

VEILED AND UNVEILED BEAUTY: THE ROLE OF THE IMAGINATION IN AUGUSTINE'S ESTHETICS

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The article addresses the tension between two different approaches to Augustine's esthetics: a contemplative esthetics of divine beauty and an incarnate esthetics of created beauty. An examination of Augustine's theory of the imagination demonstrates the complementary nature of these two approaches. Contemporary theorists (such as Robert J. O'Connell and Carol Harrison) fail to provide an adequate account of Augustine's esthetics because they adopt one approach at the expense of the other.

THE TENSION INHERENT IN Augustine's Christian Platonism continues to perplex admirers of his works despite efforts by scholars to resolve it. This problem is still the case today regarding Augustine's treatment of what has come to be known as esthetics. Underlying his recognition of the importance of beauty in the quest for wisdom is an understanding of the role that the imagination plays in this quest, sometimes for ill, sometimes for good. Augustine's frequent use of images and his reliance on Scripture as the revealed word of God place the imagination at the crossroads of salvation.

To grasp the significance of the imagination for appraising Augustine's ambiguous response to beauty, Carol Harrison's criticisms of Robert J. O'Connell provide a useful point of departure. In her *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of St. Augustine*, Harrison sets out to correct the inadequacy of O'Connell's approach to Augustine's esthetics. For Harrison, O'Connell's "disincarnate epistemology" represents an otherworldly view of Christianity that overlooks the beauty of creation. She attributes this excessive negativity toward creation to O'Connell's controversial doctrine

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of the soul's preexistence. This doctrine, she insists, vitiates his entire account of Augustine's esthetics.¹ Not only does it imply an unduly Platonized idea of the soul's fall from, and return to, goodness that is fundamentally at odds with Christianity, but it has also been soundly refuted by eminent scholars. The alternative to this distorted view of Christian esthetics is, from Harrison's perspective, an "incarnational esthetics" that recognizes the beauty of creation and draws its inspiration from revelation instead of Platonism.

While Harrison's criticisms of O'Connell appropriately serve to broaden the horizon of Augustine's esthetics, O'Connell's emphasis on the philosophical underpinnings of Augustine's early esthetics complements Harrison's theological reworking of Augustine's thought. Indeed, it points not only to the difficulty Augustine experienced in reconciling pagan insights with his own understanding of Christianity, but also to the tension inherent in the Christian command to love God and neighbor. For God can be loved for his own sake as well as through the love of others. It is this twofold movement implicit in the nature of Christian love—the mystical longing for absolute Beauty that transcends space and time (vertical) and the natural attraction to created beauty in the world of space and time (horizontal)—that gives rise to the tension in Augustine's esthetics. Both authors are aware of the complexity of the soul's response to beauty, yet neither examines the role of the imagination in accounting for this response.

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which the tension inherent in Augustine's esthetics has its roots in the way in which Augustine conceives the nature of the imagination. Instead of approaching Augustine's esthetics simply from the perspective of human nature, as O'Connell does, my study enlarges that perspective to include a consideration of how the mind functions. By focusing on this concern, it will be possible to clarify the source of the disparate understandings of Augustine's esthetics.

To accomplish this task, I consider Augustine's conception of the imagination by concentrating on three concerns. The first centers on the nature of Augustine's theory of the imagination, especially in regard to the distinction he makes between two types of memory images: *phantasia* and *phantasma*.² The second revolves around Augustine's use of these terms in his texts. Here it will become apparent that Augustine's doctrine of the Fall,

¹ Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 32–35, 60–61. On this point, see Robert J. O'Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1978) 44–45, 113, 136, 140–41.

² For an analysis of the use of these terms in classical and medieval thought see Murray Wright Bundy, *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Medieval Thought* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1928).

not O'Connell's particular interpretation of it, lies at the heart of the Platonized theory of Christian esthetics that Harrison rejects. Here, too, the limitations of O'Connell's perspective and the need to provide a more positive account of created beauty will become evident. My third concern focuses on the juxtaposition of a "contemplative esthetics" of ascent and an "incarnational esthetics" of everyday experience.³ In summing up the implications of this study as a whole, my final section reflects on the tension that arises between these two different types of esthetics and assesses how coherent Augustine's conception of the imagination is.

AUGUSTINE'S CONCEPTION OF THE IMAGINATION

Augustine's conception of the imagination is inextricably bound up with his understanding of memory and the role that memory plays in storing, reproducing, and arranging the images generated in it on the basis of sense experience. Because the images found in memory have an empirical origin, Augustine's thinking in regard to the imagination reflects the emphasis on empiricism associated with Aristotelian, Stoic, and Neoplatonic habits of thought. In this sense, memory refers to the mind's ability to retain information gathered on the basis of sense experience and to restore it to consciousness if need be, not to the process of recollecting the eternal, incorporeal notions of logic, number, and goodness essential to the pursuit of wisdom.⁴

Augustine adopts an empirical outlook in the *De Trinitate* at the stage in his argument where he begins his inquiry into the image of God in human nature. Initially he points out the similarity between the outer man and the inner man. Then, on the basis of this comparison, he clarifies its implications for the mind's inner operation. Just as an outer trinity of object, sight, and intention is needed to account for the conformation of the senses to objects in the sensible world, so, too, another trinity of memory, internal sight, and will is necessary for the recollection of the information derived from sense experience and stored in memory.

³ The term "contemplative esthetics" is my own. O'Connell refers to Augustine's use of two different types of esthetics in his early works: an esthetic of antithetical totality and an ascensional esthetics (*Art and the Christian Intelligence* 22). The latter notion dominates O'Connell's thought in this work. For a recent analysis of the role of contemplation in Augustine's thought, see John Peter Kenney, *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine: Rereading the Confessions* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁴ See Augustine's comments on memory in *Confessions* 10.8–10.26, in *S. Aurelii Augustini Confessionum: Libri XIII*, ed. Martinus Skutella (hereafter cited as Skutella) (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1981) 217–37 and *Epistula 7* (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina [hereafter CSEL] 34/1.13–18).

The two trinities differ, however, in that the latter is derived from the former and therefore exhibits more inwardness than its progenitor does. The distinction between these two trinities is crucial to Augustine's understanding of the terms *phantasia* and *phantasma*.⁵ At the level of initial contact with the external world, the soul's vision (*visio*) of the objects around it consists solely in sensation. But this vision, limited though it may be, leaves a likeness of itself in the memory. When the thinking subject subsequently turns his or her attention to this memory image and recalls it to mind, the result is the internal vision that Augustine associates with cogitation or imagination.⁶ By differentiating these two types of vision in this manner, Augustine is able to discern the difference between sensing and fantasizing. His use of the term *phantasia* for fantasy or imagination is of considerable worth to his understanding of the soul's inner life, because it indicates the existence of a higher empirical function of the mind than sensation.

On some occasions, Augustine clearly distinguishes *phantasia* from *phantasma*; on others, he appears to use them interchangeably. In *De musica* 6.11.32, for example, he insists on using the Greek expressions for these terms in his works since he cannot find their equivalents in Latin. And yet, in this same passage, the different meanings attached to these expressions remain quite distinct in his mind. For unlike *phantasia*, which represents a simple memory image in the mind, *phantasma* refers to the image of an image. While the former is found in memory, the latter is the product of mental labor, more often than not perverse in nature and burdening the mind with the weight of its own vacuity.⁷ As second order memory images voluntarily induced in the mind, *phantasmata* can impair the proper functioning of the intellect and hamper its efforts to find truth.

In *De Trinitate* Augustine distinguishes *phantasia* and *phantasma* in a similar fashion, this time by appealing to a hypothetical situation in which he describes two cities, Carthage and Alexandria. To describe Carthage,

⁵ Gerald J. P. O'Daly suggests in his *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987) 106 that, for Augustine, these terms originate in Stoic thought. Compare Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation* 165 n. 145. In *Soliloquia* 2.20.34 (CSEL 89. 93–94) Augustine associates the Latin verb *cogito* with the imagination along with its memory images, *phantasia* and *phantasma*. He makes a similar correlation between cogitating and imagining in *Confessions* 10.11 (Skutella 222–23).

⁶ *De Trinitate* (hereafter *Trin.*) 11.1.1–11.2.6 (CCL 50.333–41); 11.7.11 (CCL 50.347). See Bundy, *The Theory of the Imagination* 158–59.

⁷ *De musica* 6.11.32 (PL 32.1180b–1181a). See F. –J. Thonnard's comments on the *De musica* on the distinction between *phantasia* and *phantasma* in *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, ed. Guy Finaert and F. –J. Thonnard, Bibliothèque augustinienne 7 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1947) 523–24 n. 84.

Augustine inquires of himself to determine whether or not he can call to mind the image of a city he once experienced by means of sense perception. When he discovers that he can indeed recall such an experience, he realizes that this recollection is possible, because a replica of that experience remains in his mind in the form of an image of Carthage. Augustine calls this image a *phantasia*.⁸

In the case of Alexandria, however, Augustine finds just the opposite. He cannot recollect an image of this city as he can of Carthage, because he has never seen Alexandria. Despite the lack of experience, Augustine recognizes that it is possible to picture Alexandria in his mind, or imagine what it must be like, based on a credible report from someone else who has experienced it. But beyond the simple belief that Alexandria must be like the picture he draws in his mind, Augustine cannot go. Without any experience of the actual city of Alexandria, he must rely solely on opinion, the supposition that Alexandria really *is* like the picture that exists in his mind, an image whose accuracy even he himself doubts. The questionable status of this image prompts him to characterize it as a *phantasma*.⁹

Augustine reiterates the same point elsewhere in *De Trinitate* with respect to the contents of Scripture. Here, too, he is conscious of the mind's penchant to form images whenever it comes into contact with empirical reality. When reading Scripture, many people form mental images of what the bodily appearance of Christ looks like, one this way, and the other that way; yet only one image accurately portrays his physical appearance. No one can claim sole possession of this image, because no one since the first century has seen him, and no one from that time has left a reliable portrait of him. The multiple portraits of Christ produced in time are simply a matter of human conjecture, the depiction of the incarnate face no more than a *phantasma*.¹⁰

Consequently, Augustine differentiates two types of belief, faith and opinion, while at the same time distinguishing between belief and empirical knowledge. For it is one thing to believe that Christ is the Son of God born of the Virgin Mary and another to surmise that in his incarnate life he had a beard, long hair, and brown eyes. The former pertains to the stability of faith, the latter to the instability of opinion. Beyond belief, empirical knowledge of Christ remains conceptual in nature, confined to generic notions, such as virginity and birth, derived from sense experience, or

⁸ *Trin.* 8.6.9 (CCL 50.281). Compare his comments at 11.3.6 (CCL 50.340); 11.4.7 (CCL 50.341–42); 11.7.11 (CCL 50.347).

⁹ *Trin.* 8.6.9 (CCL 50.281–82). Compare Augustine's remarks in *Contra Faustum* 20.7–20.8 (CSEL 25/1.541–44); *Contra epistulam Manichaei quam vocant Fundamenti* 18 (CSEL 25.215).

¹⁰ *Trin.* 8.4.7 (CCL 50.275–76). Compare *Epistula* 169.2.7 (CSEL 44.616–17).

evocative in expression in the way in which a proper name designates a divine mystery.¹¹

Thus far, the difference between *phantasia* and *phantasma* appears to be fairly straightforward. *Phantasia* refers to a simple memory image generated by the mind's internal vision, whereas *phantasma* designates the product of the mind's activity in arranging and rearranging into a coherent whole the disparate images stored in memory.¹² The dubious correspondence between a *phantasma* and external reality also suggests that it is distinct from a *phantasia*.

Sometimes, however, Augustine suggests otherwise. In commenting on a passage from the *De Trinitate* in the *Retractationes*, he refers to the memory image of a four-footed bird as a *phantasia* instead of a *phantasma*. The image of a four-footed bird, however, is a composite image, as it requires the juxtaposition of two different memory images: a four-footed creature, such as a horse, and a bird.¹³

On other occasions, Augustine employs the term *phantasia* negatively, as he does for the most part with *phantasma*. In one passage, for example, he associates the Manichean conception of the kingdom of heaven with the notion of *phantasia*.¹⁴ In another, he aligns *phantasia* with the mistaken notion of souls engaging in various activities in heaven before their union with the body.¹⁵ As in the case of *phantasmata*, *phantasiai* can impede the mind's contemplative vision of God. They, too, must be silenced in the upward ascent toward God; otherwise, the flash of vision experienced at Ostia is merely an illusion and the mind forever deluded by a multitude of images that darkens the understanding and turns its attention toward the sensible world. Despite anomalies such as these, the distinction between simple images and more complex fantasies that require the work of the imagination remains firmly rooted in Augustine's thought.

In summing up these initial remarks on the nature of Augustine's theory of the imagination, it is important to note Augustine's emphasis on the close relation between the imagination and sense experience. In this respect, the imagination constitutes the locus of the mind's struggle to liberate itself from the ill effects of memory images that orient it rather toward the world than God. And if the imagination *is* central to this struggle, as Augustine would have his reader believe, then it poses a threat—though it

¹¹ *Trin.* 8.5.7–8.5.8 (CCL 50.276–79).

¹² Note the reference to a faculty of the imagination at *De vera religione* 20.40 (CCL 32.212): “Nihil enim est corporis, quod non uel unum uisum possit innumerabiliter cogitari, uel in paruo spatio uisum possit eadem imaginandi facultate per infinita diffundi.”

¹³ *Retractationes* 2.15 (CCL 57.101–2).

¹⁴ *Contra Faustum* 8.2 (CSEL 25/1.307).

¹⁵ *Sermo* 165.5.6 (PL 38.905a–906b). See also *De musica* 6.6.39 (PL 32.1184b).

need not do so—to the love of God and neighbor that the beauty inherent in them evokes.

Thus, like the Stoics before him, Augustine affirms the moral neutrality of memory images per se even as he holds human beings responsible for their use of images that lie silently in memory, biding their time and awaiting the appropriate moment to emerge into the full light of consciousness.¹⁶ It is to the doctrinal and ethical implications of these images that I now turn to try to discern more clearly the limitations of the imagination in the pursuit of divine beauty.

THE PROBLEM WITH *PHANTASMATA*

Augustine uses the term *phantasma* in a decidedly negative fashion whenever doctrinal and ethical considerations are at issue. The negative connotations of the term appear largely in three distinct, yet related contexts. Each reveals the difficulty the mind has in resisting *phantasmata* on account of its fallen condition, whether in relation to seeking God above creation or finding God in it through the love of Christ, the human mind, other human beings, or the natural world.¹⁷ One of Augustine's most striking uses of this term occurs in the context of his refutation of heretics. *Phantasmata* are also to blame for idolatry and the devil's deceitfulness in his interactions with human beings as well as for contaminating the human heart with false images of Christ's life and death.

In the case of heretics, Augustine finds that not only do *phantasmata* account for the inability to comprehend the fundamental truth of Christianity, but also that they cause the inner and outer turbulence of the human spirit.¹⁸ A familiar refrain in Augustine's refutation of the Manicheans is their inability to differentiate the true nature of God and the soul from their vain imaginations (or false conceptions) regarding these matters.¹⁹ Augustine characterizes these vain imaginations in a number of ways that sheds more light on what hinders the human mind's quest for truth. For despite the vainness of their imaginations, heretics nevertheless think that they have found the truth.

According to Augustine, their error consists precisely in mistaking opinion for truth. Instead of grounding their beliefs on empirical reality and the memory images derived from it, they speculate or conjure up in their own minds images that have no bearing whatsoever on reality. They then attrib-

¹⁶ Bundy, *The Theory of the Imagination* 162–65. Compare *Trin.* 11.10.17 (CCL 50.353–55).

¹⁷ O'Connell recognizes this fact (*Art and Christian Intelligence* 40–41, 58–59, 71).

¹⁸ See, e.g., *De musica* 6.13.42 (PL 32.1185a) and *De vera religione* 34.64–35.65 (CCL 32.228–30).

¹⁹ *Contra Felicem* 2.3 (CSEL 25/2.831); *Confessions* 3.6–3.7 (Skutella 42–47).

ute these images to divine entities, such as God and soul, as if they were real.²⁰ As a result, their speculations are empty or devoid of reality because they have no basis in human experience. On the level of thought, Augustine traces the roots of this emptiness to the undisciplined manner in which the mind gathers together and sorts out memory images in the process of recollection. The falseness inherent in the complex of memory images that emerges from this activity arises in conjunction with the fraudulent mixture of images that the mind constructs out of the corporeal shapes that first appear to the bodily senses.

This lack of mental discipline, however, has more far-reaching implications, in that Augustine links it to a love of deception.²¹ In other words, heretics like the Manicheans are reluctant to seek the truth because they are mesmerized by the appearances of things. They deceive not only themselves but others. They would rather serve themselves than their Creator. In promulgating lies instead of the truth about the nature of God and the soul, let alone empirical reality, they mire themselves in the subjective pleasures of the imagination with its ties to the senses and thereby close themselves off from a true understanding of God and the soul.²² Their lack of openness to incorporeal reality reveals the extent of their carnal-mindedness or ineptitude in penetrating beyond the corporeal dimensions of space and time to a deeper, more profound awareness of an intelligible and spiritual order.²³ So deeply engrained is the love of deception in them that they can grasp neither the incorporeal nature of the power of the imagination that resides in their nature nor the difficulty involved in resisting the *phantasmata* that this power produces in them on account of their vanity.²⁴ In keeping with Augustine's understanding of his own mind prior to his conversion, their minds remain clouded by a multiplicity of *phantasmata* that obscures the truth and beauty about themselves and God, while inhibiting their reason from judging the merits of their own opinions.²⁵ In this sense, memory images weigh the mind down and frustrate its efforts to see God face to face by concealing divine beauty behind a veil of sensible images.

To convince his reader that Manichean belief constitutes nothing more than a clever assemblage of *phantasmata*, in the *Contra epistulam Mani-*

²⁰ *Contra Faustum* 5.7 (CSEL 25/1.278–279); 8.2 (CSEL 25/1.307); 20.7 (CSEL 25/1.541–42).

²¹ *Contra epistulam Manichaei* 32 (CSEL 25.233–36); *Confessions* 3.7 (Skutella 45).

²² See *Contra Faustum* 5.11 (CSEL 25/1.283–84).

²³ In *Contra epistulam Manichaei* 23 (CSEL 25.219–21) Augustine characterizes carnal men as foolish individuals “qui nondum possunt spiritualia cogitare.”

²⁴ *Contra epistulam Manichaei* 18 (CSEL 25.215).

²⁵ See, e.g., Augustine's remarks in *De vera religione* 39.72–39.73 (CCL 32. 234–35).

chaei quam vocant quam Fundamenti Augustine dissects Mani's account of the race of darkness, tracing the various components of this fanciful arrangement of memory images back to empirical reality. Mani is surely in error, Augustine insists, in thinking that the race of darkness could ever exist, because thoughts regarding creatures that inhabit darkness, such as serpents, obviously spring from facts governing the origin of animal life.²⁶ The fanciful notion of a race of darkness, therefore, is simply a concoction of Mani's imagination organizing in novel ways memory images that have their source in the empirical world.

Far from singling out the Manicheans as the reckless inventors of empty images of reality, Augustine's reduction of the Manichean faith to a thoughtless complex of *phantasmata*, or rash opinions concerning the nature of God and the soul, captures the essence of his thinking in general regarding heretics. The Manicheans are not the only group that Augustine finds incapable of reading Scripture or discerning the true nature of God and the soul on account of their carnal-mindedness. The carnality of polemicists such as Petilian, Jovinian, Julian of Eclanum, and the Arians also attest to the false ideas and fallacious arguments that arise in the human mind on account of *phantasmata*.²⁷ Insofar as carnal-minded individuals remain on the surface of things, their thinking on intelligible and spiritual realities can accommodate only sensible representations of the divine. When indulged in to excess, sensible images stupefy the mind, causing it to mistake imaginary beings for God and thereby preventing it from seeing God as he is.

In his *De agone christiano*, Augustine provides an example of the distorting effect that sensible images have on thinking. Commenting on the Trinity, he rejects the idea that Christians believe in three Gods. He charges that heretics fail to understand that the nature of God is one and selfsame. Because they are accustomed to rely on the senses in thinking about divine reality, and because the senses cannot grasp a nature that is one and selfsame, they assume that the Trinity is three separate beings instead of one. This inference seems to follow naturally on their perception of the corporeal world; for is it not the case that the Trinity is similar to the three animals that they perceive as existing separately from one another in space? And so, to them, the divine nature must be similar to corporeal nature because in each case three distinct beings exist, not just one.²⁸

Augustine uncovers the same sort of mental trickery at work in how

²⁶ *Contra epistulam Manichaei* 32 (CSEL 25.233–36). Compare *Confessions* 4.4 (Skutella 60); 4.7 (Skutella 63). See also *De vera religione* 55.108 (CCL 32.256).

²⁷ *Contra litteras Petiliani* 3.27.32 (CSEL 52.186–88); *Contra Iulianum* 1.2.4 (PL 44.643a); *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum* 3.117 (PL 45.1297).

²⁸ *De agone Christiano* 15.17 (CSEL 41.119). Compare Augustine's comment in *Contra Faustum* 20.8 (CSEL 25/1.542–44).

carnal-minded individuals think about the nature of the soul. In a passage in *De genesi ad litteram* he observes that some individuals limit their conscious awareness to sensible realities, so much so that they can only think of the soul as a bodily thing. For if they were to think of the soul in any other way, they would have to think of it as nothing at all. But they are terrified of conceiving the soul in this manner because they fear the extinction of the self.²⁹ This sort of dilemma arises whenever someone pays too much attention to *phantasmata* and thus ends up believing that they alone are real.

These examples suffice to illustrate the difficulty that *phantasmata* present for a Christian Platonist like Augustine. Because the imagination depends on the senses for the production of *phantasmata*, Augustine frequently accounts for the difference between *phantasmata* and intelligible realities in terms of antithetical metaphysical qualities. Whereas *phantasmata* presuppose a consciousness of things that are multiple, variable, and lacking in unity, intelligible realities presume just the opposite, namely, that consciousness pertains to objects that are simple, invariable, and unified.³⁰ The trouble with carnal-minded individuals is that they are so immersed in the senses that they are incapable of lifting up their minds, as Augustine would say, to a higher level of rational insight from which they could judge the proper role of these two different types of realities.

An excessive preoccupation with *phantasmata*, however, gives rise to other forms of pernicious thinking besides the invention of fables regarding the race of darkness and the use of carnal analogies bearing on the nature of God and the soul. *Phantasmata* are also at the root of idolatry. For Augustine this is certainly the case with respect to the new gods invented by heretics who follow in the pagans' footsteps. What is a new god, Augustine asks, other than an object that temporarily captivates the human imagination? Surely it is not an old god, or an eternal one, as the God of Christianity is. A new god, then, is either one or the other of two things: a stone or a *phantasma*.³¹ But since the new gods of the pagans have passed away, heretics now persist in worshipping the images that they have set up in their own hearts.³² In this respect, the latest idolaters are worse than the pagans were, because their hearts have now become the temples of *phan-*

²⁹ *De Genesi ad litteram* 10.24.40 (CSEL 28/1.327). Compare *Trin.* 10.8.11 (CCL 50.324–25).

³⁰ *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 4.9 (CCL 38.18); *De vera religione* 34.64–35.65 (CCL 32.228–30).

³¹ *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 80.13–80.14 (CCL 39.1127–30). Compare *De vera religione* 2.2 (CCL 32.187–88).

³² *Contra Faustum* 15.6 (CSEL 25/1.425–28); 20.15 (CSEL 25/1.556); 20.19

tasmata, the false gods of emptiness that conceal the only God who truly is "I am who am."

Who better represents these latest idolaters than Manicheans like Faustus and theurgists like Porphyry, both of whom enjoy a common love of emptiness induced by the devil's hidden machinations? For while Faustus's heart is intoxicated with deceptive dreams of particles of divine light streaming toward the sun, Porphyry's is filled with divine visions that result from fraudulent rites. In both instances, Augustine insists, *phantasmata* arise in the mind through the devil's contrivance, and the mind is deceived by its vanity into thinking that it can see God face to face in this life.³³ For Augustine, nothing could be more deceptive than *phantasmata*, since by their very nature they obscure the fact that the God of Christianity is a hidden God, by making it appear as if he were a visible object like the sun or an imaginary being such as an angel conjured up in a theurgic vision.

If the *phantasmata*, induced in the mind by the devil, can seduce human beings into thinking that incorporeal being is, in fact, corporeal, and consequently that incorporeal being is nonexistent, it can also delude the mind into thinking that corporeal being is a product of the imagination and equally unreal. Augustine appeals to several examples of this confused thinking in the New Testament, primarily in relation to events in Christ's life. In his sermons, Augustine recounts scenes in which not only the disciples but also ordinary people erroneously thought that the figure appearing before their eyes was merely a semblance of a human being and not the incarnate God of Christianity. Thus, the disciples were troubled because they thought that the person they saw walking on the water toward them in the boat was an apparition.³⁴ Later, they were visibly shaken by the appearance of the resurrected Christ who seemed to be a phantom rather than someone of human flesh.³⁵

Other events found in Scripture—such as the meal that Abraham prepared for the angels who visited him (Gen 18:1–10) and the meal that Martha prepared for Jesus and Lazarus (John 12), whom Christ raised from the dead—enable Augustine to confirm that the Christian Scriptures are not filled with *phantasmata*, as heretics tend to suggest.³⁶ Still, on the basis of their reading of the Gospels, the Manicheans maintained that the incar-

(CSEL 25/1.560). Compare Augustine's remarks in *De vera religione* 10.18 (CCL 32.199); 38.69 (CCL 32.232–33).

³³ *Contra Faustum* 14.11 (CSEL 25/1.411); *De civitate Dei* 10.10 (CCL 47.283–84).

³⁴ *Sermo* 75.1.1 (PL 38.474b–475a); 7.8–8.9 (PL 38.477a–478b).

³⁵ *Sermo* 116.5.5 (PL 38.659a). Regarding Christ's ascension into heaven see *In Johannis evangelium tractatus* 21.13 (CCL 36.219–20).

³⁶ *Sermo* 362.10 (PL 39.1616b–1617a); *In Johannis evangelium tractatus* 50.5 (CCL 36.435).

nate Christ was an illusion, an imaginary body conjured up by the human mind and possessing no reality whatsoever.³⁷ And Jovinian, who, contrary to Christian belief, denied that Christ's mother was a virgin, supported them in their endeavor.³⁸

In his youth Augustine too supported the Manichean illusions by succumbing to their religion. Perhaps nowhere else in his works than in the *Confessions* is his anguish over the problem of *phantasmata* so palpably visible. In scene after scene in the first eight books he admonishes his reader about the dangers of *phantasmata*, of how they enabled the Manicheans to ensnare him, and how they left him empty and panting for the true God of Christianity.³⁹ The problem with *phantasmata* is that they darken the mind with empty images of sensible reality and in so doing obscure the mind to itself, so that it can no longer see the source of all beauty beyond and in the created world, including itself. And yet, as Augustine was also to learn, it is possible to see divine beauty in this life if only in a mirror dimly (1 Cor 13:12).⁴⁰

BEAUTY AND THE IMAGINATION

In *De Trinitate* Augustine concludes that the two commandments to love God and to love neighbor are inseparable.⁴¹ The soul's movement in loving God is not just simply inward and upward toward absolute beauty, but outward as well toward created beauty. Because of this twofold movement toward God through the self and what is other than the self, human beings find themselves attracted to both absolute and natural beauty.⁴² For just as the two commandments are inseparable, so too are a contemplative esthetics of ascent and an incarnational esthetics of creation. And yet, a tension exists between the desire to transcend the confines of space and time altogether and the yearning to find completion in and through the confines of what is most familiar.

Attention to Augustine's conception of the imagination, however, provides a basis for understanding the nature of this tension and why it arises

³⁷ In *Confessions* 5.9 (Skutella 89) Augustine refers to this Manichean belief.

³⁸ *Contra Iulianum* 1.2.4 (PL 44.643a); *Sermo* 75.7.8 (PL 38.477a–478b).

³⁹ *Confessions* 3.6 (Skutella 42–45). Compare 9.3 (Skutella 183) and 12.11 (Skutella 302).

⁴⁰ *Trin.* 15.8.14 (CCL 50A.479–80); 15.23.44–15.24.44 (CCL 50A.522–23).

⁴¹ *Trin.* 8.8.12 (CCL 50.288): Qui ergo non est in lumine quid mirum si non uidet lumen, id est non uidet deum quia *in tenebris est?* Fratrem autem uidet humano uisu quo uideri deus non potest. Sed si eum quem uidet humano uisu spiritali caritate diligeret, uideret deum qui est ipsa caritas uisu interiore quo uideri potest.

⁴² On this point, O'Connell (*Art and the Christian Intelligence* 63, 83–87) and Harrison (*Beauty and Revelation* 114) seem to agree.

in his thought. Augustine recognizes that the imagination is at the crossroads of salvation because both admonitions of truth and memory images in the form of *phantasiai* and *phantasmata* enter the mind through the senses. In a fallen world the imagination can function as both an instrument of salvation and a source of perdition depending on how the will uses it. Because of this division in the will, memory images may be more or less opaque in terms of what they reveal about the nature of divine reality.⁴³

A classic example of how Augustine exploits the ambiguity of memory images occurs in the *Confessions* in how he uses the image of clouds before and after the conversion scene in Book 8. Prior to his conversion, the image of clouds functions as a reminder of just how dangerous *phantasmata* are—because they enclose the mind in the opaqueness of sensible images and prevent it from arriving at a true understanding of the nature of God and the soul.⁴⁴ In this sense, human ignorance and a perverse will weigh down the mind even as it struggles to pierce the clouds above to behold the divine light. On more than one occasion Augustine describes the futility of the struggle to climb the heights of contemplative awareness as long as hordes of *phantasmata* continue to afflict the mind's eye and the pull of evil habits continues to weaken the will.⁴⁵

After his conversion, however, Augustine uses this image to convey a different understanding of reason and the imagination. Not only is it possible for reason on rare occasions to transcend all *phantasmata* and touch the heights of contemplative awareness, but also in more ordinary times it can grasp the divine light of revealed truth shining through the clouds.⁴⁶ In so doing, Augustine makes provision for fallen humanity during this time of pilgrimage and exile by interpreting the image of clouds from the perspective of both the contemplative and the wayfarer in time. For, while the contemplative seeks to transcend *phantasmata*, the wayfarer heeds the admonition of truth and transforms his relation to memory images in time. He does this by allowing the beauty of the divine Word to illuminate his mind at the same time that it transforms his relation with others, his understanding of himself, and the meaning of the figures found in Scripture.

The contemplative's movement toward God, though always in God, who

⁴³ See *Trin.* 11.5.7 (CCL 50.343–44). Compare Harrison's acknowledgement of this ambiguity (*Beauty and Revelation* 165–66, 171, 239–43, 265–71).

⁴⁴ Compare O'Connell, *Art and Christian Intelligence* 107–8.

⁴⁵ Augustine associates the notion of *phantasmata* with the image of clouds in *Confessions* 7.1 (Skutella 124); *Trin.* 8.2.3 (CCL 50.271); 9.6.11 (CCL 50.302–3); *Sermo* 207.3 (PL 38.1084b). See also his references to *phantasmata* in the context of contemplative ascent at *Confessions* 7.17 (Skutella 146); 9.10 (Skutella 200–201); *De musica* 6.16.51 (PL 32.1189a); *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 26.2.8 (CCL 38.158); *Trin.* 8.2.3 (CCL 50.270–71).

⁴⁶ *Confessions* 11.9 (Skutella 271–72). Compare *Trin.* 15.27.50 (CCL 50A.533).

is above him, is both inward and outward. This seemingly paradoxical movement in Augustine's thought gives rise to the tension in his esthetics and leads scholars such as O'Connell and Harrison to emphasize different aspects of his works. Underlying this difference are two disparate philosophical impulses that have their roots in the Neoplatonic effort to account for beauty by combining elements of Platonic mysticism and Aristotelian and Stoic empiricism.

When viewed from the perspective of Platonic mysticism, the imagination and the senses on which it depends for its memory images clearly occupy an inferior position in the hierarchy of the sensible and intelligible realms. Given its close ties with the senses, the imagination remains confined to the sensible realm because it lacks reason's capacity to comprehend the truth independently of the senses. In this respect, the cogitation or thinking associated with the imagination retains the sense of opinion or speculation and therefore lacks the guarantee of certainty that reason ultimately strives to attain. Moreover, due to the Fall, the imagination is prone to be burdened by *phantasmata* that deflect its attention away from God. In view of this precarious situation, the contemplative impulse negates the created order entirely in order to commune exclusively with divine beauty.⁴⁷

O'Connell captures well this sense of Augustine's esthetics by focusing on the Platonic overtones of his early works. But what emerges in conjunction with this insight is the role that *phantasiai* and *phantasmata*, not the soul's preexistence, play in these works. Although only later does Augustine fully develop his doctrine of the Fall, even at this stage it is clear that he was conscious of the threat that the imagination poses to attaining a proper understanding of the nature of God and the soul. This awareness is especially evident in his anti-Manichean works where his main concern is to expose and uproot the *phantasmata* that beleaguer the Manicheans, as they once did him, and other heretics who, because of their fondness for *phantasmata*, subvert the truth of Christianity.

For the most part, however, O'Connell ignores the influence of the empirical tradition on Augustine's doctrine of the imagination. This influence is noticeable in Augustine's thought as early as 389 in his response to Nebridius's questions concerning the nature of the imagination.⁴⁸ In this

⁴⁷ Regarding the contemplative character of Augustine's thought, Kenney concludes that "it might well be asked whether the portrait of Christian contemplation presented in the *Confessions* is anomalous in the later thought of Augustine. The answer is no. This great treatise of theological self-interpretation yielded an account of the soul's hidden life and of God's beneficence from which he never retreated. Indeed, the works that follow the *Confessions* do nothing to change this understanding of contemplation" (*Mysticism* 129–30).

⁴⁸ See *Epistula* 7 (CSEL 34/1.13–18). Compare *Epistula* 110 (CSEL 34/2.704–22).

tradition, the imagination is dependent on the senses for the images it stores in memory and subsequently recollects and combines in keeping with its perceptions of the world. This empirical strain in Augustine's thought enables him to maintain the vital link between the imagination and the sensible order. When used responsibly, both the imagination and the senses are instrumental in the acquisition of a true understanding of the Christian faith, as is the mind itself in which these activities occur. Because the created order is simply the medium in which the spiritual meaning of figures and admonitions are conveyed to the understanding, grace and reason devoid of entanglement with the senses are needed to interpret and judge the meaning hidden in that order.⁴⁹

More so than O'Connell, Harrison grasps the impact that the empirical tradition has on Augustine's esthetics. Her sensitivity to Augustine's emphasis on the Incarnation, Scripture, and the image of God in human beings broadens the range of the images that constitute the locus through which the beauty of the divine Word shines.⁵⁰ But as in the case of the image of clouds or that of a mirror, the divine beauty revealed in these images is brief and fleeting. All too often, due to the Fall, the mind's proclivity for *phantasmata* subverts these images, so that they veil more than they unveil the radiance of divine beauty. Harrison downplays this fact even though Augustine's preoccupation with it is still evident in texts where his interest in Platonism has waned and his polemics with heretics continue unabated.⁵¹

Though at times his efforts to harmonize contemplative and incarnational approaches to esthetics may appear to falter, Augustine manages to accommodate both in his writings. For just as the scriptural command to love God and neighbor requires the love of both God and the other, not God or the other, so too does the love of beauty, since it seeks divine radiance both beyond and through the sensible image.⁵² Yet, both are fraught with danger due to the incessant attraction of *phantasmata*. And so, in this time of pilgrimage and exile, whenever Ostia remains a distant memory, the imagination provides a place of temporary solace and a humble shelter for the divine.

⁴⁹ *Trin.* 9.6.10 (CCL 50.301–2). Examples of the limitation of the imagination can be found at *Soliloquia* 2.20.35 (CSEL 89.174–75) and *De vera religione* 3.3 (CCL 32.188–90).

⁵⁰ See, e.g., her comments in *Beauty and Revelation* 64–67, 81–83, 95–96, 140–44, 206–7, and 260.

⁵¹ *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum* 1.82 (PL 45.1105a); 3.117 (PL 45.1207a).

⁵² Compare Augustine's comments on the love of God and neighbor to the relation between inner Truth and incarnate Truth at *Contra epistulam Manichaei* 36 (CSEL 25.241–42). *De vera religione* 50.98–52.101 (CCL 32.250–53) is also of interest in this regard. For a recent study on this subject, see Peter Burnell, *The Augustinian Person* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2005) 97–135.