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Cusanus at Sea: The Topicality of Illuminative Discourse*

Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle / Toronto, Canada

Skeptics and mystics, humanists and fools professed a learned ignorance; yet none explored the oxymoron more intellectually than Nicolaus Cusanus in *De docta ignorantia* (1440). It was at sea, he disclosed, that his ardent but frustrated desire was graced by a divine illumination: "To embrace incomprehensible things incomprehensibly in learned ignorance, through the transcendence of incorruptible truths humanly knowable."¹ The experience stimulated a career of religious inquiry remarkable for its vigorous invention.² He had been "at sea returning from Greece," he explained, when the incident occurred. As a papal delegate Cusanus had indeed been commissioned to invite the authorities of the schismatic Byzantine church to participate in a council of reunion with the Roman See. Cusanus and his companions successfully persuaded the emperor, the patriarch, and other ranking ecclesiastics to accompany them on a return voyage from Constantinople to Venice.³ Although the illumination has seemed baffling, it has been located on this voyage from November 27, 1437, to February 8, 1438.⁴

*I wish to thank Paul Oskar Kristeller, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Columbia University, for his support of this research.

¹ "Accipe nunc, pater metuende, quam iam dudum attingere variis doctrinarum viis concupivi, sed prius non potui, quousque in mari me ex Graecia redeunte, credo superno dono a patre luminum, a quo omne datum optimum, ad hoc ductus sum, ut incomprehensibilia incomprehensibiliter amplecterer in docta ignorantia, per transcensum veritatum incorruptibilium humaniter scibilibus." Nicolaus Cusanus, "Epistola auctoris ad dominum Iulianum cardinalem," in *Opera omnia*, 16 vols. (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1932-), vol. 1, *De docta ignorantia*, ed. Ernst Hoffmann and Raymond Klibansky, p. 163, lines 6-11.

² For an intellectual history, see Pauline Moffit Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus: A Fifteenth-Century Vision of Man* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982).

³ For this trip, see Edmond Vansteenberghe, *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues (1401-1464): L'action—la pensée* (Paris: Édouard Champion, 1920), pp. 60-63; Erich Meuthen, *Nikolas von Kues, 1401-1464: Skizze einer Biographie* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1964), pp. 52-53.

⁴ By scholars of such varying persuasions as Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, p. 5; Ekkehard Meffert, *Nikolaus von Kues: Sein Lebensgang, Seine Lehre vom Geist* (Nürnberg: Freies Geistesleben, 1982), p. 54; Jasper Hopkins, introduction to *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance: A Translation and Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning, 1981), p. 1; James Biechler, *The*

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Place may be a geographical fact. It is also a rhetorical topic, the middle term of description: who, what, *where*, when, and why. In the classical manual, Cicero's *De inventione*, place is considered in relation to the second topic for the attributes of actions, the performance of the act. "Inquiry will be made," Cicero instructed, "about place, time, occasion, manner, and facilities. In considering the *place* where the act was performed, account is taken of what opportunity the place seems to have afforded for its performance." Opportunity is "a question of the size of the place, its distance from other places, *i.e.*, whether remote or near at hand, whether it is a solitary spot or one much frequented, and finally it is a question of the nature of the place, of the actual site, of the vicinity and of the whole district." Other attributes are "whether the place is or was sacred or profane, public or private, the property of the person in question or of another."⁵ It was also propounded in *Rhetorica ad C. Herennium* that for the statement of facts or narrative to have plausibility the advantages of the scene of action must be accounted, to obviate a refutation that the place was unsuitable.⁶

Cusanus's place "at sea" occurs in an appended epistle to his patron, Giuliano Cardinal Cesarini, composed as epideictic rhetoric. This was the genre that classically treated praise or blame in the spectrum from panegyric to invective.⁷ It was distinguished from the deliberative rhetoric of the forum, which debated an issue for the civic good, and from the juridical rhetoric of the court, which defended or prosecuted a legal case. It was a class of oratory that enjoyed an extraordinary revival and popularity in the fifteenth century at the papal court where Cusanus served.⁸ Yet the epideictic genre had always been proper for the dedication of compositions to patrons or friends. Cesarini was honored by the presentation of a work that claimed divine inspiration. "I believe," Cusanus confides, "that I was conducted to this by a supernal gift from the Father of lights, from whom is every good gift" (James 1:17).⁹ The epistle concludes with praise for Christ, who has so increased by faith in his intellect and affection as to

Religious Language of Nicholas of Cusa (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1975), pp. 28, 29; D. J. B. Hawkins, introduction to *Of Learned Ignorance*, trans. Germain Heron (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), pp. xiii–xiv.

⁵ Cicero, *De inventione*, 1.26.37–38, 2.12.39–40; trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949), pp. 75–76.

⁶ *Rhetorica ad C. Herennium*, 1.9.16, 2.4.6.

⁷ The standard work is Theodore C. Burgess, *Epideictic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902).

⁸ John W. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1979). Cusanus never employed the epideictic genre in preaching, however, pp. 94–101.

⁹ See n. 1 above.

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inflame him with a singular love.¹⁰ As epideictic rhetoric the epistle is not historical report. There was a distinction well established in classical literature between the epideictic and the historical, the laudatory and the narrative.¹¹ As invented from the topics concerning the attributes of persons, the epideictic genre considers name, nature, manner of life, fortune, habit, feeling, interests, purposes, achievements, accidents, and speeches.¹² In the development of these topics the orator is not obliged, as is the historian, to the statement of fact. Epideictic rhetoric is not an impartial but a tendentious exercise for which facts may be selected and rejected, exaggerated or understated, even wholly fabricated, and organized toward the honorable end of virtue.¹³ The criterion is not the intellectuality of truth and falsehood but the affectivity of good and evil, as promoting a judgment of praise or blame.

As epideictic in genre, it is not a brute fact that Cusanus experienced the illumination "at sea returning from Greece" with reference to an actual voyage on the Mediterranean or the Adriatic. Considering the topic of place in the history of illuminative discourse, it is plausible that the reference, even if fundamentally literal, is more significantly symbolic. Considering the symbolic method of *De docta ignorantia*, this is not only plausible but probable. The place hallowed by hierophany is always significant,¹⁴ whether the manifestation be argued as illumination, insight, intellection, or intuition. Consider Augustine in the garden, or, flanking Cusanus historically, Petrarch on the mountain and Luther in the tower.¹⁵ Literal and allegorical senses could coexist, as the lion with the lamb. Yet it was the allegorical sense of the universe that fascinated theologians, convinced that realities were not brute facts but significant vestiges of a sublime truth traced by the finger of God on the book of creation.¹⁶

Cusanus inherited this mentality,¹⁷ but he was disappointed in his de-

¹⁰ Cusanus, "Epistola auctoris" (n. 1 above), p. 163, line 18, to p. 164, line 3; see n. 60 below.

¹¹ Burgess, *Epideictic Literature*, pp. 117–18, 196–97.

¹² Cicero, *De inventione*, 2.59.177, 1.24.34–36; cf. *Topica*, 23.89.

¹³ See n. 11 above.

¹⁴ For an introduction to sacred space, see Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions*, rev. ed. (Paris: Payot, 1974).

¹⁵ For these parallels, see my hermeneutics, "A Likely Story: The Autobiographical as Epideictic," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57 (1989): 23–51.

¹⁶ For example, Hugh of St. Victor, *Eruditionis didascalicae*, 7.4, in *Patrologia latina (PL)*, CLXXVI, 814; Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, 2.11.2, in *Opera theologica selecta*, ed. Augustine Sépinski, 5 vols. (Quaracchi: College of St. Bonaventure, 1934–64), 5:54; Meister Eckhart, "Quasi stella matutina," *Predigten* 9, in *Die deutschen Werke*, ed. Josef Quint, 5 vols. (Stuttgart: Wilhelm Kohlhammer, 1958–63), 1:156, lines 7–9.

¹⁷ He cites Hugh of St. Victor in "Signum magnum" (1439), *Sermones* 8, in *Opera omnia*, XVI/2, p. 155, lines 16–17. O'Malley notes that Cusanus occasionally employs this theme, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome*, p. 97. On signs, see Nancy S. Streuver, "Metaphoric Morals: Ethical Implications of Cusa's Use of Figure," in *Archéologie du signe*, ed. Lucie Brind'amour and Eugene Vance (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983), pp. 303–34.

sire to behold the Author. "All our wisest and most divine teachers," he acknowledged, "agree that visible things are truly images of invisible things and that from created things the Creator can be knowably seen as in a mirror and a symbolism." Analogies are adduced to signify the interrelationship of all things and the status of this universe as an approximate image of the absolute exemplar. Yet Cusanus faulted philosophers for thus seeking precise ontological truth, the quiddity of things, and he stated that all have failed to discover it as it is. This failure results, he proposed, from the intrinsic lack of proportion between the finite and the infinite. There is no certain medium for bridging this metaphysical dualism. The analogical method, which proceeds comparatively from the assumed certain to the uncertain, is only approximate. The precise combinations in the material objects that ground the analogy are beyond human reason, and so is any adaptation of this assumed known to the unknown. Yet the definition of man is intellectual, and the perfection of his nature consists of the achievement of knowledge. The natural discursive appetite of the intellect toward truth is so thwarted, concluded Cusanus, that its proper end is not a knowledge of the object of its inquiry but of its own ignorance.¹⁸

Man is immensely "at sea," an expression which still in the modern idiom denotes uncertainty, perplexity: "In a state of mind resembling the condition of a ship which is out of sight of land and has lost her bearings; in a state of uncertainty or perplexity, at a loss" (*OED*, s.v. "sea," *at sea*). It was the rhetorical rule that place had to afford the opportunity for the performance of an action. Perhaps the voyage of seventy-four days from Constantinople to Venice did allow Cusanus the leisure for profound speculation. His official duties, as toward the ecumenism to be proclaimed at the Council of Florence-Ferrara (1438–39), may argue for more labor than leisure, however. A further rhetorical rule insisted on the credibility of locating a certain action at a certain place. Cusanus's critic John Wenck repeated the claim "at sea, returning from Greece" with frank mockery.¹⁹

Yet the sea has excellent credibility in Western culture as an hierophanous site. In Greek cosmology, Ocean represented the great principle of creation who in coupling mythologically with Tethys begot the generation of the gods.²⁰ The potency of the sea to evoke the numinous has so

¹⁸ *De docta ignorantia*, 1.11, p. 22, lines 4–16; trans. Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance*, p. 61, line 3, p. 8, line 20, to p. 9, line 28; 1.1, p. 5, lines 14–16, 23, p. 6, lines 9–10; 1.1, p. 5, lines 3–8, 3.4, p. 131, lines 23–24; 1.1, p. 6, lines 17–22.

¹⁹ John Wenck, *De ignota litteratura*, appendix in Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning, 1984), p. 98, lines 22–23.

²⁰ Homer, *Iliad*, 14.201, 302, 246; Plato, *Timaeus*, 40e–41a. See Jean Rudhart, *Le thème de l'eau primordiale dans la mythologie grecque* (Berne: Francke, 1971), pp. 35–123.

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prevailed through the centuries that Freud, in analyzing piety as illusion, was constrained to dispute as the source of religion "the oceanic feeling."²¹ The sea is not merely an opportune and plausible place for spiritual enlightenment, however. In Neoplatonist philosophy it is the precise and perfect site for divine illumination. This maritime topic, as elaborated by Augustine, provides the fundamental context for Cusanus's experience "at sea."

Plato had imagined evil matter as the sea, the abyss of dissimilitude through which God steers as helmsman toward the restoration of the world. The mortal condition of the immortal soul resembles the sea-god Glaucus, a wild creature dripping with seaweed and encrusted with the shells and barnacles that have replaced limbs abraded and mutilated by the waves. Such is the soul marred by evils. Yet in its love for wisdom it may be raised from the depths of the sea in which it is submerged and scraped clean of its accretions to reveal its true nature.²² It was Plotinus who established this motif to compare the metaphysical quest. The soul he conceived as a wanderer from the One, who must for the restoration of its integrity voyage across the open sea of sensible matter to the homeland of intellectual vision. He urged flight to the fatherland of origin, gaining the open sea by the craft of Odysseus who eluded the sensual pleasures of Circe and Calypso. This is not a physical voyage on foot, coach, or ship. The route home is by an interior dialectic, disciplined by an ascetical divestiture of the multiform—"cut away excess"—until by a method of intellectual transcendence the divine unity is apprehended—"concentrate your gaze and see." As he counsels in another oceanic metaphor, the divine illumination appears above the trained and tranquil intellect like the sun rising on the horizon from the sea. This climactic experience rides the crest of the wave of a surging intellect: "Here, we put aside all the learning; disciplined to this pitch, established in beauty, the quester holds knowledge still of the ground he rests on, but, suddenly, swept beyond it all by the very crest of the wave of Intellect surging beneath, he is lifted and sees, never knowing how; the vision floods the eyes with light, but it is not a light showing some other object, the light is itself the vision."²³

²¹ Sigmund Freud, "Das Unbehagen in der Kultur" 1, in *Gesammelte Werke chronologisch geordnet*, ed. Anna Freud et al., 18 vols. in 17 (London: Imago, 1946-68), 14:421-506. This replies to the claim of Romain Rolland that "the true source of religious feelings" is "a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic'," and that the source of religious energy is this "oceanic feeling." James Strachey et al., eds. and trans., "Civilization and Its Discontents," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1974), 21:64-65, 72.

²² Plato, *Politicus*, 273d. For the textual debate between "topos" and "pontos," see Jean Pépin, "A propos du symbolisme de la mer chez Platon et dans le néoplatonisme," in Association Guillaume Budé, *Congrès de Tours et Poitiers [1953]* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1954), pp. 257-59. Plato, *Republica*, 10.611c-612a; cf. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.1.12.

²³ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.8; 1.6.9; trans. H. A. Armstrong, *Plotinus*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.:

Although he will chart a different course, Cusanus's location of his illumination "at sea" indicates topically the Neoplatonist apprehension of the One. The Odyssean soul traverses dialectically the open sea of sensible matter to perceive at the crest of a surging intellectual wave the very light that illumines the mind, as if arising from that ocean. It is in this dialectic unto contemplation that Cusanus's "transcendence of incorruptible truths humanly knowable" originates. The experience is not knowledge. As Plotinus states, "Here, we put aside all the learning." It is rather an apprehension of the source of knowledge, of the Light above the mind that illuminates all created objects as knowable. This act is incomprehensible in its operation; the seer confesses himself "never knowing how." An ignorance is integral to illumination.

The maritime metaphor for the metaphysical pursuit was enduring in the history of philosophy. When Kant composed his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, he developed this comparison. Hume's ship rotted on the shore of skepticism, while Kant stated that "my object is rather to give it a pilot, who by means of safe principles of navigation drawn from a knowledge of the globe, and provided with a complete chart and compass, may steer the ship safely, whither he listeth."²⁴ The metaphor was most impressively and influentially cultivated by a master rhetorician.²⁵ A floundering Augustine, immersed in evil yet struggling to emerge through comprehension, imagined creation visible and invisible as a great bounded mass. In the image he copied from Plotinus: "It was like a sea, everywhere and in all directions spreading through an immense space, simply an infinite sea. And it had in it a great sponge, which was finite, however, and this sponge was filled, of course, in every part with the immense sea."²⁶

Harvard University Press, 1966–67), 1:259, 261. Compare 5.3.7. See also Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 1.9.18, ed. Bernard Dombart and Alphonse Kalb, 2 vols. (Turnholt: Brepols, 1955), p. 666, lines 85–92; *Confessionum libri XIII* (hereafter called *Confessions*), 1.18.28, 8.8.19, ed. Lucas Verheijen (Turnholt: Brepols, 1981), p. 15, line 11, to p. 16, line 17, p. 125, lines 23–25. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.5.8. For an argument from gazing at the sun arising from the ocean, see Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, 4.34.54, in *PL*, XXXIV, 319; cf. *Confessions*, 11.18.23–24, p. 205, line 1, to p. 206, line 24. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 6.7.36; trans. Stephen McKenna, rev. B. S. Page, *The Enneads*, 4th ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), p. 590.

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik*, introduction, ed. Benno Erdmann, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 22 vols. (Berlin: Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1900–42), 4:262; trans. Lewis White Beck, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), p. 10.

²⁵ For other, non-Neoplatonist, symbolism of the sea in the early Christian tradition, see Édouard Jauneau, "Le symbolisme de la mer chez Jean Scot Erigène," in *Le néoplatonisme: Royaume, 9–13 Juin 1969* (Paris: Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, 1971), pp. 388–92; Hugo Rahner, *Symbole der Kirche: Die Ekklesiologie der Väter* (Salsburg: Muller, 1964), pp. 239–564.

²⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.5.7, p. 96, lines 14–17; trans. Vernon J. Bourke, *Confessions* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), p. 168.

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Like Cusanus, Augustine was a historical voyager.²⁷ His provincial status as an African, remote from the civil and ecclesiastical centers in Italy, necessitated the navigation that is thematic in his literature.²⁸ His realistic descriptions of the sea surpass the platitudes of rhetorical exercise on that topic.²⁹ It is the symbolic sea, however, that is significant. The watery abyss in which Augustine confesses himself awash in error is his cardinal metaphor for creation as corrupted by original sin. The sea is the world that spurts bitter and briny from Adam's navel. In his own epideictic composition, the *Confessions*, he orates his carnal flux from the embryonic fluid onto the "flood of human customs," into a "whirlpool of moral evil," and "unto that great and fearful sea." In its abyss he despairs of the truth. As a philosophical Skeptic he drowns on the oceanic bottom: "I had come to the depths of the sea."³⁰

This oceanic metaphor symbolizes, as in Plato, the region of dissimilarity to God.³¹ The voyage to the port of philosophy from which the pilot of the soul disembarks to the land of happiness initiates Augustine's dialogues. Man founders allegorically in this world "as if in a stormy sea," tacking on a faulty course. Augustine narrates his reckless course across the sea of Manichaean superstition to the waves of Academic skepticism, then by entrusting himself to the North Pole who is Christ, to "this land" of Catholic faith. With "sails full set and all oars bent, [I] threw off all ballast and brought my ship, shattered and leaking though it was, to the desired resting place," having sped with rare fortune into the wide port of philosophy.³² Such comparison of life to a sea voyage was an ancient Hellenic tradition that early acquired Christian attributions and substitutions.³³ It was in Neoplatonist philosophy that Augustine anchored his

²⁷ See Othmar Perler, *Les voyages de Saint-Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1969), pp. 57–81.

²⁸ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 24.

²⁹ Jean Rougé, "Saint Augustin et la mer. Rhétorique et réalité," *Cahiers d'histoire* 27 (1982): 45–56.

³⁰ The initial survey of this topic is Henri Rondet, "Le symbolisme et la mer chez saint Augustin," in *Augustinus Magister: Congrès international Augustinien Paris, 21–24 Septembre 1954*, 3 vols. (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1954), 2:691–701; more recently, Bernd Lorenz, "Apuntes para la imagen del mar en las *Confesiones* de san Agustín," *Augustinus* 31 (1986): 179–84. It is documented and developed much more fully here and in my article, "The Prudential Augustine: The Virtuous Structure and Sense of His *Confessions*," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 22 (1987): 137–41, 144–48.

³¹ For this concept, see appendice 5 in Pierre Courcelle, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire: Antécédents et Postérité* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1963), pp. 623–40; Plato, *Politicus*, 273c–d.

³² Augustine, *De beata vita*, 1.1–5, ed. W. M. Green (Turnholt: Brepols, 1970), p. 65, line 1, to p. 68, line 132; trans. Ludwig Schopp, *The Writings of St. Augustine*, 4 vols. (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1948), 1:43, 45, 46. Compare *Contra academicos*, 1.1.1, 2.1.1, 3.2.3, *ibid.*, p. 3, line 8, p. 18, lines 17–23, p. 36, lines 32–39.

³³ Campbell Bonner, "Desired Haven," *Harvard Theological Review* 34 (1941): 49–67.

belief in the intellect as the pilot that elevates the soul to the paternal harbor.³⁴ Submerged in the watery abyss of carnal pleasures, he sought dry land. Having achieved some intellectual ascent from the corruptible to the incorruptible, he discovered in Plotinus the method for transcending even incorruptible truths. This was the dialectical voyage from the sensible to the intelligible, then from the intelligible to its source. "Thus admonished to return unto myself, I entered into my innermost parts under Thy guidance. . . . I entered in and saw with the eye of my soul (whatever its condition) the Immutable Light, above this same eye of my soul, and above my mind."³⁵

An illuminative experience was that of Cusanus "at sea." Even in the modern idiom, to be "at sea" denotes ignorance, even error, as in the related expression "all wet," or in Berkeley's metaphor, "an ocean of false learning."³⁶ The problem addressed in *De docta ignorantia* is how to bridge the opposition between the finite and the infinite, as there exists between them no proportion.³⁷ In his tripartite structure, Cusanus's solution is Augustine's: Christ as the mediator between God and man.³⁸ Augustine, whose intellectual glimpse of the immutable Light had been struck down by a divine mystery revealable only to a faithful gaze,³⁹ through his conversion matured to believe in a different vehicle for the journey from the carnal to the spiritual. This was not the inquiring mind but the humble bark of the cross, in a metonym, "the wood."

The sea is corrupted creation, the secular realm. In this world good and evil men swim together as in a sea, enclosed in nets, until shore is reached. All descendants of Adam are under this condemnation, gloomily submerged in bitter oceanic depths from which none can be rescued without labor, grief, and fear. Even the citizens of God are "on pilgrimage in this wicked world as though in a flood." Christ alone is the way (*via*) by which and to which one journeys. He is the swiftest, sublimest, and surest way because it is the way that the king of the fatherland has made himself. "Whither do we go? Unto the Truth. By what path do we go? By faith.

³⁴ See the many references in Proclus, *Théologie platonicienne*, ed. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink, 5 vols. (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1968-87), 1:111, n. 3, 4:147-48, n. 3.

³⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.10.16, p. 103, lines 1-5; trans., p. 180.

³⁶ George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous 3 in The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols. (London: Nelson, 1949), 2:259.

³⁷ *De docta ignorantia*, 2.2, p. 102, lines 4-5; cf. 1.3, p. 9, lines 4-5.

³⁸ See Gérard Rémy, *Le Christ Médiateur dans l'oeuvre de Saint Augustin*, 2 vols. (Paris: Honore Champion, 1979). Vansteenberghe, *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues (1401-1464)* (n. 3 above), pp. 389-408; H. Lawrence Bond, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Reconstruction of Theology: The Centrality of Christology in the Coincidence of Opposites," in *Contemporary Reflections on the Medieval Christian Tradition: Essays in Honor of Ray C. Petry*, ed. George H. Shriver (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1974), pp. 81-94; in general, Rudolf Haubst, *Die Christologie des Nikolaus von Kues* (Freiburg: Herder, 1956).

³⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.17.23, p. 107, lines 16-32.

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Whither do we go? Unto Christ. By what path do we go? Through Christ.” This is the way of humility, of which virtue Christ is the peerless model. By straining the utmost powers of the mind, a man may attain to That which is, even to where It is, as if seeing his own country across an expanse of sea. “Yet who can get to It, *Where It is*,” asks Augustine. “He sees whither he would go, but he has no way of going. . . . Between us and It, lies the sea of this world, over which is our way.” The incarnation of the Word is the resolution. “That we might have therefore a way of going, He came thence, to whom we wished to go. And what did He? He appointed a plank on which to get over the sea. For none can get over the sea of this world, unless he be borne upon the Cross of Christ.”⁴⁰

Man is a castaway far from the fatherland. The route home has been so cut off by the tempestuous waves of this world that there is no way to cross the sea to that country unless one is borne on the wood. Christians must survive in this world—the sea—without yielding to wind or wave. They should navigate on the wood, confident that, although the voyage may be in rough wind, it will be a favorable wind. Whoever turns his face toward God will be carried home, while whoever turns his back on him will flow into the bitter wickedness of this world like a river into the sea. Without a ship men will perish, for the waves will overcome even the bravest swimmer who attempts the open sea. For the crossing a ship is needed, the wood that bears mortal weakness. Voyagers aboard should attend to the anchor of faith, the ropes of virtues, the sail of charity, and the prosperous wind of God’s word. Should water seep on board through the crevices in the hold, it must be pumped out by good works. Christians travel in ships on tempests of temptations among the waves of this world. They should not fear danger, for the wood that holds together the world will bear them afloat. Their

⁴⁰ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 20.15–16, II, p. 725, line 1, to p. 727, line 34, mixing literal and metaphorical expressions; 18.49, II, p. 647, lines 1–8; 22.22, II, p. 842, lines 1–7; 15.26, II, p. 494, lines 35–37; trans., Henry Bettenson, *The City of God against the Pagans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 644. *Enarrationes in psalmos*, ed. Eligius Dekkers and Iohannes Fraipont, 3 vols. (Turnholt: Brepols, 1956), 69.4, II, p. 832, line 16, to p. 833, line 51; 64.11, p. 833, lines 6–18. *Annotationum in Job*, 27, in *PL*, XXXIV, 853; *De cataclysmo*, 1.1, in *PL*, XL, 693; *De cantico novo*, 2.2, *ibid.*, 680. *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 109.2, III, p. 1602, line 31, to p. 1603, line 35; 125.4, III, p. 1847, line 29, to p. 1848, line 39; 134.20, III, p. 1952, lines 29–35; 141.9, III, p. 2051, lines 2, 14, p. 2052, lines 21–25. *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus CXXIV*, ed. Radbodus Willems (Turnholt: Brepols, 1954), 69.2, p. 500, lines 3–17. *Sermones*, 10.5, in *PL*, XXXVIII, 95; 91.5.5, 569; 123.3.3, 685; 141.4.4, 777–78; 150.8.10, 814; 170. 11.11, 933–34. *De utilitate ieiunii*, 3, ed. S. D. Ruegg (Turnholt: Brepols, 1969), p. 233, lines 98–99. *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 12.26, in *PL*, XLII, 268. *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 119(6).3, III, p. 1681, lines 3–5; 124.2, p. 1826, lines 23–30; trans. H. M. Wilkins, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1853), 5:523. *Epistolae*, 118.22, 17, in *PL*, XXXIII, 442, 440; cf. *De fide et symbolo*, 4.6, in *PL*, XL, 184–85. *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus*, 2.2, p. 12, lines 22–35; trans. H. Browne, *Homilies on the Gospel according to St. John, and His First Epistle*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1848), 1:20–21.

very pilot is Christ on the wood of the cross, and he ensures them safe sailing to the promised haven.⁴¹

So Augustine admonishes: “Let us keep watch on the Wood; even in the water, even on the waves, we are safe: let not Christ sleep, let not faith sleep; if He has slept, let Him be awakened; He will command the winds; He will calm the sea; the voyage will be ended, and we shall rejoice in our country.” The foundation for this belief is the incarnational plunge of the Word into the sea and his redemptive emergence from it. The mystical meaning of Christ as “the fish” is that “he was able to remain alive—that is, without sin, in the abyss of our mortal condition, in the depths, as it were, of the sea.” A risen Christ still walks on the crests of the seething floods of this world. The briny sea that foams and frets within mortal skin formerly raged with unchecked turbulence but now is mere bitterness confined within human breasts. Christ has conquered the sea and set bounds to it.⁴²

This is the course philosophers have rejected. Certain secular philosophers validly sought the Creator through the creature (Rom. 1:20), but they ascribed their intellection of him to their own talents. In their pride they spurned the Creator for idols. They spied That which is, but from a distance. Because they could not hold to the humiliation of Christ, in whose ship they would have safely arrived at the destination of their vision, they scorned the crucified one as vile. “The sea is to be crossed, and you despise the plank? O proud wisdom,” declaims Augustine. He whom the philosophers intellectually glimpsed is the preexistent Logos, crucified to provide the plank on which they, inflated with pride and adrift from the fatherland on the waves of this world, might cross. “He himself became the way, and that through the sea. Thence he walked in the sea, to show that there is a way in the sea.” With his feet planted on the waves, the flesh walked while the Godhead steered. Since man cannot walk in the sea as Christ did, he should be carried in a ship, on a plank. He should believe in the crucified to arrive at the fatherland, “so believing, that they may hold fast by the plank, and cross the sea.”⁴³

⁴¹ *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus*, 2.4, p. 13, line 30, to p. 14, line 33. *Enarrationes in psalmos*, II, 54.10, p. 664, lines 9–33; 54.24, p. 674, line 27, to p. 675, line 40; 64.3, p. 825, lines 12–19; 66.7, p. 865, lines 62–68; 90(2), 11, p. 1276, line 4, to p. 1277, line 9; 93.25, p. 1326, line 1, to p. 1327, line 32; 95.11, p. 1350, lines 15–17; III, 103 (3).17, p. 1515, lines 26–29; 124.5, p. 1839, line 32; 125.2, p. 1846, lines 43–48; 113(1).7, p. 1639, lines 4–6. *Sermones*, 75.2.2, 75.6.7, in *PL*, XXXVIII, 475, 477; 76.6.9, 482; 131.2.2, 730. *De cantico novo*, 2.2, in *PL*, XL, 680.

⁴² Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 103(3).4–5, p. 1524, line 17 to p. 1525, line 10; trans., 5:132 (modernized). *De civitate Dei*, 18.23, II, p. 614, lines 58–64; trans., p. 790. See also *Enarrationes in psalmos*, II, 67.3.1, p. 891, line 29, to p. 892, line 55; 68(1).6, p. 907, lines 1–15. *Ibid.* 32 (3/2).9–10, I, p. 261, line 1 to p. 262, line 3; 76.21, II, p. 1065, lines 1–16; 92.7, II, p. 1298, line 61 to p. 1299, line 72; 94.9, II, p. 1338, lines 5–7.

⁴³ Augustine, *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus*, 2.4, p. 13, line 1, to p. 14, line 37; trans., pp. 22, 23 (modernized). Cf. 2.16, p. 19, lines 28–29.

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This metaphorical argument rhetorically refuted the claim of philosophers to have attained God intellectually. Plotinus had stated that a ship was unnecessary, as the mind sufficed for the journey across the sea. This was the dialectical voyage from the sensible to the intelligible, then the transcendental from the intelligible to the One. It proceeded classically by analogy from the creature to the Creator. Augustine rejected this experiment, one he had ventured only for his feeble glance at God to be struck down by the intensity of the Light. His intellectual discovery was not God but himself: "I discovered that I was far from Thee in the area of unlikeness." He was still Odysseus at sea, enthralled by woman as Circe and rhetoric as Calypso, until his conversion in the garden dredged him from the seabed of concupiscence and beached him on the shore of continence.⁴⁴ Philosophers might glimpse God, but only believers could attain him, temporarily through faith in Christ, eternally in the beatific vision.

Such conviction of Christ as the way across the void between God and man establishes the tripartite structure of Cusanus's *De docta ignorantia*.⁴⁵ The scheme is the Neoplatonist topic of departure and return, such as Thomas Aquinas had employed to organize his *Summa theologiae*.⁴⁶ In Cusanus's plan, book one investigates the maximum absolute, God; book two, the maximum contracted, the universe; book three, the maximum at once absolute and contracted, Jesus. The method and genre are mixed. The initial and intermediate parts venture a symbolic knowledge of God and the world by "a mode of reasoning" (*ratiocinandi modum*) mathematical and metaphysical. The final part argues for Christ by deliberative rhetoric, punctuated with epideictic bursts of praise and concluding with a prayer as the classical end of an encomium.⁴⁷ Cusanus proceeds in continuity with his rational method by arguing Christ as the coincidence of the absolute maximum (God) and the universal maximum (man). He states this demonstration as the conclusion in Christ, who is truth, of the truths he has already exposed.⁴⁸ Cusanus then adopts the method of faith, which is God's own way for bearing man across the void between the infinite and the finite.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.10.16, p. 103, lines 15–17; trans., p. 181. *Ibid.*, 6.12.22, p. 88, lines 17–40; 8.1.2, p. 113, line 28 to p. 114, line 34; 8.12.28–29, p. 130, line 1 to p. 131, line 38.

⁴⁵ See José Luis Azcona, "Cristo, camino humilde, según san Agustín," *Augustinus* 18 (1973): 317–54; Victorino Capánaga, "Special Issue: Buscando a Dios con san Agustín," *Augustinus* 28 (1983): 209–14.

⁴⁶ See James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), p. 219.

⁴⁷ For epideictic praises, see 3.11, p. 157, lines 7–10; 3.12, p. 160, lines 16–17; for the prayer, 3.12, p. 162, line 28, to p. 163, line 3. For prayer as the classical ending of an encomium, see Burgess, *Epideictic Literature* (n. 7 above), p. 126.

⁴⁸ *De docta ignorantia*, 3.1–4, p. 119, line 4, to p. 132, line 27. "Epistola auctoris ad dominum Iulianum cardinalem," p. 163, lines 11–13.

This methodological distinction between reason and faith is explicated in the postscript, where Cusanus differentiates between “various liberal methods” (*variis doctrinarum viis*) and “this method” (*hac via*). The parallelism is patent, with both phrases in the same case, the plural reducing to the singular. This singular method is distinguished from “the general method” (*communem viam*) of the philosophers, which he claims to have superseded in the intermediate book. Its reference is to Christ the way who concludes his labors: “And now I have finally completed the third book concerning most blessed Jesus, proceeding always from the same foundation; and the Lord Jesus has become for me continuously grander in my intellect and affection through an increase. For no one having faith in Christ can deny that by this method [*hac via*] he is inflamed more profoundly with desire, so that after lengthy meditations and ascents he might see most sweet Jesus as alone to be loved and with joy abandoning everything would embrace him as true life and eternal joy.” Christ, he declares, is “the end of intellectual desires.”⁴⁹

After arguing for a being who would be the coincidence of the absolute maximum and the contracted maximum, Cusanus is conducted in faith and by reason to assent to this truth. Now yawns the void. From his demonstration of the necessity for such a being as required for the perfection of creation, he vaults to the identification of this being as Jesus, “the First born of all creation.” At this juncture his appeal shifts from scientific models to scriptural authorities, notably Paul, “who in a rapture was enlightened from on high” to this knowledge.⁵⁰ The plain style of his calculations rises to the eloquent style of his persuasions, as if in imitation of that Odyssean voyager who from a secure groundswell is suddenly swept upwards to a crest on the surging wave of the intellect. As his prose develops from the infinite line to the exclamation point, Cusanus discloses the method of this knowledge as faith.

“All our forefathers unanimously maintain that faith is the beginning of understanding. For in every branch of study certain things are presupposed as first principles. They are grasped by faith alone, and from them is elicited an understanding of the matters to be treated. For everyone who wills to ascend to learning must believe those things without which he cannot ascend. For Isaiah says, ‘Unless you believe, you will not understand.’ Therefore, faith enfolds within itself everything which is understandable. But understanding is the unfolding of faith. Therefore, understanding is guided by faith, and faith is increased by understanding.” Sound faith most perfectly is Jesus’, in whose absolute faith men variously participate.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163, line 18, to p. 164, lines 3, 6.

⁵⁰ *De docta ignorantia*, 3.1–3, p. 119, line 4, to p. 129, line 14. *Ibid.*, 3.1, p. 129, line 18, to p. 130, line 9; trans., p. 133.

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This faith is “a most excellent gift of God,” which conducts toward the truth by illumination. Formed in simplicity through learned ignorance, faith in Christ can be increased and unfolded in understanding by ascending degree. For the highest and profoundest mysteries of God are revealed through the hidden treasury of Jesus to the small and humble wanderers in this world.⁵¹

It was to such a traveler as Cusanus that this mystery was disclosed. Faith in the incarnate Word is the method, the illuminating gift, by which he was led “to embrace incomprehensible things incomprehensibly.” In the postscript Cusanus delineates verbally a methodological opposition toward this end. He had actively striven to touch it (*concupivi . . . attingere*) “by various methods” (*variis viis*), until he was passively led to embrace it (*ductus sum . . . amplecterer*) “by this method” (*hac via*). This he defines as faith in Christ. As he expounds, faith unfolds every intelligible. Although God is unknowable as he is, he remains in himself intelligible. By the reasonable science of learned ignorance man can know that absolute truth exists, although he is unable to comprehend it. It is by faith that man may embrace what he has merely touched by reason.

Since God is not knowable in this world (where by reason and opinion or by doctrine we are led, with symbols, through the more known to the unknown), He is apprehended only where persuasive considerations cease and faith appears. Through faith we are caught up, in simplicity, so that being in a body incorporeally (because in spirit), and in the world not mundanely but celestially we may incomprehensibly contemplate Christ above all reason and intelligence, in the third heaven of most simple intellectuality. Thus, we see even the following: viz., that because of the immensity of his excellence God cannot be comprehended. And this is that learned ignorance through which most blessed Paul, in ascending, saw that when he was being elevated more highly to Christ, he did not know Christ, though at one time he had known only Christ.⁵²

Although Cusanus identifies learned ignorance with the Pauline ecstasy, there is no scriptural evidence for this. Like other speculators on that pericope (2 Cor. 12:1–10), he is conforming its authority to his own theory. He employs the modesty topic,⁵³ in imitation of Paul, who related the revelation in the third person, as if about another man. It was Cusanus’s own contemplation that was christocentric. And the christocentric program of *De docta ignorantia* is this: “To the end that we may conceive—above all our intellectual comprehension and in learned ignorance, as it were—this

⁵¹ Ibid., 3.11, p. 151, line 26, to p. 152, line 23; trans., p. 149.

⁵² “Epistola auctoris ad dominum Iulianum cardinalem,” p. 163, lines 6–7, 10–11, 21–22. *De docta ignorantia*, 1.3–1.4, p. 9, lines 21–28, p. 10, lines 4–6. Ibid., prol. 2, p. 59, lines 9–12. 3.11, p. 152, line 25, to p. 153, line 7; trans., p. 150.

⁵³ For an introduction, see Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 83–85.

person who united a human nature to Himself, let us ascend in our understanding and consider.”⁵⁴

Yet what did he mean by “to embrace incomprehensible things incomprehensibly in learned ignorance”? A concept of learned ignorance was traditional.⁵⁵ Augustine thought marvel rather than understanding the appropriate response to God. Man should joyfully desire “to find Thee by not finding, rather than by finding not to find Thee.” The transcendence of the divine mystery of simplicity and multiplicity eludes easy apprehension, expression, and judgment. God alone knows, he affirmed, and it is not right for the illuminated creature to know the Light in the same way that It knows itself. “Our knowledge, in comparison with Thy knowledge, is but ignorance.” The ascent of Yahweh upon the cherubim and his swift flight on the wings of the wind demonstrate to his lovers an incomprehensibility that surpasses the powers by which human souls mount as though also winged. The highest unknown heavens can only be investigated by human conjecture. As man is unfit to contemplate the Creator in himself, he may but praise him in his works. A man does not err in not knowing, but in assuming that he knows something that he does not. “Certainly we do not know what we are unable to conceive in our thought, and, when any thought comes to our mind, we cast it out, reject it, despise it; we know that what we seek is not this, although we do not know exactly what it is. Therefore, there is in us a certain learned ignorance, if I may say so, but it is learned in the Spirit of God, who helps our infirmity.”⁵⁶

Although Cusanus insisted that he discovered learned ignorance independently,⁵⁷ the concept of comprehending the incomprehensible incomprehensibly is borrowed. Augustine had urged that, although the knowledge by which God creates is incomprehensible to man, incomprehensible things should be sought increasingly because progress in this pursuit perfects man. Such mysteries are sought to be found sweeter and found only to be sought more eagerly. Cusanus’s phrase resonates with Augustine’s definition of the function of wisdom. It derives from an argument in a very public text, *De civitate Dei*, about whether divine knowl-

⁵⁴ *De docta ignorantia*, 3.4, p. 130, lines 23–25; trans., p. 134.

⁵⁵ F. Edward Cranz, “Saint Augustine and Nicholas of Cusa in the Tradition of Western Christian Thought,” *Speculum* 28 (1953): 309–11; Hopkins, *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), pp. 158–59, nn. 3, 7.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.6.10, p. 5, line 66, to p. 6, line 2; trans., p. 11; 13.11.12, p. 248, lines 15–20; 13.16.19, p. 252, lines 1–6; 11.4.6, p. 197, lines 11–12; trans., p. 333. *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 17.11, I, p. 96, lines 1–9; 32/2(2)6, p. 259, lines 1–3; 134.5, III, p. 1941, lines 2–4. *Epistolae*, 199.13.52, in *PL*, XXXIII, 924; 130.14.27–130.15.28, in *PL*, XXXIII, 505–6; trans., Sr. Wilfred Parsons, *Letters*, 6 vols. (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1951–56), 2:398. See also Vladimir Lossky, “Les éléments de ‘Théologie négative’ dans la pensée de saint Augustin,” in *Augustinus Magister*, 1:575–81.

⁵⁷ *Apologia docta ignorantiae*, ed. Klibansky, in *Opera omnia*, 2:12, line 19, to p. 13, line 19.

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edge comprehends the infinite. The example is numbers. The reasoning of the Platonists, who respect the idea that God designed the cosmos on the numerical principle, and the revelation of scripture testify to the divine understanding of an infinity of numbers. "It follows then," Augustine argues, "that since whatever is comprehended by knowledge is limited by the very comprehension of the one who knows, in some ineffable way, all infinity is made finite by God since in His knowledge it is not incomprehensible." Man should not presume to limit the divine knowledge. "The fact is that God, whose knowledge is simple in its multiplicity and one in its diversity, comprehends all incomprehensible things with an incomprehensible comprehension [*cuius sapientia simpliciter multiplex et uniformiter multiformis tam incomprehensibili comprehensione omnia incomprehensibilia comprehendit*]." ⁵⁸

When Cusanus claims to have embraced "incomprehensible things incomprehensibly" he means that he has attained to wisdom. He has not achieved this like God through omniscience but been conducted to it through faith "in learned ignorance." He had been swept to the crest of the wave of intellection through his investigation of the infinite as numerical, simple in multiplicity and one in diversity. The apprehension, however, is the gift of faith in Christ as the maximum absolute and contracted. In considering the difficulty of contemplating and comprehending fully the divine substance, and in citing the very text Cusanus acknowledged (James 1:17), Augustine had advised the necessity of a purified soul for seeing the ineffable ineffably. Since man is not yet purified, he is strengthened by faith and led by more accessible paths to gain the proficiency and skill to grasp that reality. In Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden, commending himself to the weak by his own weakness as the crucified. "Our Lord Jesus Christ was humbled in order that He might teach us this most beneficial humility, and it is directly opposed, I repeat, to that sort of ignorant knowledge—if I may use that expression—which makes us take pleasure in knowing what Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, Pythagoras, and Democritus thought, and other things of that kind, for the sake of appearing learned and well informed. In reality, that is far from learning and erudition."⁵⁹ This Greek wisdom is the sea in which Cusanus is adrift of the truth until he is rescued by faith to learned ignorance. His contemplation "at sea" is not of Christ the historical person, for historical data are not subject to contemplation, only to meditation. Cusanus con-

⁵⁸ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.7.13, 15.2.2, in *De Trinitate libri XV*, ed. W. J. Mountain, 2 vols. (Turnholt: Brepols, 1968), 2:479, lines 119–21, p. 461, lines 15–23. *De civitate Dei*, 12.19, II, p. 375, line 1, to p. 376, line 38; trans., p. 261.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 1.1.2–1.1.3, 1:29, line 64, to p. 30, line 81. *Epistolae*, 118.4.23, in *PL*, XXXIII, 442; trans., 2:282–83.

templates the *concept* of Christ the incarnate Word, indeed the concept of concepts as the maximum absolute and contracted.

The fundamental importance of the rhetorical topic of place for his illumination "at sea" is solidified by his introduction of its counterpart. It is with solemn significance that Cusanus confesses: "Therefore, we who are believers in Christ are led in learned ignorance unto the Mountain that is Christ."⁶⁰ In the Neoplatonist dialectic the term of the voyage at sea is land, the fatherland, the beloved country. The land is also an elemental motif of biblical faith as the covenantal promise.⁶¹ It is most hallowed as the mountain of Zion, the secure, lofty, fertile dwelling place of God.⁶² The archetypal journey at sea to the mountain was the celebrated passage of the Israelites through the Sea of Reeds to the mountain of sanctuary (Exod. 15:17). In the exegesis of Augustine the fatherland to which man journeys is also the mountain of Zion, which means "beholding." Zion symbolizes the inexplicable vision and contemplation of the beatifying face of God, as divinely promised. In hope, man has already cast his anchor upon that mountain, lest he suffer shipwreck upon the sea. Every soul that strives to see the Light that is God's light is enlightened and is a Zion. Yet the mountain of God he sublimely personifies as Christ. This is a mountain of grace to strengthen and enrich by excellent gifts. Unlike the saints who are enlightened mountains, he is the incomparable mountain, beautiful in form, who is the very enlightenment of God. In its incarnation this light solidly reconciled the world to God. As the mountain of mountains, Christ conducted man to his end, "that is, unto Himself, to be beheld as He is, as God."⁶³

With the ancient metaphor of the sacred mountain as a symbol of the universal center,⁶⁴ Cusanus identifies Christ as the mediator between God and man. He is the very mountain whose slope Cusanus climbs and at

⁶⁰ *De docta ignorantia*, 3.11, p. 153, lines 8–9; trans., p. 150.

⁶¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Robert L. Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space: Four Biblical Essays* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1981).

⁶² Terence L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology* (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1985), pp. 35–69; Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space*, pp. 25–41; Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 131–60.

⁶³ Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 64.3, II, p. 824, line 1, to p. 825, line 19. For Zion as contemplation, see also 75.5, II, p. 1040, line 28, to p. 1041, line 42. *Ibid.*, 98.4, II, p. 1381, lines 13–22. *Ibid.*, 67.22–23, II, p. 885, line 1, to p. 887, line 64; trans., 3:336. For Christ as the mountain of mountains, see also 124.4.6, III, p. 1837, line 1, to p. 1840, line 31; 87.10, II, p. 1215, lines 40–42; 3.4, I, p. 19, line 15; *Sermo*, 45.5, in *PL*, XXXVIII, 265.

⁶⁴ The most recent and relevant study is Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain*, pp. 26–29, 59–62, 71–72, 82, with bibliography, pp. 289–91. For an introduction to the symbolism of the center, see Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Harvill, 1961), pp. 27–56; *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Trask (New

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whose peak as the coincidence of opposites he embraces wisdom. Christ is the summit of those "incorruptible truths humanly knowable" he transcends in learned ignorance. Cusanus describes the ascent. Forbidden to touch the Mountain with carnal senses, the intellectual eye perceives an obscuring mist within. This is the Mountain on which all intellectual beings may be pleased to dwell. By approaching this Mountain with more steadfast faith, one is rapt from sensible observation to perceive with interior audition terrible sounds of its majesty and to understand readily that this alone is the Lord whom the universe obeys. Gradually one arrives at certain incorruptible footprints, divine characters in which the voice of God himself speaks through the tongues of the prophets and saints. From there believers ascending with greater ardor are rapt into simple intellectuality, transcending all sensible matter to arrive at the perception of things that cannot be revealed because they are beyond all vocal utterance. Here Jesus as the goal of every utterance is heard incomprehensibly. Cusanus abbreviates the ascent: from the corporeal utterance as the sign of a corruptible mental word, to its cause in an incorruptible mental word of concept, to Christ as the incarnated Concept of all concepts as the Word made flesh! This is the truth progressively manifested to the believer who ascends by Christ and who by the divine efficacy of a faith formed in love is united to him. In this union man is elevated to a power over everything that does not exist in unity with Jesus. He is made Christlike and so obtains the full perfection of his nature as a pilgrim.⁶⁵

In the postscript Cusanus states that by an illumination of faith he embraced what he had previously striven for a long time to attain by other means. These vain methods (*variis doctrinarum viis*) have been rendered as "paths of learning" or "doctrinal approaches."⁶⁶ Cusanus's frustration with the *viae doctrinarum* may repudiate the philosophical and theological methods of the schools, especially scholastic logic.⁶⁷ The tracks of prominent doctors were ascribed individually as *via*, and collectively there developed a contentious division between the ancient and the modern procedures, the *via antiqua* and the *via moderna*.⁶⁸ His phrase probably alludes only obliquely to that medieval phenomenon, however. The term is classical, as ancient as Plato, but neither philosophical nor theological. Cusanus's phrase "doctrinarum viis" likely

York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 1–48; *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958), pp. 367–68.

⁶⁵ *De docta ignorantia*, 3.11, p. 153, line 9, to p. 154, line 9. *Ibid.*, p. 154, lines 10–13, p. 156, lines 4–17.

⁶⁶ Heron, p. 173; Hopkins, p. 158.

⁶⁷ Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus* (n. 2 above), p. 34, n. 1.

⁶⁸ See the articles in "Ancients and Moderns: A Symposium," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48 (1987): 3–50.

renders “kata paideusin hodōn,” which means “mathematics.” The term originated in the *Timaeus*: “And now I will endeavour to show you the disposition and generation of them [the elements] by an unaccustomed argument, which I am compelled to use; but I believe that you will be able to follow me, for your education has made you familiar with the methods of science [kata paideusin hodōn].”⁶⁹ The concept was available to Cusanus through Calcidius’s translation and commentary on the *Timaeus*, which concludes with this very passage,⁷⁰ and through the citation in Proclus’s *Theologia platonica*.⁷¹ He owned both in manuscript, the latter obtained during his mission as papal legate.⁷² In those texts the term *viae* denotes “methods” and *eruditio* or *doctrina*, “the liberal arts,” with particular reference to the quadrivium, specifically mathematics or geometry.

⁶⁹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 53c; trans., Benjamin Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1937), 2:33. The term is explained as “mathematics” by A. E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), pp. 360–61. See also Guillaume de Conches, *Glosae super Platonem*, ed. Jaeneau (Paris: J. Vrin, 1965), pp. 290–91; and for the fortune and manuscripts, including one owned by Bessarion, pp. 29–48. Bessarion, as archbishop of Nicea, was among the prelates who sailed with Cusanus in 1437–38 from Constantinople to Venice. Vansteenberghe, *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues (1401–1464)*, p. 63. He may not have owned the manuscript then, of course. The commentary of Proclus on the *Timaeus*, which Cusanus himself owned in William of Moerbeke’s translation (Watts, p. 21), does not include the passage at issue. Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria*, ed. E. Diehl, 3 vols. (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1903–6). The term is explicitly defined as “mathematics” also in Simplicius, *In Aristotelis De caelo commentaria*, 3.7, ed. I. L. Heiberg (Berlin, 1894), p. 641, lines 25–26. For the fortune of the work, see D. J. Allen, “Mediaeval Versions of Aristotle, *De caelo*, and of the Commentary of Simplicius,” *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* 2 (1950): 82–120. Cusanus apparently did not own this text, although he had been exposed to it during his study at Padua, according to Vansteenberghe, pp. 430, 241.

⁷⁰ Plato, *Timaeus*, a Calcidio translatus commentarioque instructus, ed. J. H. Waszink (London and Leiden: Warburg Institute and E. J. Brill, 1962), p. 345, line 17, to p. 346, line 13.

⁷¹ Proclus, *Theologia platonica*, 1.2. The term is identified as “mathematics,” as in *Timaeus*, 53c, by Saffrey and Westerink, eds., *Théologie platonicienne* (n. 34 above), 1:11, n. 1.

⁷² Cusanus’s manuscript of Calcidius is London, British Library, cod. Harl. 2652. See Klibansky, *The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition during the Middle Ages* (London: Warburg Institute, 1939), p. 31; B. L. Ullman, “Manuscripts of Nicholas of Cues,” in his *Studies in the Italian Renaissance* (Rome: Storia e letteratura, 1955), p. 358; P. O. Kristeller, “A Latin Translation of Gemistos Plethon’s *De fato* by Johannes Sophianos Dedicated to Nicholas of Cusa,” in *Niccolò Cusano agli Inizi del Mondo Moderno: Atti del Congresso Internazionale in occasione del V centenario della morte di Niccolò Cusano, Bressanone, 6–10 settembre 1964* (Florence: Sansoni, 1970), p. 189. For Cusanus’s acquisition of the Proclus manuscript, see Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, p. 5. Its earliest extant translation is a fragment copied in his own handwriting, and it was finally rendered completely for him by his friend Petrus Balbus. For a history of the text, see *Théologie platonicienne*, ed. Saffrey and Westerink, I, cl–clx. With reference to cod. Argentorat. 84 and cod. Cus. 185, see Klibansky, *The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition during the Middle Ages*, pp. 31, 52; Vansteenberghe, *Le Cardinal Nicolaus de Cues (1401–1464)*, p. 30 and nn. 1–2; Kristeller, “A Latin Translation of Gemistos Plethon’s *De fato* . . .,” pp. 187–88, 190–91, and in general his “Proclus as a Reader of Plato and Plotinus, and His Influence in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance,” in *Proclus: Lecteur et interprète des Anciens* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1987), pp. 191–211.

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Cusanus's argument is in relation to this Platonist tradition. When he explains that he had long and ardently endeavored to attain knowledge of God "doctrinarum viis," he expresses his frustration not with scholastic doctrines but with his own experiments in various scientific methods. The mathematical model of argumentation in *De docta ignorantia* is patent. Although the lesson of learned ignorance is that the absolute truth exceeds human reason and intellection, there is a process toward approximate truth—verisimilitude—through the things manifested by nature. The more abstracted from sensible considerations this comparative method is, the more certain its knowledge becomes. Mathematics exemplifies such abstract knowledge. Its examples and illustrations have traditionally so well served theological inquiry that number has even been asserted as the essential exemplar of creation in the mind of the Creator.

Cusanus thus enrolls himself in the Pythagorean school. "Proceeding on the pathway of the ancients [*veterum via*]," he declares, "I concur with them and say that since the pathway [*via*] for approaching divine matters is opened to us only through symbols, we can make quite suitable use of mathematical signs because of their incorruptible certainty." His procedure is from an examination of finite mathematical figures with their characteristics and relations, to a comparative transference of their relations to corresponding infinite figures, to a transumption of the relations of these infinite figures to the simple Infinite without any figure. "At this point," he states, "our ignorance will be taught incomprehensibly how we are to think more correctly and truly about the Most High as we grope by means of a symbolism."⁷³

He justifies his procedure in the creative skill of the divine Measurer. Just as God employed the quadrivium in creating the world, so may man in investigating the relationships of objects, elements, and motions.⁷⁴ Cusanus is convinced that the models of the sciences can afford comparative insights to man, desirous by his intellectual nature of knowing God, yet "at sea" because of the intrinsic lack of proportion between the finite and the infinite. In catapulting the method of theology from the foundational trivium to the advanced quadrivium,⁷⁵ he transcends the discursive disciplines that more commonly articulated its arguments and doctrines. *De docta ignorantia* originates in a methodological shift from the linguistic to the symbolic, from the comparative discourse of the metaphor to the comparative demonstration of the model. While Cusanus gra-

⁷³ *De docta ignorantia*, 1.3, p. 9, lines 24–26; 1.4, p. 11, lines 12–14; 1.11, p. 22, line 17, to p. 24, line 9, trans., p. 62; 1.12, p. 24, lines 13–25; trans., p. 63.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.13, p. 110, lines 23–26, p. 111, lines 11–13.

⁷⁵ An emphasis in *De docta ignorantia* upon the quadrivium is also stated by Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, pp. 125, 72–73.

ciously acknowledges his predecessors in this method, perhaps none labored with more conviction or ingenuity on the principle that God geometrizes. In *De docta ignorantia* he investigates the line, the triangle, the circle, and the sphere.⁷⁶ In *De coniecturis* he examines a diagram of the quaternary progression of number, a paradigm of polarity in interlocking pyramids, and a mathematical and geometrical drawing of the universe. A painted icon serves as an optical model in *De visione Dei*, as does a lens in *De beryllo*; and a spinning top for the physical laws of motion in *Trialogus de possest*. Spatial relations are explored through the model of the game in *De ludo globi* and the hunt in *De venatione sapientiae*.⁷⁷

Just as persistent was his commitment to a distinction, even opposition, between such scientific models, which venture a comparative knowledge of God, and the singular method of faith in Christ, which secures learned ignorance of him. In mature reflection, in *Trialogus de possest* (1460), Cusanus still dichotomized the method of the human mind and the method of divine revelation. Affirming the transcendence of the imminent God to man he stated: "Unless by His own light he expels the darkness and reveals Himself, He remains completely unknown to all who seek Him by way of reason or intellect [*via rationis et intelligentiae*]. But He does not abandon those who seek Him in deepest faith, surest hope, and the most fervent possible desire—i.e. [those who seek Him] by that way [*via illa*] which we were taught by our only master, Christ, the Son of God, the living way [*viva via*], the sole revealer of His own father (who is our omnipotent Creator)." The sight and the site to which faith conducts remains on Zion.⁷⁸

This vital route to God Cusanus symbolized as a voyage at sea to the mountain. The primary religious intuition of the earth has been defined as "the cosmos—repository of a wealth of sacred forces." In this feeling of solidarity with the microcosm, earth means "all that surrounds man, the whole 'place.'"⁷⁹ Cusanus was skeptical of such solidarity. The experience of *Behausung*, in which man feels at home in the universe, was confronted in him with *Hauslosigkeit*, in which man feels adrift, even marooned, in it.⁸⁰ Metaphysical dualism creates a psychological tension between location and dislocation, as expressed in the rhetorical topic of place. Yet

⁷⁶ *De docta ignorantia*, 1.11, p. 23, line 1, to p. 24, line 9. Ibid., 1.13–23, p. 25, line 17, to p. 47, line 28; and *passim*.

⁷⁷ See Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, pp. 87–223.

⁷⁸ *Trialogus de possest*, 75, ed. Renata Steiger, in *Opera omnia*, XI/2, p. 87, lines 1–7; trans., Hopkins, *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa*, p. 153. Ibid., 32–39, pp. 37–47; for Zion, pp. 38–39.

⁷⁹ Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 242, 244.

⁸⁰ The categories, as describing historical epochs, are those of Martin Buber, "Das Problem des Menschen." Grete Schaefer, *The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber*, trans. Noah J. Jacobs (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), p. 29.

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although Cusanus "at sea" had strained and strained and had not seen, he persevered in exploring the cosmos for models that might disclose the shape of the sacred. These might at least conduct man to the threshold of God, although faith alone would usher him into the sanctuary.

The detail of locating his illumination "at sea" is not a rhetorical ornamentation but a rhetorical orientation. Those who disregarded places—who violated decorum—were classically judged "tactless."⁸¹ To ignore the propriety of place is also to be *tactless*, without the traditional markers for situating religious experience. The significance of setting in fiction is commonplace. It is also important in discourse about the self in the epideictic genre,⁸² which may by the rhetorical rules exploit the techniques of fiction. This analysis has ventured to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of literalism and allegorism by steering a symbolic course, as coincident with Cusanus's own mentality. A symbolic interpretation does not deny physical space but explores its intellectual, spiritual, and cultural dimensions. The illumination may have happened at sea, but not flatly so. When Cusanus explained "at sea returning [*redeunte*] from Greece," he indicated as fundamental the Neoplatonist maritime topic, even replicating the term of the *exitus-reditus* scheme. Greece was indeed the port of departure for his symbolic voyage. The Odyssey of soul had been developed by classical and Christian intellectuals as a major motif for the quest of the fatherland.⁸³ Before Homer, the philosopher Thales had postulated water as the principle of being.⁸⁴ Before poet or philosopher, the mythologist had imagined the cosmic mountain that unites earth to heaven as emerging from the chaos of the primordial sea.⁸⁵

Cusanus promised his patron rarities, even wonders.⁸⁶ Yet it was from the very lectures of Cesarini that he had learned his enthusiasm for Augustine,⁸⁷ so that patron and pupil stood on some common ground.

⁸¹ Cicero, *De oratore*, 2.5.20; trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, *De oratore*, 2 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1967–68), 1:211.

⁸² Current criticism recognizes that first-personal writing is not mere reportage; for a sample of trends in interpretation, see James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980). I prefer to distinguish Cusanus's epistle as epideictic rather than autobiographical. See my hermeneutics "A Likely Story" (n. 15 above) for extensive bibliography on criticism.

⁸³ Vincenzo Cilento, "Mito e poesia nella *Enneadi* di Plotino," in *Les Sources de Plotin* (Geneva: Vandoeuvres, 1960), pp. 279–80; Rahner, "Odysseus at the Mast," in his *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, trans. Brian Battershaw (London: Burns & Oates, 1963), pp. 328–86; Pépin, "The Platonic and Christian Ulysses," in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), pp. 3–18.

⁸⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, A 3 (983b 20–30).

⁸⁵ G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. E. Turner (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938), p. 55.

⁸⁶ *De docta ignorantia*, prol. 1, p. 2, lines 4–5.

⁸⁷ Vansteenbergh, *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues (1401–1464)* (n. 3 above), pp. 262–63.

With the modesty topic typical of epideictic dedications, Cusanus juxtaposed his wee tomfoolery with Cesarini's great genius, barbarism with culture, and private leisure with public occupation. The grand acknowledgment of his patron's office toward the Apostolic See implied playfully that even Cusanus performed an apostolic role.⁸⁸ Augustine had insisted that the apostles were ignorant: "There were just a few men, the merest handful, untrained in the liberal arts, completely uneducated, as far as pagan philosophy is concerned, with no knowledge of literature, no equipment in logic, no trappings of rhetoric." In faith they acted their part. "And Christ sent them out as fishermen with the nets of faith into the sea of this world; and in this way they caught all those fish of every kind, including—more wonderful, because rarer—even some of the philosophers."⁸⁹ An ignorant Cusanus has cast the net of faith into the secular sea and wonderfully caught some rare fish. These philosophers provide him the method of reasoning to the principle of a coincidence of opposites divine and human. Yet Greek wisdom must yield to learned ignorance, for only faith identifies that principle as the mediator who is Christ, and so conducts man "at sea" to "the mountain." The topicality of his illuminative discourse establishes a continuity yet discontinuity of classical and Christian cultures, reason and faith. With Augustine's conclusion on the disciplines, Cusanus ultimately compliments himself. In praising Pythagoras for divine teaching, Augustine had applauded heroic voyagers: "Of the wise man only can it be truly said: 'Calmly he stands, like a motionless rock in the turbulent sea-surge.'"⁹⁰

⁸⁸ *De docta ignorantia*, prolog. 1, pp. 1–2.

⁸⁹ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 22.5, p. 810, lines 20–26; trans., pp. 1027–28. See also p. 811, lines 31–33, 46–47.

⁹⁰ Augustine, *De ordine*, 2.54, ed. Green (Turnholt: Brepols, 1970), p. 136, line 48, to p. 137, line 49; trans. Robert P. Russell, in *Writings of Saint Augustine*, I, 331. Vergil, *Aeneid*, 7.586; cf. Homer, *Iliad*, 15.618–19.