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AUGUSTINE *CONFESSIONS* VIII 8, 19 AND HORACE

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In *Confessions* VIII 8, 19 Augustine draws upon an expression in one of Horace's epistles. The borrowing is significant in that both writers are urging that spiritual well-being cannot be reached by physical means.

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In the eighth book, § 8, 19, of his *Confessions* Augustine described the agony of spirit which preceded his conversion. That the agony was spiritual is emphasized by the choice of language: *anima, animus, cor, mens, pectus, spiritus, intus*. There were of course physical manifestations of this interior turmoil, but the distress was fundamentally of the mind. Augustine's goal was to «enter into a pact and covenant with God», and for that one had to be willing, *velle*, as he well knew. Putting his difficulty in physical terms, he acknowledged that «to reach that destination one does not use ships or chariots or feet» (*conf.* VIII 8, 19¹).

The commentators² all recognize that Augustine here drew upon a passage in Plotinus. Most recently Peter White (White 2019, p. 262) commented that «the language is borrowed from Plotinus' account of the soul's return to the One in 'On Beauty' (*Enneads* 1.6.8, in Armstrong's translation): "Our country from which we came is there, our Father is there ... We cannot get there on foot ... You must not get ready a carriage, either, or a boat"». An earlier commentator, James J. O'Donnell, referred the reader to his note on a previous occurrence of the borrowed expression in the first book, where he added that Ambrose had also appropriated Plotinus' passage in *Isaac* 8, 78-

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¹ Translation by Chadwick 1991, p. 147.

² For instance, Pizzolato 1994, p. 270.

79 *nec navibus fugiamus aut curribus aut equis* (O'Donnell 1992, vol. III, p. 47 and vol. II, pp. 94-95).

What is helpful about O'Donnell's citation of Ambrose is that we see in his paraphrase of Plotinus the choice of the everyday Latin word you would expect for chariots: *curribus*. When we turn, finally, to Augustine's Latin however the language is unexpected and striking: *non illuc ibatur navibus aut quadrigis aut pedibus* (conf. VIII 8, 19). No simple chariot here (despite Chadwick's translation), but a four-horse racing chariot. So far as I know, no one has asked why Augustine shunned the obvious word in favour of a rather extravagant one.

The answer is that he has remembered a passage in Horace, *epist.* I 11, 28-29 *navibus atque || quadrigis petimus bene vivere* («in ships and four-horse chariots we make for happiness»). Apart from drawing attention to this unnoticed allusion, I want as well to suggest that it is neither decorative nor inert. I believe that Augustine alluded to the verse-letter of Horace because its moral message was, for a pagan at any rate, similar to his own situation.

Horace's epistle is addressed to one Bullatius, who was vacationing among the glamorous cities of the Greek East. Travel abroad provided the moralizing poet with one of his favoured themes, that true contentment is indifferent to place. True contentment is not to be secured by physical means, but by composure of the spirit, *aequanimitas*. As Horace put it in the last line of the poem, you can be happy anywhere *animus si te non deficit aequus*. Since he was discoursing on physical travel to faraway places his use of the expression *navibus atque || quadrigis* was in keeping with his theme. Since Horace insisted that the physical means (or vehicles) we employ to secure (or reach) happiness were inadequate, Augustine found that his expression would serve to paraphrase the passage from Plotinus. Any reader who picked up the allusion to Horace would see that the message of his verse-epistle was in harmony with Augustine's insistence upon the need to adjust the mind so as to make it capable of reaching its goal.

Augustine's choice of the word *quadrigis*, rather than *curribus*, or perhaps *carpentis* (= waggons: the word Juvenal used in his allusion to the Horatian phrase in his satire 9, 132), clinches his specific debt to Horace. Harald Hagendahl however did not include this passage in his collection of *testimonia* (Hagendahl 1967, vol. I, pp. 184-190, especially pp. 188-189). That is surely no reproach to him, since Augustine did not signalize the allusion by naming the poet he drew upon, and it would be unreasonable to expect anyone to identify in the ocean of Augustine's prose works a tiny pearl like this. But the passage should go some way to confirming Hagendahl's hunch that Augustine «was fairly well acquainted with the *Satires* and *Epistles*» (that is to say, he was not drawing on an anthology; cfr. vol. II, p. 468 on Augustine's at-

titudes). There may even be a further piece of evidence to suggest that Augustine had this poem in mind when composing the narrative of his conversion.

In line 28, just before mentioning the ships and chariots, Horace employed a striking oxymoron to point his criticism of the Roman's restless travel urge: *strenua nos exercet inertia* («a busy idleness troubles us»). Augustine too used oxymora in VIII 8, 19 *insaniebam salubriter et moriebar vitaliter*. One of the referees of this note drew attention to a few more such oxymora «that are essential to express the general point of the chapter», namely *volens quo nollem perveneram* (VIII 5, 11), *sarcina saeculi... dulciter premebar* (VIII 5, 12), and *severa misericordia* (VIII 11, 25). It thus seems to me worth considering that Augustine's recollection of the short sentence which precedes the phrase *navibus atque || quadrigis* may have prompted an additional debt to Horace's rhetoric.

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