

The Beauty of the Cross in Augustine's Aesthetics*

DAVID LYLE JEFFREY

Baylor University

Waco, TX

WHILE AUGUSTINE has been generally regarded as the foundational figure for hermeneutics and biblical exegesis in the West, his name is not so often associated with aesthetics. This is perhaps understandable, given his famous self-deprecatory remark in his *Confessions* that while he had once written a book entitled *Of Beauty and Proportion*—"in two or three volumes, I think," he says rather laconically—it was somehow lost. There is not the slightest hint of lament in this remark, and given that it forms part of Augustine's acknowledgment of his preconversion preoccupation with inferior subjects out of dubious motives,¹ the lost work on aesthetics can seem to be something that in his own mind he lumped together with his adolescent pranks and other misdirected pursuits of the old life.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The questions which he had attempted to pursue in the lost books, first among them the nature of the beautiful and its compelling "allure," as he calls it, are,

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¹ *Confessions* 4, esp. 4.13.20 through 16.31. I have used here the translation of J. G. Pilkington, corrected on occasion by the translation of F. J. Sheed, recently reedited by Michael P. Foley, *Augustine's Confessions* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006).

following his conversion, reframed in a larger intellectual context; far from being dismissed as spiritually or philosophically unworthy, they are revalorized and made central to the meaning of his new life. In brief, the basic questions of the lost *De pulchro et apto* remain at the center of Augustine's work as a Christian theologian and philosopher. Any reflection on his aesthetics must accordingly take into account the theological and metaphysical matrix in which his aesthetic ideas, as we have them, are formulated.

Two extrinsic contexts, one ancient, the other modern, have intervened to obscure the continuing pertinence for Augustine of his early questions about the nature of corporeal beauty and its seductive allure. The oldest of these draws heavily upon the language of Neoplatonism, to which Augustine was certainly indebted, but by which he has been sometimes characterized too narrowly as a metaphysical realist or even a dualist.² More recently, the paradigmatic post-Kantian disposition in aesthetics, namely to reject metaphysics altogether, has found much of Augustine's biblical and theological language, as well as his argument, to be mere piety, a kind of mysticism. I want to suggest that each of these approaches prevents a just appreciation, and to argue (1) that Augustine is not such a strict Neoplatonist as some believe, and (2) that his metaphysical teleology is not abstracted from physical reality and bodily experience. Considered canonically, Augustine's aesthetic ideas reveal themselves to be fundamentally more Hebraic than Hellenic—which is to say, much more biblical—historically grounded and tangibly mediated than some of his apparently Neoplatonic language might on the surface seem to indicate. Thus, while metaphysical realities are obviously crucial to Augustine's overall theory of beauty, his mature ideas about the beautiful, and indeed of the nature of its allure (he uses the sensual word *allicit*, from *allicere*, “to entice”) depend absolutely upon sensible appreciation and corporeal experience. In however paradoxical a fashion, his ideas about the beauty of the Cross form the crux of his general theological aesthetics.

² Augustine's fellow North African Albert Camus wrote a master's thesis with this emphasis (1939, University of Algiers); the major study by K. Svoboda, *L'Esthétique de saint Augustin et ses sources* (Brno: A. Píša, 1933), known to Camus, is the most important study taking this view.

The Beautiful as an Object of Love

To return to the *Confessions* (ca. 397–401 AD), as he reflects further on the questions that prompted his lost work, we immediately encounter a word that might seem indecorous in a Neoplatonic context and a type of category mistake in a post-Kantian aesthetic: that word is love (*amor*):

I loved these lower beauties . . . and I said to my friends, “Do we love anything but the beautiful? What, then, is the beautiful? And what is beauty? What is it then that allures and unites us to the things we love, for unless there were a grace and a beauty in them, they could by no means attract us to themselves.” And I marked and perceived that in bodies themselves there was a beauty, from their forming a kind of whole, and another from mutual fittingness, one part of the body with its whole, or a shoe with a foot, and so on (*Confessions* 4.13.20, trans. Pilkington).

Augustine's strong early connection of both *pulchro et apto* with desire in the lost book is not at all lost in his subsequent Christian reflections on beauty.

A Neoplatonic rhetorical ambience in his subsequent discussions of beauty is nonetheless apparent. As Carol Harrison has observed in her landmark study, Augustine's familiarity with Plotinus in particular provided him with both a useful paradigm and a vocabulary.³ Yet Plotinus's *Peri tou Kalou* (*Ennead* 1.6), I would suggest, is as important as a foil to Augustine's own thinking as it was as a prompt.⁴ For Plotinus, Supreme Beauty is part of the transcendent order to which all earthly beauty is at best a pale simulacrum; he claims that only the soul can come to know it, and then only by rising above sense-bound experience. Harrison speculates that after the hard and dualistic materialism of the Manicheans had lost its appeal for Augustine, the transcendental

³ Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), achieves much better balance and is still the best general study. See also her “An Essay in Saint Augustine's Aesthetics,” *Federación Agustiniana Española, Estudio Agustiniano* (1990): 205–15.

⁴ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 5 vols., ed. Stephen Mackenna (London: Medici Society, 1917–30; reprint, New York: Pantheon, 1965). For Plotinus, the One (or Good) is beyond Being; for Augustine, “God”—another name for Being—is highest.

idealism of Plotinus must have seemed a refreshing antidote, and she thinks that preference for the soul in his soul-body dialectic in the early Christian works is clearly indebted to Plotinus.⁵

Any such indebtedness, however, involves a less mystical notion of soul progress in Augustine than one finds in Plotinus. This is evident as early as the *De ordine* (ca. 386 AD), a work of Augustine's Cassiciacum period, in which he stresses that the soul is ordered toward its higher potential through a rigorous intellectual training in the disciplines of the liberal arts. Reason is developed through experience, in which governance by number is seen to provide the order, harmony and form we observe and confirm in the created world.⁶ One of Augustine's most favored biblical texts supporting the thesis of *De ordine* is Wisdom 11:21, "Thou hast ordered all things in measure, wisdom, and number."⁷ This recurrent text, referring as it does for Augustine to the physical Creation, offers an important clue to his emphatic parallel, emphasized so strongly in the *De ordine*, of divine authority with reason (2.9.26–27; cf. 2.4.12 through 2.5.14). In the *De ordine* Plotinus is never mentioned, nor is Plato; Aristotle is cited, however, and lineaments of Aristotle's thought are visible at a number of points (e.g., 2.11.31; cf. 2.5.16). There is an aspect, then, of Augustine's use of the notion of ascent in learning that sees "corporeal things as definite steps" en route to an apprehension of incorporeal or intelligible realities, but in Augustine one should not pass too swiftly

⁵ Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 4–6, 12–15; she notes that Augustine's interest in created beauty becomes much more pronounced in the course of his theological writings. I wish to correct that contextually warranted view by showing how much it already figures in his early writings.

⁶ *De ordine*, 1.8.24, trans. Silvano Barruso as *St. Augustine: On Order* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2007), 31. For a discussion of Augustine's classification of the arts, which differs slightly from later orderings of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, see Danuta R. Shanzer, "Augustine's Disciplines: *Silent diutius Musae Varronis?*," in *Augustine and the Disciplines: From Cassiciacum to Confessions*, ed. Karla Pollmann and Mark Vessey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 69–75.

⁷ *Wisdom* 11:20–21 is one of Augustine's most frequently cited biblical texts in this connection, though the aura of Pythagoreanism contextualizes it. Cf. the discussion by Henri-Irénée Marrou in *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Brossard, 1958), 262–75, and the contextualized ripostes to I. Hadot, *Arts libéraux et philosophie dans la pensée antique* (Paris, 1984) by Shanzer as well as the articles following, by William Klingshirn and Philip Burton, also in Pollmann and Vessey, *Augustine and the Disciplines*, 113–64.

over these "steps."⁸ As he puts it in his *De musica* (ca. 397 AD), the things of mortal beauty are beautiful in their own kind and order, and by an overarching order they are joined together in a harmonious unity that he describes as a "poem of the universe."⁹ It is possible for Augustine to find beauty even in a cockfight; in its own way, he insists, it too is an evidence of the pervasiveness of *apto*, order:

We could see their intent heads stretched forward, hackles raised, mighty thrusts of beak and spur, uncanny dodgings. There was nothing amiss in every motion of those irrational beasts. There was clearly another Reason controlling everything from on high, down to the universal law of victor and vanquished. The first crowed in triumph and puffed its feathers in a clear sign of superiority. The other had ended up with a featherless neck, voiceless, and crippled. I don't know how, but everything was a hymn to the beauty and harmony of nature. (*De ordine* 1.8.25)

What to some tastes might be a more fitting example of ugliness and disorder, Augustine here describes as a "hymn to the harmony and beauty of nature," apparently in all seriousness. Later, in *De libero arbitrio* (ca. 395 AD), he will return to this point in a more formal, theological vein, praising the divine wisdom that "speaks to us in the beauty of every created thing."¹⁰ His characteristically frank appreciation for physical beauty in a wide range of objects and phenomena portends later reflections on the way in which, for him, the beauty and harmony of mortal life necessarily entails a frisson of opposition and contraries.

It is clear thus that contemplation of beauty in the natural order is, like Augustine's view of the exercise of reason by training in the liberal arts, certainly an *anagogicus*; it offers an upward leading way or ascent

⁸ Cf. his *Retractions* 1.6; Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 25.

⁹ *De musica* 6.10.28; Robert C. Taliaferro, trans., *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 4 (New York: Cima, 1947).

¹⁰ *De libero arbitrio* 2.16; Anna S. Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff, trans., *On Free Choice of the Will: Saint Augustine* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964).

of the soul toward a fuller vision of intelligible beauty.¹¹ He has a variety of ways of troping out this notion of ascent, but as in this passage, the motif of an educational journey predominates among them:

For those, therefore, who are ascending upwards the first action may be called, for the sake of instruction, quickening; the second, sensation; the third, art; the fourth, virtue; the fifth, tranquility; the sixth, entry; the seventh, contemplation. They may also be thus named: of the body, through the body, about the body, the soul towards itself, the soul in itself, towards God, with God. And again thus: beauty from another thing, beauty through another thing, beauty about another thing, beauty towards the beautiful, beauty in the beautiful, beauty towards Beauty, beauty in Beauty.¹²

That mortal beauty is a means to transcendent Beauty makes his point; beauty of the soul does not cancel out beauty in the body, but necessarily begins in and depends upon it. This is a point he makes firmly against Mani and the Manicheans (ca. 390s AD).¹³ The soul is “a great

¹¹ Cf. Saint Bonaventure's *De reductione artium ad theologiam* (Retracing the Arts to Theology), written nine centuries later. Sister Emma Thérèse Healy, ed. and trans., *Works of Saint Bonaventure*, ed. Philotheus Boehner et al. (Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1955).

¹² *De quant. Animae*, ee. 70–76; cf. 35.79; cf. Svoboda, *L'Esthétique de saint Augustine*, 60–61.

¹³ Sermon “On God's Providence” (Dolbeau, 29), 4, in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, series III, vol. 1, 1 ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (New York: New City Press, 1997), 57. In Sermon 243.8, Augustine exclaims, “If such a great corporeal beauty (*tanta corporis pulchritudine*) is manifest in our flesh even now, how much greater will it be there.” In such remarks we hear echoes of Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:9, “Eye hath not seen or ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those who love him” (quoting, in turn, Is 64:4, 65:17). To Mani he says, “let us praise God because he has given such a great good even to this beauty, though it is the least. Yet let us not cling to it as lovers of it, but let us pass beyond it as lovers of God, in order that, situated above it, we may judge concerning it and may not be entangled in it and judged with it. And let us hasten to the good that is not spread out in space, and does not pass in time, and from which all natures in places and times receive beauty and form. In order to see that good, let us cleanse our heart by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who said, *Blessed are the clean of heart because they shall see God* (Mt 5:8).” Answer to the “Letter of Mani,” known as “The Foundation” (*Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant Fundamenti*) 42.48.

force of a non-bodily nature” but its works we nevertheless see as they are embodied, and by them, as with the works of the Creator God, we are frequently “amazed”:

Look round at the order imposed on things, at the beauty of cultivated fields, of thickets uprooted, of fruit trees planted and grafted, all the things we see and love in the countryside; look at the very order of the state, at the noble piles of buildings, at the variety of arts and crafts, at the number of languages, at the depths of memory, at the ripeness of eloquence. All these things are works of the soul. How many and how great are the works of the soul, all of which you can see, and you can't see the soul itself!¹⁴

It becomes apparent to Augustine that a keener awareness of the work of the artist, including most notably the Divine Artist, makes us want to know the artist. This is to him only natural:

Should one look at the works and not look for the craftsman? You look at the earth bearing fruit, you look at the sea full of its animals, you look at the air full of flying creatures, you look at the sky bright with stars; you recognize the changes of the seasons, you consider the four parts of the year, how the leaves fall from the trees and come back again, how their seeds are given their numbers, and each thing has its measurements, its weights, how all things are being administered in their own ranks and order, the sky up above with total peace, the earth down below having its own proper beauty, the beauty *sui generis* of things giving way to and succeeding each other. Gazing on all these things you behold them now all given life by created spirit, and you don't go looking for the craftsman of such a great work?¹⁵

This passage comes from a sermon whose purpose was explicitly Christian apologetics, and the language here is far more indebted to biblical passages Augustine quotes frequently than it is to Plotinus. Seminal

¹⁴ Sermon 360B.9; *ibid.*, 371.

¹⁵ Sermon 198.31; *ibid.*, 202.

biblical texts in his address to the beauty of creation include Wisdom 11:20–21, alluded to here, and Psalm 19, a poem that provides much of the framework for Augustine’s method and is likewise to be found quoted everywhere in his writings. This biblical grounding is the element most often overlooked, I think, when Augustine’s “Neoplatonism” is emphasized too strongly, as it certainly is in Karol Svoboda’s *L’Esthétique de saint Augustin et ses sources*,¹⁶ a work that has had a significant influence in characterizing Augustine’s aesthetics in western scholarship generally. James O’Donnell has more recently examined the role of Neoplatonism in Augustine’s writings and concluded more accurately, “It is not that he discovered that the Plotinian method did not work; he discovered that it did work, and that it was not enough.”¹⁷

Created Beauty

The distinction between use and enjoyment of something for its own sake is basic to the argument of Augustine in *On Christian Doctrine*,¹⁸ his book on hermeneutics and what we should now call “literary theory.”¹⁹ Here Augustine is elaborating a method for reading the text of Scripture in such a way that readers will not be distracted by aesthetic preoccupation with matters of style and language (however important these are) from a deeper intellectual purpose in reading, namely to come to an understanding of the divine authorial intention. That is to say, we are asked to refer from the beauty of the art object back to the intellectual being who created it. For Augustine, attention must be devoted to matters of composition as a means we use en route to our enjoyment of a primary encounter with meaning in the text. He allows that some elements we may both “enjoy *and* use” (1.3), but his concern is that the

¹⁶ See note 2.

¹⁷ James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions. Commentary in Three Volumes* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958). David Bentley Hart reflects Augustine when he says that “the idea of the beautiful—which somehow requires the sensual to fulfill its ‘ideal’ nature—can never really be separated from the beauty that lies near at hand,” in *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 20.

¹⁸ *De doctrina Christiana* 1.3–5, D. W. Robertson, Jr., trans., *Saint Augustine: On Christian Doctrine* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958).

¹⁹ See David Lyle Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), chaps. 1 and 3, for an extended discussion.

goal of our intellectual journey not be frustrated or detained through arrested development, such as too narrow a preoccupation with style or method, or indeed any other species of idolatry of the sign. He does not deny to literary language its beauty; indeed, he will go on to say that its various beauties are indispensable, the means of drawing us on in our quest for meaning, and hence to be considered most carefully. His point is cautionary, simply that we should guard lest

the beauty of the country through which we pass, and the very pleasure of the motion, charm our hearts, and turning these things which we ought to use into objects of enjoyment, we become unwilling to hasten to the end of our journey; and becoming engrossed in a factitious delight, our thoughts are diverted from that home whose delights would make us truly happy.²⁰

The rind or outer husk of an edible fruit is what attracts us to it, and therefore is a critical element of our knowledge. Yet it is not the ultimate good we seek; that is the kernel or meat within.²¹ Analogously, when we are said to “enjoy” the company of a noble intellect or virtuous person, says Augustine, we should not “stop short upon the road, and place our hope of happiness in man or angel” (1.33.36), but rather recognize that “when [we] have joy of a man in God, it is God rather than man that [we] enjoy” (1.33.37). For Augustine, so far from denigrating the person in question, this recognition gives to that person the full measure of his value as a creature made in the image of God. In all of these examples, the issue is right reference, and Augustine’s classic defense of Greek and Roman pagan poetry in the education of Christians depends upon it. But here too we see that the paradigm he draws upon is biblical, even as he is acknowledging the value of Neoplatonism:

²⁰ *De doctrina* 1.4 in the American edition of J. F. Shaw, trans., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st ser., vol. 2, *St. Augustine's City of God and Christian Doctrine* (1887; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004). For an account of the almost thirty-year hiatus in his writing of this book, see David Lyle Jeffrey, “Self-Examination and the Examination of Texts: Augustine’s Confessions and On Christian Doctrine,” in *Houses of the Interpreter: Reading Scripture, Reading Culture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 39–53.

²¹ *De doctrina* 3.7.11; cf. 3.5.9; see the discussion by H. I. Marrou, *S. Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (Paris, 1938), 413.

Moreover, if those who are called philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it. For the Egyptians had not only the idols and heavy burdens which the people of Israel hated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and garments, which the same people when going out of Egypt appropriated to themselves, designing them for a better use, not doing this on their own authority, but by the command of God.²²

Right reference for meaning is in this context essentially a matter of discernment between rightly ordered affection and idolatry of the mere sign, in which, for Augustine as for most readers of the Bible in his day, we are instructed by the Scriptures narratively: for example, it may occur to the reader of Exodus that the gold with which Aaron fashioned the golden calf idol may well have had the same source as that which was later, more properly, to be appropriated by the artists Bezalel, Aholiab, and the “wise-hearted women” to adorn with art the tabernacle for God’s presence in the sanctuary.²³ The issue is fittingness. This passage is but one of many biblical archetypes on which Augustine drew for his distinction between use and enjoyment. To distinguish is not to denigrate; Augustine shows that what is frequently at issue in such narratives is an argument for the reader’s acquisition of rightly ordered love; such love, he will say repeatedly, does not disparage the body or any beautiful thing in the world, since they are expressions of a universal language of love emanating from the “Maker of all things, visible and invisible” (Nicene Creed). In this context his pervasive praise for the beauties of nature (Creation) is poetic, and itself beautiful. It may be too much to say, as does Hans Urs von Balthasar, that such praise of nature constitutes effectively a contradiction of all Platonism, but it certainly qualifies it.²⁴

²² Shaw, *St. Augustine’s City of God*, 2.40.60.

²³ See David Lyle Jeffrey, “Bible Translation and the Future of Spiritual Interpretation,” *Modern Theology* 28, no. 4 (2012), 692; see also Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, 52–59.

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 7 vols., ed. Joseph Fessio, S.J., and John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 2.123. Cf. Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 130–31.

Creation itself, rightly viewed, is for Augustine the beauty that awakens us to Beauty. Reciprocally, Beauty lets us in turn appreciate mortal beauty in a fuller way. His rhetoric seldom soars as high as when he turns his prose to this subject:

Ask the loveliness of the earth, ask the loveliness of the sea, ask the loveliness of the wide airy spaces, ask the loveliness of the sky, ask the order of the stars, ask the sun making the day light with its beams, ask the moon tempering the darkness of the night that follows, ask the living things which move in the waters, which tarry on the land, which fly in the air; ask the souls that are hidden, the bodies that are perceptive; the visible things which must be governed, the invisible things which govern—ask all these things, and they will all answer thee, Lo, see we are lovely. Their loveliness is their confession. And these lovely but mutable things, who has made them, save Beauty immutable?²⁵

Finally, in the Incarnation Christ made manifest God's own immutable Beauty in visible form; thus for Augustine the incarnate God is "beautiful in heaven; beautiful on earth; beautiful in the womb; beautiful in his parents' hands," and even "beautiful on the Cross."²⁶ Here immutable Beauty itself has come to have a corporeal form that draws us to the beauty of Creation's meaning; this is a principle that was to be realized abundantly in the plastic and graphic arts over the next millennium and beyond, especially in regard to the restoration of Creation (or re-creation) effected in the Atonement. Thus, for Augustine and the artists who follow in this train, it is entirely fitting to speak of the Cross, of the Crucifixion, as beautiful:

"He had no form or comeliness that we should look at Him."
The deformity of Christ forms you. For if He had not wished to

²⁵ Sermon 241.2.2, trans. Erich Przywara, *An Augustine Synthesis* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1939), 116.

²⁶ *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 44.3; cf. 45.7. A. Cleveland Cox, trans., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st ser., vol. 8 (1888; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 146, 148. See here Richard Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts from the Catacombs to the Eve of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9–12, 31–33.

be deformed you would not have received back the form that you lost. Therefore, He hung deformed upon the cross, but His deformity was our beauty.²⁷

Transcendent Beauty

To a degree that can be obscure to our contemporaries, to refer to the Cross as beautiful in the fourth century was to put considerable strain on the aesthetic idea of proportion or “fittingness.” While Christians were from the outset identified as the *crucis religiosi*, it was not a compliment; the association of salvation with the ignoblest of executions was still, as Paul put it, “a stumbling block to the Jews, and foolishness to the Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23).²⁸ To gesticulate on the forehead with the sign of Cross seems to have become customary in the second century, at least according to Tertullian. It seems likely that there was an implied biblical warrant, with repeated self-crossing an indication of penitence and grief for the consequences of sin (perhaps recollecting the Tau on the foreheads of “those who sigh” in Ezek 9:4–6) and a declaration of a willingness to take up one’s cross (Lk 9:23), if necessary unto martyrdom.²⁹ Alex Stock has argued that Paul’s reference to the Cross as “stigma” and “stigmata” (Gal 6:17) is analogous to the branding of slaves, and yet also parallel to the commandment in Deuteronomy 11:18 to bind Torah “as a sign on your hand and frontlets between your eyes” (cf. Dt 6:8).³⁰ But visual appearances of the Cross in Christian art come later, and appear then slowly, even secretly. We do not find the Cross in fresco art of the catacombs, for example, but where we might expect it other symbols such as an anchor, lamb, shepherd, even the cryptogram *ichthys*. Indirect references to Christ’s death such as the staurogram, a compression of the *tau* and *rho* in the Greek word *stauros*, may have appeared as a proto-ligature, as a species of *nomina sacra* in Papyri Bodmer P45, P66, and P75. As Larry Hurtado has noted, the two-letter compendium to those prepared to look for it, might suggest the figure of a man on a cross.³¹ Since these manuscripts considerably predate Constan-

²⁷ Sermon 27.6, cited in Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 234.

²⁸ Tertullian, *Apologeticus adversus genes pro Christianus*, PL 1:365–66.

²⁹ Viladesau, *Beauty of the Cross*, 42–43.

³⁰ Alex Stock, *Poetische Dogmatik: Christologie: Figuren* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2001), 318–19.

³¹ Larry Hurtado, “The Staurogram in Early Christian Manuscripts: The Earliest Visual

tine's famous *labarum*, his cross in the sky vision on the Milvian bridge and its triumphalist motto, *in hoc signo vincis* (in 312 AD), for Hurtado the use of the staurogram suggests a proleptic art image such as will appear in more typical contexts only much later, in the middle to late fourth century. Given the dating, the question naturally arises: was it Constantine who made the sign of the Cross publicly acceptable?

In the first part of his reign, Constantine continued to crucify convicted slaves. Eusebius tells us that later on he gave it up, in honor of the Passion.³² It is sometimes noted that a medallion with the bust of Constantine, wearing a helmet with a tiny, nearly invisible Christogram, was minted around 315 AD, but this is not really a representation of the Cross.³³ About thirty-five years later a Roman sarcophagus was carved with a cross, in relief, on which the Christogram is superposed through the imposition of a laurel wreath; with the head of Sol on the right and Luna on the left, we have a clear imitation of earlier depictions of the emperors here attached to the "triumphant cross" (see Figure 1).³⁴ This example is unique, but clearly Constantinian. Elsewhere, however, the use of the Cross continues to be minimalist, even when a subject might seem to warrant it. In the Mausoleum of Santa Costanza in Rome, a church built by Constantine as a mausoleum for his daughter in 354 AD, there is an apse mosaic of the *traditio legis* in which the representation of Christ who is passing on the Law to Peter (*Dominus legem dat*) is identified in part by a tiny unadorned "x" floating above his head, asymmetrically.³⁵ All of these signs remain cryptographic; none gives us the crucifixion of Jesus with verisimilitude.

Reference to the Crucified Jesus?," in *New Testament Manuscripts*, ed. Thomas Kraus (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 207–26.

³² Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae* 1.8.

³³ Johannes G. Deckers, "Constantine the Great and Early Christian Art," in *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, ed. Jeffrey Spier (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 89; cf. Josef Engemann, *Deutung und Bedeutung frühchristlicher Bildwerke* (Darmstadt: WBG; 1. Auflage, 1997).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 105–6.

³⁵ Deckers, "Constantine the Great and Early Christian Art," 95; Fabrizio Bisconti, "Variazioni sul tema della Traditio legis: Vecchie e nuove acquisizioni," *Vetera christianorum* 40 (2003): 251–70. It is a curiosity worthy of further reflection that Augustine's vocabulary for divine beauty, while drawn from his exegesis, is synthetic, more theological than philologically or semantically driven. He does not know Hebrew, yet seems to have sensed, despite the filter of the LXX, what the *Vetus Latina* could not alone give him. The Hebrew Scriptures use terms for beauty such as *yafeh* (beau-

Figure 1



There are small but important exceptions. Somewhere around the beginning of the third century, perhaps in Syria, someone carved an amulet out of jasper, probably for a pagan magician, which depicts Jesus hanging naked on the Cross, surrounded by magical names.³⁶ It

e.g., Is 28:5; 44:13) more or less equally to refer to feminine beauty, artistic beauty, Hebrew term for beauty, *mareh*, occurs in Isaiah 53:2, a passage crucial to Augustine in our context. The Septuagint translates *yafeh* with *doxa* in passages in which the term may signify “glory” or “radiance” as well as beauty (e.g., Ps 29:2; 96:6–8), but *kalos*, *kallon* in places where aesthetic or feminine beauty would seem to be signified (e.g., Ezek 27:2,4,11), as well as for “splendor” or “magnificence” (e.g., Ezek 28:12, 17; 31:8). In Isaiah 44, which refers to the realistic beauty of comeliness in a statue, Hebrew *tip ara* is rendered with *kale*, and so also is *mareh* (Is 53:2) with *kalos*. When we come to the Vetus Latina renderings, where there were several versions possibly available, we can be less than certain, but if the Vulgate can be assumed to replicate the norms of usage in regard to these terms, it is interesting to note that with regard to those passages of Scripture that are crucial to Augustine’s view of the Beauty of the Cross, the Latin texts themselves do not provide his vocabulary. Whereas in the Vg for Isaiah 53:2 we have *neque décor*, for the doubled *yafeh* and *kalei* of Psalm 45:2 we have *speciosa forma*. Augustine will occasionally use the latter phrase, but in discussing the Psalm 45 and Isaiah 53 texts he prefers above all *pulcher*, *pulchram*, and *pulchritudo*, terms that in the Vulgate are most frequently found in the Song of Songs referring to the beauty of the Bride and Bridegroom. Yet this is the term preferred where Augustine is building up from those counterpoised passages his cruciform aesthetics. *Pulcher*, however, comports better with the dominant Hebrew terms—a result, perhaps, of Augustine’s often uncanny contextual discernment.

³⁶ Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, 228.

is not inconceivable that such a magical amulet, however such things were discouraged by the bishops, may have given rise to a more orthodox gem stone carving of Jesus crucified with all twelve disciples gathered round the Cross. In this later miniature, likely Syrian and of the mid-fourth century, above Jesus's head appears the acrostic *ich-thys*.³⁷ Like other medallions of the sort, it was probably used as a signet ring. But full scenes of the Passion, such as the four carved ivory reliefs known as the Maskell ivories, do not appear until after the first quarter of the fifth century. These, like the gemstone signets, are all personal objects; so too would have been the plain iron cross worn by St. Macrina (d. 379), discovered by her brother St. Gregory of Nyssa at her death.³⁸ None may be associated with public worship. Processional crosses begin to appear in the fifth to sixth centuries but then as stauromograms, not crucifixes.³⁹

What Augustine calls the "beautiful cross," the adorned, exalted cross such as we find in the mosaic apses of prominent churches in Rome, appears first around 400 AD. A splendid example is the figure of Christ enthroned, surrounded by the apostles in the Heavenly City, in the apse of Santa Pudenziana (ca. 400; see Figure 2).⁴⁰ Here a beautiful jeweled cross hovers over the head of Christ on his throne. It is striking, and not duplicated before the resplendent "beautiful crosses" of churches in Ravenna more than a century later, such as in the apse of Sant' Appolinaire in Classe (about 549), whereas in Santa Pudenziana, the Cross is already meant to be both beautiful and a focus of worship (see Figure 3).⁴¹ In Santa Pudenziana the images of the four evangelical beasts suggest both the divine presence in Ezekiel's vision and the sign in the sky of the returning Christ from Revelation. In Sant' Appolinaire, the gem-studded golden cross has a head of Christ where the beams cross, and the scene is of the Transfiguration, with

³⁷ Ibid., 229; cf. the helpful notes by Felicity Harley.

³⁸ Charles G. Hebermann et al., eds., *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15 vols. (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1908), 4.524b.

³⁹ Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, 233–36, provides examples in iron from the fifth and early sixth centuries.

⁴⁰ Anne-Orange Poilpré, *Maiestas Domini: Une image de l'Eglise en occident Ve-IX siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 2006); Fabrizio Bisconti, ed., *Termini di iconografia paleocristiana* (Rome: Vatican City, 2000); cf. Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, 113.

⁴¹ Herbert L. Kessler, "Bright Gardens of Paradise," in Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, 129.

the Cross representing the transfigured Lord. In San Vitale, angels hover over the Abraham *akedah* mosaic with a beautiful medallion cross, and the Cross nimbus behind the enthroned Christ in S. Apollinaire Nuovo follows the pantocrator mosaics of Hagia Sophia and S. Maria Maggiore; all are mid-fifth century or later, and the matchless Vatican Cross, a reliquary cross of Justin II, is sixth century (see Figure 4). In the richly illustrated Rabbula Gospels (586 AD), the crucifixion of Jesus is depicted with verisimilitude—the earliest known such depiction in painting.⁴²



Figure 2

⁴² Written in Syriac translation (the Peshitta); the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension illuminations may have been lifted from a Greek gospel (Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, 276, following Massimo Bernabò et al.).



Figure 3



Figure 4

Thus, somewhere between about 350 and 425 AD, depiction of the Cross went from being a code, a staurogram, a secret sign for believers, to being a subject fit for the finest focal artwork of great sanctuaries. What were the causes of this remarkable change?

One of the causes may simply be the public image of Christianity after the triumph of Constantine. Augustine seems indirectly to acknowledge this when he says of Christ in *Sermon 87*: “You see, he has come forth from hidden obscurity to being a celebrity. Christ is known now, Christ is preached everywhere. . . . He was once someone laughable” (Serm. 87.9).⁴³ Our bishop elsewhere seems to take a more nuanced view of the public reason given for Constantine’s ban on public crucifixion:

Then, there was nothing more unbearable in the flesh; now, there is nothing more glorious on the forehead. What did he who gave such honor to his punishment save for his faithful? Indeed, now among the punishments of the convicted it is no longer in use by the Romans; for where the cross of the Lord has been honored, it has been thought that a guilty man would also be honored if he were crucified (*Tractatus in Ioannem* 36.5; ca. 409 AD).

On Augustine’s view, the Cross had already gained more honorable than dishonorable associations in the public square. What once had necessarily to be hidden had now, in a variety of ways, entered mainstream culture; it could not be hidden anymore.

Yet there are deeper reasons—theological and aesthetic—why Augustine clearly wants to revise residually negative social views of the Cross. For Christians, he will argue, it is no longer a symbol of shameful death, nor even just a permissible sign of the *religiosi crucis*; it is the very signature of Divine Beauty. He asks his fellow Christians to see the Cross not just through the eyes of faith, but in particular through the eyes of love—the eyes of the Church as Bride of Christ. What this per-

⁴³ John E. Rotelle, ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine: Sermons on the New Testament*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 3.412. All sermon quotations are from this translation unless otherwise noted.

spective creates initially is irony and paradox where the crucifixion is concerned, but such paradox as is interpretable by love, beginning with the love of the Bride. Thus, though the beauty of the Bride has been degraded by sin, "it is made beautiful (*pulchra*) by him" (*Serm.* 138.6); she then develops correspondingly a powerful spiritual love for the Bridegroom. In the thrall of this love she loves Christ "crowned with thorns, ugly and without dignity" (Is 53:2). "What is it that she loves?" Augustine asks; "is it a fine figure of a man above the sons of men?" The reference here to Psalm 45 juxtaposes the two biblical texts in such a way as to create contradiction for the unbeliever yet a beautiful paradox or mystery for the Bride. "That bridegroom," he says, "became ugly for the sake of his ugly bride, in order to make her beautiful" (*pulchram*; *Serm.* 95.4). Speaking elsewhere of these two texts (Is 53 and Ps 45), Augustine calls them "two flutes, playing, as it were, differing tunes, but one Spirit blows into both . . . [so] they are not discordant" (*Tractatus in Epistoli Ioannem* 9.2; ca. 429 AD). The unbeliever hears only cacophony. Now we see where Augustine is going with his biblical trope. Just as there can be no meaningful concept of Truth without the possibility of falsification, that is, of giving the lie to a claim, so too there can be no concept of the Beautiful without a contrary, the Ugly. On the Cross, two poles, as John Donne would later say, "meet" in a startling frisson. So Augustine: "For the sake of your faith Christ became deformed, yet Christ remains fair—fair in form above the sons of men." How so? Or, as Augustine says in a similar passage (*Serm.* 44.2), "Where does all this beauty come from?" His answer:

Christ's deformity is what gives form (*forma, formosa*) to you. If He had been unwilling to be deformed, you would never have gotten back the form you lost. So He hung on the cross, deformed; but his deformity was our beauty (*sed deformitas illius pulchritudo nostra erat*). (*Serm.* 27.6; cf. *Serm.* 44.4)

In this way, "a foul sight, the sight of a man crucified . . . produced beauty. What beauty? that of the Resurrection" (*Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons*, 346).⁴⁴ Hence, for the Bride, who longs to see the Bridegroom's

⁴⁴ The question is well put by Viladesau, *Beauty of the Cross*, 9.

face, "Woe to that love of thine, if thou canst conceive anything more beautiful than Him, from who is all Beauty" (*sup. Ps 44:16*). Transcendent Beauty is the source and grounding of that beauty seen in her crucified beloved by the Bride. "He loved us first who is always beautiful," Augustine says elsewhere, and "by loving [him] we in turn are made beautiful" (*Tractatus in Epistolam Ioannis 9.9*).⁴⁵

There is thus another paradox in Augustine's idea of beauty in the Cross, namely that transcendent Beauty reveals itself only to those who have "eyes to see" in the sense that the prophets mean it. In this much, for Augustine, we might almost say that "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder." Speaking of those who crucified Christ, he notes that "they had not eyes whereby Christ could seem beautiful. To what sort of eyes did Christ seem beautiful? To such as Christ himself sought" (*sup. Ps 128:8*). To see his beauty, he adds, our "eyes must be cleansed." Beauty in the Cross is possible to believers because "he healed our eyes" (*Tractatus in Ioannem 2.16.2*). What counts as beautiful is not a matter of random subjectivity, therefore, but is, in the manner the prophets understood, determined by a precondition of the heart.

As Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, it is in this "converted" sense that Augustine can speak of the beauty of the Cross, and argue that Christ crucified "is the basis and standard of everything that is beautiful and all ideas of the beautiful . . . We have to learn from [him] what beauty is."⁴⁶ When Augustine reads Psalm 45, "out of Zion is the semblance of his beauty," he sees transcendent Beauty informing terrestrial beauty, yet for him, of course, this transcendent beauty actually inhabited the world (*sup. Ps 45:4*). Christ never abandoned, even in his disfigurement on the Cross, "that beauty which is in the form of God" (*sup. Ps 104:5*); transcendent Beauty shines through the "form of one who hung upon the cross," he says, and it transfigures that form with glory. Since "God is always beautiful, never deformed, never changeable" (*Tractatus in Epistolam Ioannis, 9.9*), our beauty, and our perception of beauty, will be clarified to the degree our love recognizes his beauty.

This is the sense of "aesthetic" in Augustine that leads Michael Hanby

⁴⁵ Translation by John W.W. Rettig, *St. Augustine: Tractates on the Gospel of John* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 257.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Valadesau, *Beauty of the Cross*, 10 (but the reference is inaccurate).

to his conclusion, following Balthasar, that for Augustine "salvation is aesthetic. It consists in the restoration of beauty from the beautiful itself, and it takes the form of the love of the beautiful—because the beautiful *is* love, and because apart from participation in this love there is finally nothing."⁴⁷

In Tractate 118 of his work on the Gospel of John, Augustine comments on the gospel accounts of the crucifixion of the Lord in such a way as to show it to be the paradigmatic *kairos*, time and eternity conjoined. He applies to it the prayer of Paul in Ephesians "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:17–19). He then interprets this beautiful apostolic prayer in a cruciform way, saying of the Cross:

Its breadth lies in the transverse beam, on which the hands of the Crucified are extended; and signifies good works in all the breadth of love. Its length extends from the transverse beam to the ground, and is that whereto the back and feet are affixed, and signifies perseverance through the whole length of time to the end. Its height is in the summit, which rises upwards above the transverse beam; and signifies the supernal goal, to which all works have reference, since all things that are done well and perseveringly, in respect of their breadth and length, are to be done also with due regard to the exalted character of the divine rewards. Its depth is found in the part that is fixed into the earth, for there it is both concealed and invisible, and yet from thence spring up all those parts that are outstanding and evident to the senses; just as all that is good in us proceeds from the depths of the grace of God, which is beyond the reach of human comprehension and judgment.⁴⁸

The Cross of Christ is the sign of his glory, but it is rooted and



⁴⁷ *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), 55.

⁴⁸ Tractate 118.5; John Gibb and James Innes, trans., in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2004), 432.

grounded in the mortal dirt of our reality, indeed, in the reality of our deformity. This, above all, makes the Cross beautiful in our eyes.