

Spiritual Itinerary of the Soul to God in Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine

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INTRODUCTION

In book eight of *Confessiones* Augustine described how he became familiar with the story of Antony, decided to imitate him, and read a passage from Romans as the message from God. But the language of the conversion scene includes still a Plotinian element. He shows us the incident in the garden at Milan partly in a way that Plotinus chose to explain the ascent of the soul to the divine. This itinerary would not be interpreted to be a temporal and spatial movement. According to Plotinus, it should be realised by opening the interior eye of our mind. He repeatedly emphasises on the mode of waking the inner vision within the soul. In his treatise entitled 'On the beautiful' (*Enneads* 1.6), Plotinus clearly states that, along with the soul becomes beautiful and good, it becomes like God. His concern for the soul's liberation from the passions reaches to the crucial point of his discussion about the means and the device for the spiritual vision of the inaccessible beauty.

'Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland': this is the soundest counsel. But what is this flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For Odysseus is surely a parable to us when he commands the flight from the sorceries of Circe or Calypso... The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and There is The Father. What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? This is not a journey for the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of coach or ship to carry you away; all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see; you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use.¹

It is interesting to note that the flight of the soul to God occurred in both Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine. Although Augustine's use of Eastern patristic literature and the relations with Greek patristic writers have been examined, his relationship to them may seem ambiguous.² In this paper, I shall first summarise the characteristics of their—Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine—descriptions of the soul's journey to God, from the

1. *Enn.* 1.6.8: *Plotini Opera* 1 (1951) 115-16; trans. Stephen MacKenna (1917-30) 63.

2. See Paul Henry, *Plotin et l'Occident* (Louvain, 1934); John Callahan, *Augustine and the Greek Philosophers* (Villanova Pa., 1967); Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin*, 2nd edn. (Paris, 1968); Robert J. O'Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine's Imagination* (New York, 1994).

viewpoint of how they employ the Plotinian language. Then I shall consider the similarities and differences of these passages, thereby suggesting the possibility that Augustine was in some way affected by Gregory's treatment of the spiritual itinerary.

GREGORY OF NYSSA: *DE ORATIONE DOMINICA*

In a sequence of five homilies, *De oratione dominica*, directed to the masses of the faithful, Gregory of Nyssa interprets the Lord's Prayer in its each invocation. Although there is still a discrepancy in a certain date for the composition of this work, it seems highly likely that he began writing it in around 380, when his writing activities were led to more productive and fruitful than before.³ After emphasising the necessity of prayer in its soteriological dimension in the opening homily, he proceeds to the explanation of the invocation, *Our Father, who are in Heaven*, in the second homily. It is interesting to note that, with specific attention to both the parable of the prodigal son and his confession in the gospel of Luke, Gregory emphasises the kindness of the father as a factor in demanding the return of the soul to our 'beautiful fatherland.'

Thus the return of the young man to his Father's home became to him the occasion of experiencing the lovingkindness of his Father; for this paternal home is the Heaven against which, as he says to his Father, he has sinned. In the same way it seems to me that if the Lord is teaching us to call upon the Father in Heaven, He means to remind you of our beautiful fatherland. And by thus putting into your mind a stronger desire for these good things, He sets you on the way that will lead you back to your original country.⁴

Gregory follows the Greek philosophical tradition, in particular the Platonic view of the soul and its purification, when engaged in the interpretation of scriptural passages about the avoidance of evil in this world. How does he address the emancipation of the soul from bodily concerns? In a Platonic passage from *Theaetetus*: since there always exist evils of this earth, humans must flee from earth to heaven. Following the moral exhortation, their flight comprises the step of 'becoming as like God as possible.' They become 'like God' when they become 'just and pure, with understanding.'⁵

Now the way which leads human nature back to Heaven is none other than that of avoiding the evils of the world by flight; on the other hand, the purpose of fleeing from evils seems to me precisely to achieve likeness with God. To become like God means to become just, holy, and good and suchlike things.⁶

Gregory's description of attempting to bear resemblance, that is, 'likeness with God,'

3. See Ekaterina Kiria, art. '*De Oratione Dominica*', in Lucas Francisco *et al.* (eds.), Seth Cherney (trans.), *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa* (Leiden; Boston, 2010) 550-53.

4. Gregory of Nyssa, *De oratione dominica 2*: PG 44,1145A; ACW 18,42.

5. Plato, *Theaetetus* 176A-B.

6. Gregory of Nyssa, *De oratione dominica 2*: PG 44,1145A; ACW 18,42.

seems to be inspired by the passage in Plato. The affirmation in *Theaetetus* reinterpreted continuously within a Christian context shows us that the goal of the virtuous life is the imitation of God. The flight from the 'evils of the world' takes us to the attainment of the various virtues and to the reminiscence of our fatherland that the prayer inspires in us. Yet, it has been clearly articulated by scholars as Hubert Merki that Gregory develops the theme described here on Plotinus (*Enneads* 1.2.1), not directly on Plato.⁷

If anyone, as far as in him lies, clearly shows in himself the characteristics of these virtues, he will pass automatically and without effort from this earthly life to the life of Heaven. For the distance between the Divine and the human is not a local one so as to need some mechanical device by which this heavily weighted earthly flesh should migrate into the disembodied intelligible life.⁸

Another important point to note is that the return of the soul to the 'fatherland,' a distinctively Plotinian expression, is defined not as a spatial but rather as an intellectual movement. Gregory does not accept the necessity of any 'mechanical device' by which to direct the soul to the higher level of virtuous attainment. His emphasis on the intellectual dimension of the flight shows a close similarity to a treatise of Plotinus entitled 'On the Beautiful' (*Enn.* 1.6): after considering the emancipation from the passions (1.6.5), Plotinus raises the question, 'what (τρόπος) must we do? How lies the path (μηχανή)?'⁹ Following the Plotinian framework for grasping God with our 'mind', that is, calling upon 'vision, which is to be waked within you, a vision (ὄψιν),'¹⁰ Gregory confirms that the soul is brought to the fatherland 'without effort' because no means of bodily movement need to be arranged. The deliberate turning to God with the mind itself is only required to be brought to heaven 'automatically.'

No; if virtue has really been separated from evil, it lies solely within the free choice of man to be there where his desire inclines him. Since, therefore, the choice of the good is not followed by any labour—for possession of the things that are chosen follows the act of choice—you are entitled to be in Heaven immediately, because you have seized God with your mind. Now if, according to Ecclesiastes, *God is in Heaven*, and you, according to the Prophet, *adhere to God*, it follows necessarily that you should be where God is, because you are united to Him. Since then He has commanded in the prayer to call God Father. He tells you to do nothing less than to become like to your Heavenly Father by a life that is worthy of God, as He bids us do more clearly elsewhere when He says: *Be you therefore perfect, as also your Heavenly Father is perfect*.¹¹

Thus, Gregory incorporates the 'free choice of man' into the flight of the soul. It lies

7. See Hubert Merki, *ΟΜΟΙΟΣΙΣ ΘΕΩ. Von der platonischen Angleichung an Gott zur Gottähnlichkeit bei Gregor von Nyssa* (Fribourg, 1952).

8. Gregory of Nyssa, *De oratione dominica* 2: PG 44,1145B; ACW 18,42.

9. Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6.8: *Plotini Opera* 1, 115; trans. MacKenna, 62.

10. *Enn.* 1.6.8: *Plotini Opera* 1, 116; trans. MacKenna, 63.

11. Gregory of Nyssa, *De oratione dominica* 2: PG 44,1145B-C; ACW 18,42-43.

within our power (ἔξῆστί) whether we are where God is or exist among the evils of the world. It is noteworthy that Plotinus does not refer to the human will in the treatise (*Enn.* 1.6) where he tells us the soul's itinerary to the fatherland. Here Gregory does not develop the concept of will and, only briefly, insists that the attainment of virtues depends on the faculty of free choice. However, it would be inappropriate not to indicate that the discussion about the will and its related terms, such as choice, voluntary, and freedom, are not entirely absent from the treatises of Plotinus.¹² And, for Gregory, the concept of the will and the condition of the human being are closely interrelated, in particular indispensable for considering the significance of human liberty and its ontological dynamics. Then, with regard to their descriptions of the flight of the soul, what is the most crucial point to be made, especially in Gregory, whose use of and indebtedness to Plotinus are characterised by both verbal correspondences and similarities of thought? The emphasis of the former is on willing (free choice) and of the latter on seeing (vision), but both Plotinus and Gregory regard the spiritual itinerary as being achieved without difficulty. Although Gregory does not exclude the possibility that no evil comes to subsistence outside of the human will, the repeated encouragement to the faithful based on the scriptural passages (Ecclesiastes and the Prophet) is clear. It is in this sense that Gregory's optimistic affirmation on the return of the soul is to be appreciated.

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO: *CONFESSIONES* AND OTHER WRITINGS

Examples indicating how Augustine of Hippo evaluated the flight of the soul may be taken from the *Confessiones* (397-401), as well as from other earlier and later writings, written during the period 386-417. In this section, I shall first look at the descriptions in both his early and late works, thereby showing a shift from the intellectual to the moral interpretation of the soul's itinerary. Then, with the focus on the passages found in the *Confessions*, I shall examine his approach to the soul's departure and the return to God.

In his earliest extant writings referred to as the *Cassiciacum Dialogues*, Augustine's *Contra Academicos* is the first work written during his retirement to a country-house near Milan (386), in which he explicitly integrates the return of the soul to Heaven into his concern for 'our life, morality, and spirit.'

The spirit (*animus*) will return more safely to Heaven since it supposes that it will (a) overcome the dangers of all fallacious arguments; (b) triumph over the passions in returning to the region of its origin, so to speak, once truth has been apprehended; and (c) exercise its rule once it has been wedded to moderation in this fashion.¹³

Again in the fourth *Dialogue, Soliloquia*, he gives further description of the flight of the soul. In the dialogue between Augustine and his own Reason, it is made explicit that

12. See e.g. *Enn.* 6.8.1-6: 'On the Voluntary and the Will'.

13. Augustine, *Contra Academicos* 2.9.22: CCL 29,30; trans. Peter King (1995) 46.

‘not by one way is she [*scil.* Wisdom] approached.’¹⁴ By using the metaphorical language of the sun and the light, Reason suggests the possibility that each is able to grasp the Wisdom ‘according to his soundness and firmness.’ Then, it encourages Augustine to flee from sensible things.

We need sound and perfect wings if we are to fly from this darkness to yonder light, which does not deign to manifest itself to men shut up in a cave unless they can escape, leaving sensible things broken and dissolved.¹⁵

The bodily eye cannot see the sun ‘unless it be strong (*sanus*).’¹⁶ The soul is often deceived about its own state of health. As some scholars have pointed out, these interpretations of the soul’s flight are expounded in the same language as Plotinus employed in his treatise (*Enn.* 1.6 ‘On the Beautiful’), in particular concerning the flight as the awakening of the power of seeing, along with related imageries: the wing, the light, and the sun. Augustine sets out the highly intellectual framework for the explanation found in the *Enneads* of Plotinus.

Around ten years later, Augustine started writing *De doctrina christiana*, in which he calls attention to the purification of the mind, thus relating the journey towards the fatherland. Affirming the unchangeable truth that the unchangeably wise life is to be preferred to that which is changeable, he indicates the different types of people: those who do not see it are ‘like a blind man in the sun, who cannot be helped by the brightness of such a clear and powerful light shining into his eyes’¹⁷ and those, who see but escape from the truth, lose the sharpness of their mind by the ‘habit of living in the shadows cast by the flesh.’¹⁸ They are ‘as it were, blown away from their homeland by the adverse winds of their own perverted characters.’ Augustine admonishes the reader to purify their minds in order to ‘enjoy to the full that truth which lives unchangeably.’¹⁹ A mostly intellectual interpretation of the flight is, on the Plotinian pattern in *Enneads* (1.6), therefore given.

Let us consider this process of cleansing as a trek, or a voyage, to our homeland; though progress towards the one who is ever present is not made through space, but through goodness of purpose and character.²⁰

It is noteworthy that he concedes the existence of people who, regardless of their spiritual orientation, deliberately abandon the truth: they are in pursuit of the things

14. *Sol.* 1.13.23: CSEL 89,35; trans. John Burleigh (1953) 37. See his critical remarks in *Retract.* 1.4.3.

15. *Sol.* 1.14.24: CSEL 89,37; trans. Burleigh, 38.

16. *Sol.* 1.14.25.

17. *De doc. chr.* 1.9.9: CSEL 80,13; trans. R. P. H. Green (1995) 21.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *De doc. chr.* 1.10.10; CSEL 80,13; trans. Green, 21.

20. *De doc. chr.* 1.10.10; CSEL 80,13; trans. Green, 23.

that are 'secondary and inferior to whatever they admit to be superior and more outstanding.'²¹ Indeed, they deviate from a rational scheme of behaviour.

The sporadic references to the flight of the soul are found also in the relatively late works. For instance, the exposition of Psalm 149, probably preached in 404,²² explicating the second verse of Psalm 149 and focusing on the eternal life of the 'true Zion,' speaks about the fatherland to be approached 'not by swift feet but by love.'²³ Augustine clarifies by what means of travel people should flee to their home.

Such travelers look not for ships but for wings; let them seize the twin wings of charity. What are charity's paired wings? Love of God and love of our neighbor.²⁴

It is the non-intellectual way of understanding that he defines as an appropriate approach to the spiritual itinerary of the soul to God. This is the same with the interpretation offered in Book 9 of *De ciuitate dei*, which was written by 417. Here Augustine mentions Plotinus by name and combines passages from *Enneads* 1.6.8 ('On the Beautiful') and 1.2.8 ('On Virtues') as follows.

What has become of that saying of Plotinus, 'We must flee to our beloved county. There the Father is, and there is everything. Where shall we take ship? How can we flee? By becoming like God.' If man comes near to God in proportion as he grows more like him, then unlikeness to God is the only separation from him, and the soul of man is estranged from that immaterial, eternal and unchangeable being in proportion as it craves for things that are temporal and changeable.²⁵

He emphasises that human beings require a mediator not like a demon, but like Christ, who can 'render us truly divine assistance for our purification and liberation.'²⁶ As regards his concern for the mediator, it is worth noting that 'the man Christ Jesus' has remained on the highest level, 'not by spatial remoteness.'²⁷ This expression is the same as that used in *De doctrina christiana*. Another important expression of the mode of travel is found in a paraphrase from the treatises of Plotinus. Augustine seems to accept the Plotinian definition of the attainment of the blessed life: it consists in 'becoming like God.'

I shall turn my attention to the passages in the first and eighth books of *Confessiones*. In book eight, before being involved in the 'tolle lege' incident in a

21. *De doc. chr.* 1.9.9; CSEL 80,13; trans. Green, 21.

22. See Pierre-Marie Hombert, *Nouvelles recherches de chronologie augustinienne* (Paris, 2000) 368. See also François Dolbeau, *Augustin d'Hippone. Vingt-six sermons au peuple d'Afrique* (Paris, 1996) 508.

23. Augustine, *En. Ps.* 149.5; CSEL 95/5,276; WSA III/20,496.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *De ciu. dei* 9.17; CCL 47,265-66; trans. Henry Bettenson (1972) 364.

26. *De ciu. dei* 9.17; CCL 47,266; trans. Bettenson, 364.

27. *Ibid.*

Milanese garden, he continued his struggle against the fragmented state of his will. It has been suggested by some scholars that, in the story of his internal conflict, Augustine speaks about the flight of the soul from the Plotinian point of view.

By neither by ship nor chariot nor on foot had I progressed any nearer to it [*scil.* heaven] than I had gone from the house to the place where we were sitting. To progress towards it—indeed, to attain it—was nothing other than the will to progress, but with a will that was strong and whole throughout; ...²⁸

As have been mentioned in his earlier writings, he follows closely the views and language expressed in a treatise of Plotinus (*Enneads* 1.6). However, in comparison with Plotinus' stress on the power of seeing should be noted Augustine's view on what he defines as a faculty of arriving at its final destination, a faculty which he regards as indispensable to make this journey, that is, a united will 'that was strong and whole throughout.' We also find the description of the flight of the soul in the first book of the *Confessiones*, in which the prodigal parable in the gospel of Luke is interpreted from the Plotinian point of view.

The road that leads us from you and back to you again is not one that we can measure, or tread with our feet. The younger son in your story did not need horses or chariots or ships when he set out to squander his wealth in a far country, he did not grow wings and fly off in view of all, or go striding on his way. But you, his father, who had been kind in giving him his inheritance when he set out, were kinder still when he came home empty-handed. The far country into which he departed was a state of mind, ruled by lusts, full of darkness, and cut off from your face.²⁹

This interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son lies in fact at the heart of his view of the flight of the soul. Augustine, although ostensibly adapting the passage of Plotinus after he heard Ambrose's sermon *De Isaac uel anima* around in 386, does not share the view, in two respect, with both Plotinus and Ambrose. While Plotinus considers the return of Odysseus to be a symbol of the soul's wandering, Augustine omits the reference to this Homeric imagery and substitutes the prodigal son for Odysseus. And he exchanges the Plotinian (and Ambrosian) focus on the vision for his consistent concern for the will. These points seem to be understood as his contributions to the pagan framework for the flight of the soul.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While mentioning the name of Plotinus only in an exceptional case, Augustine repeatedly and clearly adapts the passages of *Enneads*, especially the treatise 'On the Beautiful,' to the flight of the soul. There is agreement among scholars that Augustine's treatment was significantly affected by Plotinus, although further investigation is required to determine which passages they would be privileged to discuss. Particularly

28. *Conf.* 8.8.19: BA 14,48; trans. Philip Burton (2001) 176.

29. *Conf.* 1.18.28: BA 13,322.324; trans. Burton, 24.

in his early works, it is clear that Augustine defines the flight as the awakening of the inner vision, thereby using the intellectual approach taken in the *Enneads*. His concern for the purification of the mind is in fact replaced by the attention to the bifurcation of the human will. However, along with the development of Augustine's view of the soul's flight, there still remain several similarities of terminology. This is the same with the influence of Plotinus on Gregory's exposition of the Lord's Prayer. In his view of the soul's return to the fatherland, Gregory defines the final step as that of 'becoming like God,' based on a treatise of Plotinus (*Enneads* 1.2). As regards the focus on the intellectual mode of the flight, his explicit indebtedness to another treatise (*Enneads* 1.6) is acknowledged. Gregory was also primarily affected by the Plotinian theme of the flight in his treatises.

The question of how far Augustine was influenced by Gregory in his view of the flight of the soul is one which has been difficult to determine. The basis for our approach to the possibility of Gregory's influence on Augustine is the fact that both Gregory and Augustine combine the ancient story of the soul's wandering with the prodigal parable. For Gregory, it seems appropriate that this parable is connected with his interpretation of the prayer. Both imply the 'fatherland' and the soul's return to God. Thus, he brings together the earthly father and the heavenly father. In *Confessiones*, where Augustine inserts the Lucan parable into the Plotinian view of the flight, the prodigal son appears abruptly and his father is absent. His father is merged with the heavenly father whose kindness and generosity are clearly confirmed. It seems likely that Augustine bears in mind the Gregorian way of uniting the two fathers. Another important point to consider is the similarity of expressions given by Gregory and Augustine. With regard to the departure and the return of the soul, Augustine refers to spatial distances: 'the road... is not one that we can measure' (*spatiis locorum: Conf.* 1.18.28). While Plotinus does not offer any equivalent to the phrase, in the passage of Gregory we see the similar language, 'local one' (τοπικὴ διάτασις: *De oratione dominica* 2). It is interesting to note that, again in his later work, Augustine states that the mediator has remained on the high, 'not by spatial remoteness' (*locorum distantia: De ciu. dei* 9.17). This expression is also very similar to that of Gregory. Concerning the slight similarities, such as the repetition of the intensifying phrase (*nihil eart aliud quam—οὐδεμία τις ἔστιν ἄλλη εἰ μὴ*), and the absence of the 'difficulty' (πόνος), further investigation would be needed.

It might be probable that, before engaging in *Confessiones*, Augustine was affected in some way by Gregory's interpretation of the flight of the soul and the prodigal parable. It is also likely that, in *De sermone domini in monte* (393), the exegetical legacy (including Gregory's *De beatitudinibus*, written probably before 378) lies behind Augustine's understanding of the Matthaean beatitudes.³⁰ Perhaps, before his

30. See Naoki Kamimura, 'Augustine's scriptural exegesis in *De sermone domini in monte* and the shaping of Christian perfection' (forthcoming).

ordination into the priesthood in 391, he might have known some passages from *De oratione dominica*. Yet, it needs further investigation into some undetermined sources of Augustine's exposition of the flight of the soul.