with them and cannot be put into words. (They cannot bring *themselves* fully back.) To borrow a suggestive distinction drawn by Claude Romano, it is *événemential*, not *événementiel*: it “*illuminates its own context, rather than in any way receiving its meaning from it.*”⁵³ This context is precisely “eternal life,” the promised Kingdom.⁵⁴ Augustine reflects on his experience without experience:

If only it could last, and other visions of a vastly inferior kind could be withdrawn! Then this alone could ravish and absorb and enfold in inward joys the person granted the vision [*si continetur hoc et subtrahantur aliae visiones longe imparis generis et haec una rapiat et absorbeat et recondat in interiora gaudia spectatorem suum*]. So too eternal life [*sempiterna vita*] is of the quality of that moment of understanding [*momentum intellegentiae*] after which we sighed. Is not this the meaning of ‘Enter into the joy of your Lord’ (Matt. 25:21)? And when is that to be? Surely it is when ‘we all rise again, but are not all changed’ (1 Cor. 15:51). (IX.x.25)

Three things need to be heeded in these few lines. First, we need to see that we have shifted from hearing to seeing, though remaining “inward.” The senses of the soul allow ready passage from the one to the other. Second, we have passed from the eternal to the sempiternal, from *aeternum* to *sempiterna*, which perhaps may be no more than an elegant stylistic variation, since *sempiternitas* means the everlasting or eternal and need not imply temporal duration. Yet the choice of words may also indicate an uncertainty about the role of the resurrected flesh in eternal life with God. In their movement from stretching to ecstasy, Augustine and Monica have separated body and soul and, as already observed, in effect have died without being resurrected. Their joy is “a moment of understanding” of the quality of life the saints enjoy with God before their resurrection in the flesh. Yet this resurrection will come, and an unanswered question in the text is how the

⁵³ Claude Romano, *Event and World*, trans. Shane Mackinlay (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 38.

⁵⁴ See Augustine, *City of God*, XX.9.

resurrected body can be eternal. Does it take up space and time? Or is it entirely mental? Whatever Neo-Platonic dimension runs through the ascent at Ostia for Augustine (though presumably not for Monica), it is modified by a belief in the resurrection. Yet this belief is not easy to align with his experience of the eternal. By the time he was concluding *De civitate Dei* he maintained, as he had done at times in earlier years, that the saints “are going to see God in the body itself,” though exactly what this body is he cannot say.⁵⁵ The mind may be absorbed into the eternal, though a resurrected body, it seems, may need duration of some sort. One participates in eternal life through the Grace of God, and this need not be in contradiction with having a physical body that needs to experience duration. Third, it is significant that the event, being *événemential*, cannot be ascribed a cause within mundane existence. Only God can allow an ascent to him, and no amount of mental energy or even longing for God can guarantee that one can touch the divine.

“We asked what quality of life the eternal life of the saints will have”: Such was the prompt for the event that has been described. And the answer is given in the dazzling “moment of understanding” which consists of “inward joys.” The context that is illuminated cannot be articulated, for there has been no *conversio ad phantasma*, as Aquinas will say centuries later.⁵⁶ He would also say that Augustine and Monica received the *donum intellectus*, the gift of understanding, which lifts their cognitive abilities beyond their mortal limits. They are not given new knowledge of the deity but now they “know the same things more penetratingly and above the human mode.”⁵⁷ The “vision” has not been an experience in any usual sense of the world; it has been an eschatological event that has changed both mother and son, giving them pre-thetic understanding of the quality of eternal life, and even a sense perhaps of resurrected life. Following Jean-Luc Marion, we might say that Augustine and Monica touched *idipsum* in a counter-

⁵⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, XXII. xxix. For a survey of Augustine’s views of the resurrected body, see Brian E. Daley’s fine article, “Resurrection,” in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, gen. ed., Allan D. Fitzgerald, foreword Jaroslav Pelikan (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999), 722-23.

⁵⁶ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a q. 84 art. 7.

⁵⁷ Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, trans. F. R. Larcher, intro. Richard T. A. Murphy (Albany: Magi Books, 1966), 179.

experience, one that “resists the conditions of objectification,” for the God they encounter is certainly no object, not a being or a phenomenon.⁵⁸ What is mentally touched abides beyond time and space; the contact brings forth intense joy and also frustration by dint of its brevity and the need to return to mundane life. The Ostia “audition” is indeed saturated to the second degree, as Marion would say: *idipsum* was unable to be aimed at, could not be borne, evaded any analogy with experience, and could not be looked at.⁵⁹

Dom Cuthbert will tell us that the event at Ostia is a “mystical experience” *par excellence*. “The claim consistently and unequivocally made by the whole line of great mystics found, perhaps, its simplest and most arresting expression in these words of St Augustine: ‘My mind in the flash of a trembling glance came to Absolute Being – That Which Is.’”⁶⁰ He will do so because he speaks from a modern tradition that has come to figure religion by way of experience and that, in the wake of several important works on “mysticism,” now speaks of “mystical experience.”⁶¹ I am thinking, in particular, of William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), Friedrich von Hügel’s *The Mystical Element of Religion* (1908), Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism* (1911), and Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). One of the reasons to study the writings of the mystics, Dom Cuthbert says in his Prologue, is “for the sake of their mysticism, itself, as a religious experience.”⁶² To be sure, Dom Cuthbert is in some ways seeking to correct this tradition by placing a steady emphasis on contemplation. He draws from Auguste Soudreau and Augustin Poulin, among others, who are concerned with interior prayer rather than experiences in a narrow sense, and who know very well that spiritual consolations are not usual features of mental prayer.⁶³ As he says,

⁵⁸ See Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 215.

⁵⁹ See Marion, *Being Given*, § 24.

⁶⁰ Butler, *Western Mysticism*, 4.

⁶¹ See my essay, “Religious Experience and the Phenomenality of God,” *Between Philosophy and Theology: Contemporary Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Christophe Brabant (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 127-46.

⁶² Butler, *Western Mysticism*, 3.

⁶³ See Auguste Soudreau, *The Degrees of the Spiritual Life: A Method of Directing Souls According to their Progress in Virtue*, trans. Dom Bede Camm, 2

“contemplation’ is the word that will be met with in St Augustine, St Gregory, and St Bernard, to designate what is now commonly called ‘the mystical experience’” (4). Yet is “mystical experience” simply a modern translation of “contemplation,” one that leaves no remainder? Dom Cuthbert himself gives a reason for saying no when he writes of “experiences” that seem to take place only in the “higher kinds of contemplation,” and of “frequent phases of prayer and contemplation . . . from which such experience is absent.”⁶⁴ That great taxonomist of the contemplative life, Giovanni Scaramelli, would agree with him.⁶⁵ Contemplation does not always end in mystical experience, nor does “mystical experience” serve as a proper translation of *contemplatio*.

At Ostia Augustine and Monica followed Christian *contemplatio* in a manner that was peculiar and was to remain so throughout the tradition, except for treatises on mystical experience that took the form of dialogues. Not everyone can follow the Prince, Dom Cuthbert might say. If the son drew on Neo-Platonism as a vehicle for the ascent, the mother almost certainly did not, even though she is hailed as a wise woman and a true philosopher, and yet they both touched the unsayable God of Christianity. If we call this flash of insight an “experience,” we must do so with many caveats; for it was a moment of understanding, one that took place outside space and time, one that strictly could not be objectified, and one that could not be communicated. What struck Augustine and his mother was not a unity with divine being but rather attaining ineffable contact with that which is above and beyond all change. The event at Ostia organizes the whole of the *Confessiones* from the vantage point of Book IX. We fully understand the most memorable line on its first page only when we have grasped the significance of the Christian ascent: “our heart is restless until it rests in you” [*inquietum est cor*

vols. (London: R. and T. Washbourne, 1907), and *The Life of Union with God, and the Means of Attaining It According to the Great Masters of Spirituality*, trans. E. J. Strickland (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne Ltd., 1927), esp. 12, and A. Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer: A Treatise on Mystical Theology*, trans. Leonora L. Yorke Smith, pref. D. Considine (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1921).

⁶⁴ Butler, *Western Mysticism*, lviii.

⁶⁵ See G. B. Scaramelli, *A Handbook of Mystical Theology*, trans. D. H. S. Nicholson, intro. Allan Armstrong (Berwick, Maine: Ibis Press, 2005), ch. 3, 4.

nostrum donec requiescat in te] (I.i.1). Peace could only be found for Augustine after the *ictu cordis* at Ostia, in a journey passing from the region of dissimilarity to the Selfsame, from the world to the Kingdom.

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