

Looking for Home: Travel As Metaphor in Augustine

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Looking for Home: Travel As Metaphor in Augustine

Wandering, homecoming, exile, journey are pervasive metaphors in Augustine's writings. He did not romanticize them. He did not even say much about his actual journeys. Travel, by either land or sea, was usually an uncomfortable necessity in his day, undertaken not for its own sake but to arrive at the destination.¹ It could encompass the activities of kidnappers and slave-traders, as we learn from one of the recently discovered letters of Augustine.² Precisely because of its discomforts and hazards travel was a source of readily understood metaphors. They are integral to the presentation of *his own journey* in the *Confessions* and elsewhere. But they also belong to his understanding of the *Christian life*. And they are fundamental to his theory of *finite being* in all its modalities. Let us consider these in sequence.

I. AUGUSTINE'S JOURNEY

For Augustine and his world the term "conversion" was primarily positive, a turning *toward*, and specifically toward God. It was a turning toward something worth having, a "supreme value" we would say today, which promised to be the source of happiness. Thus a self-reference was also involved—there was something in it for oneself, too.³ It was like finding a home, or coming into port, or getting

1. See Othmar Perler, *Les voyages de saint Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1969), pp. 25-115, for the kinds of routes, means of transport, weather conditions and times of year, dangers, and accommodations along the way—and Augustine's use of various details as metaphors, especially in his sermons.

2. *Ep. 10** in the collection newly edited by Divjak (CSEL 88). The following abbreviations of the works of Augustine are used in this article: *C. Ac.*: *Contra Academicos* (CC 29); *De b.v.*: *De beata vita* (CC 29); *De cat. rud.*: *De catechizandis rudibus* (CC 46); *De civ. Dei*: *De civitate Dei* (CC 47-48); *Conf.*: *Confessiones* (CC 27); *De Gen. c. Man.*: *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* (PL 34); *De ord.*: *De ordine* (CC 29); *De Trin.*: *De Trinitate* (CC 50-50A); *De mor.*: *De moribus* (PL 32); *De ver. rel.*: *De vera religione* (CC 32); *En. Ps.*: *Enarrationes in Psalms* (CC 38-40); *Ep.*: *Epistolae* (CSEL 34, 44, 57, 58, 88); *In Io. ev.*: *In Iohannis evangelium* (CC 36); *Serm.*: *Sermones* (PL 38-39); *Serm. Den.*: *Sermones a M. Denis editi* (MA 1); *Sol.*: *Soliloquiae* (CSEL 89).

3. "We all desire happiness," he said, following Cicero. And happiness must mean having what is worth having, and being secure about one's situation (*De mor.* I, iii, 4). See Harald

to one's true country. But his voyage toward the haven of "philosophy" (*De b.* v. i, 1; *C. Ac.* II, i, 1) or "wisdom" (*C. Ac.* II, ii, 2) was a confused one. There were, as R. A. Markus says, "other ports of call" along the way.⁴

In reflecting on the various ways in which people move toward the haven, Augustine comments that some sail tranquilly toward it; some wander far from the shoreline and are blown off course but then find the way once again. But there is a third kind of voyage, and Augustine classifies himself here, among those who remember their homeland, who know very well about it, are not blown off course by violent storms, but still delay, because they have been gazing at the stars, wandering in the mists, hearing the enticements of sirens (*De b.* v. i, 2).⁵

How, then, did he get back on course? The story is told in two short narratives written a few months after what we call the conversion (*De b.* v. i, 4-6; *C. Ac.* II, ii, 5), and at much greater length eleven years later in the *Confessions*.

Several major factors appear in succession. In his nineteenth year, Augustine says, he read Cicero's *Hortensius* and was aroused to the life of philosophy, which, as we know, means the quest for wisdom. This, he suggests, is the moment when he stood up straight—became autonomous, the modern world would put it—and stopped bending his neck to the yoke of authority.⁶ Throughout his career Augustine will evoke the restless and indeterminate quest of the human spirit, traced so well by Blondel and a host of twentieth-century Catholic philosophers: a quest that is restless—but indeterminate, able to rest on any object.⁷

Convinced that he should follow the path of reason, he turned away from the authoritarianism of the Catholic Church of North Africa.⁸ He fell in with the

Hagendahl, *Augustine and the Latin Classics* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1867), pp. 486-97.

4. R.A. Markus, *Conversion and Disenchantment in Augustine's Spiritual Career*, Saint Augustine Lecture 1984 (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1989), p. 6.

5. Travel metaphores and geographical allusions abound in a poem addressed to Augustine by his pupil Licentius, who was associated with Augustine in the months following his conversion. The most recent scholarly discussion is Danuta Shanzer, "'Arcanus Varronis iter': Licentius's Verse Epistle to Augustine," *Revue des études augustiniennes*, XXXVII (1991), 110-143.

6. Robert J. O'Connell, S.J., "On Augustine's 'First Conversion': *Factus Erectior* (*De Beata Vita* 4)," *Augustinian Studies* 17 (1986) 15-29 highlights this phrase in Augustine's autobiographical account. O'Connell shows that the term is used in a positive way, as representing a step forward, for it has resonances with Psalm 144:14 and with the parable of the Prodigal Son.

7. In the famous passage at the beginning of the *Confessions*, we must emphasize the statement "Our hearts are restless," then the conclusion, "until they rest in you." It is never self-evident that "You have made us for yourself." Similarly he talks about "loving love, seeking something to love" (*Conf.* III, i, 1); if there was a desire for God, it would be only implicit.

8. He speaks of *supersticio* in several autobiographical passages (*De b.* v. i, 4; *De util. cred.*

Manichaeans, who claimed to base their religion on reason rather than authority. Eventually he was led to question this metaphysics (more accurately, this myth masquerading as science) under the influence of the Academics, who questioned all claims to certain knowledge and thought of life as a series of ventures in which we must act on the basis of probability. First excessive expectations, then a sobering. These are predictable features of the quest for wisdom.

Like Aeneas fleeing Dido, Augustine left his mother in Carthage and sailed to Rome.⁹ After a year he went to Milan—recommended by Symmachus, the last great champion of Roman paganism (*Conf.* V, xiii, 23). Thus he lent himself to the resistance to Catholic Christianity, even as it was being given the weight of law by the emperor Theodosius. Physically he had been traveling north; now he looked north figuratively, too. In Milan, he says, he began to learn about a more credible guide, a Big Dipper which would point to the Polestar (*De b.v.* i, 4). Soon after the events he emphasizes three things: conversations with the bishop Ambrose, reading some “books of the Platonists,” and reading the apostle Paul (*De b.v.* i, 4). This sequence corresponds roughly with books VI, VII, and VIII of the *Confessions*. The process took some time. Let us look at the major stages.

1. ACKNOWLEDGING AUTHORITY. Augustine speaks of having been imbued with the Christian religion from infancy (*C. Ac.* II, ii, 5). He often mentions his disappointment that, in the writings of the philosophers, the name of Christ is not mentioned (*Conf.* III, iv, 8; VII, ix, 13-15). On arriving in Milan he paid a courtesy call to Ambrose, the bishop who had just been engaged in controversy with Symmachus, and Ambrose, he says, “received me like a father” (*Conf.* V, xiii, 23). He enrolled as a catechumen, having decided to adhere to Christianity unless or until something better appeared.

We may consider these reliable autobiographical statements, for there is no reason for him to falsify the matter. He is acknowledging an arbitrary influence upon himself, sheer conditioning by his environment. And yet he turns it to advantage. He recognized, he says, the role of authority—*auctoritas*, which in Cicero meant relying on the word of those who had prior possession of the truth and knew better than oneself.

But this by itself was not enough. It would have been a surrender to authority, good enough for simple believers but not for someone who had become inflamed with the philosophic quest. Authority and belief may be the way, but the goal is to possess truth through reason. Now another decisive factor enters the picture.

i, 2). While the suggestion has given offense to some readers, he is probably referring to Catholic Christianity. Relevant passages are discussed in James O'Donnell's *Confessions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), II, 175-77.

9. The parallels with the *Aeneid* are discussed in O'Donovan, II, 307-8.

Augustine read what he calls “a few books of the Platonists,” and these certainly included several treatises from Plotinus’ *Enneads*.

2. THE BOOKS OF THE PLATONISTS. To the scandal of many, the French scholar Alfaric commented that Augustine was converted not to Christianity but to Platonism.¹⁰ Others, alarmed at this dramatic statement, have tried to rephrase it: perhaps he was converted to Christianity under Platonist auspices—and, conversely, to Platonism under Christian auspices.¹¹ We know, in any case, that there was a “circle” of Platonists in Milan, and even Ambrose’s sermons in this very year of 386 were pervaded with Platonist themes. It might be most accurate to say that Augustine was converted first to Platonism, and then (some months or weeks later) to Christianity. The Christianity with which he grew up had been intellectually inadequate, driving him into a long detour; now he comes to see Christianity in a new light, thanks to the Platonism which he acquires along with it.

But how? In the *Confessions* he evokes his experience on reading these “books of the Platonists” (*Conf.* VII, x, 16; xvii, 23; xx, 26). Perhaps misreading Plotinus, he expected a vision or contemplation which would give happiness or beatitude, *not* in a momentary or intermittent way, *not* under conditions beyond earthly life, but, if all went as it should, on an everyday basis, a “life in happiness” because one’s consciousness would constantly be bathed in the divine light. What he hoped for was not ecstasy; Mandouze has coined the more accurate term “enstasy.”¹² This “life in happiness” would be both contemplative and active at once—an expectation that he would be “at home” within himself and dwell there with God. There is a parallel in Meister Eckhart’s bold declaration that the highest life is represented not by Mary, who relaxed in contemplation, but by Martha, whose care for many things is approved as long as she remembers the “one thing necessary,” God and constant unity with God, even in the midst of activity. It is a noble aspiration—but for security and stability, not adventure and uncertainty.

Augustine would remain convinced, throughout his lifetime, that the Platonist philosophers had glimpsed the goal and gained a fairly accurate perspective on it, though Biblical revelation is needed to correct them at some points. The difficulty is that the philosophers are not able to get there (*Conf.* VII, xxi, 27; *De Trin.* IV,

10. Prosper Alfaric, *L’Évolution intellectuelle de saint Augustin. I.* [the only volume printed] *Du manichéisme au néoplatonisme* (Paris: E. Nourry, 1918), p. 399.

11. The counter-attack was mounted by Charles Boyer, S.J., *Christianisme et néoplatonisme dans la formation de saint Augustin* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1920), and the controversy is summarized by Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* (Paris: De Boccard, 1968), pp. 7-12.

12. André Mandouze, *Saint Augustin. L’Aventure de la raison et de la grâce* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1968), pp. 690 ff.

xvi, 21 - xvii, 23; *In Ev. Io.* 2, 2-4; *De civ. Dei* VIII, 10). That seems to have been his own experience at the time. "I babbled like an expert," he says in looking back (*Conf.* VII, xx, 26). He thought of himself as part of a spiritual elite, one of those who have been seized by the quest for truth and must carry through with it (*De ord.* I, viii, 24; *Sol.* I, xiii, 23). But somehow—probably through failure to achieve a steady vision of the divine—he gained humility. "I learned the difference," he says, "between presumption and confession" (*Conf.* VII, xx, 26). What he had achieved was only a glimpse, not a dwelling; but, as Evelyn Underhill paraphrases it, "The mystic need is for a Home, not for a Vision."¹³ How was he to "raise anchor" and sail into the haven (*De b. v.* i, 4)?

3. GETTING UNDER WAY. Augustine could have entered the church as an average Christian, through what A.D. Nock has termed "adhesion" rather than "conversion,"¹⁴ as many people were doing. That was all the more reason to become a Christian not conventionally but heroically; if he delayed it was precisely because of the heavy demands which he placed on himself.¹⁵ He would lead the celibate life—an ideal in which two traditions converged. The single, undistracted state was honored not only by fourth-century Christians but by philosophers as well. Augustine and his friends had already talked about living together in a life of contemplation, and the communities which he later established (first on the family farm in Tagaste in 388, then in the bishop's residence in Hippo) were heavily influenced by the philosophic tradition (*C. Ac.* II, ii, 4; *Sol.* I, xii, 20; *Conf.* VI, xiv, 24). And yet he also used the language of the monastic movement, which characterized itself as "divine servitude" (*servire Deo*). It was a flowing together of the two streams, and the result was different from either one of them in isolation.

A few years later it was through the monastic life that Augustine, against his intentions, stumbled into the clergy. He had avoided any place that was without a bishop, but when he came to Hippo Regius, whose bishop was aging, he was recognized and was forcibly detained to become a presbyter and bishop-designate. He would have preferred contemplation; now he assumes different responsibilities—to our benefit, for his public becomes much broader than the educated intellectuals for whom he had been writing, his interests more varied, his language more to the point.

13. Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystic Way: A Psychological Study in Christian Origins* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1913), p. 301, paraphrasing *Confessiones* VII, xx, 26.

14. A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 6-7.

15. The point is made with special force by Mandouze, p. 176.

And so, by the time Augustine writes an account of himself in the *Confessions* eleven years later, there have been many discontinuities.¹⁶ There was *discontinuity with his past*. He was now a bishop, with new responsibilities. The Empire itself had undergone the political crisis of the 390s, the last pagan uprising, staged as a battle of the gods, and crushed under what seemed miraculous circumstances by Theodosius in the battle of the Frigidus. Pagan morale collapsed. Soon Theodosius and his sons will ban sacrifices, smash idols, and convert temples into churches.¹⁷

Thus Augustine, only eleven years later, is living in a different world and playing a different role. The *Confessions* do not merely narrate his past but contend with it, offering better and wiser interpretations, debating with himself and refuting himself just as he refuted his opponents in more public debates—and, in the process, instructing and exhorting others by leading them through his own self-criticism.

There was also *discontinuity with his present*, even with his own abilities. He was now in his early forties, the time of “midlife crisis” when people begin to sense their finitude, ask whether they are fulfilling their expectations of themselves, and perhaps accept their limitations with tranquility. As a result of his renewed study of Paul, Augustine came to a fresh appreciation of the bondage of the will, inward conflict, and the need for grace. “I labored in behalf of the free choice of the human will,” he recalled about these years, “but the grace of God prevailed.”¹⁸ More and more, it seemed, he had to acknowledge human frailties—against the Donatists, who thought they could create a pure church; against the Pelagians, who thought that a sinless life was possible; against “Christian times” themselves, when the sack of Rome made it clear that even the Christian establishment was no guarantee of peace and happiness.

There was even *discontinuity with the future*, the hoped-for fulfillment. The vision of God, which Augustine had expected to achieve any day through intellectual exercise and disciplining his affections, is now deferred. He begins to say that one comes home, gains beatitude and rest, merely *in spe* but not yet *in re*.¹⁹ He

16. The notion of discontinuity is emphasized—not, of course, for the first or last time—by R.A. Markus, *Conversion and Disenchantment* and *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 28-36, 50.

17. These events and their impact on Augustine are discussed in R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, pp. 112-123. There is an especially important series of articles, surveying and analyzing this entire “transition period,” in *Il Cristianesimo nella storia* (1990), republished (and translated into Italian) in *L'intolleranza cristiana nei confronti dei pagani*, a cura di Pier Franco Beatrice (Bologna: Ed. Dehoniane, 1993).

18. *Retr. II*, 1, referring to *De div. q. ad Simpl.*, I, q. 2, where he adopts a predestinarian position on the basis of Romans 9:10-29.

19. The formulaic use of this contrast begins to appear about 398-400 in *Conf. X*, xx, 29 (the moment of discovery?), *C. Fau. XI*, 7-8 and *XII*, 1, *C. litt. Petil. II*, vii, 14 and III,

begins to talk about being *in via*, on the way toward a goal that has not yet been reached.

We have come some distance from the “early Augustine.” There has been a sobering—perhaps, Peter Brown suggests, because he “could not withstand the terrific weight of his own expectations.”²⁰ With it comes a broadening of perspective—a recognition that he is *not* basking in the divine light but is only *on the way* and will reach it only under very different conditions. Augustine gives us permission, in other words, to have second and third thoughts about conversion narratives, in the confidence that they may come to be interpreted more fully as time discloses more adequately what is involved in the way that was chosen. He invited his readers to engage in further examination, asking only that they display the same spirit of inquiry, of comprehensiveness, and of readiness to re-learn that he demanded of himself.

II. THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY

We may be struck by the richness of experience in the *Confessions*. But the journey is not self-explanatory. Augustine sets it within a wider framework—the cosmos, human history, God’s purposes for both of them. But of course there must be a pattern of interpretation, and the one that is most recurrent is that of *wandering and homecoming*.

There are some obvious ways in which it was a homecoming—to the faith of his mother Monica, which he had fled; to North Africa, which he had left and to which he then returned under quite different auspices; perhaps also to the irascible manner of his father Patricius, whom he had not liked much; certainly to God, who, he discovered, was always present even when his own attention was dispersed among the things of the world.

But was it also a homecoming in a more cosmic sense? Robert O’Connell has spent his career demonstrating that the Platonist theme of the preexistence of the soul had more of a place in Augustine’s thought than we would like to suppose. I am not so sure that Augustine *affirmed* preexistence; but he did give it credence as one of the possible theories of the origin of the soul, indeed, the most probable.²¹ He was more firmly convinced that the soul is set between God as pure

v, 27, and *De bapt.* I, iv, 5.

20. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. 147.

21. Augustine’s practice is to list four classic theories explaining how the soul gets into the body: propagation from one generation to another, separate creation of each by God, sending of the soul into the body by divine will, and spontaneous movement of the soul into this particular body and destiny (*De lib. arb.* III, xxi, 62; *Ep.* 143, 6; *Ep.* 166, 7), or, more schematically (reversing the order of the first two), “either God, or nature, or necessity,

Being, in whom alone one finds true happiness, and the world of changing matter, in which the soul is dispersed and loses all coherence. The problem, then, was how to be *restored* to a life—perhaps an actual life, perhaps only a possibility—from which one has somehow drifted away.

Augustine understands his own wandering and homecoming on the model of the Prodigal Son, allegorized with imagery drawn from Plotinus' *Enneads* (I, vi, 6-8). His journey to the far country is not with horses, carriages, or ships, not with visible wings or churning knees, but with misdirected desire (*Conf.* I, xviii, 28), just as his return is not travel in space, not with ship or chariot or feet, but with an act of will (*Conf.* VIII, viii, 19). Augustine's was a "hierarchical" universe, with degrees of being everywhere—in the heavenly bodies, among living things, in the political world—and these, when properly understood, functioned as "steps" by which to ascend, stage by stage.²² The external world with its degrees is a sign and reminder, then, of a different journey, turning from *outward things* to one's *inner self*, and then *rising toward God* (*Conf.* VII, xvii, 23; IX, x, 25; X, vi, 9; *In Io. ev.* 20, 12; *En. Ps.* 41, 7).

Long before he abandoned the hypothesis of *preexistence*, Augustine abandoned his excessive expectations for the *present*; he deferred them to the future, saying that fulfillment is now possessed only *in spe* but not yet *in re*. As a bishop, furthermore, he found himself becoming much more *social* in his thinking. He began to speak of the "two cities" constituted by two different loves (either of God or of finite things), and he saw them stretching throughout human history, beginning with Cain and Abel.

Human beings who should have moved toward the heavenly city are now born citizens of the earthly city, in the lineage of Cain; but some are reborn citizens of Jerusalem, the city of God celebrated in the Psalms. The so-called "Psalms of Ascent" (Pss. 119-133 in the Greek and Latin numbering) are allegorized to evoke an ascent to the heavenly Jerusalem. And Augustine follows Paul (Gal 4:25-26) in understanding the earthly city as a sign of the Jerusalem above. But where Paul emphasized the *difference*, Augustine adds *continuity*. The earthly Jerusalem, the people of Israel in its cultic assembly, points in both directions: as part of the

or our own will" (*De b. v. i*, 1). In his discussion of these theories he implies that the sequence is in ascending order, from the less to the more probable. The question of the origin of the embodied soul became a matter of more intense discussion after 415, and in 417 he seems to have rejected the theory of personal preexistence for a vaguer theory of the sin of all "in Adam." See Robert J. O'Connell, S.J., *The Origin of the Soul in St. Augustine's Later Works* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), pp. 179-200, 300-319.

22. For a convenient summary see Suzanne Poque, *Le langage symbolique dans la prédication d'Augustin d'Hippone. Images héroïques* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1984), pp. 311-23.

earthly city, with its own earthly “presence,” it is temporal, destined to pass away; but it is called to be a “figure” of the heavenly Jerusalem, toward which the elect are traveling (*De civ. Dei* XV, 2).

These citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem now dwell in the midst of the earthly city as *peregrini*—not pilgrims in the later sense, but resident foreigners, the *gerim* of ancient Israel, the *πάροικοι* of the Greek cities, free persons who nonetheless were not citizens because they did not have property or belong to one of the official clans or share in the civic cult or have places in the theater. They also constituted the poor and most vulnerable portion of the cities, facing exclusion or expulsion during food shortages.²³ The connotations are negative, relieved only by the hospitality or tolerance of those among whom the foreigner dwells.

For Augustine the negative connotations of “peregrinus” are pervasive. He uses the term in referring to foreign languages or peoples. In writing letters to fellow bishops who are away from their homes, the salutation reads “coepiscopo peregrino.” Early in his intellectual development he uses the metaphor of dwelling in a strange land to refer to the soul, wandering on earth, away from its tranquil home with God (*De an. quan.*, xxxi, 63).

The semantic field of biblical terms (in the Vetus Latina, of course) was even stronger. It referred to the people of Israel during their servitude in Egypt (Gen 11:32), or to the homeless stranger who is to be given shelter. The term also referred to the Gentiles, “alienati a societate Israel et peregrini testamentorum et promissionis” (Eph 2:12)—a situation reversed by Christ, who preached peace to those who were far away as well as those who were near, so that the Gentile Christians are no longer “peregrini et inquilini” but “cives sanctorum et domestici Dei” (Eph 2:19). But they have changed their citizenship; in becoming fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, they become strangers in this world.

Augustine’s favorite text, which he paraphrases at least eighty times, is Paul’s statement (II Cor 5:6-7), “quamdiu sumus in corpore *peregrinamur a Domino; per fidem enim ambulamus*, non per speciem.” All the essential points are there.

1. It is sojourning *away from* (“a,” “de”) God, Christ, the heavenly city, the vision of God, often reinforced by suggestions of separation (“inde,” “unde”) or distance (“longe,” “a longinquu”). This is true not only of individuals but of the *peregrina ciuitas*, the city of God—more precisely, that portion of it which wanders on earth, away from its true home.

2. It is sojourning *in the body*, or *in the world*, as in strange territory, quite different from what one who is suffering and struggling hopes for. A person who enjoys living in a foreign country does not love the homeland. If one loves the

23. Bernhard Kötting, *Peregrinatio Religiosa. Wallfahrten in der Antike und das Pilgerwesen in der alten Kirche* (Münster: Regensberg, 1950), pp. 7-11.

homeland, life in a foreign country will be bitter; one will not find security; and every day will be tribulation (*En. Ps.* 85, 11 and 16). It is travel as travail.

3. Despite these negative overtones, Augustine avoids using certain terms to describe the situation of the wanderer or exile. “Exile” suggested banishment. “Alien” and “alienation” applied to what belongs to another or is hostile; to alienate property was to make it another’s, so that is no longer one’s own. These terms, then, suggest either *contradiction* (alienation from God and salvation, or from one’s authentic being [*De Trin.* XI, v, 9]) or *difference in kind* (e.g., the Manichaean “good” and “evil” principles). The *peregrinus*, by contrast, sojourns in a country whose “difference” from the city of God is neither an exile nor a difference in kind nor a direct opposition to that proper destiny. For example, in a concluding a long chapter on Cain, the ancestor of us all and the founder of the earthly city, Augustine says that fleshly desires are to be “healed as our own, not rejected as alien” (*De civ. Dei* XV, 7). The “far country” in which we sojourn, in other words, does not exclude the possibility of rebirth; yet it is full of temptations to evil. Alienation occurs through our own *consent* to temptation—when, through our own decision, we depart from God. Then the consequence of alienation is exile. Thus we must translate *peregrinus* with “stranger,” “foreigner,” “sojourner,” “traveler,” but not “alien” or “exile.” We may chart the terms as follows:

	Location	
Personal Relationship	<i>Proprium</i> <i>Alienum</i>	<i>Peregrinatio</i> <i>Exsilium</i>

4. Because one is in a foreign but not an alien setting, there can be the positive movement of *walking by faith*, and all of life can become the vehicle by which to reach the goal. God is *distant*, to be sure, from those who are in exile, and yet has also *prepared a way* (*En. Ps.* 66, 5).²⁴ The way is Christ, more precisely, his humanity, which is the way to his divinity: through Christ, to Christ.

[The Word] became man so that one who is God might be the man, the mediator between men and God (I Tim 2:5), and reconcile those who were far away, and join those who were separate, and call back the alienated, and lead back the sojourners (*En. Ps.* 100, 3).

24. Augustine usually speaks of the way that definitely leads to the goal as a *via*, while an *iter* is more neutral, needing to be qualified as good or bad, erratic or fatiguing. He does not use the word “itinerarium,” although it was beginning to be used during the fourth century. He does use “viator,” but still metaphorically, not yet as a technical term for the Christian *peregrinus*. The theme of “la patrie bienheureuse et la voie pour y parvenir” is summarized in Olivier du Roy, *L’Intelligence de la foi en la Trinité selon saint Augustin. Genèse de sa théologie trinitaire jusqu’en 391* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1966), pp. 96-106.

Walk through the man, and come to God. You go through him, you go to him. ... I do not say, "Seek the way." The way itself has come to you. Rise and walk (*Serm.* 141, 4).

If the way is lacking or unknown, what good is it to know the goal? There is only one way, guarded against all errors, when the same one is both God and man. Where you go is God, the way you go is the man [*quo itur Deus, qua itur homo*] (*De civ. Dei* XI, 2).

The walking begins with faith and is completed by love, *caritas*, poured into human hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). The gift of the Spirit is an *arrha*, a “down payment” or “earnest” (II Cor 1:22, 5:5), already the beginning of what is sought.²⁵

What did Christ promise? Eternal life, as an earnest of which he gave the Holy Spirit. Eternal life is possessed by those who already dwell there; the earnest consoles those who are still away from home. ... We already have the earnest; but we thirst for the fountain from which it flows (*Serm.* 378).

Because it is a beginning, even to be a *viator* is to have a certain kind of “perfection.”

There is perfection and perfection. One can be perfect in traveling but not yet be perfect in arriving. The perfect traveler starts well, walks well, holds to the way, but, while still a traveler, does not yet arrive at the goal. And yet the traveler who walks, and walks on the way, is walking somewhere, trying to arrive at some destination (*Serm. Den.* 18,2-3).

There are other complexities. In walking a “way,” one wills many things; but some of them are willed for the sake of other things which are sought for their own sake. Therefore Augustine says in a striking passage:

the joining of these right acts of willing constitutes, as it were, a path (*iter*) for those who are ascending toward beatitude, a path traveled by definite steps. ... Blessed are those who, by their acts and their character, sing the Songs of Ascent (*De Trin.* XI, vi, 10).

25. The Phoenician and Hebrew word (*arrabon*) was taken into Greek (*ἀρρωσθών*) and then into Latin (usually *arrha*), and via Old French has become transformed into the English word “earnest.” At one point in a sermon delivered in Carthage (*Serm.* 23, 8-9) Augustine comments that those in the congregation who have understood the difference between a “pledge” (*pignus*), which is returned when the promise is fulfilled, and an “earnest” (*arrha*), which is part of the fulfillment, are explaining it to the others—not surprising in a commercial city with Phoenician roots! While we are mentioning commercial metaphors, Augustine spoke of almsgiving as transferring one’s treasures to heaven (Mt 6:19-21), and the poor as the porters (*laturarii*, a vernacular rather than literary term) who carry it to a different bank and enable one to “migrate” to a new home (*Serm.* 18, 4; 25A, 4; 38, 9; 60, 8; 107A, 2; 114A, 4).

The point is made with a bit more philosophical rigor in an earlier passage (*De ver. rel.* lii, 101 - lii, 103): curiosity seeks knowledge, pride seeks power (or ease of acting), desire seeks rest; but all of these are fulfilled in God, and what they most love in this life can be perfected only after this life.

Even when the journey is under way, with awareness of the goal and the beginning of what is sought, it is beset with hazards. Journeys can be by land or by sea, and in Augustine's imagery the land journey seems safer and more secure; it is on solid ground, after all, and human agency is involved, although the achievement is "not of the one who wills, or the one who runs, but of God's mercy" (Rom 9:16), a walking "not after the flesh but after the Spirit" (Rom 8:4). A sea journey, by contrast, connotes danger and insecurity. In one passage Augustine suggests that *all* who dwell in this world are travelers tossed by waves and storms, and Christians are different only in wanting to return to the homeland and sailing in the ship of the church, which, while storm-tossed, is the only way of salvation, with sailors who have abandoned human means and pour out their voices to God (*Serm.* 75, 4). It is only by the "wood of the cross" (usually *lignum crucis*) that the church is kept from being submerged in stormy seas, and even then by a narrow margin and with great difficulty (*Conf.* I, xvi, 25; *In Io. Ev* tr. 2, 2-4; *De cat. rud.* xix, 32; *Serm.* 75, 2; *Serm.* 252, 2). The sea is a dangerous place, described this way in a classic passage (*En. Ps.* 64, 9):

The sea is a figure of this age, bitter with salt, tossed by gales, where, by their perverse and depraved desires, people have become like fish devouring each other. Look at this evil sea, this bitter sea raging with waves; see the kind of people with which it is filled. Who wants an inheritance without the death of another? Who wants gain without another's loss? How many seek to climb through the fall of others! How many want others to sell their goods so that they may buy them! How they oppress each other and devour those they can! And when a bigger fish has devoured a smaller one, it is devoured by a still larger one.

Augustine speaks of the "waves of temptation" which beat upon him from childhood on (*Conf.* I, xi, 18), the "torrent of custom" which sweeps the children of Eve into the vast sea (*Conf.* I, xvi, 25), the "bitter sea" of humanity (*Conf.* XIII, xvii, 20) tossing with conflicting desires.

Even the journey by land is beset with difficulties. Perhaps one can see the homeland in the distance, from a wooded hilltop, but not see the way and be confronted by sinister beasts (*Conf.* VII, xxi, 27)—is this the source of the opening canto of Dante's *Commedia*? Because of the power of evil one must be led there, like the Magi, "by another way" (*De Trin.* IV, xii, 15) which cannot be blocked by the powers of evil—is this the source of Dante's "altro viaggio," the way of Inferno and Purgatorio and Paradiso?

Despite the strength of their conviction about the goal and the way that leads to it, Christians still understood their *peregrinatio* as "sojourning," not yet as

“pilgrimage” in the medieval and modern sense. To be sure, they were beginning to make journeys to Jerusalem and other holy places,²⁶ and founding *xenodocheia* for the assistance of travelers and the poor.²⁷ But Augustine was uninfluenced by these first beginnings of “pilgrimage.” In North Africa the Christians looked more like liminal outsiders. They celebrated the martyrs on their “birth days”—the days of their leaving earth for heaven—at their tombs, made more impressive during the fourth century with basilicas which could hold large crowds.²⁸ No wonder Julian the Apostate ridiculed the “Galilaean” for deserting the celestial deities and worshiping corpses and relics (*Ep.* 52 [114] to the Bostrians). The Christian community gathered *en masse* at the tombs of the martyrs, a different locale than the cathedral; on these occasions they were especially reminded of the transiency of life, and their social differences were left behind in the city.²⁹ But there was not yet anything like a religious procession to these places, since it would have looked too much like the pagan *pompa* which Christians had renounced at baptism.³⁰

In “liminal” rituals, as Turner describes them, the conventional “structure” of society is negated in the “anti-structure” of *communitas*, breaking free, in a socially approved way, from the differentiations and inequalities of everyday life.³¹ This *communitas* fills several different roles: it makes the usual inequalities bearable by giving occasional opportunities for status reversal; it makes “structure” serve the common good by reminding those who have power and privilege that they are not essentially different from the others and that they have responsibilities for all³²; it even creates new demands, for *communitas* itself may be institutionalized in

26. Kötting, *Peregrinatio Religiosa*, pp. 80ff.; Marcel Simon, “Les pèlerinages dans l’antiquité chrétienne,” *Les pèlerinages de l’antiquité biblique et classique à l’occident médiévale* (Paris: Geuthner, 1973), pp. 97-115; E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire AD 312-460* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982); Pierre Maraval, *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d’Orient. Histoire et géographie des origines à la conquête arabe* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985); Robert L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 101-25.

27. Kötting, pp. 376ff.

28. The customs of the time, and Augustine’s attitudes to them, are summarized in Fredrik van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, transl. by Brian Battershaw and G. R. Lamb (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), pp. 471-526.

29. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 42.

30. Kötting, *Peregrinatio religiosa*, pp. 386-88.

31. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishers, 1969), pp. 106-11.

32. V. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 102-105, 177-78.

highly ritualized ways.³³ The Christian Church in Augustine's day played all these roles. It had begun as an exception to, a rebellion against, the religion and culture and even the politics of the Roman Empire. It exhorted high officials to see their office as a responsibility. But it also offered a new set of ritualized practices which, even while pointing above themselves, could seem to many to be just as conventional and oppressive as the old ones.

But a difference remained. The city of God, Augustine pointed out, is founded upon faith; Rome, the earthly city *par excellence*, was first founded and only later gave divine honors to Romulus (*De civ. Dei* XXII, 6). This may explain why the pagans were fighting a losing battle against Christianity. François Paschoud notes that the traditional rituals of the civic cult must be performed by officials and be publicly financed, for their whole purpose was to guarantee the health of the state; Christianity, however, had grown without state support, had a self-sustaining life of its own, and could live with a "secular state."³⁴ It taught people to transcend their earthly community, looking not only *above* it to a God who was not a function of the earthly city, but *within* themselves to a new freedom that enabled them to dissent from its religious practices and become *peregrini*, and *below* it to the poor, the other group of *peregrini* who also became part of the entourage of the Christian bishops.³⁵

III. THE ONTOLOGICAL JOURNEY

We have been looking at the Christian journey, the way which leads to fulfillment. But Augustine knew that it is possible to lose the way, even to lose orientation or any sense of the goal. As a moralist, then, he must inquire into the causes of wandering away, and he finds them in the multiplicity of *images*—sensory, intellectual, cultural—that encounter human beings and the conflicting *impulses* that arise within them. As a philosopher he must go even farther and inquire into the very nature of finite existence, for it is the presupposition, the condition of possibility, for the bad as well as the good things that can happen in the journey of life. As a consequence he develops what we might call a *metaphysics of travel*.

Augustine understood not only corporeal but spiritual things to be intrinsically formless, changeable, fluid—to be, in a word, rooted in "matter," awaiting formation by God.³⁶

33. V. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 137-38.

34. François Paschoud, "L'Intolérance chrétienne vue et jugée par les païens," *Il cristianesimo nella storia*, 11 (1990), pp. 554, 565, 574; reprinted in *L'intolleranza cristiana*, pp. 161, 174, 185.

35. Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp. 91-103.

36. The metaphor of soul as "matter" is found in Plotinus (*Enneades* V, i, 7; V, ix, 4),

The “fluidity” of finite spirit has at least three basic connotations: (1) *indeterminacy* as life “of some sort,” characterized only by its “wandering liquidity”³⁷; (2) *potentiality*, the capacity for something better, since it is “not yet” what it can become; and (3) *corruptibility*, whose lack (its darkness and fluidity) begins only a *descriptive difference*, a “non-culpable darkness” (*De civ. Dei* XI, 20), but may also issue in acts of evil.

Thus finite being—let us use the term “existence,” since already in Augustine *existentia* is set in contrast to God as *esse* or *essentia*—is intrinsically unstable. The world “ex-sists” in its otherness from God; it has “being” in its returning toward God or being more like God. Thus existence is the principle of dispersiveness and alterity, keeping things both *alter*, mutually other, and *aliter*, existing “otherwise” from one moment to another (*Conf.* VII, xx, 26). This is not tragic. If there is to be a world distinct from God it must exist *differently* than God. It has its own minimal degree of being and goodness—but only minimal; matter is a *nihil aliquid*, an *est non est* (*Conf.* XII, vi, 6); as Plato had said, it is “always becoming and never is” (*Timaeus* 28A).

The Platonist tradition was fascinated with Plato’s discussion (*Politicus* 269C–274D) of the possibility that the World Soul might spontaneously reverse its actions and the world, “storm-tossed,” sink into the “infinite region of dissimilarity,” except that the supreme God puts a hand to the tiller and restores the delicate balance of the cosmos.³⁸ This is “cosmic anxiety” with a vengeance, a sense that there is contingency and fallibility at the very root of things, analogous to our contemporary anxiety that the planet as a whole is threatened with nuclear or ecological disaster, but with this difference: we ourselves have now become the unstable World Soul. It is not surprising, then, that the Platonists can describe the world as a storm-tossed sea, and Augustine follows the tradition.

With all its insecurity, there is an aesthetic grandeur about the human situation. Augustine notes a characteristic of human behavior and of countless narratives,

who ultimately got it from Aristotle, for whom sensory and intelligent life has no nature of its own but is susceptible of being formed by what it experiences (*De anima*, III, 4–8 [429a9–432a10]). This same understanding of soul as indeterminate life, not “essentially” good or bad but capable of both, is found in Origen (*De principiis* I, v, 3; III, iv, 2). I have traced Augustine’s use of this motif in “Nature and Grace in Augustine’s Expositions of Genesis I, 1–5,” *Recherches Augustiniennes* V (1968), 95–137, and *Augustine the Theologian* (London: Burns & Oates, 1970), pp. 197–223.

37. Augustine uses expressions like “qualiscumque vita” (*Conf.* XIII, iii, 4), or, more ambiguously, “vagabunda deliquia” (*Conf.* XIII, v, 6). “Deliquia” was rarely used by Latin writers. It had overtones of “flowing down,” “deliquescence,” and “delight” (*deliquiae = deliciae*); see the commentary on the *Confessions* by James J. O’Donnell, III, 351 for references to the scholarly discussion.

38. I have explored this in “‘Regio Dissimilitudinis’ in the Christian Tradition and Its Context in Late Greek Philosophy,” *Augustinian Studies* VI (1975), 153–179.

Biblical as well as secular: we rejoice more when there has been danger and loss than when things have remained stable and calm; we impose on others a period of testing lest they win the prize too cheaply; we even impose pain or privation on ourselves so that the pleasure at the end will be greater (*Conf.* VIII, iii, 6-7). We could go on to mention the lurid curiosity about violence and injury, the prurient interest in sex, which are so often criticized in the mass media and popular culture and yet are so successful in the marketplace. We are fascinated with the agonies, the temptations, the excesses of others, because we know that these are human possibilities; we wonder how we would react under similar circumstances, and we want to live them vicariously. At such moments Augustine adopts the Stoic view of evil: the tensions and reversals, the dark places along with the light, make finite life more “interesting,” aesthetically more complex.

The world in which we live is “interesting,” too, filled with dangerous things. We are like visitors to a forge, he says, surrounded by unknown implements which can hurt us, and yet they are indispensable to the smith’s work (*De Gen. c. Man.* I, xvi, 25-26); we complain about buzzing flies and crawling insects, when we should appreciate their intricacy and the balance of the ecosystem, entirely apart from our own convenience (*De civ.* XII, 4). In passages like these, Augustine begins to sound like the modern explorer, the natural scientist, the tourist who can take an interest in the journey and the colorful sights along the way. Does Pliny’s *Natural History* tell about pygmies or dog-headed people or “shadow-footed” people? If they are descendants of Adam and Eve they are our brothers and sisters, and share the same possibility of salvation that Christians have (*De civ. Dei* XVI, 8). Are there fantastic “life forms” like those that appear in the cantina scene in *Star Wars*? Augustine would say that they also share the same Creator and the same intellectual and spiritual possibilities as earthlings.

He also makes a place for open-ended searching for the human good. As a philosopher he affirmed the dictum that “we all seek happiness.”³⁹ But we do not know *in what* happiness consists, and as a philosopher he goes through all the possibilities; somewhat facetiously he mentions that Varro found 288 permutations and combinations in views of the human good (*De civ. Dei* XIX, 1-4). Of course Augustine is convinced that true happiness is found only in the contemplation of God, for only there can we find that which is *worth having*, can be *attained*, and with *security*. But he acknowledged at least the theoretical possibility of alternatives.⁴⁰ He also entertained the hypothesis that, even if one cannot *attain* the truth, one can be happy in *seeking* it (*C. Ac.* I, iii, 7). In the same spirit, moderns have loved Lessing’s statement,

39. See n. 3, above.

40. Most of these are explored in Gerard O’Daly, *Augustine’s Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 163-64, 166-67, 181, 184.

If God held in his right hand all truth, and in his left the always changing quest for truth, although with the proviso that I would always lose my way, and told me, "Choose!" I would fall humbly on the left, saying, "Father, give this one; the pure truth is for you alone!"⁴¹

Even if there were *no* hope of achieving happiness, we would prefer the pain of conflict rather than be dominated by vice (*De civ. Dei* XXI, 15). Or perhaps there is a *diversity* of highest goods, appropriate to different individuals; but even then there would be a shared wisdom, a shared insight into the diversity (*De lib. arb.* II, ix, 26-27). In moods like these, Augustine might agree with Aristotle and his modern commentators, who suggest that, "just as one swallow does not make a summer," the good and happy life is one which is varied and balanced, self-chosen and self-executed.⁴²

To him, of course, these are only theoretical possibilities, for he has abandoned this merely human wisdom and dedicated himself to God, on the principle that one finds one's life only by losing it. And yet he never forgets the temporality of everything, cosmic or human or angelic. Whatever stability is gained, even in contemplation of the unchanging God, it only "restrains" but does not cancel the intrinsic instability of the human spirit (*Conf.* XII, ix, 9), which remains temporal in its nature, rising above time only psychologically or existentially, no longer desiring something different in the future or regretting what it has lost to the past (*Conf.* XIII, xi, 12; xv, 19).

Augustine could never have hoped, furthermore, for a perfectly satisfying state of affairs at the end of human history, for life would soon lose its interest and time would still go on. He would understand John Stuart Mill, who, at a time of despair,

put the question directly to myself, "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great

41. Gotthold Lessing, "Eine Duplik," in *Werke* (München: Hanser, 1979), VIII, 33. The Romantic and Idealist transformation of Platonist and Christian travel metaphors is discussed in M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), and in "Spiritual Travelers in Western Literature," in B. Magliocchetti and A. Verna, eds., *The Motif of the Journey in Nineteenth-Century Italian Literature* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994), pp. 1-20.

42. Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* I, 7 (1098a17-1098b7). An influential modern essay, arguing in favor of an "inclusive" rather than a "dominant" end, is W. F. R. Hardie, "The Final Good in Aristotle's *Ethics*," *Philosophy* 40 (1965), 277-95, reprinted in *Aristotle: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by J. M. E. Moravcsik (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 297-322.

joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!"⁴³

One had to be careful of this even in loving God. Origen suggested that the reason for the fall of finite spirits was exhaustion or satiation or boredom (*κόρος*) in contemplating God (*De princ.* II, ix, 2).⁴⁴ The modern world is convinced that it would indeed be boring. Kant liked to quote verses from Albrecht von Haller,

... die Welt mit ihren Mängeln
 Is besser als das Heer von willenlosen Engeln
 (The world with all its failings still
 Is better than a host of angels void of will).⁴⁵

But Origen already suggested an alternative: maintain the eagerness of loving desire (*De princ.* I, iii, 8; II, vi, 3-5; ix, 2; xi, 7). Gregory of Nyssa, in order to avoid any suggestion that God might be finite or the vision of God uninteresting, stressed what is still lacking, the "darkness" that remains even in the presence of divine light, and thus the need for infinite progress (*Vita Moysis*, ii, 219-255). Augustine similarly ends his long work on the Trinity by advising us to seek the incomprehensible, and to continue as long as we make progress in the inquiry, for "it is sought in order that it be found more sweetly, and found in order that it be sought more eagerly" (*De Trin.* XV, ii, 2).

Augustine's age was a limited one, culturally and geographically; and bureaucracy from within and barbarians from without were steadily narrowing its possibilities. And yet he knew the infinitude of the human spirit, restlessly moving forward and outward, looking within and outside and above itself for orientation and for fulfillment, hastening on, capable of change for the better—and for the worse. Despite the limitations of his world, and perhaps because of them, he encouraged his contemporaries not to be premature when they felt the thrill of discovery and fulfillment. In that same spirit he gave permission to later centuries—and to ourselves—to broaden our horizons and continue venturing forth.

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43. John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1924), p. 113.

44. Marguerite Harl, "Recherches sur l'origénisme d'Origène: la 'satieté' (*κόρος*) de la contemplation comme motif de la chute des âmes," *Studia Patristica* 8: *Texte und Untersuchungen*, 93 (1966), 373-405, shows that this was not Origen's own view, and later accusations came in part from changes in the connotations of *κόρος*.

45. Albrecht von Haller, "Über dem Ursprung des Übels," II, 33-34, quoted in Kant's *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* and *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, in the "Akademie-Ausgabe," *Immanuel Kant's Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. von der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Reimer, 1900-1955), VI, 65n. and 397n. The translation is from *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, transl. by Th. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 58n.