

The Augustinian Tradition in Rhetoric.  
By Hanne Roer<sup>1</sup>

Scholars of rhetoric still draw inspiration from the classical tradition in which Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian loom high above all others as they offer a variety of theoretical perspectives. Hence a strong focus on the classical heritage has marked rhetorical historiography, as seen for example in George Kennedy's impressive *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition* (1980) describing the *Nachleben* of classical rhetoric. It still seems as though many rhetoricians prefer an idealized version: classical rhetoric, its rebirth in the renaissance and, as the climax, modern rhetoric of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (1994) Thomas Conley has shown that Ciceronian rhetoric dominated schools, churches and universities until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, I shall argue in what follows that Augustine was the originator of a new understanding of rhetoric in spite of the fact that Ciceronian rhetoric ran through his veins. Consequently, we should consider religious rhetoric an important current in the history of Western rhetoric, not simply a reflection of the classical tradition but a perspective that might make it easier for us to understand present-day religious argumentation.

While ancient rhetoric was performed in the city-state, the Christian orator found himself in a doubled space, the earthly and the celestial city. The main challenge facing the heritor of classical rhetoric was coping with a heterogeneous audience as has been emphasized by Marc Fumaroli (*L'age de l'eloquence*, p. xxii). Augustine's reflections on time in his *Confessions* (conf) may be said to outline the premises for Christian, rhetorical performance. The Christian orator was faced with the notion of the corrupting influence of time, and his audience would be conscious of the brevity of life and the judgement waiting after death. Hence, it was a great challenge creating that

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feeling of presence, which is essential for successful communication.

Though Augustine says many negative things about rhetoric, his writings demonstrate his profound respect for this Classical liberal art. He worked as a teacher of rhetoric in Thagaste and Carthage (conf 4.2) but at the age of 29, he left for Rome where he successfully taught rhetoric, leading him to the position as official orator of Milan. Having heard of St. Ambrose's oratorical skills he went to hear him in order to study his technique but discovered that the formal qualities of St. Ambrose's oratorical skills were inextricably linked to the substance of his words, the Christian truth (conf 5.13-14). Disgusted at having to perform a panegyric speech the contents of which both he and the listeners knew to be untrue he gave up rhetoric at the time of his conversion.

The Latin rhetorical tradition, particularly the writings of Cicero and Quintilian, influenced Augustine deeply. Though they did not offer absolute moral standards, Cicero and Quintilian grounded their vision of rhetoric in a humanistic idealism. The ancient dilemma between the moral relativity and the cultivating power of rhetoric hence sets the frame for Augustine's reflections on rhetoric in his most important work dealing with persuasive language, *On Christian doctrine, De doctrina Christiana* (doctr. chr.), and in the smaller works, such as *On order, De ordine* (ord) and *On teaching catechumens, De catechizandis rudibus* (cat. rud.). For the interest of this essay, I will concentrate on his theoretical innovations and not necessarily his style of preaching.

In *Confessions*, Augustine developed the contours of a proper Christian rhetoric. Just like the preaching of Ambrose, it was characterized by an intimate relation between form, matter, thought, and words, excluding the treatment of oratorical skills as a purely formal technique. For Augustine, Christian truth was an important thing, the linguistic expression secondary, but powerful language may lead sinners onto the right path. In all of Augustine's reflections on rhetoric he took for granted the performative power of words, relying on their strength in guiding the thoughts and actions of the listeners. With the *Confessions* Augustine created an essentially Christian genre, the

inner dialogue so different from ancient literature in which the soul talks with God.

In addition, he also gives us also a vivid picture of the multi-ethnic and often uneducated audience facing the Christian orator. The Christian orator himself is not necessarily better educated and most likely found it difficult to understand the Bible, no less than communicating it, hence the urgent need for a new discipline of textual exegesis. *Confessions* is among many things the narrative about Augustine's own way towards reading the Scriptures and offers reflections on exegesis and allegory (books 11-13).

The need for instruction is illustrated by Augustine's most important work on rhetoric, *On Christian doctrine*. It consists of four books that fall into two main parts. Book 1-3 deal mainly with Christian doctrine and principles for interpreting the Bible, book 4 gives precepts for communicating the properly understood Christian doctrine. Augustine announces that his work is no manual of rhetoric (Book 4 1.2) but deals with the right treatment of the Scriptures (*tractatio scripturarum*), beginning with the books on the discovery of what to say, *de modo inveniendi* (1-3) and concluding with the fourth book on the ways of expressing this, *de modo proferendi*. Augustine's reinterpretation of rhetoric thus consists in replacing *inventio*, the ancient art of finding arguments pro et contra, with hermeneutics, i.e. the reading of Scriptures according to certain general rules. These are rather broad but not arbitrary as the result of the textual exegesis is given in advance (Pollmann 138-9). Augustine reinstalls rhetoric as a central social and political factor since reading texts and teaching Scriptures to others was essential in the new Christian society.

In Book 2, Augustine defines rhetoric as a value neutral discipline that may be used in order to promote god as well as bad. Classical rhetoric offers insights in efficient and functional language that are universal, such as stylistic elegance, expressions of esteem, clarity and brevity. He also compares the liberal arts to the Egyptian gold that the Jews brought with them when fleeing Egypt (Ex. 2:22), another way of disassociating rhetoric from its Classical past.

In Book 4 Augustine treats many of the traditional issues of *elocutio*. He announces in the proem that he is not interested in the many rules regarding style and expression. Though eloquence is secondary, it is still essential as it has the power to sway the minds of the audience. The three offices of the orator consist of teaching, conciliating and moving. Augustine quotes Cicero for saying that an eloquent person should teach, please and persuade with the necessary means (4.12.28), but emphasizes that teaching (*docere*) the Scriptures in order to persuade the listeners is the most important task (4.14-31).

The most important innovation consists in Augustine's replacing of classical literature as model for imitation with the Scriptures, particularly St. Paul. He treats the Ciceronian theory of the three levels of style in great detail, low, middle and high (it takes up three-fourths of book 4), rejecting the idea that each style corresponds to different levels of subjects because everything concerning Christianity is important (*materia grandis*, 4.1836-37). He appreciates the effect of a grandiose *sermon* making people cry and act in accordance with faith (4. 24). Prayer is the most important preparation for the Christian orator, and the Christian, who knows who to perform but not to compose a speech, should deliver another person's sermon. Augustine thus transforms Classical rhetoric using terms and phrases from it, turning rhetoric into hermeneutics.

Historians of rhetoric agree that *On Christian doctrine* was so widely used in the following centuries that we may talk about an Augustinian tradition, alongside the Aristotelian and Ciceronian. According to Fumaroli, this Augustinian tradition ends in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Jesuit rhetoric of the Catholic revival flourished whereas Kennedy regards Fénelon as the final exponent of Augustinian rhetoric. Innovation in Christian rhetoric due to inspiration from Augustine is certainly most evident in the early Middle Ages and the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly in the Catholic counterreformation, but I do not believe that it is right to set a "last date" on this tradition (Roer forthcoming). Later on we do not find theoretical works such as Fénelon's

*Dialogues sur l'éloquence en general et sur celle de la chaire en particulier* (written 1679 but published 1718) for the simple reason that there were hardly written any new, imaginative works on rhetoric in the later 18<sup>th</sup> and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

However, in schools and seminaries, especially in Italy, this Augustinian inspired rhetoric never died. In seminaries manuals of preaching, often titled “On divine/sacred eloquence”, were used, and new ones were written. In modern rhetoric of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Augustine has also played a role as a main source of inspiration for Kenneth Burke (especially *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 1961), thus setting his mark on Burke’s philosophy of forms and symbols. Even today, we find rhetorical manuals with prescriptions for the Christian orator, including reflections on the proper use of classical rhetoric that are clearly framed by Augustine’s vision of rhetoric (D.S. Cunningham 1991, Otto 1999, L.L. Hogan and R. Reid 1999, J. M. Kay 2007). Christianity is centred on a word that became flesh, and Augustine showed how to materialize abstracts truths in language.

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