

The Ostia Experience

Augustine's *Confessions* IX.x

The day when my mother was going to die was hanging over us. You knew the day; we didn't. It just so happened that—with you, I believe, taking hidden measures to manage our affairs—my mother and I were standing alone in the house where we were staying, leaning at a window and looking out on the garden. This was in Ostia on the Tiber, far from the maddening crowds, where we were getting some rest after the hard work of long travel and getting set to sail. Alone together, we were having a very pleasant conversation. Forgetting what had passed by, stretched out toward what lies before us, we were asking each other what the the eternal life of the saints was going to be like, even though no eye has seen it, no ear has heard it, and it has never climbed up into the human heart. Yet we did so under the care of the present truth, which is you. We opened the mouths of our hearts to drink from the higher streams that flow from your wellspring, the wellspring of life, which is with you. Perhaps, splashed by by those waters, we could in some way think of so great a thing, at least as far as our capacities could allow.

When our talk arrived at an end, it seemed like even the greatest delight of the fleshy senses illuminated by the greatest embodied light wouldn't be worth comparing to the pleasure of that eternal life. It wouldn't even be worth remembering. Straightening ourselves up, our feelings aflame for it itself, we walked step by step through all embodied things and even the heavens themselves, through the sun and the moon and the stars that shine their light down on the earth. And here we were climbing even further through your works. Yet we were climbing on the inside. We were climbing by thinking and talking and wondering. When we arrived at our minds, we climbed past those too, so that we could reach a place that never lacks in fertility. That's where you feed Israel the food of truth forever. That's where life is wisdom. Through wisdom, everything that has been and will be comes to be. But wisdom itself does not 'come to be.' It is as it was. It is as it will be. Or rather: "have been" and "will be" are not in it. Only "to be" is in wisdom, since it is eternal. And "have been" and "will be" aren't eternal. So while we are talking and opening our mouths to drink it all in, we are reaching out to wisdom ever so slightly with every heartbeat. And then we breathed out. We abandoned this early harvest of the Spirit there because it was bound to that place. We then retraced our steps back to our noisy mouths, with their words that begin and end. How are they in any way like your word, our lord, which remains in itself without getting old and yet makes all things new?

And so we were saying, “What if all this fleshy noise fell silent? What if these fantasies of lands and waters and skies fell silent? What if the stars fell silent? What if the soul itself fell silent to itself and went past itself by not thinking of itself? What if dreams and imagined revelations fell silent? What if every language and every sign, everything that happened by passing by fell entirely silent? Even if all these things did talk, they would say to whomever listened, ‘We didn’t make ourselves. The one who remains in eternity made us.’ What if, after saying this, they again fell silent? What if, after they perked up our ears to the one who made them, he then spoke—not through them, but through himself? What if we could hear his word, not through some fleshy tongue or some angelic voice or some sound from the clouds or some riddle of similarity, but through him himself? What if we could hear the one that we love in all these things without all these things? Would it be like now, when we are stretching ourselves out and reaching out with grasping thoughts toward the eternal wisdom that remains above all things? What if we could hold onto this? What if all those other visions, so very unequal to wisdom, were dragged away, leaving only wisdom to grasp and devour and swallow up in more inward joys the one who looks at it? Would everlasting life then be like this movement of understanding, through which we breathed out? Wouldn’t that be what it means to be ‘enter into the joy of your lord?’ And when would this be? Wouldn’t it be when everyone is raised up again, but not everyone will be changed?”

These are the kinds of things I was saying, even if not in that exact measure or in those precise words. Still, Lord, you know that on that day, as we were saying those things, this world and all its delights were growing cheaper with each word. It was then that my mother said, “Son, as much as you want to hold onto me, I don’t find joy in anything in this life anymore. What am I still doing here? Why am I here? I don’t know. My hope for this age is already all used up. There was only one thing that kept me desiring to stay on a little longer in this life: to see you become a Catholic Christian before dying. My God responded to me and more. I see you disregarding earthly happiness and becoming a slave to God. So what am I doing here?”