Introduction

Life, or, Stories from an Early Christian Universe

In this inquiry one fact appears clear at the outset. The entire constitution of the world is various and diverse; for it consists of rational beings, and others more divine, and of bodies of different kinds; and besides these, of dumb animals, that is wild beasts, cattle, birds and all creatures that live in water; then secondly of places, such as heaven or the heavens, earth, water, and also the air which is between these two, or that which men call the aether; and finally of all things which spring or grow out of the ground.

Rufinus / Origen, On First Principles 2.1.1

There are two stories that have been told many times by scholars who write about early Christianity. They are good stories: one is based on the writings of the third-century theologian and philosopher Origen, and is about the beginning and end of the world; the other story is based on the writings of the late fourth- and fifth-century monks Rufinus of Aquileia and Jerome of Stridon, and is about a quarrel between friends. It is usual to distinguish these stories from each other by classifying the first as theology and the second as history. In this book, I will set those categories to one side, and distinguish the stories from each other in terms of the scale of the actors who play roles in each of them. In the first story, the actors are large: God, the Word, and the cosmos. (Origen,
among others, would not agree that God and the Word are physically large; let us say rather that in this story God and the Word are conceptually large. The cosmos, on the other hand, is simply large.) In the second story, the actors are human-sized, because they are for the most part human. By way of introduction, I would like to retell these stories in their conventional sizes, and then explain what it might look like to tell these stories from a series of other points of view, on a series of different scales, and with a variety of nonhuman actors.

I will begin with the humans.

Over the course of a few years in the middle of the fourth century, two young human persons, Rufinus and Jerome, lived in the city of Rome. Rufinus had been born around the year 345 in the small northern Italian town of Concordia, not far from the much larger city of Aquileia. He is sometimes called Rufinus of Concordia, but more often Rufinus of Aquileia. His family was Christian, respectable, and wealthy—a later friend, Palladius, will call him “very well born”—though it was not as wealthy as some of the families he would later be part of. Jerome was born in Stridon, in the province of Dalmatia, to the east of Aquileia. He too came from a wealthy Christian family but, like Rufinus, his family was also not as wealthy as the families he would later become part of. Rufinus and Jerome had been sent to Rome to complete their education. While there, they became friends, and, after their education in the city had concluded, they each developed an interest in what was at that time a new form of philosophical training: Christian ascetic practice. Classical precedents as far back as Socrates, or even Pythagoras, had established that lovers of wisdom were likely to stand a little outside of conventional society, and so those who, like these two young humans, pursued Christian wisdom nine centuries later, might also desire to become persons whose eccentric and disciplined lives bespoke a close relationship with the divine source of wisdom. Both Rufinus and Jerome embarked on this pursuit.

This involved much reading and travel. Over the course of their training, both men began to read the work of the third-century philos-
opher Origen: Rufinus studied with the famous biblical scholar Didymus the Blind in Alexandria and probably learned of Origen’s works there. Jerome got to know the famous bishop and writer Gregory of Nazianzus in Constantinople, and probably became interested in Origen’s works there. Origen found in Christian biblical texts a divinely ordered cosmos that flowed downward from a unified beginning in God into the multiplicity of the universe, and then turned upward in slow, inexorable return to divine union. What were the workings of this cosmos, and what was the place of souls within it? These were questions that the narratives of scripture and the love of wisdom could together illuminate. Jerome and Rufinus became enthusiasts for Origen’s approach to Christian thought and scripture and, when they were no longer quite so young, they both settled, as Origen had done more than a century before, in the biblical Holy Land, to lead lives of scholarship and ascetic transformation. Rufinus, under the patronage of his friend, the wealthy Roman aristocrat Melania the Elder, settled on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem in 380. Jerome, under the patronage of the wealthy, but not quite as wealthy, Roman aristocrat Paula, settled in Bethlehem in 386.

There followed a great deal of trouble. Controversy over the doctrinal correctness of Origen’s ideas had existed during Origen’s lifetime, and permutations of this controversy persisted in the late fourth century. During the 390s, as Rufinus and Jerome reached what is now human middle age, the bishop Epiphanius of Salamis traveled to Palestine to encourage communities there to reject Origen’s work. Epiphanius was close to Jerome, and Jerome renounced what he described as Origen’s heretical ideas, while nonetheless insisting that there was much in Origen’s work that could remain useful to a careful biblical scholar. Rufinus, by contrast, refused to renounce Origen, arguing that passages in Origen’s writings that appeared heretical were being misconstrued, had been taken out of context, or had been corrupted by scribal errors or ill-intentioned copyists, over the course of their
transmission. The differences in their responses to Epiphanius’s request led to a bitter division between Rufinus and Jerome. This division was tentatively healed, and peaceable words were exchanged, in 396.

It is fair to blame Rufinus for breaking the peace, although Jerome’s subsequent expressions of rage have not endeared him to modern scholars. In 397, Rufinus returned to Italy and published a Latin translation of Origen’s major early treatise, *On First Principles*. In the preface of his translation he praised Jerome, without naming him directly, as his predecessor in translating Origen’s work. Jerome received this as a thoroughly backhanded compliment. Over the course of the next several years, as they grew into old human beings, Jerome and Rufinus would engage in an increasingly angry public debate over Origen’s work; into this debate they drew many of their friends within the Roman aristocracy. In the year 400, both the pope at the time, Anastasius, and the patriarch of Alexandria, Theophilus, condemned Origen’s writings, but continued harassment of prominent public figures on the grounds of Origenism made the anti-Origenist cause unpopular. The charismatic preacher John Chrysostom was deposed from his episcopal seat in Constantinople in 403, under suspicion of Origenist heresy, and this deposition appeared to many onlookers to be a baldly political move by Theophilus of Alexandria, part of an ongoing rivalry between Alexandria and Constantinople. This fact, along with the death of Epiphanius of Salamis in the same year, caused much of the controversy to subside. Rufinus continued to translate works of Origen into Latin throughout this period, until his death in the year 410 or 411. Jerome continued to use Origen’s work in his biblical commentaries, and to vilify Rufinus in angry personal terms, until his own death in 419.

That is the series of events that scholars of early Christianity often call the Origenist controversy, narrated briefly, on a human scale. Now consider the larger-than-human story. This is the story within which the people I have just described are mere pinpricks of intellectual light,
barely clothed in quickly vanishing flesh, invisible in comparison to
the fire of divine reason and divine love. It is the story that Origen tells,
but it is also, according to Origen, the story that the universe tells. In
the beginning, God created all things. It created all things out of
an activity of Its being for which we have no word other than love,
although this word, like all the words to describe God in this story, is a
guess and a failure. God created all things in and through Its Word, the
divine Logos, which is God's eternal rationality, Its wisdom, truth, and
order, Its living creative principle. The beings created by this Word
were living, rational, and immaterial, and were united, by virtue of
their rational natures, to God and to the Word. Indeed, by their natures,
they were themselves echoes of what the Word is. Eventually, how-
ever, these beings wavered in their concentration, fell away from their
intellectual union with God and the Word, and began to lose their
rational fire. They became, in a common Greek play on words, souls: they were “cooled-off” beings, for psyche, soul, in a standard ancient
etymology, is derived from psychesthai, to cool off. This loss is how the
universe begins. Then God desired all things to return to Itself, and so
It made the physical world to hold and to care for these cooled-off liv-
ing beings, and to teach them how to make their way home. It made
each kind of body in the world to be the best teacher for its soul, as far
as that soul had fallen away from its original unity: different types of
bodies—stars, angels, humans, bodies that were various and diverse—
were made for different degrees of apartness. In this story, all rational
animate things are called to return to their first home, and are taught
to return by the bodies they have been given. The universe is alive
with beings desiring to be set aflame. This desire is both taught by, and
revealed in, the bodies that we beings wear.

Although the cosmos and its living bodies are our most immediate
teachers, God’s teaching did not end with the creation of the world. It
provided two other teachers, although they are two only in appearance,
for both are ultimately incarnations of the primordial and creative
Word. The first teacher is scripture, which, like the souls to whom it reaches out, is clothed in matter—that is, clothed with the literal meanings of human words, yet alive beneath them with spiritual fire. The second teacher is the Christ, a union of the one rational being who did not fall away from primordial unity but was placed in a body nonetheless and, along with the Word of God itself, sent into the material universe in human form to teach the cooled-off beings how to return to divine intellection, which is, again, spiritual fire. These incarnations of the Word, too, are eternal aspects of what the Word is. As they appear in the time of the world, they are meant to free humans, along with all animate material things, to return to their original state. For, to quote Rufinus quoting Origen quoting Paul, “we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.”

The world is itself a living, ensouled teacher of souls, but it is also the necessary tool for the Word to reach those beings who live in the world: it is instructive in itself and is the instrument of the Word’s instruction. This is the setting in which all living beings play a role, both as protagonists of their own fall and return, and as instruments. They are receivers of instruction, desiring beings, and vehicles for the instruction and direction of others’ desire.

The end of this story is the final return, the end of time, and the end of the world. Every being that has fallen away will be restored, and God will be “all in all.” To quote Origen again, the rational being “will no longer be conscious of anything besides or other than God, but will think God and see God and hold God and God will be the mode and measure of its every movement.”

This is the end toward which the universe tends, which is both its own dissolution and its release. The process of reunification is happening right now, through the slow ascent of individual beings through progressively less and less fallen ways of being, and through intricate sets of movements unfolding between beings with different bodies, who aspire differently to the same end. In this story, all the characters have intersecting paths, leading them slowly toward reunion.
That is the story that Origen tells. But Origen had a schoolmate too. Origen was the older contemporary of the great Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus; they had both been taught by a certain Ammonius Saccas, a Platonist about whom little is known, but whose students’ work during the third and fourth centuries was in the process of shaping both Christian and non-Christian understandings of the late antique universe. Perhaps because of their shared learning in Platonism, Plotinus’s writings are both like and unlike Origen’s: in non-Christian terms, Plotinus describes a universe that is ordered and beautiful, flowing outward from the simplicity of God down into increasing complexity, to touch, finally, the outermost edges of being in formless matter. Out of the beyond-being of utter divine simplicity, which Plotinus also names the One, first emerge the two beings, Mind and Soul, whose rational, animating activity and generosity will ultimately generate and overfill the living universe in which we exist. As ensouled, alive, mind-filled beings, we are ourselves connected to the greater Mind and Soul from which we are distantly derived and in which we are completely enveloped; as beings at all, all parts of the cosmos are full of, moved by, and move toward, the divine Soul. All things in this order come from the One and long to return to it. We forget that we are living in this greater order only because we are easily distracted, undisciplined in seeing and contemplating the principles and animating forces behind the world of sensate matter. Our task, then, is continually to remove what obstacles we can from our vision of the goodness out of which we and our world come, and so to speed our reunion with the One that is our home.

Plotinus and Origen tell non-Christian and Christian versions of a story of cosmic unity, overflowing goodness, separation, desire, and return. They lived in worlds whose story arcs converged, and so, although we may call the object of our study an early Christian universe, it is really a universe of generosity, loss, and homecoming, spoken about at times in terms drawn from Plato and spoken about at
other times in terms drawn from scripture. Plotinus’s student, Porphyry, organized Plotinus’s writings to try to describe this universe in the best way possible. Origen’s later readers, Rufinus and Jerome, translated and reorganized Origen’s writings, also to describe this universe in the best way possible.

The stories that they told about this universe, and the stories that they experienced by living in it, are the stories that will structure this book. Because the world in which we now believe ourselves to be living appears to us primarily as human-sized, historians often tell these stories from a human-sized perspective: Plotinus, Porphyry, Origen, Jerome, and Rufinus are characters in one human-sized story. Inside their heads, they thought about another, larger-than-human story, and so the desiring universe existed in the minds of humans. In this book, we will try to put the human inside the mind of the larger-than-human universe. The question we will ask is not “what did these humans think?” but “where did these humans live, and what did it feel like to live there?” In the world in which our humans lived, the generosity and rationality of God or the One thought them into being, and thus God’s thought, in its various manifestations, had far more causative power than their thinking had on God. What was it, then, to be a human rational being inside a universe full of living, nonhuman, rational beings? What was it like to be living as a rational desiring being inside another rational desiring being, a larger being that had given you your body and your environment in order to communicate with you about yourself, and about itself? What, in turn, did it mean to be a nonhuman part of this desiring universe, groaning in labor pains, and instructing the human in human ends, while also striving toward its own dissolution and restoration? In this book, I place the humans in their human-sized worlds, but my aim is to explore the larger-than-human desire, the superabundant aliveness, of the universe in which these long-ago human people lived, and the way that their experience of this aliveness structured events that we conventionally call parts
of early Christian or late antique history. The humans that I have described felt themselves to live in a crowded, striving, laboring universe, and so the stories that I tell here are stories in which they play a part: sometimes their part is large, but more often it is very small, because the world that they lived in was much larger than they were.

Although this world contained conflict and difference, it was also a world predicated on recurrence, resonance, and return. Small things that can be seen, in this world, are like larger things that are harder to see; past events that we know are like future events that we do not know. The universe is governed by likenesses. Parts of the world stand in for other parts, and times stand in for other times, even as those parts also stand within other parts, and those times unfold within other times. For Origen, “the end [of the world] is renewed after the pattern of the origin and the issue of things made to resemble their beginning.” “All teems with symbol,” Plotinus says; “the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another.” Likeness and analogy are ways of understanding what it is to be in this world—to be alike to things greater and lesser than oneself, to be living like things that have lived, and will live, before and after oneself—and they are also ways of understanding what one’s self will come to be at the end of the world. Likeness in this world is order, but it is also fear and desire. What is it to be a single being in a world made out of likeness? Beings recur. For this reason, stories from this world necessarily overlap; writing turns and looks for likeness. Particulars are both unique and deeply familiar. It is not surprising in this world that the human Plotinus is like the human Origen, although different; that both are like the older Ammonius, although different. It is not surprising that the young, and then the old, Rufinus is like his friend, and then his adversary, Jerome, although they are different; that both are like Origen, although again different. It is not surprising that Plotinus’s writing survives only in its rewriting by his student and editor Porphyry; that Origen’s writing survives largely, and differently, in the rewriting of Rufinus.
and Jerome. Likeness between the lives, the words, and the thoughts of humans, in this world, is not unoriginality. It is desire to become more like divine thought and the divine Word; it is to return to an origin. To tell stories from this universe is, for this reason, to look for likeness, resonance, and return.

In this book, I use repetitions and reflections in many texts—often but not exclusively the intertwined writings of Origen and Rufinus, as well as their likenesses in the writings of Plato, Plotinus, and Porphyry—as a basis for imagining the universal desires, the falls and returns, of living beings of many different kinds, all of whom were believed to live in similar ways, in this complex alive universe. Because late ancient world systems were often totalizing but rarely total, the early Christian universe I will describe is not purely Origenist, nor purely scriptural, but is also a deeply Platonist, Aristotelian, and Stoic place. The stories I will tell are associative; they look for likeness between beings rather than uniqueness. Of course Plotinus is not the same as Origen, nor is Rufinus the same as Jerome. But all of them used the principle of resemblance to live in a world that was both larger and smaller than they were. And so the stories I will tell use their works associatively and resonantly, rather than analytically and differentially, to describe resemblances in their world: events and patterns that happened through many beings, on many different scales. Certain parts of the stories from this universe will be complicated due to issues of size, because it is sometimes hard to identify protagonists who exist on different physical or temporal scales than we do. Other parts of these stories will be complicated due to issues of perspective, because it is also hard to imagine historical events from perspectives that shift above and below our own. And so the stories from this universe are necessarily both partial and recurrent, happening from one view and then, differently, from another. Sometimes it will be easier to glimpse the resemblances between beings; sometimes it will be harder. The resem-
blances will always be there, because they are always parts and patterns of the same universe.

All these stories exist and find their basic connection through the principle of diffuse life, an aliveness or vitality that is the constitutive principle of this ancient universe, and that extends far beyond human size and lifespan, investing different kinds of agency within a variety of nonhuman beings. All these living beings interact, both intimately and distantly, with each other and with the humans with whom they come into contact. Aliveness, then, is the true starting point of this storytelling.

I will begin again, not with humans or with God, but with life.

It is hard, even now, to define “life” in a precise way that captures all its complexities, along with the porous boundaries that separate the alive from the not alive. Fire, for example, acts in some ways that parallel the activities of beings more conventionally described as alive: it consumes, grows, spreads, releases energy. So does a thunderstorm. Other creatures act in ways that parallel what we would conventionally imagine to be dying but are not dead: amphibians who freeze completely, whose exterior skins become solid, and whose hearts and brains cease to act in winter months but which thaw and begin to act again at the return of spring warmth. At times, it is not even clear what the boundaries of the living or dying creature might be: a forest can act as a single complex living and dying organism in some respects but as the location of individual living and dying in others. Viruses reproduce and spread only with the help of hosts. Sequoias use fire to reproduce. Endoliths live in stone, and can consume it to grow slowly, over centuries or millennia. It is difficult to know, sometimes, what is alive, or in what aliveness consists.

That is because one of the characteristics of aliveness is its own profusion. Things are alive beyond our comprehension. This has always been true: Aristotle’s student Theophrastus, in On Stones, wonders if it is really the case, as he has heard, that some stones have the ability to give birth to young. The existence of endoliths, now, does not show
that Theophrastus was correct then, but it is a useful repetition of the ancient wonders that grew from the foundation of the world’s aliveness. Aliveness has always taken more forms than humans expect or remember, and the world in which our human protagonists were young, and then were old, was made out of aliveness. This aliveness was a puzzle to them: Porphyry, the student of Plotinus, chose to begin his organization of Plotinus’s treatises with the essay on “The Animate and the Man.” In it, Plotinus asks how it is reasonable to think of all beings as participants in the same aliveness, and says, in partial answer, “in so far as any bodies are Animate, the Soul has given itself to each of the separate material masses, regardless of magnitude; even in the whole universe it remains one and undivided: say rather that it appears to be present in the bodies by the fact that it shines into them: it makes them living beings not by merging into body but by giving forth, without any change in itself, images or likenesses of itself like one face caught by many mirrors.” For Plotinus, we are all alive because we are all not ourselves; we are mirrors briefly catching the untouchable aliveness of the universe. In this world, individual lives are not easily delineated. Instead, aliveness itself becomes apparent in flashes, at different times and on different scales. Mirrors catch the face of the universe regardless of magnitude.

The particulars of this world are always being born and always dying. God is the source of life and is relentless, and for this reason aliveness, in this universe, exists in an unstoppable overflow. Since God is also the source of rationality, the rushing proliferation of the world is also suffused with divine thought. This reason, too, is caught in the world’s mirrors, and so life and divine thinking are inseparable. Beings above and below the human scale of reason live and move in patterns that glancingly reveal to the human its own life’s movement toward greater reason. They form words that we can almost, through a glass darkly, understand. Plotinus says, “We may think of the stars as letters perpetually being inscribed on the heavens or inscribed once for