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FROM OSTIA TO AVILA: ON THE “INCARNATIONAL” MYSTICISM OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

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Abstract: Saint Augustine’s account of his mystical vision at Ostia left a profound influence on later Christian mystics. This article examines the mystical paradigm set forth by Augustine and evaluates its impact on the tradition of Christian mysticism in both the Greek East and Latin West. The Augustinian paradigm begins from vestiges of Neoplatonist philosophy, outlining a formal pattern of ascent to the purely intelligible realm of divine wisdom. Augustine’s persistent use of corporeal language and imagery diverges from the Greco-Roman past, however, to incorporate elements of the created order into his experience of the purely intelligible realm, thereby rejecting Plotinus’s notion of an unfallen self that can be fully divorced from the material world. Instead, Augustine retains a sacramental regard for the created order, developing a mystical paradigm which acknowledges that the human soul can only access and make sense of divinity in terms of the material world. The Augustinian pattern of ascent ultimately reflects the doctrine of the Incarnation by suggesting that divine Truth is revealed in corporeal form. This pattern exerted a special influence on Saint Teresa of Avila, who adopted elements of Augustinian mysticism in her own reflections on achieving union with God in spite of sin. Through the ages, Augustine’s mystical paradigm can be seen as foundational in the line of Christian mystics, carrying with it a distinctly Christian optimism which suggests that holiness and intimate union with the divine are still attainable in a fallen and finite universe.

The vision that Saint Augustine shares with his mother at Ostia represents one of the most vivid and influential scenes in the *Confessions*. It supplies important insight into the mysticism of Augustine, exemplifying the mystical paradigm that he sets forth in the Christian tradition. This essay, consisting of three parts, aims to unravel the complex intertwinement of mysticism and materiality in the Augustinian mode of ascent. I begin by identifying what it is that makes Augustine a “mystic” and what defines his experience at Ostia as “mystical.” I then argue that Augustine’s mysticism operates within a central

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paradox: he discusses each stage of his ascent to the higher world through a lens of intensely corporeal language, diverging from Neoplatonist patterns of ascent and ultimately, adapting his Neoplatonist background to reflect Christian doctrines of sin and salvation. Finally, I trace Augustine's influence on later mystics, examining in particular the influence that Augustine's mysticism and Christian anthropology left on Saint Teresa of Avila.

Whether Augustine can indeed be classified as a "mystic" remains a debated question; however, several key features of his writings indicate that he must be considered so. In the words of Jean Gerson, the *Catholic New Encyclopedia* defines mysticism as "knowledge of God by experience, arrived at through the embrace of unifying love," or the "the direct union of the human soul with the Divinity."² Taking these elements into account, Cuthbert Butler ventures to call Augustine "the Prince of the Mystics," citing the saint's "intellectual vision into things divine" and "love of God that was a consuming passion."³ Both of these traits come forward in Augustine's account of his vision at Ostia, where he describes an experience of transcendental union with divine wisdom. Here he and his mother inquire together after the eternal life of the saints, which, he claims, "neither eye has seen nor ear has heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man." Such an experience, he further contends, can only be attainable "if... the tumult of the flesh has fallen silent, if the images of earth, water, and air are quiescent."⁴ This passage seems to suggest that Augustine's mysticism consists entirely of leaving "flesh" and "images" behind, of *exchanging* these things for an unearthly and immaterial reality. In fact, however, close examination of the account as a whole reveals that the material world is never fully absent from Augustine's mystical ascent to God.

First, Augustine draws heavily on the language of nature and the created world to describe his spiritual journey beyond the material order. Rather than dismissing his physical location as extraneous to the mystical experience, he takes time to situate the reader in a very particular setting: at Ostia, on the Tiber. He then narrows his gaze to the window where he and his mother take their place, overlooking the household garden as they enter into their

² Jean Gerson, *De Mystica Theologia* 1.6.6., quoted in the Catholic University of America, *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Detroit: Thomson/Gale, 2003).

³ Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: The Teachings of Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life* (New York: Dutton, 1923), 19.

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.10.25.

shared mystical experience.⁵ Significantly, it is from this very posture that their ascent takes root, as they look out into the garden together and fill their eyes with a scene of creation. In a similar way, Augustine goes on to weave very physical images into his ascent to the divine reality. He tells of being fortified by “a **spring** on high” (*superna fluenta fontis tui*), imagining a spiritual font in parallel to the Tiber river that flows in his midst. Quoting from Scripture, he also speaks of divine wisdom as the “**firstfruits** of the spirit” and exalts in the “**dew**” from the spring that fosters their contemplation (*fontis vitae; inde pro captu nostro aspersi...*). Taken together, these words and phrases come together to place vestiges of the material world at various stages along Augustine’s ascent to a spiritual and immaterial reality. His ascent begins as he looks out upon the physical world, and, even as he begins to experience higher truths, he continues to make sense of this experience in terms of the created order.

To a similar effect, this same passage consistently describes his intellectual progress through the language of bodily actions. “Step by step we **climbed**,” (*perambulavimus gradatim*) he says as the moment of their shared understanding approaches. He then adds: “with the mouth of the heart wide open, we **drank** the waters” (*inhiabamus ore cordis*). Finally, as the two begin to reach some higher plane of understanding, Augustine reports: “We **entered** into our own minds ... and **moved up** beyond them” (*venimus in mentes nostras et transcendimus eas*). This language of bodily movement likens the vision at Ostia to a kind of physical migration, once again expressing Augustine’s mystical ascent through the lens of the created order. Meanwhile, as he rejoices to strive for the realm “where you [God] **feed** Israel eternally with truth for food” (*unde pascis Israel in aeternum veritate pabulo*), he even applies the language of bodily activity to the ultimate end of the mystical experience. In this way, Augustine describes in material terms both the goal that the mystic is seeking (spiritual “food”), and also the ways in which that goal must be reached—we attain the nourishment God has prepared, he suggests, by imitating the movements of the body in our minds, embracing the same zeal, hunger and exertion with which our physical selves achieve great feats on Earth.

The particular “bridge” that brings Augustine to his experience of divine Wisdom, meanwhile, also belongs to the created world: conversation with his mother Monica. Indeed,

⁵ Augustine, Confessions, 9.10.23.

Augustine reaches his great moment of understanding not by closing his mind and heart to all the material bodies in his midst, but by drawing ever closer to Monica, with whom he shares a deeply human bond of both familial and spiritual communion. “We talked very intimately,” Augustine writes, as he recalls “searching together” with her for Truth (*conloquebamur ergo soli valde dulcite*). He adds that “the conversation led us” (*ad eum finem sermo perduceretur*) to an important conclusion, namely, that bodily pleasures are nothing compared to the life of eternity. Here he emphasizes that this conclusion came about *through* engaging in certain activities with his earthly mother and fellow pilgrim, namely, “dialogue and reflection and wonder” (*cogitando et loquendo et mirando opera tua*). In her analysis of this passage, theologian Janet Martin Soskice writes: “The vision at Ostia is social, not solitary, for that is how we hear the Word — through Scripture, preaching, the witness of others. These are the ligatures of love which bind us to one another and to God.”⁶ Thus, Augustine suggests that experiencing intimacy and intellectual companionship in mortal life prompts us to yearn ever more deeply for intimacy and intellectual union with God.

In sum, Augustine incorporates into his mystical ascent three major components of the material order, including i) the natural world, ii) bodily actions, and, most importantly, iii) conversation with another person. He thereby suggests that engaging with the created world is not at all contrary to mystical experience; rather, it helps bring about the moment of revelation. Corporeal phenomena therefore come forward in his account as “rungs” on a ladder that leads us to experience divine truth and understanding for ourselves. At the same time, his intensely physical language also serves an important communicative purpose, preserving the memory of an otherwise inarticulable experience that can then be contemplated over again by the mystic himself and further disseminated in writing for readers to understand. Thus emerges the central paradox of Augustine’s mystical vision at Ostia: even as he seeks to leave the world behind, he weaves the material order into each stage of his spiritual journey, maintaining a “sacramental” regard for creation that recognizes its inherent goodness and ability to lead us into a deeper relationship with its divine author.

⁶ Janet Martin Soskice, “Monica’s Tears: Augustine on Words and Speech,” *New Blackfriars* 83 No. 980 (2007): 457, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01829>.

As he proceeds with his account, Augustine continues to use intensely corporeal language even up to his climactic moment of union with the divine, affirming that, to the end, materiality never fully dissipates from his mystical experience. In this moment, Augustine and Monica experience a “flash” of the eternal wisdom that flows forth from their conversation with one another.⁷ Here Augustine speaks of the ultimate and eternal wisdom like a tangible object, explaining that he and Monica “panted after” it (*inhiamus illi*), desiring it with the force of a bodily need, and even “touched” it (*atingimus eam modice tot ictu cordis*) for one fleeting instant. This image of “touch” conjures the striking image of the two mystics not only mentally, but even *physically* joining themselves to God, offering up their whole selves, body and soul, to this moment of encounter. As the experience quickly fades, Augustine then laments the fleetingness of it all, expressing a fervent desire for that same wisdom to “ravish and absorb and enfold” (*et haec una rapiat et absorbeat et recondat in interiora gaudia spectatorem suum*) the mystic in interior joy forever, couching his prayer in language of physical conquest and totalizing materiality. And so, even in his highest raptures of spiritual ecstasy, he does not fully divorce his mindset from the material order. Turning now to the legacy of Augustinian mysticism, this point carries important consequences for Augustine’s Christian anthropology and his influence on later Christian mystics.

The pattern of ascent that Augustine sets forth here resembles that of the Neoplatonists; however, his emphasis on materiality also adapts the old way to fit into a new Christian context. Many scholars have identified the vision at Ostia as possessing key elements in common with the formal pattern of ascent set forth in Plotinus.⁸ In one sense, Augustine imitates this pattern by proceeding in ordered succession from dialectical reasoning to a domain of pure intellect. Neoplatonism, however, holds that we have a natural capacity to dwell in the transcendental world, to discover there a purely “intelligible” and “undescended” self. As Kenney points out, “Augustine countenances no such idea of an unfallen self... the contemplative soul cannot discover its real self in eternal wisdom, for there is no eternal self there to be recovered.”⁹ The fleetingness of the vision at Ostia

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.10.24.

⁸ Similarities have been noted especially between the Ostia account and Plotinus 5.1.2.14 ff.

⁹ John Peter Kenney, *The Mysticism of St. Augustine: Re-Reading the Confessions* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 82, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.yale.idm.oclc.org/lib/yale-ebooks/detail.action?docID=243331>.

indicates that, for Augustine, eternal wisdom is something ultimately unattainable in this life, “an aperture opened by the grace of Christ emergent within the soul, but not naturally found there.”¹⁰ This very idea comes through as well in Augustine’s persistent use of corporeal language, which suggests that the material world remains fundamentally inseparable from who we really are as finite, fallen creatures. Thus, his Christian anthropology stresses that the material order, with all its stains and imperfections, is something that we neither can or should leave behind in this life. And yet, as he dares to venture into higher realms with Monica by his side, Augustine exemplifies the possibility of catching glimpses of eternal beatitude in mortal life, instilling in his reader the hope of attaining much more than a glimpse of such beatitude forever after in Heaven.

Augustine’s model of mysticism went on to exert a significant influence on other Christian mystics, surfacing in foundational texts from both the Greek East and Latin West. Alexy Fokin shows that, through the ages, Christian thinkers both imitated and developed Augustine’s paradigm of “gradual intellectual ascent” to divine union. One notable example includes *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum* by St. Bonaventure, which offers a “road map” (*itinerarium*) to mystical union that guides the reader from contemplation of external realities (*extra nos*) to internal realities such as memory, intellect, and will (*intra nos*) to the transcendent realm of the divine (*super nos*).¹¹ So too does Augustine proceed through these three principal stages at Ostia: he moves from conversation at his window overlooking the garden to internal reflection to total divine union—even though, as I have argued, these stages are in fact more intertwined than it might appear at first glance. Similar trajectories can also be seen in the works of Greek Byzantines and Church Fathers such as the Great Cappadocians, St. Maximus the Confessor, and Dionysius the Areopagite, all of which, much like Augustine, drew on Neoplatonist ideas to re-frame Plotinus’ theory of intellectual cognition to match their understanding of a new Christian God.¹² Preserved in these and other texts, the Augustinian model clearly influenced Christians across the ages who strove

¹⁰ Kenney, *The Mysticism of St. Augustine*, 82.

¹¹ St. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium* V-VII, quoted in Alexey Fokin, “St. Augustine’s Paradigm: *ab Exterioribus ad Interioribus, ab Inferioribus ad Superiora* in Western and Eastern Christian Mysticism,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7 No. 2: 91, <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v7i2.121>.

¹² Cf. 2 Dionysius of Areopagita, *De mystica theologia* I.1, *De divinis nominibus* 1.4, *Epistula* 5; Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua*; Gregorius Nyssenus, *De vita Moysis*, I.162.7–163.8 et al., quoted in Fokin, “St. Augustine’s Paradigm,” 99-105.

for a similar experience of divine union that Augustine himself professes to have received at Ostia.

St. Teresa of Avila offers a particularly salient case study with which to evaluate Augustine's impact on later Christian mystics. In her autobiography, she reflects on the profundity of her experience reading the *Confessions*, saying, "When I got as far as his [Augustine's] conversion and read how he heard that voice in the garden, it seemed exactly as if the Lord were speaking in that way to me, or so my heart felt."¹³ Significantly, Teresa describes herself hearing the voice of God after being immersed in Augustine's written word, that is, after *connecting with another person* through the human construct of language. Her experience recalls Augustine's conversation with Monica, picking up on the idea that intellectual engagement with other people can lead us to an encounter with the divine. Teresa later goes on to describe her own mystical encounter in strikingly Augustinian terms. She writes, for example, "A feeling of the presence of God would come over me... so that I could in no wise doubt either that he was within me, or that I was wholly absorbed in him."¹⁴ Much like Augustine, Teresa draws here on intensely physical language to describe an immaterial phenomenon, speaking of divine union as a merger of two material bodies. In particular, this passage echoes Augustine's wish that eternal wisdom might "ravish and enfold and absorb" the person experiencing it for all eternity. Thus we see the two mystics joined across time, looking to the material world as a way of both accessing and representing their own mystical experiences.

Augustine's discussion of sin and salvation also left a significant impact on St. Teresa of Avila, with these themes further connecting the concepts of mysticism that emerge from each. As Teresa writes in her autobiography, "I have a great affection for Saint Augustine, because he had been a sinner. I used to find a great deal of comfort in reading the lives of saints who had been sinners before the Lord brought them back to Himself."¹⁵ Here she acknowledges the subtle optimism that underlies Augustine's own mystical paradigm: we are fallen, and yet an intimate relationship with God is still possible, even to the point of mystical union with the divine. In the *Confessions*, Teresa observes Augustine's

¹³ St. Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus: The Autobiography of Teresa of Avila*, ed. and trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Dover Publications, 2012), 67.

¹⁴ Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, 68.

¹⁵ Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, 67.

“helplessness, his habituation to sins, his tears of self-betrayal,”¹⁶ and yet, paradoxically, these very traits soon convince her of his holiness. For even as he fails to attain the ideal for which he strives, he presses on in his spiritual journey, exemplifying a radically Christian hope for salvation in spite of his sin. This phenomenon relates back to both saints’ emphasis on materiality in their own mystical accounts, as each dares to suggest that is in fact possible, with God’s grace, to seek glimpses of Heaven on Earth without losing sight of who we are as finite, broken, fallen creatures *who can never in mortal life fully extricate ourselves from the imperfections of the created order*.

Thus, Augustine’s emphasis on materiality in his own mystical paradigm bears important implications. His distinctive pattern of ascent represents both a continuation and a break from the Neoplatonist tradition, carrying with it the recognition that we do not yet belong to the immaterial world. Instead, Augustine holds that the physical world is inseparable from our human nature. Accordingly, so long as we dwell in earthly life, we can only access and make sense of divinity *in terms of* the material order. This line of argument goes back to the idea of the Incarnation itself; the very language of “Word made flesh” affirms that the material world, duly revered, holds the power to reveal divine truth. Preserving his insights in the memory of the *Confessions*, Augustine thereby helped lead generations of Christians to seek their own union with the divine. His account of the vision at Ostia exemplifies his method of proceeding in incremental steps to God, beginning with what lies right before your eyes—perhaps even the person by your side. In vivid Latin prose, the work communicates his slow, determined faith that one day, in spite of our fallen nature, the glimpses of divine union that we can experience in this life might one day be eternal.

¹⁶ Kenney, *The Mysticism of St. Augustine*, 82.

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