How the West Was Won

Essays on Literary Imagination, the Canon, and the Christian Middle Ages for Burcht Pranger

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FAST FORWARD, OR: THE THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL EVENT IN QUICK MOTION (MIRACLES, MEDIA, AND MULTITUDES IN ST. AUGUSTINE)

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No better starting point than St. Augustine's views can be found to obtain a summary--albeit contradictory and evolving, exemplary as well as speculatively deeply appealing--understanding of the early and medieval Church's now exuberant, then more reluctant, but always extensive and intensive, dealings with miracles and marvels and the claims, true and false, that were made in their name by the faithful and imposters alike. More than St. Paul or any other of the Fathers of the Church, Augustine sets out the parameters for reconceiving the theology of miracles and miracle belief, together with their epistemological and moral, spiritual and ecclesial presuppositions and ramifications. In spite of his initial reluctance to give miracles and miracle belief their philosophical no less than theological or pastoral due, Augustine's final statements on the subject arguably remain the most important point of departure and overall frame of reference for all subsequent considerations of their force and significability, event and effect. From St. Thomas Aquinas through the Reformation, and from Blaise Pascal up to Ludwig Wittgenstein, but also in the writings of Alain Badiou no less than those of Jean-Luc Marion, to name just a few examples, the Augustinian legacy of conceptualizing miracles and miracle belief has left a lasting impact on the Western theological and philosophical imagination. It may even offer some of the most suggestive ingredients of any account of the contemporary postsecular world in which religion and media and, I would venture to add, miracles and special effects inform and transform the ways in which current affairs and especially political events present themselves in a variety of generalizing-universalizing, yet also equally intensifying and trivializing-ways.

In so-called everyday life, what is considered extraordinary is given ever newer opportunities to graft itself upon the ordinary, lifting it out of habitual patterns of perception and expectation. Yet in so doing, it exposes the everyday and the ordinary simultaneously--but also, with increasing intensity and at an exponentially growing scale and pace--to possible
sublimity and banality, thus amplifying a risk that was always inherent in the proliferation or, more precisely, dissemination of religious notions and sensibilities, discourses and regimes. Paradoxically, the expansion and phenomenal success of the extraordinary in the ordinary implied a diminished, if remaining, significance of things—indeed, a becoming ordinary of the extraordinary—as well.

This paradoxical logic may surprise us, but it is exactly how the Western canon (and pretty much anything else of significance, elsewhere in the world) was won and, inevitably and immediately, lost again. No one among the Fathers of the Church seemed more acutely aware of this chance and risk—including its political scansion and reverberations—than Augustine. And this is precisely why his writings have remained a standing referent for contemporary political thinking or have regained more and more relevance in the political actuality of everyday as the inner contradictions of modern society and the so-called secular age have become more and more apparent.

While suspicious of the abundant expressions of popular religion such as magic and exorcism, healings and relics, Augustine entertains a complex relationship with the domain of what, traditionally, is conceived as the supernatural. It is this complicated relationship that I wish to bring out in a few broad strokes, mindful of the complexity of the matter and mostly concerned with three or four striking traits of his conception, namely the miracle belief’s publicity and publicity, on the one hand, and the miracle’s presumed acceleration and fastforwarding of natural processes and, hence, special effect on us, on the other. These are two motifs and motivations that, to my knowledge, have not yet found the attention they deserve.

Moreover, Augustine’s argument also relies, thirdly, on a conception of multitude and catholicity—indeed, universality or globality—that is not without implications for the philosophical and theologico-political work that his writings continue to inspire and that, anachronistically speaking, they seem to have anticipated all along, not least in their nuanced dealing with and theorization of miracles, their strategic and pragmatic use and momentum, their political but also more generally persuasive and perlocutionary aspect.

A final, fourth, motif, not explicitly mentioned but deployed throughout his later thought on miracles, martyrs and healings, combines, as Peter Brown has suggested in his study of the lives of the saints, a figure of

“inversed magnitudes” to link a heavenly and earthly aspect of things (often fragmented objects, relics, and the like). In so doing, it enables what I would like to call a specimen of counterfactual thinking that at once liberates and burdens human agency—and, again, politics—in a truly innovative way. Swapping the minimal and the maximal, the particular and the general, singular and universal, the logic of the miracle and of miracle belief holds the key to our understanding of what (in modern terms) we call events, just as it allows us to unlock the contemporary reality and virtuality of so-called special effects (of visual and sensory shock and awe, absorption and immersion, spin and the political affect). Both operate on a less than fully conscious level according to a systematics and rhythm that the documented as well as immemorial archive of religious tradition—again, notably of miracles and miracle belief—is best equipped to make us see (hear, feel) and, indeed, analyze and think through.

As in the immense and infinite spaces of Augustine’s memoria as well as in the infinite spaces within and without of which Pascal speaks no less suggestively, the religious archive of miracles and their testimony holds more in stock than is present, represented or presentable, at any given moment at time. Yet at each of its unique instantiations it makes the virtual totality—and, indeed, total social fact—of its resources and repository felt in the most acute and pressing of manners. As Wittgenstein may have intimated with so many words, religion’s (or, for that matter, the miracle’s) “essence” is the sheer ontological weight with which our human need and custom seems to continually call for these motifs’ and motivations’ reinstantiations, as if there were nothing outside of the very “metaphysics” that our language espouses whenever and wherever it “goes on a holiday” (that is to say, potentially anytime and anywhere).

For reasons that I cannot develop here in all necessary detail, the four aforementioned traits may well be Augustine’s proleptic intuition—and strikingly original interpretation avant la lettre—of the ways in which the phenomena of public and global religion present themselves in the current day and age, propelled and filtered as they now increasingly are by technologies of communication, that is to say, of networks and new media. This already would be sufficient ground to consider Augustine’s thought of continued and renewed interest in the debates concerning the prominent—now salutary, then again disturbing—political theologies in the contemporary, so-called postsecular, world.

Augustine's early definition of miracles is far from rigid, but it has a remarkable precision of its own that is not really affected by its later development, which is marked by revision no less than retraction, attuned as it increasingly is to pragmatic circumstances and perlocutionary effects more than anything else. But then, all these aspects can already be gleaned from the definition that *De utilitate credendi* (The Usefulness of Belief) (xvi, 34) introduces as follows:

By 'miracle' I mean something strange and difficult which exceeds the expectation and capacity of him who marvels at it. Among events of this kind there is nothing more suited to the populace, and to foolish men generally, than what appeals to the senses. But... there are two kinds of miracle. Some there are which merely cause wonder; others produce great gratitude and good will. If one sees a man flying one merely marvels, for such a thing brings no advantage to the spectator beyond the spectacle itself. But if one is affected by some grave and desperate disease and at a word of command immediately gets better, love of one's healer will surpass wonder at one's healing. Such things were done when God appeared to men as true Man, as far as was necessary. The sick were healed. Leper were cleansed. To the lame the power to walk was restored; to the blind, sight; to the deaf, hearing. The men of that time saw water turned into wine, five thousand satisfied with five loaves of bread, waters walked upon, the dead raised.2

One crucial element in this definition and its several characterizations is that the miracle presents an 'authority' that is needed by the man who either lacks reason or is unable to follow its reasonings in full rigor and thus does not succeed in beholding eternal truths in any clear and steadfast manner. This view is intimately connected with the assumption that miracles have, first of all, a deeply pragmatic function and meaning, which, of course, raises the question what, exactly, is wrong with phenomena that are 'merely marvels' or that bring 'no advantage to the spectator beyond the spectacle itself.' After all, could such uselessness not rather be an indication of some inner worth, some intrinsic and objective value, independent from any spectator's subjective appreciation? Alternatively, could not the useless, at certain times and in special contexts, be precisely the most effective and productive, creative or subservive of qualities as the, as it were, anecomic—or otherwise unmediated or non-mediatized—end in itself that does not let itself be appropriated as a means to an ulterior end


In other words, the pragmatic element and purpose that marks, if not motivates, miracles comes out only by value of its contrast to habitualized
perceptions and patterns of behaviour. This is why miracles may not always be needed or opportune and effective (but were—or could again be—indispensable at other times, in different situations, for alternative audiences). Indeed, their very success at bringing something radically novel and memorable, creating a ‘multitude’ that adheres to its principle and practices fidelity to their event, makes us ‘continually aware’ of them and causes us to forget the extraordinary origin and significance of what has now become a mere ordinary near-natural, and automatic, conventional or normative—given (but was not always quite like that).

It has been suggested that Augustine’s definition extends to, perhaps, too broad a variety of natural and supranatural phenomena and events. One interpreter summarizes this tendency as follows: “scattered through his writings the term miraculum has at least five different meanings: angelic prodigy, diabolical mirum, magical legendarium, a phenomenon attributed to pagan deities, and in general anything strange or marvelous.”

Does this mean that the term miracle, far from being a terminus technicus with definite description or clear reference, designates “merely an extraordinary event” of any nature (the supra naturam included), directed to man’s ‘body’ or ‘mind’ with a specific pragmatic purpose in mind? If something more or else—different also from a ‘hidden signal’—is implied in Augustinian miracles and the belief that they install or recreate in multitudes, what exactly, then, could it be?

To answer these questions we must first determine what it would mean for a miracle to appear as arduous or unusual and thereby to exceed the expectation or ability of the one who witnesses it or who subsequently—having first been present as an eyewitness—becomes a martyr for it, thus inspiring or constituting a multitude as things happen. For one thing, it cannot mean that the miracle, for all its supernatural quality and aura, can be believed to have violated or interrupted a natural law in any strict, modern-mechanistic or causalistic sense of the word ‘law.’ Even if God is the free, uncaused ‘cause’ of the universe, His world is not that of a chain of being, of things and events, in which causes determine effects in exclusively proportionate ways.

In Contra Faustum Manichaeum (Answer to Faustus, a Manichean) (26.3), Augustine notes explicitly that miracles cannot counteract the divine established and universal order of things and events, since not even God can act against Himself and the laws of created nature He Himself ordained. All things created follow God’s command and general or special providence, and so do the occurrences or happenings we experience (witness and baptize) as miracles and that seem to contravene our habitual patterns of perception and expectation and that, hence, exceed the far from adequate knowledge that we human creatures (as finite, i.e., mortal, sinful and ‘still weak’ beings) base upon them:

God, the creator and maker of all natures... does nothing contrary to nature. For what he—who is the source of all the measure, number, and order of nature—does will be natural to each thing. But human beings do not do anything contrary to nature except when they sin, but they are restored to their nature by punishment.... But it is not wrong for us to say that God does contrary to nature what he does contrary to what we know of nature. For we also call nature the usual course of nature known to us, and, when God does something contrary to it, these actions are called marvelous and miraculous. But God does nothing contrary to that supreme law of nature which is removed from the knowledge of those who are wicked and still weak, just as he does nothing contrary to himself. But a spiritual and also rational creature, to which class the human soul belongs, sees better what is possible or what is impossible the more it partakes of that immutable law and light. But the more it is removed from it, the more amazed it is at what is unfamiliar and the less it discerns what the future holds.

Such an explanation would seem to suggest that the belief in miracles must, first of all, be attributed to a subjective stance and has, therefore, no objective ground, correlate, or—in terms of the later medieval controversy concerning so-called universals—no so-called fundamentum in re. Miracles, on this view, do not contradict a divinely instituted and universal natural rule or regularity, which, after all, is inviolable, but only the limited interpretation that we—again, as finite, sinful and weak creatures—are given (or give ourselves) of it.

Does this mean, as has been suggested, that “the only difference between miracle and non-miracle is that miracle, being unusual, is assigned to a different mode of causation from ordinary events” and that it springs from so-called “semina seminum implanted in the world at creation,” whereas non-miracles or false miracles have no such seminal ground to

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6 R.M. Grant, Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1952), 217, cited also by Hardon, “The Concept of Miracle from St. Augustine to Modern Apologetics,” 230, n. 2.

explain and justify them? In other words, do miracles, non-miracles, and false miracles, simply belong to different "classes of events," all of them thoroughly "natural," since there is nothing else they ever could be (there being nothing but one, single created universe, for us, mortal beings)? Or is the naturalness of miracles also—or, perhaps, first of all—supranatural in the precise sense that "besides their natural constituents creatures also possess certain seminal elements (seminales rationes) which God can stimulate into operation, contrary to the creature's ordinary mode of activity"? In the latter scenario, the meaning of 'supranatural' would be that of something in and of "nature" which "only a direct intervention of God can actuate." Put differently, as the Scholastics would come to call it, the miraculous quality would thus signal an 'obediential potency' that lies dormant in nature waiting only for God to be triggered.

We need not consider the details of these views here, but this much is clear: if we can reconstruct matters along these lines, a traditional distinction throughout the history of medieval and early modern thought, namely between the secundum naturam ("according to nature") and supra naturam ("above nature") is already preempted by Augustine's more subtle—i.e., neither naturalist nor supranaturalist—interpretation of the phenomena in question.

Augustine's stroke of genius comes at a price, albeit one that no historical or contemporary conception of miracles and miracle belief seems to be able avoid paying. After all, if the world of creation is as such a miracle (an "absolute" miracle, as Wittgenstein will come to suggest in his famous "Lecture on Ethics"), then the smaller, "relative" miracles are, strictly speaking, superfluous or, in any case, not quite up to their concept of eminent—more precisely, divine, if not necessarily exclusive, exceptional—signs. Relative miracles, compared to the absolute miracle that alone is consistent with its concept, would, on this view, be impossible, that is to say, unable to demarcate or otherwise distinguish themselves from the wonder of wonders that the world as such (as a created cosmos or universe) already signals in every single one of its aspects.

Yet, conversely, the modern view that would seek to avoid such contradictions of assuming the presence of relative miracles in the presence of a single absolute one, in the end, fares no better. For if the world is interpreted, not as a grand miracle, but in naturalistic-causal-mechanical terms, then there is no room for separate-relative-miracles either (unless, of course, they are defined as exceptions from and violations of the principle of sufficient reason and natural law, which is, precisely, what renders them unintelligible and a matter of perspectival illusion, superstition or projective, in any case subjective, whim, alone). Against this foil, miracles would likewise represent the impossible par excellence (and an impossibility that not even God, let alone some Deist World-architect, could want or pull off).

Whereas in the classical view the concept of relative miracle does not come off the ground or acquire any distinction since it cannot mark itself off from a creation that is miraculous as such or in toto, in the modern view the miracle (whether relative or absolute, the difference matters little) cannot be thought or experienced since it contraves the bounds of sense or any horizon of possible phenomenologization in principle. Wittgenstein is only consequent, then, to call it nonsensical or absurd. "Saturated" as the phenomenon of the miracle in its own way may be in either (relative or absolute) case, it is fully absorbed in the order and fabric of things (the "great chain of Being," as Arthur Lovejoy called it) in the first, traditional, interpretation and fully excluded—again, impossible or one form of so-called nonsense—in the second, modern one.

And yet, it is no accident that it is, precisely, in these two—historical no less than different systematic (i.e., conceptual and analytical)—contexts that miracles and miracle belief have been most intensively debated and, paradoxically, succeeded in making themselves somehow, if not perceived, then at least felt. They did so even there wherever they presented or represented the unthinkable and impossible as that which eludes all possible forms and categorizations of experience (and, hence, remained "our call," indeed, for us, in faith and good faith, to decide and live up to).

The Pretext of the World

In The City of God, Augustine writes that "God made a world full of innumerable miracles, in sky, earth, airs, and waters, while the earth itself is beyond doubt a miracle greater and more excellent than all the wonders with which it is filled." This theological, indeed, Scriptural claim—in tune

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8 Grant, Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought, 218-219.
9 Ibid.
10 Hardon, "The Concept of Miracle From St. Augustine to Modern Apologetics," 213.
11 Ibid.
with the final books of the *Confessions*, which offer an at once exegetical and philosophical meditation on the book of *Genesis*—preempts any accusation that Augustine's conception of miracles and miracle belief is either too inclusive (and, hence, unable to ward off any confusion between miracles and phenomena and events which may well appear to us as wondrous or true at first glance, but which turn out to be impositions, on second reflection) or too stringent (and, therefore, too limiting, allowing no miracle but the one of creation as such or in toto to deserve the name).

There is a fine balance, then, between the global and minimal presentations of the wondrous that precedes the further differentiation between *miracula* and *mirabilia*. What the references to these extremes make clear is that Augustine hovers in between them, elevating both to a more moment of a grander vision, albeit one whose theological or ontological prize the moderns and our contemporaries may no longer be willing to pay.

The contemporary interest in so-called *generic* miracles and forms of miracle belief—in terms of the "extraordinariness of the ordinary" (Stanley Cavell), "secular faith" (Sari Nusseibeh) or "laicized grace" (Alain Badiou)—likewise can be seen as the endeavor to circumvent the historical and systematic bifurcation between the miracle as special (*mirabilia*) and exceptional (*miracula*), together with the conceptual difficulties each of them entails, *without* fully escaping their shadows (to begin with an inherited terminology that is here to stay, for at least some time still to come, and loaded with a host of theological and theologico-political presuppositions that are neither easily forgotten nor overcome). What these thinkers have in common is the articulation of the subtle balance between the objective and subjective aspect of miracles and miracle belief in ways that surpasses both. This new perspective is one that both Augustine and the thinkers of the generic miracle share.

This said, miracles and the belief in them may well be my call, but one needs a *pretext* in the phenomenal world for calling it so. In other words, the value of miracles and miracle belief in even the most pragmatic (rhetorical, perlocutionary, and strategic-militant) of its guises needs at least the *semblance* of an objective cause—whether divine or natural—that triggers, if not explains or justifies, the effect as it affects a specific addressee or audience in special ways.

The view that the world as such is the miracle, more than any particular fact or event in it, finds a remarkable echo in a twentieth century thinker for whom Augustine became an important reference, namely Ludwig Wittgenstein. True enough, Augustine often serves as negative foil against which Wittgenstein's own thinking (on language, time, etc.) receives its distinctive profile (in the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*, in the *Blue and Brown Books*, and elsewhere). Yet for Wittgenstein, as for Augustine, it is the world itself which is the most miraculous miracle, the wonder of wonders, leading him to suggest that, for those whose belief is a profound sense of safety, there is nothing, really—nothing that exists, nothing that is the case—that could possibly contradict the wonder that things are.

As Burnyeat notes with reference to Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian engagement in the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* with the so-called scene of instruction in Augustine's philosophy of language and its acquisition in children:

Augustine shares with Wittgenstein a strong sense that nothing other people may do or say and no fact about the world around me, can determine me to respond in the right way. No one can achieve my understanding for me, not for the trivial reason that it is mine, but because to internalize the requisite connections is to go beyond what is presented on any occasion of so-called teaching.13

*Mutatis mutandis*, miracles and miracle belief cannot be taught, nor do they, strictly speaking, teach us anything in turn! The example they set needs to be emulated—as Burnyeat says, "internalized"—or faithfully adhered to and followed up on in an altogether different way.

While miracles have thus an objective component (locating whatever happens in the realm of things, objects, bodies, or other bits of finite matter), just as they have also subjective component (requiring us to see and judge things for what they are), they do not find the ground of their legitimation in either of these objective or subjective elements and forms, and reconstellate themselves in any number of ways. Just as according to Augustine only God can teach us, so only God—or whatever name we wish to give the instance that, in modernity and beyond, takes His place—does miracles and makes us believe them. To see or experience a miracle is already to believe, and not just this very event in isolation. Indeed, every miracle calls for at least one other and conjures up whole sets of beliefs and acts, perceptions and judgments, affects and effects; in other words, whole universes of different possible worlds.

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But if this is the case, is Burnyeat's view in the end not just another example of the subjective stance which we discussed earlier, according to which justified miracles are always merely relative to us? We need not draw this conclusion, even though a fine line of nuance separates the two possible readings that interest us here. Suffice it to note that we can also say that miracle belief is nothing outside a certain ‘fidelity to the event’ that requires a certain structure of iterability, that is to say, more than one miracle, yet another belief.

The Classical View

Augustine inaugurates a line of argument whose multiple motifs and motivations extend all the way through the Middle Ages and up to modern philosophy. As one scholar remarks, he “lays the groundwork for the later medieval concern to eliminate through judicial or scientific means those alleged miracles which, despite the gullibility and ignorance of the untrained observer, could be rationally understood.” Indeed, when Augustine states that “nature is the will of God (Dei voluntas rerum natura est),” implying that “a portent is not contrary to nature, but contrary to our knowledge of nature (Portentum ergo fit non contra naturam, sed contra quam est nota natura),” then he anticipates almost verbatim the modern scientific view, according to which miracles must be attributed to a subjective evaluative expression that has no objective correlate per se.

Paradoxically, it is this modern view which, in turn, will trigger the ‘great debate of miracles’ in which the latter are seen as—irrational and superstitious, implausible, in any case, unverifiable—attempts to exempt events from the order of reasons, to sever the natural connection between cause and effect, and to break through habitualized or conventional patterns of expectation. Miracles are now portrayed as violations or infringements of a natural or social and psychological rule and general sense of lawfulness, whose testimony, let alone proof, is inconclusive at best. From Spinoza to Hume—and, more obliquely, Locke—and from Feuerbach up to Schopenhauer this seems the accepted view. With the exception of Pascal, we have to wait until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries before an oblique return to the more subtle Augustinian position in thinkers as diverse as Walt Whitman, Wittgenstein, Hannah Arendt, Cavell, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida becomes apparent (albeit mostly without explicit reference to the philosophical depth of the Church Father’s theological archive, not to mention its political edge).

It would go too far here to speculate about the reasons for this resurgence and renewed relevance of the Augustinian conception of the miracle and of miracle belief. But the current trends in public and global religion, together with their politically mediated and, especially, technologically mediatized elements and forms (or ways) of modern and postsecular life would have to be part of any explanation of this phenomenon and the overall impression it leaves well beyond strictly theological or philosophical debates. As I suggested earlier, with his interest in publicness and acceleration, multitudes and catholicity—and, especially, in his adoption of the principle or heuristics of “inverse magnitudes”—Augustine has, in a sense, anticipated much of this trend by outlining some of its operating principles and doing so in a spiritual and political world which is no longer our own even though it determined to no small extent how the West established its intellectual canons and was eventually won.

No miracle, for Augustine, can be unnatural or contra naturam, since nature is in its ultimate reality and structure God’s providential design which from the very outset “provides all natural history with all kinds of exceptional events.” Such events merely form a stark contrast with the “observational regularities” that alone are available to us, human creatures: “They are incomprehensible to men and function to demonstrate God’s sovereignty to believers.” But that does not make them supernatural, let alone violations or infringements of natural law and therefore impossible, as many moderns—with their more stringent conception of cause and effect—would eventually come to believe. Nor is miracle belief, therefore, ipso facto irrational, based on a form of religiosity that Spinoza, following Lucretius, called superstition or that philosophical anthropologists like Feuerbach and Fokke Sierksma identified with a projective mechanism, of sorts.

There is far more continuity between the different categories of natural and wondrous—and, in that sense, divinely ordained and supernatural—events that interest Augustine (marvels and miracles being the most prominent among them). As Lorraine Daston observes:

14 Goodich, Miracles and Wonders, 13.
15 Augustine, City of God, XX1.8.
17 Ibid.
Marvels shaded into miracles without a sharp break for Augustine, for both testified to how far the power exceeded that of human understanding. This is why Augustine parried the objections of the pagan philosophers to Christian miracles like the resurrection by listing natural wonders—the wood of a certain Egyptian fig tree that sinks rather than floats, the Persian stone that waxes and wanes with the moon, the incorruptible flesh of the dead peacock—that also defied explanation: "Now let those unbelievers who refuse to accept the divine writings give an explanation for these marvels, if they can." However, certain events deserved to be singled out from the perpetual wonder of nature as true miracles because of the message they bore. The miracles of the early Christian church were of this sort, consolidating faith and unity by a wave of conversions...¹⁸

During his early career Augustine had been convinced that the time of miracles was over and that the extensive appeal to so-called memoriae, which contained supposed remnants of martyrs and saints, needed to be condemned if the Church and ecclesiastical authority were not to expose themselves to pagan practice and philosophical scorn. He feared that the early church would drown out its claims in the increasing number of uncontrollable and often implausible claims that popular culture seemed to yearn and rely on. "They worship every bit of dust from the Holy Land," Augustine complained as he started to look out for a means to bring structure and some reason in the plethora of demands for salvation and the immediate gratification of religious desires.

Yet while from his extensive discussion of wondrous events and miracles in De civitate Dei as well as his more fleeting remarks in the Confessiones on the vice of "curiosity," it is thus clear that, in Augustine's eyes, the time of miracles—which were necessary during Biblical and apostolic times—is largely over, there is no doubt that the elder Augustine radically shifted his perspective as he became not only more attuned to the devotion of his flock, but also intent on solving an important conceptual problem: Why or in what sense do miracles persist? And how do they (still, once again, and, perhaps, on an even greater scale and with more fervor than ever before) speak to us, spectators and witnesses—in French, miracles—of later generations? To answer these questions, we must briefly map out the evolution of Augustine's later thought and the retractiones—not least on the subject matter of miracles and miracle belief—it entails and bequeathed to an emerging and receptive Western canon.

While in the early work De vera religione (Of True Religion), Augustine had claimed that the miracles that occurred in New Testament times were now superfluous, a radical view he would reiterate with so many words in later books and sermons, he gave these phenomena further thought and a much more prominent place in later life as he reassessed basic tenets of his theology and especially its ecclesiastical and pastoral implications. The later view of miracles and miracle belief, I would claim, also contains important elements of a complete philosophy of history and of politics. This is hardly surprising when one considers that miracles are not an afterthought, but concern precisely the–tangential yet consequential–points of contact where divine agency touches upon the human, earthly realm and lifts it out of its habitualizations, freeing it up for meanings and acts that enable it to mitigate for a heavenly city. Indeed, there is a curious logic of "inverse magnitudes" that allows the most minimal events to obtain special—indeed, maximal—effect, just as there is a sense that the infinitesimally small acts bring down the greatest of powers (if only by mocking their presumed totality, rendering them obsolete and overcoming them by one single–and, often, idiosyncratic–stroke of fate, that is to say, of providence).

Before discussing these matters further, it is useful, though, to consider the careful reasoning that surrounds Augustine's earlier view, before moving to its later revocation or, rather, reinterpretation. The full quote from Of True Religion, xxv, 47, leaves no doubt as to the complexity of Augustine's early position as it relies on the emergence of a certain catholicity—a universal multitude, as it were—that is seen a resituating the place of miracles and miracle belief:

We have heard that our predecessors, at a stage of faith on the way from temporal things up to eternal things, followed visible miracles. They could do nothing else. And they did so in such a way that it should not be necessary for those who came after them. When the Catholic Church had been founded and diffused throughout the world, on the one hand miracles were not allowed to continue till our time, lest the mind should always seek visible things, and the human race should grow cold by becoming accustomed to things which when they were novelties kindled its faith. On the other hand we must not doubt that those are to be believed who proclaimed miracles, which only a few had actually seen, and yet were able to persuade whole peoples to follow them. At that time the problem was to get people to believe before anyone was fit to reason about divine and invisible things. No human authority is set over the reason of a purified soul, for it is able to arrive at clear truth. But pride does not lead to the perception of truth. If there

were no pride there would be no heretics, no schisms, no circumcised, no worshippers of creatures of images. If there had not been such cases of opponents before the people was made perfect as promised, truth would be sought much less eagerly.20

True, Augustine never seems to fully repudiate his insight that “[i]f we look for a cause of awe and wonder now, we should contemplate nature” (De utilitate credendi, xvi, 34), nor does he ever forget that the “daily miracles of creation are as great as those of the incarnate Lord” (Tractatus in Joannis Evangelium, 9.1), arguing further that the “material miracles,” such as the healing of “blind eyes,” worked by Christ according to the Gospel stand in no comparison to the “miracles of inward moral conversion” of the faithful, which signal the opening of “blind hearts,” just as charity by far outweighs the miracle workings that may have been opportune or necessary at earlier moments in time (Tractatus in Joannis Evangelium, 17.1).21 Last but not least, throughout his writings Augustine maintains that the miracles from New Testament and apostolic times symbolized first of all the later sacraments of the Church and should, hence, be taken figuratively more than anything else.

Yet Augustine also softens his assessment of the many popular religious claims with which he was confronted as a bishop in his own congregation and those of his colleagues. Chadwick speaks of a “shift” from the earlier position which becomes clear by 426 when Augustine is composing the final book of the City of God as well as from what he says in the Retractationes, where he notes that pagans are wrong to dismiss the claim that miracles take place at the tombs of the saints. True, he acknowledges, there are “not such notable wonders as in apostolic days, but not none at all” (Retractationes, 1. 14.5). The question thus becomes: what may these latter day miracles still or yet again mean? How could what were once conceived as unique—one-upon-a-time-only—events now come to be reiterated (i.e., repeated and displaced or disseminated) beyond their original Sitz im Leben and burst onto the scene with newly defined pragmatic, perlocutionary purposes in view? Further, how do contemporary miracles constitute alternative multitudes, whose public and political claims require the formation of a newly conceived universality or, rather, catholicity? In other words, what makes miracles into more than mere metaphors for a spiritual transformation that is reported starting from one soul and its confession alone?

As Chadwick notes in his beautiful rendering of the Confessiones: “In his own time Augustine stressed the sacraments as God’s present means of special grace, and saw in conversion the greatest of miracles. Like miracles, however, the sacraments are a visible ladder to reach spiritual and invisible things.”22 Or again: “Visible signs and sacraments are a necessity because of the fallen nature of humanity. Signs are required by sinful people, but truly spiritual Christians look higher, beyond material means.”23 In other words, for all their transformational power, they are not ends in themselves and as “special providences” they do not contravene the “primary marks” of divine Creation which, Chadwick explains, are “mathematical order and reason,” meaning, once again, that miracles are “contrary not to nature but to what we know of nature.”24 Thus, the Confessiones claim that it is often merely a symptom of “curiosity” when people

study the operations of nature which lie beyond our grasp, when there is no advantage in knowing and the investigators simply desire knowledge for its own sake. This motive is again at work if, using a perverted science for the same end, people try to achieve things by magical acts. Even in religion itself the motive is seen when God is ‘tempted’ by demands for ‘signs and wonders’ (John 4:48) desired not for any salvific end but only for the thrill.25

Interpreting biblical Scripture and inferring that the created earth “does not ask for great miracles to bring faith into being” —and immediately adding: “Nor does it refuse to believe unless it sees signs and wonders (John 4:48)”26—Augustine here takes all references to wonder and wonders to be signs of ignorance, gestured not so much to those who believe, but to those who do not. In post-biblical times, he goes on to implore, a different register may be called for. And the allegorical reading of the opening chapters of Genesis suggests as much, indicating that we have come a long way since the prophetic and apostolic times of old:

May your ministers now do their work on ‘earth,’ not as they did on the waters of unbelief when their preaching and proclamation used miracles and

21 These references I take from Henry Chadwick, Augustine of Hippo: A Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 77.
23 Ibid., 289, n. 24.
24 Ibid., 290, n. 27.
25 Augustine, Confessiones 10.55.
26 Ibid., 13.21.
sacred rites and mystical prayers to attract the attention of ignorance, the mother of wonder (mater admirationis), inducing the awe around by secret symbols. That is the entrance to faith for the sons of Adam who forget you, who hide from your face (Gen. 3:8) and become an 'abyss.' May they now do their work as on dry land separated from the whirlpools of the abyss. May they be an example to the faithful by the life they live before them and by arousing them to imitation (1 Thess. 1:7). 27

In other words—and this motif becomes something like a refrain for his thoughts on the matter, for Augustine, the "sacraments of initiation and miraculous wonders" are merely "necessary to initiate and convert 'uninstructed and unbelieving people' (1 Cor. 14:23)." 28 They add nothing decisive for those who live a genuine life in faith already and who see—if not face to face, no longer as if through a mirror—then at least more directly and clearly.

Augustine's initial view on miracles and miracle belief is thus not so far removed from Pascal's later insight that the phenomena are mostly "momentary [punctuel] and ephemeral," with its inevitable consequence that the testimony of miracles speaks to relatively few people (and first and foremost the direct witnesses who were right there or who heard of these events from those who had seen or heard them first hand). It is an insight that may well have convinced Pascal to remove the "dossier" with extensive, if somewhat loose, observations on miracles from the apologics for the Christian faith he had originally planned and to insist instead on the single argument of the miracle subsistant, that to say, the fact, revealed by Scripture, that the unique creation is itself the miracle that matters and remains, for all eyes to see and every heart to rejoice in. 29

Several fragments make this argument in succinct terms, emphasizing the provisional and anticipatory, proleptic—and, hence, already counterfactual—claim or usage of miracles in biblical, apostolic, and patrician times, while explaining their relative obsolescence in the times that followed the prophesied 'conversion of nations,' the decisive geopolitical event that turned the need for special effects tailored to special audiences into the global awe, the 'final effect,' that the 'subsistent miracle' inspires.

Miracles and their belief, then, belong neither to the abstract metaphysical proofs of 'reason' as it determines and uses 'principles' that are structurally limited and that all too easily and quickly elude us, nor to the directness of 'inspiration' of the 'heart' and of 'feeling.' If anything, Pascal suggests, with a turn to the realm of what we would now call the ordinary, that miracles and miracle belief form an integral part of the world of 'custom.' In this everyday world they, paradoxically and pragmatically, represent and present the possibility of new, unexpected habitualizations (having first enabled us to break with old ones), based as these are on "instinct" and "automatism," without therefore having the instantaneousness of the very 'feeling' in which, Pascal says, we should put all our "faith," given that reason and the intellect are such that they must "always waver." 30 Indeed, Pascal writes: "It is the heart that feels God, not reason: that is what faith is. God felt by the heart, not by reason. The heart has its reasons which reason itself does not know: we know that through countless things." 31 We do not so much constate or infer, observe or demonstrate, miracles, therefore, but "know" and acknowledge them differently, with a faculty that is neither that of the senses nor the intellect, but one of feeling, that is to say, the heart. And, in this, Pascal once more echoes an Augustinian view that gives "love" prevalence over any and all human faculties, since precisely it alone gives the "restless heart"—the cor inquietum—the peace it seeks but finds nowhere but in God.

Retractiones

What makes for the shift in Augustine's appreciation of miracles, especially the healings or reports thereof, that he encounters in his days as a bishop in Northern Africa, where the cults of the saints and the practices of popular belief were widespread? As to the diffusion of so-called memoriae Brown comments that

Africa had always been full of such holy bodies. What was new, however, was the sudden wave of miraculous cures associated with them: seventy would take place in Hippo within the space of two years... Miracles had remained a matter of vague popular feeling: those who experienced them, treated them as intimate, personal revelations [e.g., de civ. Dei, XXII, 8, 164-168]; those who heard them, quickly forgot or garbled their accounts [de civ. Dei, XXII, 8, 400]; Augustine decided both to examine and record each instance, and to give verified cures a maximum of publicity. In Hippo,

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 13.27.
[30] The tripartition of heart, instinct, and principles is mentioned in Blaise Pascal, Pensées, and Other Writings, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 58; the correlative distinction between inspiration, custom, and reason is made in ibid., 147.
[31] Ibid., 157-158.
he insisted on receiving a written report from the healed person, a libellus; and this document would then be read out in church, in the presence of the writer, and later would be stored in the bishop’s library. His aim was to draw together these scattered incidents, until they formed a single corpus, as compact and compelling as the miracles that had assisted the growth of the Early Church [de civ. Dei, XXII, 8, 350-353]. It is not the first time that Augustine had appealed to the ‘facts’ of popular belief... The aim of this new campaign, as it is applied in the last book of the City of God, is also to ‘bend’ the ‘shocking hardness’ of the reasonable pagans, many of whom were eminent doctors, by a direct appeal to the astonishing things happening in the Christian communities all around them.32

In the “unwieldy and picturesque catalogue of strange occurrences in Hippo, Carthage,”33 documented in Book XXII of De Civitate Dei but also in Book IX (vii, 16) of the Confessions as well as in the libelli or pamphlets destined “for public reading and circulation”34 that the later Augustine authorized as a pastor and bishop, we find a host of miracle stories, all of which relate a profound sense of the continued role of divine intervention. In Augustine’s view, as expressed in The City of God, they record, “in our times, frequent signs of divine powers similar to those of old;” in other words, they present as many signs of the “eloquence of God, as it were, evinced in this divine work”:

[c]even now... many miracles are wrought by the same God Who wrought those of which we read, acting by whom He will and as He wills. But they are not as well known as the former ones, nor are they beaten into the memory by frequent reading, like gravel into a path, so that they cannot pass out of the mind. Even where care is taken to read to the people the written accounts of those who receive such blessings—and we have now begun to do this at Hippo—those who are present hear the story only once, and many are not present. In any case, those who were present do not retain in their minds what they have heard for more than a few days, and scarcely anyone is found who can tell what he has heard to one he knows to have been absent.35

Yet, as Brown explains, this shift in appreciation and explanation had not only to do with the increasing popularity of the memoriae and the need for careful public monitoring—and, indeed, “maximum publicity”—it re-

Augustine’s sudden decision to give a maximum publicity to miraculous cures in Africa should not be regarded as a sudden and unprepared surrender to popular credulity. It is, rather, that, within the immensely complex structure of Augustine’s thought, the centre of gravity had shifted; modern miracles, which once had been peripheral, now become urgently important as supports to faith.

In this evolution, indeed, we have a microcosm of the deep change that separates the religion of the young Augustine from that of the old. Like most late Antique men, Augustine was credulous without necessarily being superstitious. When remarkable events happened at holy places, he was thoroughly well-armed, as a philosopher, against crude interpretations of the event, but not against the event itself. He was not prepared to deny what reliable men told him; but he would tenaciously criticize any explanation of such events, or any religious practice, that seemed unworthy of a correct view of God and the soul.

Even the natural world was full of unique and surprising happenings.... The wise men of the ancient world had failed to map out the whole world of nature.36

In this vein, Augustine’s perspective and language have all the characteristics of a reorientated and reconstructed Neoplatonism, rather than showing any remnants of the Manicheism of old, as he struggles to come to terms with the polytheism, mysteries, and popular religion of the Graeco-Roman pagan world, which found itself at the mercy of the barbarian tribes that ransacked Rome in 410. It was this major political event that triggered a new round of accusations at the address of a Christendom now held responsible for the disintegration and demise of the empire as it had hollowed out its cultural traditions and, hence, moral substance. Augustine’s conception of history and God’s hand in the larger scheme of things as well as in special acts of divine intervention—two conjoined themes which weave a central thread of argument in the lengthy expositions in his City of God—can be seen as a theological and philosophical riposte to this claim of Christianity’s supposed subversion of the political powers that be. Augustine had too fine a political mind to let the accusation stand and offers a subtle rebuke, point by point, addressing himself to the intellectual elites of his day. As in his more occasional writings, mostly

32 Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 417-418.
33 Ibid., 422.
35 Augustine, The City of God, 22.8 (pp. 1131-1132).
36 Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 419.
letters, on internal affairs of the Church, he shows himself a master in the art of pacifying the contrary view, without ceding anything of doctrinal substance in turn.

"In Quick Motion": Token Reminders of Our Limitation By Habit

With reference to Henri-Irénée Marrou's classic study Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique, Brown makes much of the fact that, for Augustine, miracles, more than supports to faith are, first of all, token reminders of the fact that, as Shakespeare's Hamlet has it, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." In Brown's words:

A 'miracle' for Augustine was just such a reminder of the bounds imposed on the mind by habit. In a universe in which all processes happen by the will of God, there need be nothing less remarkable in the slow, habitual processes of nature. We take for granted the slow miracle by which water in the irrigation of the vineyard becomes wine: it is only when Christ turns water into wine, 'in quick motion' as it were, that we are amazed. [cf. Ep. 137, iii, 10]

What is central to the miracle is, on this reading, a certain intensification— and, in this case, dramatization and acceleration—of the ordinary and the everyday, which reminds us of their principle extraordinariness, that is to say, of the fact that they actually express a world of wonder, the wonder of the world, which is, after all, the 'miracle of miracles':

Augustine essentially regarded miracles as an acceleration of the normal processes of nature whereby the seeds (semina seminum) inherent in nature are activated. These phenomena occurred in such an unusual way that they are termed miracles and are intended to teach us a lesson. The ultimate aim is to console and bring the faithful to God, or to confound the non-believer or heretic.

With the remarkable hypothesis motif of "acceleration" we stumble upon a trope that enables us to connect Augustine's meditation in his City of God with twentieth and twenty-first century observations regarding the pacing of technological invention and its repercussions for our sense of time and space or place. We might wager a speculative leap and blatant anachronicity and suggest that just as the miracle, for Augustine, is God's tending to things natural and created according to the providential order of divine law... but this time "in quick motion," so also the contemporary global increase in the pace no less than in the scale of things and trends produces perceptions and sensations that predispose toward-and, indeed, border upon—the miraculous. The sheer quantity of proliferated images and their ever faster movement reverts into a qualitative leap to which we can adhere in faith or pay no attention. But belief and disbelief, the suspension of disbelief or belief, are merely two sides of the same phenomenon.

Also the question of agency and embodiment is important here. In the many wondrous stories which Augustine relates, the way in which the memory and presence of saints and martyrs, their shrines and relics, are recorded and rendered—mediated or mediatized—is crucial, even if "[t]he idea that such tokens of the dead could be powerful and worthy of special treatment grew on him slowly." In The Cult of the Saints Brown argues as much when he says that Augustine's accounts of the miracles at the shrine of Saint Stephen, in the last book of the City of God, were far from being a capitulation to the "silly stories" current among the "common herd." For Augustine they are surreal rather than "silly." They betray the effort by which Augustine, a man formed in the austerely immaterialist current of Neo-Platonic thought available to an educated man of his age, had come to think of a future integration of flesh and spirit. The recorded miracles of healing at the shrines show God's power and his abiding concern for the flesh. And this power, Augustine now believes, is shown most appropriately at the places where those dead now lie, who had been prepared to lose their close-knit bodies in the faith of the unimaginable mercy of the resurrection. Miracles that had once stricken Augustine, the contemplative, as of little significance, as so many lights dimmed by the sun of God's harmonious order, now take on a warmth and a glow of their own, as Augustine pays more heed to the instinctive fears and yearnings of the once-neglected body.

The "local miracles," Brown suggests, represent mostly "physical cures" and, as such, indicate an aspect of religion that Augustine had, perhaps, neglected at an earlier age, namely the fact that the body and its health form just as much part and parcel of the essence of faith as the mind and the injunction "to heal the eyes of the heart." In Brown's words:

A God Whose generosity had scattered so much purely physical beauty on the earth, could not neglect physical illness... These miracles had sprouted from the desperation of men afflicted by 'more diseases than any book of

38 Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 420.
39 Goodich, Miracles and Wonders, 14.
40 O'Donnell, Augustine, 175.
41 Brown, The Cult of the Saints, 77.
medicine could hold: The evident horrors of human existence, its miseria, assumed an urgent need for some relief, for some few solacia. These reliefs were some slight hint, like thin rays of sunshine entering a darkened room, of the final transformation, the glorious resurrection, of the bodies of the elect.9

Local miracles thus come to supplement—but not substitute for—the "global" one which is the miracle of creation, of the world, or, as Pascal will say, the "continuous" or "subsistent" miracle (miracle subsistent) as such. But this much is clear, one cannot think, believe, or act on one without assuming the other. In a sense, Augustine's later development—and apparent retractatio—in matters miraculous is thus, first of all, that of a theological, if not philosophical or logical, consequence. The later view need not be seen as rebuking the earlier one, but is inscribed in a larger perspective on the question of eternity and immortality that we need not develop here. More precisely, Brown notes,

an intellectual breakthrough of the first order lies behind what is too often presented as a belated concession to the mindless weight of 'popular belief'.

Yet Augustine's formulation of his later views, and his decision to add the records of local cases of healing to his final canonization against all the unquestioned assumptions of the pagan philosophical world view, are only special cases in the working out of the imaginative dialectic surrounding the very special dead. The result of this dialectic has been not merely to block out the negative associations of physical death with all the resources of an imaginary of paradise, but to raise the physical remains of the saints above the normal associations of place and time.... The relic is a detached fragment of a whole body.... But it is precisely the detachment of the relic from its physical association that summed up most convincingly the imaginative dialectic.... For how better to suppress the fact of death, than to remove part of the dead from its original context in the all too cluttered grave? How better to symbolize the abolition of time in such dead, than to add to that an indeterminacy of space? Furthermore, how better to express the paradox of the linking of Heaven and Earth than by an effect of "inverted magnitudes," by which the object around which boundless associations clustered should be tiny and compact? Detached fragments of the saints in gold and silver caskets, or in their miniature marble shrines, had some of the measureless quality of an objet trouvé.... Yet, in detaching the relic from direct association with physical death, the imaginative dialectic was, if anything, heightened. For what was being brought were tiny fragments around which the imaginative associations of a very special kind of death could cluster undisturbed.

At the root of every miracle of healing at a martyr's shrine of late antiquity there lay a miracle of pain.... For the sufferings of the martyrs were miracles in themselves.10

Brown's illuminating picture of the "inverted magnitudes" animating the "imaginative dialectic" of the popular belief as well as its most subtle reformation in Augustine's later writings also suggests that the miracle of miracles, the miracle of Creation, of the world as a whole and as such, requires at least one more miracle. There simply cannot be just one miracle. One miracle calls for another, for, at least, one other. Indeed, it is as if the miracle presented nothing short of a question calling out for a response, which could be nothing less than a miracle, in turn. One miraculous act solicits another, depends on another. And our very testimony of the effect of this iteration will be all the more miraculous the less this following up and following through—like the "going on" of which Wittgenstein, in his discussion of rule following speaks in his Philosophical Investigations—is warranted by the facts or states of affair of the world, as we know it (or thought we did). In sum, miracles and miracle belief are not governed by criteria. Put differently, all the criteria (concepts, definitions, rules, etc.) we ascribe to them will necessarily disappoint us.

Conclusion

One is struck by the twofold observation in Augustine's later writing that miracles and miracle belief are tied to a certain notion of the publicness and even publicity of faith, just as they are said to consist in a special perception, caused or effected, triggered or invited, by no one but God. According to the first view, miracles find their meaning and confirmation in a specific medium, of memoriae or libelli, and their communal presentation and declaration in a public forum or square, of sorts, ritualized events which, Augustine insists, must be properly processed and archived so as to avoid giving a wrong impression (to believers and unbelievers alike).

According to the special perception view, natural processes can, on certain unexpected and rare occasions, appear as if under an optical illusion that makes their event altogether special. In other words, they can be presented in what we might call a charitable light, which only a charitable disposition, itself an effect of divine grace, is able to reveal to us in the first place. That this is possible should not surprise us. After all, all natural...

42 Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 421.

43 Brown, The Cult of the Saints, 78, 79.
processes are based on the very laws that govern God's creation by His own divine decree and providence and, indeed, reveal "all of nature as a miracle," that is to say, as "the will of God realized." 44

The two aspects, taken together, offer important conceptual tools for the study of religion in the present day and age. Yet why and how, exactly, this should be the case will require further investigation.

44 Daston, "Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe," 95.