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'PROTEUS RISING FROM THE SEA': A NOTE ON PROTEUS IN *CONTRA ACADEMICOS*

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'The world is too much with us,' lamented William Wordsworth. The Romantic poet bemoaned the reduction of nature to economic exploitation and scientific rationalization. The world of the Industrial Revolution had become horizontalized and immanentized; it was no longer the sublime, charged manifestation of the divine. Earlier worldviews that had intimated a participatory ontology were being eclipsed. Modern man had lost what even 'a Pagan' could perceive in nature, namely, something of the Eternal. Wordsworth concludes his poem:

> .... I'd rather be
> A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
> So might I, standing on this pleasant lea
> Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

In a much different context, the Cassiciacum dialogues witness Augustine wrestling with some of the same difficulties that faced Wordsworth: can we catch sight of the Eternal in the temporal order? What is the relation between our finite world and the Infinite? Can we know the Immaterial as material creatures? A number of times in this context, Augustine's dialogues, like Wordsworth, refer to Proteus, the literary figure of Homer's *Odyssey*. Proteus always appears in the context of a discussion of 'image' and of the participation of the image in an immaterial reality more stable than itself. Proteus, the Greek sea monster whose name is a derivation of his status as 'firstborn' of Poseidon, was, according to legend, able to tell the future to whomever would capture him. However, Proteus would always change his shape as soon as he was seen, taking on a different form in order to avoid capture. In the Cassiciacum dialogues, Augustine links this elusive character with a Platonic account of 'image.' In *Contra Academicos*, Proteus, the 'image of truth,' expresses the participatory relation between eternal truth and the temporal 'truth-like.' My contention in this article is that in the dialogues, Proteus, as an 'image of the truth,' is a philosophical representation of the person of Christ, the image of God. The significance of Proteus in Augustine's early dialogues has not been sufficiently noted. Proteus both 'manifests and bears the person of truth'[1] and, as image, is at once derived from and revelatory of the truth. The truth, like Proteus, can be grasped only when, in the words of Augustine's counterpart at Cassiciacum, Alypius, 'some deity was directing them toward him.'[2] The debate regarding the validity of the Academics' claim that truth cannot be known and that no real correspondence exists between the truth and the 'truth-like' is really, I argue, a debate regarding the possibility of the Incarnation.[3]

The problematic 'truth-like' nature of temporal and material images is the concern of *Contra Academicos*. The context is the skeptical stance held by the Academics regarding the possibility of knowing eternal truth in a state of flux. I will suggest that Augustine's theology of the

Incarnation in *Contra Academicos* bridges the chasm posited by the Academics between the truth and the truth-like.[4] Augustine upholds the participatory character of created existence: truth is intelligible and can be known in the finite order precisely because eternal truth deigns to show itself in this order. I will propose that Augustine's description of the figure of Proteus is a veiled reference to the incarnate Christ.[5]

It is significant that the figure of Proteus is first mentioned by Alypius. It was Alypius who wanted to keep the name of Christ out of the dialogues in order to retain their philosophical integrity.[6] In the end it is precisely on account of their philosophical integrity that Proteus, the 'image of the truth,' is suggested at a critical moment in *Contra Academicos* to overcome the skepticism of the Academics. Alypius takes up the argument on behalf of the Academics and defends the two aphorisms 'that nothing can be perceived and that one should not assent to anything.'[7] He proposes that the 'truth-like' is represented by the literary figure of Proteus, who is an image of the truth, explains Alypius: '[Proteus] is represented as being usually captured precisely when his capture was to be least expected. In fact, it is said that his pursuers never laid hold on him unless some deity was directing them toward him. Now if that deity be with us, and show us that truth which is of so much anxiety to us, then I shall admit that the Academics are vanquished.'[8] Augustine seizes the advantage by leaping on the analogy of Proteus. Augustine expresses his agreement with the philosophy of the Academics inasmuch as it refuses to absolutize the material order. Attempting to derive certainty and stability, that is, eternal wisdom and truth, from transitory existence is as futile as attempting to grasp Proteus by the hand, for, like the temporal order, Proteus is always in a state of flux.

Alypius uses the analogy of Proteus to demonstrate the incommensurate relation, maintained by the Academics, between the truth and the 'truth-like.' For them there could be no real relation between the two orders; knowledge of *both* divine and human things was not possible in this life.[9] Nevertheless, the agnosticism of the Academy, which holds 'that assent is not to be given to anything,' does not have final sway. Once Proteus, 'the image of truth,' is recognized for what he is as an *image*, then the seeker of wisdom and truth will no longer be forced to remain metaphysically ignorant among corporeal delusions of sense. In other words, Augustine turns the analogy of Proteus on its head – he does not serve as a metaphor for Academic skepticism, but as a metaphor for participatory Platonism. Augustine emphasizes the *positive* connotations of an image; it need not simply be a deluding and deceptive dissemblance, but can be a participatory *resemblance*. One can, insists Augustine, press through the image to partake of eternal truth. In his various shifting forms, Proteus participates in and images the unchanging truth.

Even more significant, however, is that Augustine takes Alypius's analogy of Proteus and deploys the mythical figure as an image of the incarnate Christ. 'That truth' pointed out by the deity is seen in the figure of Proteus, who comes unrecognized into the material order as an image of eternal truth. It is at this point that the dialogue reaches its culmination. Augustine exclaims, 'That is well said. I desired absolutely nothing more.'[10] It is Alypius, states Augustine, who has led them to the conclusion regarding who can show human beings truth: 'Alike with brevity and piety, you have said that only some kind of deity (*numen*) is able to show a man what truth is. Wherefore, in this discussion of ours, I have heard nothing more pleasing, nothing more weighty, nothing more worthy of approval, and – if, as I trust, that deity be present – nothing more true.'[11] Augustine accepts as a reality what Alypius has proposed as a hypothetical but necessary condition to grasp truth: that a deity has pointed out Proteus, the image of the truth. Augustine exclaims with elation that the mention of Proteus by Alypius is the 'very best kind of philosophy (*optimum philosophiae genus*) and 'nothing more true (*nihil uerius*)'[12] because this is the point to which Augustine has been driving the dialogue all along. Proteus is

mentioned as 'the very best kind of philosophy' because he is a literary representation of the incarnate truth to which the dialogue was committed to finding. Augustine writes,

> That Proteus – so that you, boys, may see that poets are not to be entirely disregarded in philosophy – is portrayed after the image of the truth. In poems, I say, Proteus manifests and bears the person of truth, which no one can lay hold on, if he is deceived by false images, and loosens or loses his hold on the nodes of understanding. For even when the truth is being grasped and, as it were, held in our hands, those images strive in the usual manner of corporeal things – to deceive and delude us through the very senses which we use for the needs of this life.[13]

It is possible to read Augustine's description of Proteus as an expression of his early theology of the Incarnation. Proteus, explains Augustine, both 'manifests and bears the person of truth (*ostentat sustinetque personam*).' Proteus and Christ have something in common in their character as image, that is, in embodying and revealing truth. Despite them showing their face – in their appearance as the image of truth – their character of truth is not immediately perceived. Although they both 'manifest and bear the truth,' their corporeal existence 'deceives and deludes.' Proteus escapes the very moment he is thought to be captured and 'held in our hands' because then he is grasped only according to his temporal and material condition; he is, then, not perceived as an image translucent to eternal truth. Proteus as 'image of the truth' poetically attests to the possibility of the Incarnation – that eternal truth can be temporally revealed and embodied. As an image, he does not remain in his material manifestation, for this would be 'in the usual manner of corporeal things' to become a 'false image.' No, the 'image of the truth' shows itself only for a time; it is revelatory of the truth, bears the truth, and is then destined to 'hasten back to heaven when the burden of the entire body will have been cast off.'[14]

In *De ordine*, Augustine refers back to this discussion of Proteus as image of the truth. Here, Augustine writes that there is a certain unity or numerical proportion in all the various branches of study that are perceived by reason through 'reflection and contemplation.'[15] In the temporal and material order, unity is not immediately perceived; the senses understand through 'shadows and vestiges.'[16] But as the soul contemplates, it approaches the number of unity and truth. Approaching eternal truth through material existence is like the search for Proteus, 'of whom Alypius made mention when we were treating of the Skeptics.'[17] In the finite order, truth is grasped by one seeking 'as if Proteus were in his hands,' but truth, like Proteus, quickly eludes the searcher, who cannot contemplate beyond truth's material expression.[18] Augustine writes, 'But, false images of the things which we number drift away from that most hidden something by which we enumerate, snatch our attention to themselves, and frequently make that hidden something slip away even when it has been already in our grasp.'[19] The image becomes false, like Proteus, the moment it obscures and pulls away from us the truth we thought it contained. The image is only true, for Augustine – standing firmly within the Platonic tradition – when it is constituted in relation to eternal truth.[20] Only when Proteus is 'handed over by a god' does he become an 'image of truth.'

Proteus is an image of the incarnate Christ because as a 'reflected image of truth' he gives himself only to those who see an eternal and immaterial reality beyond his material and temporal constitution. In clinging only to Proteus's material existence, one is deceived; one ought rather to perceive in his materiality the truth that he both 'manifests and shows forth.' In the face of Academic skepticism, Alypius's mention of the mythical figure Proteus gives Augustine great hope. Proteus is a pledge that the infinite can be contemplated through the finite and that truth can be perceived in the temporal order if it 'is handed over by a god.' The divine

authority lives the truth in a human body, thereby linking the truth and the 'truth-like,' and offering in the finite order, in the words of Wordsworth, a 'sight of Proteus rising from the sea.'

Notes

1 *Acad*. III.VI.13.

2 *Acad*. III.5.11.

3 Augustine's early understanding of the Incarnation as expressed in the dialogues has received some scholarly attention. Recently, Michael Cameron's study of Augustine's early exegesis notes that in this period Augustine understood the Incarnation as securing possibility of attaining true knowledge and wisdom in this life: 'The Incarnation had a singular objective: to hand on true and vital knowledge of the divine.' Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 117. Perhaps nowhere is this as conspicuous as in the conclusion to *Contra Academicos* where there is an almost explicit reference to the incarnate Christ, albeit couched in Plotinian language. Augustine writes, 'Human reason would never lead such souls to that intelligible world if the most high God had not vouchsafed – through clemency toward the whole human race – to send the authority of the divine intellect down even to a human body (*diuini intellectus auctoritatem usque ad ipsum corpus humanum*), and caused it to dwell therein, so that souls would be aroused not only by divine precepts but also by divine acts, and would be thus enabled to reflect on themselves and to gaze upon their fatherland without any disputatious wrangling.' *Acad*. III.19.42 (CCSL 29 60).

4 The most helpful literature regarding the dominant themes in *Contra Academicos* includes Brian Harding, 'Skepticism, Illumination and Christianity in Augustine's *Contra Academicos*,' *Augustinian Studies* 34 (2003): 197–212. Harding maintains that *Contra Academicos* should be read as Augustine's limited endorsement of skepticism apart from the assent of faith. Harding writes, '[The] famous Augustinian motto of *fides quarens intellectum*, wherein faith must precede understanding, is the fruit of his own limited skepticism: the human mind of its own powers is incapable of knowing the truth, but illuminated by faith, it is capable.' Harding, 'Skepticism,' 212. Many authors have noted the epistemological concerns of *Contra Academicos*. Cf. Christopher Kirwan, 'Augustine against the Skeptics,' in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. M. Burnyeat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 205–23; and idem, *Augustine* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Other commentators have suggested that eudaimonistic philosophy is central to the dialogue and that epistemological questions are of the second order. Cf. Roger Holte, *Béatitude et Sagesse: Saint Augustine et le problème de la fin de l'homme dans la philosophie ancienne* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1962), pp. 73–110; A. Michael Neiman, 'The Arguments of Augustine's *Contra Academicos*,' *The Modern Schoolmen* 59 (1982): 255–79. A significant contribution to the discussion of whether the *Contra Academicos* is primarily concerned with the epistemic or with eudaimonistic philosophy has been added by Brian Harding, who concludes, 'The *Contra Academicos* then is not concerned with a refutation of skeptical epistemology so much as it is concerned with the refutation of the skeptic's teleology.' Brian Harding, 'Epistemology and Eudaimonism in Augustine's *Contra Academicos*,' *Augustinian Studies* 37 (2006): 271.

5 The aim of the dialogue as upholding the possibility of the instantiation of truth in the person of the incarnate Christ has not been brought out in earlier scholarship on *Contra Academicos*. While most studies written in the first half of the twentieth century carefully note the philosophical attack on skepticism and the insistence that the intellect is able to know truth, they are unable to link the philosophical goals of the dialogue with Augustine's expressed theological conclusions 'never to deviate in the least from the authority of Christ, for I find none more powerful.' *Acad*. III.20.43 (CCSL 29 61). David Mosher has rightly noted the Cartesian underpinning present in many earlier twentieth-century studies of *Contra Academicos*. The Cartesian quest for epistemic certainty is seemingly the only lens through which much traditional scholarship has read *Contra Academicos*. More recent scholarship by Brian Harding and David Mosher has corrected this tendency and noted the importance of faith for Augustine's epistemology; faith in the Augustinian sense as a form of knowing. Mosher argues that Augustine is less concerned with proving the certainty of knowledge than he is with expressing an *apologia* for the place of faith and authority in 'knowing' divine and human things. Cf. David Mosher, 'The Argument of St. Augustine's *Contra Academicos*,' *Augustinian Studies* 12 (1981): 103. Despite these necessary corrections in reading *Contra Academicos* as an *apologia* for the place of faith in knowledge, Mosher and Harding have not taken the argument to the next level. Augustine not only wants to demonstrate the possibility of attaining true wisdom in this life through faith, but he also wants to demonstrate that this wisdom has, in fact, dwelt on earth, which makes human possession of wisdom a genuine possibility.

6 In the *Confessions* Augustine recounts, ‘For at first [Alypius] was scornfully critical of inserting Christ’s name in my books. He wanted them to smell of the ‘cedars’ of the schools ‘which the Lord had now felled’ (Ps. 28: 5) rather than of the healthgiving herbs of the Church which are a remedy against serpents.’ *Conf*. IX.6.7 (trans. Chadwick).

7 *Acad*. II.13.30 (CCSL 29 34): *nihil percipi posse ac nulli rei esse assentiendum*.

8 *Acad*. III.5.11 (CCSL 29 41): *suamque imaginem et quasi speculum quoddam in Proteo illo animaduerti oportere, qui traditur eo solere capi, quo minime caperetur, inuestigatoresque eius numquam eundem tenuisse nisi indice alicuius modi numine. Quod si assit et illam nobis ueritatem, quae tantum curae est, demonstrare dignetur! Ego quoque uel ipsis inuitis, quod minime reor.*

9 ‘[Y]ou will not be wise as long as you are living here below; wisdom is with God, and it cannot reach man.’ *Acad*. III.9.20 (CCSL 29 46). Throughout the dialogue, it was held that the wise person is one who has knowledge of human and divine things. In the preface to Book II Augustine proposes a critical definition of wisdom: ‘Wisdom is the knowledge of divine and human things.’ *Acad*. I.6.16 (CCSL 29 12). While this is immediately a reference to Cicero’s definition of wisdom (*De officiis* 2.2.5; *Tuscul. Quaest*. 4.26.57), it is also, I maintain, an oblique reference to the two natures of the incarnate wisdom. Trygetius had maintained that the insurmountable gulf between the knowledge of human and of divine things surely entails that no one is wise, because if we are honest with ourselves, we do not even really know ourselves, much less divine things. Augustine guides the dialogue to the one who is genuinely wise: one truly familiar with both human and divine things.

10 *Acad*. III.5.12 (CCSL 29 41): *Bene habet, inquam, prorsus nihil amplius optaui*.

11 *Acad*. III.6.13 (CCSL 29 42): *Etenim numen aliquod aisti solum posse ostendere homini, quid sit uerum, cum breuiter tum etiam pie. Nihil itaque in hoc sermone nostro libentius audiui, nihil grauius, nihil probabilius et, si id numen, ut confido, assit, nihil uerius*.

12 *Acad*. III.6.13 (CCSL 29 42): *Nam et Proteus ille – quanta abs te mentis altitudine commemoratus, quanta intentione in optimum philosophiae genus!*

13 *Acad*. III.6.13 (CCSL 29 42): *Proteus enim ille, ut uos adulescentes non penitus poetas a philosophia contemnendos esse uideatis, in imaginem ueritatis inducitur; ueritatis, inquam, Proteus in carminibus ostentat sustinetque personam, quam obtinere nemo potest, si falsis imaginibus deceptus comprehensionis nodos uel laxauerit uel dimiserit. Sunt enim istae imagines, quae consuetudine rerum corporalium per istos, quibus ad necessaria huius uitae utimur, sensus nos, etiam cum ueritas tenetur et quasi habetur in manibus, decipere atque inludere moliuntur*.

14 *Acad*. II.1.2 (CCSL 29 19).

15 *ord.* 2.15.43.

16 *ord.* 2.15.43.

17 *ord.* 2.15.43.

18 *ord.* 2.15.43.

19 *ord.* II.15.43.

20 From various angles, the Cassiciacum dialogues present a unified understanding of the nature of images. Material images are no longer false when one sees in their multiplicity and fragmentation the ‘simple, true, and certain unity’ of being (*ord.* II.16.44); then Proteus is grasped not by the hands, but through contemplation. When one is no longer a slave to passions, greedy for material goods, and begins to understand immaterial being and the nature of eternity, then ‘he can search after things divine – not merely as truths to be believed, but also as matters to be contemplated, understood and retained.’ *ord.* II.16.44.