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Augustine on Heart and Life

Essays in Memory of William Harmless, S.J.

Edited by John J. O’Keefe and Michael Cameron

Augustine & the Mystery of the Human Heart (*opus imperfectum*)

Chapter 1: The Voice & the Word

William Harmless, S.J., Creighton University¹

Mid-summer heat in Carthage could be stifling. Augustine famously referred to the city as a “cauldron” (*sartago*), punning on its name (*Carthago*). In *Confessions* he had in mind more its overheated social life – the allure of its theatres, its rabid sports fans, its random street violence and easygoing promiscuities (*Conf.* 3.1.1).² It was June 21, 401, the feast of the birth of John

¹ Editors’ note: The “Introduction” was last revised by Bill on August 17, 2014. It has subsequently been revised and edited for publication, but careful attention has been given to preserving Bill’s content and meaning.

² Augustine offers vivid snapshots of the underbelly of the social life of Carthage in *Cat. rud.* 16.25. On Roman Carthage, see Lepelley: 2:11-53; Charles-Picard; Lancel 1994.

the Baptist (*S.* 288.1).³ Augustine found himself once more invited to preach by Carthage's bishop, Aurelius. A day earlier, he had stood before a wary and boisterous Carthaginian congregation and pleaded the case for Faustinus, the banker-turned-suspect-convert-and-aspiring-mayor. The mystery of the human heart was again on his mind, but this day his focus was on communication, how we speak to one another, heart to heart.

Sitting in the church's apse, probably at Aurelius' right hand, Augustine could let his eye scan the basilica's long cavernous nave.⁴ It was longer and larger than his home church in Hippo Regius. Like other North African churches of the day, it would have been lit, even during daylight hours, by lamplight, by flickers of flame fueled by locally grown and refined olive oil. The church's interior would have had a golden glow. There were no pews. As Augustine looked out from his seat in the raised apse, he would have seen the congregation standing, men on one side, women on the other (*S.* 359B.5 = *S. Dolbeau* 2).⁵ The floors were adorned with bright-colored mosaics arranged in intricate geometries or in illustrations of varied sorts – birds, flora, biblical scenes. Carthage in Augustine's day was renowned for its mosaic workshops (see Ben Abed; Dunbabin).

Augustine had little enthusiasm for the visual arts. Nor does he appear to have had much of an eye for nature's visual grandeurs. But his ear was another matter. He was sharply sensitive to sounds, to acoustic subtleties. His ear was singularly attuned to nuances of voice, of music, and the music of words. This aptitude lay at the very heart of his dazzling verbal artistry. As a preacher, his words would have voiced out and echoed down the basilica's nave. The curve of the apse's roof under which he sat would have acted as a natural microphone amplifying his well-trained voice (see Duval: 181).⁶ As he told hearers, the words he spoke, like all human words, would, from the very instant they rolled off his tongue, begin fading away, decaying into silence. Voiced words were ephemera, passing things. By contrast, Christ the Word of God is a word of an utterly different sort: unfading, eternal, a Word whose unceasing speaking keeps all creation in being, rescuing it from its propensity to fade into primordial nothingness.⁷

On this feast of John the Baptist, Augustine laced his opening words with sound-words. He begged hearers for "an attentive *silence*"; he noted their "*quiet eagerness*"; he sought to address their "*ears and minds about something of a great mystery*" (*S.* 288.1; Hill 1994: III/8:

³ On the dating of this sermon and its links to *S.* 279 (+ Morin 1), see Perler: 232-37. This is one of nine surviving sermons given on birth of John the Baptist by Augustine: *S.* 287-293B. For a study of these, see Lienhard.

⁴ This sermon was apparently delivered in the Basilica Restituta. On the churches of Carthage, see Lancel 1994. On Augustine's and other North African churches, see Gui, Duval, and Caillet. For an overview of early Christian basilicas, see Milburn: 94-120, 153-57.

⁵ In this recently discovered sermon, Augustine says that separating the congregation by sexes was relatively recent, that it had been instituted by Aurelius. He recounts how, before this separation, back in his student days in Carthage, young men (including his college-age self) used these mixed sexually gatherings to harass women (see Brown 2000: 456-57; Lancel 2000: 26-27).

⁶ While Augustine preached sitting when he presided in Hippo, he may have stood when he preached in Carthage, as indicated in a recently discovered sermon from Carthage: *S.* 359B.23 (= *S. Dolbeau* 2).

⁷ On this contrast between spoken human words and Christ the divine Word, see, for example, *Io. eu. tr.* 1.8-11; *F. et symb.* 3.3-4; *En. Ps.* 44.5-6; *Trin* 15.10.19-15.25.

110). He began with a diptych, setting the figure of Christ and the figure of John alongside one another, hinged together, one illuminating the other. To define the Baptist, he noted John's self-description: "I am a voice crying in the desert" (John 1:22); to define Christ, he cited the Fourth Gospel's prologue: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1-3). Augustine then asked hearers to imagine the Gospel scene: "Look, look at them together there at the river, both voice and Word. John the voice, Christ the Word" (*S.* 288.2; author's translation).

This pairing of Gospel epithets – a voice, a word – occasioned his meditation and drove its momentum:

Let's inquire what the difference is between a voice and a word. It's no small matter, and it calls for no small measure of attention. The Lord will grant that I don't grow tired explaining, nor you listening. Here we have two things, a voice and a word. What's a voice? What's a word? What are they? Listen to what you can confirm within yourselves, and what you can give yourselves as the answer to the question you ask yourselves (*S.* 288.3; Hill 1994: III/8:112).⁸

His opening gambit called hearers inward. Within was where they were to confirm things. Inward is where the real really is. Inwardly one discovers words are inner things, indwelling realities, matters of the heart. The heart has words to ask and words to answer. Where the heart is, there words are:

Here you are, you've been wanting to say something; this very thing you want to say has already been conceived in the heart, it's being held by the memory, got ready by the will, kept alive in the intelligence. The thing itself that you want to say, that has been conceived in the heart (*S.* 288.3; Hill 1994: III/8: 112-13).

In a few quick strokes, he sketches an epistemology: the heart conceives, the memory retains, the will enacts, the intelligence instills life. His word choice has embedded evocations. The heart is where "conception" happens. It is a womb (on this imagery, see *S.* 293A.7 = *S. Dolbeau* 3).

Words then are heart-dwellers. And silent (see *S.* 293A.7 = *S. Dolbeau* 3). The voice, by contrast, is an outer thing. Its sound is passing, is impermanent, is a less-than-real. Left to itself, he insisted, the voice "is just a sound and makes a meaningless noise, like the sound of someone yelling Someone or other has groaned; it's a voice. They've wailed; it's a voice." Without the intelligence-imbued lifeforce of an inner word, a voice is "a kind of formless sound, bearing or carrying a noise to the ears, without any meaning to the intelligence" (*S.* 288.3; Hill 1994: III/8:112). One wonders if, in performing this, Augustine himself yelled or groaned or wailed. He then made the distinction razor-sharp: "A word has full value, even without a voice; a voice is worthless without a word" (*S.* 288.3; Hill 1994: III/8:112). Here, for a moment, Augustine's Platonist instincts surface. He dismisses the outward and the sensed. The inner is where the really real is. No sooner asserted, he quickly drew back. The

⁸ This sermon represents one extended instantiation of Augustine's repeated speculations on the nature of language and signification (see Kirwan: 188-211; Rist: 23-40; Cary: 65-120).

dichotomy was too sharp, he realized. He needed to “balance the account” (*S.* 288.3; Hill 1994: III/8:112). Words and voices need one another.

Augustine begged his hearers to help him right the balance: “Please pardon this man as he struggles, and plead with God to show mercy . . . What I am to say is in my heart, but providing a service of voices needed to bring it to your ears is hard work” (*S.* 288.4; Hill 1994: III/8:114). He then pointed to himself as a living example: “What happens with me happens with everyone who talks.” Continuing then:

Here I am, already knowing what I wish to say, I’m keeping it in my heart, I’m seeking the service of the voice; before the voice sounds in my mouth, the word is already being held in my heart. So the word has preceded my voice, and in me is first the word, afterward the voice; to you, however, for you to understand, first comes the voice to your ear, so that the word may be introduced into your heart (*S.* 288.4; Hill 1994: III/8:114; cf. *S.* 293A.9 = *S.* *Dolbeau* 3).

The word lies silent in the heart, conceived in stillness. To come out, to come to birth, a word needs a servant – a midwife, so to speak. The voice is that servant. Its task, while fleeting, is necessary. The voice brings the inward word outward, it midwifes the heart into sound. For hearers the inverse occurs. The hearer bumps up against a voice, its fleeting, fading echoes. Mysteriously, somehow, the outward finds its way inward. Flickers of sound transmute and enter the hearer’s heart. The voice’s service, however transient, is delicate. It needs to be well-aimed: “It considers the person to whom it is to be spoken . . . It looks for the sort of voice to come out with that will help the listener” (*S.* 288.3; Hill 1994: III/8:113-14, modified). Augustine recalls here an orator’s most taxing task: finding the “fitting,” the right word for the right moment, at once perfectly tailored to clothe the desired meaning and perfectly tempered to make its way from hearer’s ear to hearer’s heart.⁹

Augustine chose this day to wrap himself in a philosopher’s cloak, so to speak, offering a sustained philosophical meditation on the phenomenology of human communication, its nature and its fragility. Running beneath the surface were unspoken assumptions. If words are truly inner inaudibilities, if those inner inaudibilities require a voice’s fleeting service, that implies something about who we are as human beings. His meditation presumed that while our eyes may see one another, we remain closed books. We are hidden, trapped in mute hearts, inaccessible and indecipherable to one another. Voices overcome that, but only to a degree. Voices build these fragile short-lived bridges between hearts. In this sermon, these assumptions on the mystery of the human heart remain unspoken, but in a recently discovered sermon (*S.* 293A), preached just a few years later, delivered on the very same feast of John the Baptist, Augustine retraced many of the same tracks he followed in 401. On this occasion, certain of these assumptions surfaced, if only briefly: “If we enjoyed fullness of understanding, we wouldn’t need voices. If we could see one another’s thoughts, would we need any language

⁹ The technical term here is *decorum* (“propriety”). In *Orator* xxii.74 (LCL 360), Cicero defines it this way: “‘propriety’ is what is fitting and agreeable to an occasion and person”; he discusses his theory of *decorum* and gives examples (*Orator* xxi.70-xxii.74 [LCL 356-60]). On this in Augustine, see Dodaro 2000: 2:159-74; Dodaro 2001: 70-83.

to talk to each other in?” (*S.* 293A.12 = *S. Dolbeau* 3; Hill 1997: III/11:259; see Dolbeau: 472-83; Harmless 2004b: 17-42).

Back to Carthage, 401: This day he aspired to philosophic generality, meditating in the broadest terms how he believed human communication to be constituted. For all his aspirations and generalizations, there was one specific word he yearned to communicate:

Just now I was thinking about God. You hadn't heard yet my voice; once you heard it, you too began to have what I was thinking about, but I didn't lose what I had. So in me, as though on the threshold of my heart, as though in the study-room (*secretarium*) of my mind, the word preceded my voice. But in order that what I have conceived in my heart may come out to you, it requires the service of the voice (*S.* 288.3; Hill 1994: III/8:113-14, modified).

“God,” then, was the word he sought to voice and bring to birth in hearers' hearts. And not just the word. The reality. One communicative conundrum, he pointed out, could be heard in the very act of voicing the word “God.” However this word dwelt in the heart, its sound, its vocalization, differed from language to language. In Latin, it was *deus*, in Greek, *θεός*, in Punic (the first language of many of his hearers), *yilm* (*S.* 288.3).¹⁰ Many sounds, a discordance of voices. He meant this, it seems, as a metonymy, one instance as a shorthand for many instances. The struggle to bring to birth the one word “God” in hearers' hearts was a shorthand for the many, many words he as preacher struggled to say about God. He knew well the wider discordance of voices, how fights over words – especially religious words – divided his world. In other sermons, in other venues, the fact of diverse human languages, of our inability to speak the same tongue to one another, led him to ponder the story of Babel. Babel's cacophonies were, for him, a rough parable of the human fall into incommunicable hearts. But that was not his accent here: “Let me speak in the name of Christ to ears well taught in the Church” (*S.* 288.3; Hill 1994: III/8:113). Here, even before hearers who shared his commitments and aspirations, the act of communicating the reality behind the voiced word “God” remained a struggle. He wanted his heart and his hearers' hearts on the same wavelength, plumbing the depths of the same mystery. The problem that haunted him was finding a voice that might bring to birth in his hearers' hearts the inner word “God.” And not just the word. The reality. How then, he worried, can one speak heart to heart about God, that most word-defying of realities?

Guiding this meditation's flow, often subtly, was Augustine's original diptych, that side-by-side portrait of Christ and John. The Gospels portrayed the Baptist as a forerunner. That meant, in terms of time, John predated Jesus. How then could John preach Christ before Christ? Augustine's voice / word distinction allowed him a solution. While in the gospel narrative, the historical John predated the historical Jesus, the very same gospel asserted that Christ the Word was God, thus eternal, and so as eternal Word Christ predated John. What's more, Christ as John's own inner word inspired John's outer voice. Thus, John gave voice to Christ before Christ (*S.* 288.1-2).

¹⁰ In this sermon, he mentions Punic, but not its word for “God.” In the recently discovered *S.* 293A.8 (= *S. Dolbeau* 3), he explicitly cites the Punic *yilm*.

Augustine had many irons in this fire, and resolving this theological conundrum was but one. In speaking of John, Augustine was also talking *about* himself and *to* himself. Meditating on John allowed him a way to meditate on public speaking, on what he himself did as preacher. Downplaying his own voice was intentional – and ironic. He was publicly belittling the very thing he was so good at, the very thing he was so celebrated for: public speaking. The fame he fretted over – and enjoyed – haunted him (*S.* 339.1-2 = *S. Frangip.* 2). John the Baptist offered a salve for those anxieties. John’s words about Christ were the prescription: “He must increase, I must decrease” (John 3:30; *S.* 288.5). Thus John’s preached words – and, by implication, Augustine’s own preached words – were a fleeting act of service, a voice that sprang from the word within the heart and brought to birth a word in hearers’ hearts. John was iconic of human communication rightly enacted:

John was cast in the role of the voice, but symbolically, in a mystery; because he wasn’t the only one to be the voice. Everybody, you see, who proclaims the Word is the voice of the Word ... So gather together all the voices which preceded the Word as into one man and lump them all together in the person of John. He was cast in the symbolic role of all of them, he alone was the sacred and mystical representative or person of all preachers. That’s why he is properly called the voice, as the sign and sacrament of all voices (*S.* 288.4; Hill 1994: III/8:114-15).

John, Augustine argued, got words right. He self-emptied, made himself a voice for another’s word, made his voice the Word’s servant and thus emblematic of speech well-ordered. John was thus sign, sacrament. This feast day, Augustine reminded his hearers, celebrated John’s birthday. John was born in mid-summer, right at summer solstice, when days were longest. From that day forward the sun’s light would diminish. Christmas would be six months later, right at winter solstice, and so Christ’s birth signaled the day-by-day lengthening of light (*S.* 288.5; see *S.* 289.5). “He must increase, I must decrease.”

An Interlude: On the Art of the Prelude

One can argue, as certain philosophers and theologians do, with propositions and syllogisms. But there are other ways to argue. Painters, novelists, poets, composers, filmmakers – they all argue, each in their own way, according the possibilities and strictures of their chosen media. Dante was no less a theologian than Aquinas. I have chosen to begin my argument *with* and *in* narrative. This extended vignette of Augustine in Carthage was a necessary prelude. Fugues, as Bach demonstrated, require preludes. Preludes capture the improvisational voice. They offer, amid meanderings of melody, first glimpses. They also set the key for the fugues that follow.

Before entering into Augustine’s fugue-like meditations on the mystery of the human heart, this narrative prelude was needed to clear a little imaginative space. As readers we inevitably bring our imaginations along. Without counter-portraits, our own imaginings inevitably insert themselves and subtly define the setting. If asked to picture where and when and how and why Augustine meditated on the mystery of the human heart, many might otherwise have pictured Augustine off alone wandering through dense woods, or perhaps standing atop a mountain’s rocky precipice, staring at the horizon’s vast whiteness, like Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, that icon of the 19th-century romantic. Others

might have imagined Augustine embarking as the 17th-century philosopher René Descartes did when he launched his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, burrowing himself in his private lodgings, having “carved out a space of untroubled leisure, . . . withdrawn into seclusion, . . . sitting by the fire, wrapped in a warm winter gown, handling this paper and suchlike” (13-14; on Descartes’ philosophic methods, see Cottingham).

Images of an Augustine burrowed away in scholarly solitude have come to mind for centuries. One of the most artistically skilled is by Vittore Carpaccio (c.1460-c.1526), a large oil painting entitled *Saint Augustine in His Study*.¹¹ Carpaccio portrays Augustine seated behind a desk, stylus in hand, his right arm raised in the air, poised between thoughts, ready to transcribe the next great theological inspiration. Scattered about his desk and beneath his feet are books, some piled up, others lying open, all expensively bound. He sits completely alone in a spacious, elegant study. In the background is a small private chapel, located in a niche, with an episcopal miter left behind on the altar and an episcopal crosier leaning up against the wall. Augustine himself is given a European’s face, bearded, fair-skinned. He is dressed in the refined robes of a Renaissance bishop and gazes out not at us, but to the left, at some scene visible through the nearby window or, more likely, at some far-off horizon beyond the senses’ grasp.

It is a wonderfully dramatic image. It is also almost entirely wrong. How so? First, Augustine was no European. He was an African, a native of Thagaste (now Souk-Ahras in Algeria), and he spent nearly 35 years of his life as the bishop of a second-rate, bustling North African port city, Hippo Regius (now Annaba on the Algerian-Tunisian border). Augustine the bishop had neither miter nor crosier. He said no private masses, had no private chapel, nor did he wear distinctive episcopal garb. Augustine, by his own account, spurned fineries and dressed with great simplicity, likely in the rough robes of a monk. Carpaccio’s image is wrong in other ways. It is almost impossible to imagine the historical Augustine spending long hours alone writing. He appears everywhere and always surrounded by people, whether close friends or fellow bishops or, as we saw here, in front of crowds of clamorous parishioners preaching extemporaneously. Augustine was certainly an author, but few writings were written with his own pen. He mostly spoke his books, dictating to stenographers who worked on the staff of his church. We think of Augustine as a great writer, but contemporaries knew him as a great talker. He was, in fact, a talker by profession, a highly trained and enormously gifted orator.

Thus, this prelude. We needed to start with Augustine the orator, the talker, performing before a live audience. We needed to savor that he first *spoke* about the human heart before anything got written. And when he thought about the heart, he most often thought about it not in the introspective setting and style of a Descartes, not by burrowing himself in a secluded apartment curled up in bedclothes before a fire to stave off winter’s cold; he did it instead in the heat and noisy bustle of a North African port city, publicly, as an orator tasked with speaking before gathered hearers. And he thought about the question as a Christian, the Book

¹¹ For an analysis, see Brown 1999: 507-537; on Carpaccio’s world, see Brown 1988. She argues that Carpaccio’s Augustine draw the appearance of Cardinal Bessarion (1403-1473), bishop of Nicaea, who spent parts of his career in Venice. This painting graces the cover of two of the finest contemporary scholarly studies of Augustine: Allan Fitzgerald’s *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, and Peter Brown’s *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*.

of the Gospels in hand, in the very terms that the gospel itself gave him to conduct his thinking. Settings matter. Augustine did much of his thinking within the sacral arena of public worship. This extended philosophically tinged meditation on outer voices and inner words, on the hidden hearts of speakers and hearers and the fragile vocalizations used to bridge the hearts of the two, was occasioned by a saint's feast.

And it happened out loud. This especially needs savoring. What we now read as words on a page were first, and before all else, spoken words. We have this public meditation – and volumes upon volumes of improvised words just like these – thanks to *notarii* who, like contemporary court stenographers, had mastered a coded shorthand that enabled them to record a speaker's every word (see Haines-Eitzen; Hübner). Possidius of Calama, Augustine's friend, biographer, and eventually the executor of his vast library, once remarked: "Those who read what Augustine has written in his works on divine subjects profit greatly, but I believe that the ones who really profited were those who actually heard him and saw him speak in church" (*Vita* 31 [Geerlings: 104]; author's translation; on Possidius, see Hermanowicz). His reflections, however profound or eloquent, often began in improvisation. Those reflections could have false starts and misfires, as we saw. He sometimes had to retrace his steps. Partly because that is how thinking is done, partly because the topic itself is so difficult. Speaking on mystery requires repeated and often halting raids on the inexpressible. This public Augustine, this oral improvisationalist, is not the Augustine of most people's imagination. But this is the way the historical Augustine thought and spoke about the mystery of who we are.

In this prelude we saw a meandering but fully formed exposition. Now we need to step back and trace its genesis and unfolding. I gather instances into chronological order. I focus in the remainder of this chapter on four: *On Order* (*De ordine*) in 386, *On the Teacher* (*De magistro*) in 391,¹² *On Christian Teaching* (*De doctrina christiana*) in 396, and *On Teaching Beginners* (*De catechizandis rudibus*) in 400. And we will listen in on him thinking through the issue as only an orator would. But to tune our ears properly to the sonics of his world, I need to add a preface and sketch a bit more on rhetoric's role in Augustine's world and in his career, the first because it is a discipline remote from our own educational world, the second because it is largely lost to sight.

Overlooking Hearers

Long before his ordination as bishop of Hippo Regius in 395, long before his baptism in Milan in 387, Augustine worked as a professional orator and a professional teacher of oratory (Marrou: 47-83; recently, see Gunderson; Dominik and Hall). In Augustine's world, orators were celebrities. Ancient theorists defined rhetoric as the art of speaking well, and more specifically, the art of persuasion.¹³ It was considered prerequisite for all who sought fame and fortune, whether in business or law or politics. According to the proverbial view: "This is

¹² Editors' note: Only the first two instances, *On Order* (*De ordine*) and *On the Teacher* (*De magistro*), are treated in this chapter.

¹³ On the ancient debates about the definition of the domain, see Heath. I give here the two most common: rhetoric as persuasion (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I.1, 1355a1: "the technical study of rhetoric is concerned with modes of persuasion") and as artful speech (Quintilian, *Institut* 2.14: "it is the science of speaking well" [*ea est bene dicendi scientia* LCL 350-51]).

where words are learned, where eloquence is mastered – things most necessary for crafting arguments and winning verdicts” (*Conf.* 1.16.26; author’s translation). Rhetoric was so esteemed that, for all practical purposes, the entire educational apparatus of the ancient world concentrated its energies on creating these masters of the spoken word. Being educated and being a rhetor were, for all practical purposes, synonymous.

Rhetoric launched Augustine’s career (see Brown 2000: 23-28, 54-61; Lancel 2000: 23-66; Tomlin). He received his advanced training in Carthage from 370 to 374. The gifted student soon became the gifted teacher. He opened his first school in 374 in his hometown, then in 376, set up shop in Carthage. Seven years later, dissatisfied with the city’s academic atmosphere (and perhaps his own career prospects), he packed up things and, with his mistress and teenage son, moved to Rome where he again opened a school. There he again became disgruntled with students, but in 384 he won a career-defining competition. Symmachus, the new prefect of the city and a leading figure in the imperial government, selected Augustine for a government-sponsored professorship of rhetoric for the city of Milan (see Brown 2012: 96-119; also Cameron). In those years Milan was the center of the imperial government in the West (see Williams; Kelly). This appointment catapulted Augustine to the very pinnacle of his profession. He was 30 years old. For the next two years, from 384 to 386, he rubbed shoulders with the most powerful men in the Roman Empire. On festival occasions he was required to deliver panegyrics before the emperor himself. On more routine days he tutored the sons of the powerful and the wealthy. There in Milan he encountered another skilled orator, Ambrose (d.397), the bishop of Milan, whose erudition and eloquence gradually won Augustine’s heart by shattering his intellectual roadblocks against mainstream Christianity and its Bible (see Dudden; McLynn; Ramsey 1997; Lanéry).

Ancient rhetoric as an artform and discipline had a sophistication for which we have no equivalent today. The closest parallel may be the intricate, intense, and lengthy training classical musicians undergo. Classical musicians train long years on their chosen instrument, often from early childhood. Along the way, they undergo studies in music theory, in harmony and counterpoint, as it has been crafted and elaborately codified over the last millennium. They also study music history, absorbing a centuries-long tradition of musical genius as it has flourished in thousands of masterworks, in a wide array of genres, by composers from across the world. Classical musicians, however profound their theoretical or historical mastery, remain performers at heart, required to practice hours each day, slowly perfecting their ear and their craft. Among their skills, they effortlessly sightread an arcane and intricate musical script and, at the same time, are capable of astounding feats of memory, performing hour-long concertos or symphonies by heart. They come center stage publicly only now and then, but when they do, it is a high-stakes moment, full of promise and of anxiety. Their audience is almost always an educated elite, conversant with the repertoire, attuned to often subtle nuances and thus attuned to catching even slight miscues, and perfectly willing to offer a blistering critique. While many musicians receive standing ovations and calls for encores, only a select few enjoy wide renown. Others, however talented, struggle to make ends meet and spend their best energies teaching young children with scant opportunity to let their talent and training see the light of day.

Ancient orators underwent a training no less intricate, intense, or lengthy, one that similarly balanced practice with theory, historical studies with sophisticated analytics, memory

training with high-stakes public performances. The discipline seized the imagination of the Greek intellectual world with Gorgias of Leontini (d. 380 BCE) and his student Isocrates (d. 338 BCE). (Plato's *Gorgias* singles out the former as symbol and spokesman in the great battle waged between the claims of philosophy and the claims of rhetoric) (see Wardy). Rhetoric received its classic codification with Aristotle (d. 322 BCE), was then elaborated by a centuries-long procession of Greek theorists, and was eventually translated into Latin parlance and refitted to Latin culture by Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-45 BCE) and was then repackaged into dry-as-dust textbooks such as the anonymous *To Herennius* (*Ad Herennium*) and, still later, again expanded, rethought, and recast by Quintilian (c.35-c.100 CE). Cicero had made the case that nothing befitted the dignity of empire and the responsibility of citizenship better than a civic-minded eloquence so long as words were wedded to wisdom (Dugan: 26; see also Steel 2013). Cicero's educational vision became institutionalized in towns across the Empire, where both wealthy senators and aspiring town councillors, like Augustine's father Patricius, sent their sons to schools, if necessary, in far-off cities.

By Augustine's day, nearly 800 years after Gorgias, the educational routine repeated centuries-old mappings, its categories fixed, defined, and duly numbered. There were the five elements of the discipline (invention, arrangement, style, memory, delivery); there were the three types of orations (epideictic, deliberative, judicial); there were the six components of a proper oration (introduction, narration, division, proofs, conclusion); there were the three forms of legal evidence (signs, arguments, examples); there were the three aims of the orator (teaching, entertaining, persuading) and the three styles of elocution (subdued, moderate, grand); etc., etc., etc. (see G. Kennedy). It is easy to get lost in the minutiae of ancient rhetorical textbooks and their maze of technical terminology. At the end of the day, the categories, schemes, and terminology, like that employed by classical musicians, had practical ends: to equip both performers and hearers with analytical tools for assessing actual performances.

Augustine was both a highly skilled practicing rhetor and a highly skilled theorist of rhetoric. In this chapter's prelude, we glimpsed Augustine the bishop both practicing the art and theorizing on it. But stepping back further in time and excavating Augustine the young secular (and unpublished) orator remains difficult. *Confessions* allows some access, but only through its retrospections (see Frederiksen 1986, 2001). *Confessions* remains the book of Augustine the bishop, looking back from midlife and handing down often harsh judgments on his past self. And among the items singled out for harsh judgment was his one-time career as rhetor. By the late 390s, he had become disillusioned with the ancient educational enterprise, convinced that all that elaborate training worried about all the wrong things. He chided orators – and presumably his former teacherly self – for worries about “orthographic conventions” and “syllabic qualities,” about student failures to pronounce the “h” in “human” (*homo*) even as accomplished orators in their passionate orations roused hatred against fellow human beings. “Was it not all smoke and wind?,” Augustine would rhetorically ask (*Conf.* 1.17.27; Boulding: 57). He had come to see the ancient educational system as a vast vanity, a manufacturer of wordsmiths and showmen, of verbal hired guns prepared to defend any cause, whether just or not.

We must not be misled by *Confessions*' harsh retrospectives. Rhetoric – and not philosophy – was the discipline that first formed Augustine's mind. Rhetoric was his first language, his native tongue, intellectually speaking. Amid my listing of rhetoric's stock categories, certain

ones would, at one time or another, play prominent roles in Augustine's thought: e.g., his theory of signs (*Doct. chr.* 1.2.2, 2.11; *De dialectica* 5.7); his theories on the three aims of the orator and the three styles (*Doct. chr.* 4.12.27-13.29 [three aims]; 4.17-34-26.36 [three styles]; Harmless 2010: 135-40). And rhetoric helped fix his gaze on the human heart and gave him key categories to begin thinking about it. Let one example suffice for the moment: As an orator, Augustine had been trained to memorize and deliver hour-long speeches word for word. By career's end, when he himself was in his 70s, he could be sharply critical of such rhetorical practices, arguing that memorized speeches undermined the spontaneity required of the Christian preacher (*Doct. chr.* 4.10.25). Such criticism came from one unusually well-equipped to perform the very thing he criticized. Augustine's training had made him a master of memory – most evident to us in the way he laces his own words with Biblical quotations, drawing far and wide from the Bible's most obscure corners, knitting disparate verses into intricate alliances. Augustine as a gifted and highly trained orator knew how to store thousands and thousands of words – his own, the Bible's, and many others – within the innumerable “storage bins” in the “vast storeroom of memory,” to summon whatever he needed from memory's storeroom at just the right moment (this imagery is Augustine's own: *Conf.* 10.8.12-13). Memory was the wellspring of the orator's *inventio* (“inventiveness”), what we would call “creativity” (see Carruthers 2008: 1-15; 1998). It comes as no surprise that in Book 10 of *Confessions*, memory surfaced as a core category invoked to chart the heart's mysteries.

But it was not simply rhetoric's categories that guided him and equipped him. It was its deeper concerns. Rhetoric is the art of communication. Speakers speak words to audiences. If one surveys the ancient handbooks, the vast morass of rhetorical theory focuses on the speaker and on the words spoken. The third element, the audience, receives scant attention. Hearers remained under-theorized. This is striking given the very definitions by which ancient theorists themselves defined the art. The definitions themselves measured the success of rhetoric by winning over the audience, by winning its assent.¹⁴ Here, for example, is a key definition (and admonition) from Cicero's textbook *On the Orator* (*De oratore*), a work that Augustine knew well:

There are points in abundance which even the so-called professors of rhetoric neither teach nor understand. Who indeed does not know that the orator's virtue is preeminently manifested either in rousing men's hearts to anger, hatred, or indignation, or in recalling them from these same passions to mildness and mercy? Therefore the speaker will not be able to achieve what he wants by his words, unless he has gained profound insight into the characters of human beings, and the whole range of human nature, and those motives whereby our souls are spurred on or turned back (1.12.52-53; LCL 1:40-41).

Orators as masters of persuasion were required to persuade not only hearers' minds but hearts. For convincing minds, orators drew on the resources of dialectic, that art of argumentation that so concerned philosophers. But orators knew that human beings are much more intricate creatures. They are not simply the rational animals of Aristotle's famous definition; they are

¹⁴ For example: Cicero, *Orator* viii.24 (LCL 323): “The eloquence of orators has always been controlled by the good sense of the audience, since all who desire to win approval have regard to the goodwill of their auditors, and shape and adapt themselves completely according to this and to their opinion and approval.”

animals awash with passions (Cicero, *Academica* 2.7.21, echoed in *Ord* 2.11.31). Thus Cicero's stress: the orator needs "profound insight into the characters of human beings and the whole range of human nature"; the orator needs to know how our hearts "are spurred on or turned back." But rhetorical theory gave this short shrift. It was not enough to catalog, as Aristotle's *Rhetoric* does, the vast array of human passions. What the practicing orator needed was an on-the-spot read of his audience, to sense their mood at a glance, before even a word was spoken, and then to continuously monitor shifts in their temper even as one's own speaking was in full flow. To know how to spur hearts required acuity, a highly refined emotional intelligence. Rhetorical theory offered little help. It, in effect, overlooked the hearers. Augustine did not. Over his career he probed and mapped hearers' hearts – and his own.

The Sound of Water: *De ordine*

Endings can be beginnings. One room can open into another. In between: a doorway, a *limen*, "a threshold." Doors close, sealing off what one has turned one's back upon. Doors can also open up to the new, the unforeseen.¹⁵ In the autumn of 386 Augustine closed one door. He gave notice to the city fathers of Milan, submitting his resignation as city orator. The official reason: "chest pains" (*pectoris dolor*).¹⁶ He had breathing problems. It may have been asthma, or a respiratory illness. It may have been something psychosomatic. Whatever it was, it affected his breathing and his voice. Orators require voices. One can't very well be a voiceless orator. This resignation was an ending that was a beginning, a change of career, a change of venue, a change of heart.

This is not the story most think of. Most think of *Confessions* with its famous garden scene, the voice of a child and the reading of Paul, inner light and sudden peace. That is the inside story, a backward glance told fifteen years after the fact, invested with literary elegance and the easy clarities of hindsight. *Confessions* is so powerfully told that it is hard to hear how he first spoke of these endings and beginnings. We have early accounts, penned in the months close to the event. While they lack much (though not all) narrative detail, they breathe fervor, fresh from discovery, an air of breakthrough.¹⁷ In his very earliest publication, *Against the Academics* (*Contra Academicos*), Augustine addressed his hometown patron Romanianus and recounted what had turned his life upside down, how reading "certain books" had been like sprinkling "precious perfume" on a "flickering flame," how "they suddenly sparked in me this wildfire":

Steadily, I started turning inward, quickly, totally, towards myself. And I looked back – I confess it – as though from a journey's end, back to that religion which had been implanted in us in our childhood, and which had been, as it were, woven into our bone's marrow. That religion was drawing me to herself, although I didn't know it. Staggering, hurrying, hesitating, I seized the Apostle Paul. For truly those men, I have to say, could never have accomplished such

¹⁵ The door image is one Augustine himself used to speak of the entrance into mystery: *Ord* 2.9.26. On this, see Conybeare 2005: 49-65. The term "liminality" (from Latin, *limen*, "threshold") was coined by Arnold van Gennep, later popularized by Turner: 93-111.

¹⁶ Augustine refers to it repeatedly: *De beata vita* 1.4; *Acad.* 1.1.3, 3.7.15; *Ord.* 1.2.5; *Conf.* 9.5.13.. On this period in Augustine's life, see Brown 2000: 108-17; Lancel 2000, 99-111; also Clark.

¹⁷ On the relation between *Confessions* and the earlier dialogues, see O'Meara 1951; Madec 1986; McWilliam.

great things and could never have lived the way they clearly did if their writings and their principles were opposed to so great a good as this. I read the whole book with the greatest care and attention. Then philosophy's face, however dim its rays of light before then, revealed itself to me so greatly (2.2.4-2.6; Harmless 2010: 46; O'Meara 1992).

Scented oil; a perfume-ignited wildfire; an inward turn that turns at journey's end back to a journey's beginning; an ending already there from the beginning, woven into the very marrow of one's bones. His words are images in collision, an amalgam of non sequiturs, abstractions strangely concrete. And through it all, a breathlessness. Whatever happened, he did not do it. It was done to him. He was drawn by an unseen feminine gravity ("religion . . . herself"). Adverbs are piled up: "steadily," "quickly," "totally." There is the oxymoronic clash of gerunds: staggering in a hurry, hesitating decisively. And what is seized is Paul, a person who is a book whose words are about a person. It begins with a turn inward and ends with outward words on a page. The page, in turn, reveals a philosophy that has a face.

This is conversion in all its dizzying immediacy and ambiguity. It marked Augustine's conversion to philosophy, to philosophical Christianity. For Augustine, philosophy was no academic discipline. He understood it in its etymological sense, a "love of wisdom" (*Acad.* 2.3.7; author's translation; cf. *Ord.* 1.11.32; *Conf.* 3.4.7; see Madec 1996: 15-24). This was conversion to a Christian wisdom. It meant a sharp break with career, with marriage, with fame, and the embrace of an anonymous, arduous life. It demanded nothing less than everything. This was a liminal moment – and he knew it. He spoke of its discomforture obliquely: "many persons are suddenly converted to a good and edifying life, but until they become notable by some outstanding deeds, they are still believed to be what they used to be" (*Ord.* 2.10.29; Russell: 307). Years later, this dizzying turn-about would lead him to probe the heart's mysteries in *Confessions* more directly, more personally, in the language of interiority. At this juncture he remained what he used to be: a rhetor. His earliest articulations on the mystery of the human heart would be from a rhetor's vantage point and in a rhetor's categories. They would have an objective cast. He would frame them in terms of communication theory – of sounds and voices and words, of inaccessible interiorities and the fragile soundings that bridged them.

This threshold-time would last nine months, from his initial leave-of-absence in August 386 to his baptism in April 387. Endings can be beginnings. The end of Augustine the secular orator was the beginning of Augustine the writer. In these months, he authored his first (surviving) publications, a set of four philosophic dialogues, a first burst of literary creativity, the fruits of a nine-month sabbatical. He spent these months withdrawn but hardly alone. He retired with an entourage – his mother, brother, son, cousins, friends, students – to a small town, Cassiciacum, some twenty miles from Milan, taking up residence at the villa of a friend, a certain Verecundus (O'Daly).¹⁸ Here in the autumnal alternation of classroom banter and of quiet, he found an authorial voice and gave voice to his earliest speculations on the heart's mystery and its consequences.

¹⁸ While several possible locales for ancient Cassiciacum have been claimed, the best evidence points to Cassago Brianza, 35 km. northeast of Milan.

It is in *On Order (De ordine)*, the third of the four dialogues that the mystery of the heart first surfaces as a concern, threaded amid other concerns.¹⁹ The dialogue's title names the main one. The issue of order had long haunted Augustine. The preface's opening words, addressed to a friend and poet Zenobius, spells out the difficulty:

To perceive and to grasp the order of reality proper to each thing, and then to see or to explain the order of the entire universe by which this world is truly held together and governed – that, Zenobius, is a very difficult and rare achievement for human beings (*Ord.* 1.1; Harmless 2010: 55).

Order was to be perceived, grasped. It was a matter of personal insight, a moment of illumination, a mystical seeing the all in the all. Yet in the very next sentence, he worried out loud whether “one might find an audience (*auditorem*)” capable of hearing any answer – capable both by virtue of moral stature (“merits of life”) and learning (“habit of a certain erudition”) (*Ord.* 1.1; Harmless 2010: 55). Insights need audiences, he thought. He then spelled out the philosophical conundrum: If the universe is ordered – and, of course, one cannot presume that the universe *is* ordered – then where does evil fit in? If the universe is created by an all-good and all-powerful God, whence evil? If God is all-powerful, why would an all-good God permit evil's existence to mar his handiwork? (*Ord.* 1.1).

Augustine never mentions here his one-time, now-discarded answer, one he had once held as a Manichee: that before the beginning of the universe, Evil and Good co-existed, that the material universe as we know it is a vast cosmic mistake, the pre-historical result of Evil's dark realm invading and seizing control of a portion of the Kingdom of Light, that God, the Father of lights, had not proved powerful enough to stop this invasion of Darkness, and so that in our present state we are, at our core, remnants of an ancient war, precious particles of divine light trapped in the dark matter of flesh, drunk and forgetful of our true heavenly origins.²⁰ There is no hint of that mythology here.

In the preface to *On Order*, he suggests the problem of evil may simply be a problem of perspective and invokes an artistic analogy, playing on the artform he knew so well from Carthage's famed mosaic workshops:

If one had such a near-sighted view of an inlaid mosaic that one's eye was not able to take in anything bigger than a single tessera, one might accuse the artisan of lacking any sense of artistic order or composition. What [from close range] one presumes to be a haphazard scatter of various tiny colored stones can hinder one from discerning and contemplating in a lucid light how this mosaic emblem comes together as a single integral face of beauty. Something very similar to this is found in the case of people poorly instructed, who are unable, because of a weakness of their spirit, to grasp and to examine the

¹⁹ For the text and a commentary, see Doignon. See especially Bouton-Touboulis, who takes this dialogue as a springboard for a broader systematic study of Augustine's thinking on the issue. See also Conybeare, 2006; Cary: 67-69; Stock: 121-48.

²⁰ On the Manichean cosmogonic myth, see Gardner and Lieu: 1-45; Lieu. On Manichaeism as Augustine knew it, see Decret; Van Oort, Wermelinger, and Wurst.

universal coherence and universal harmony of things (*Ord.* 1.1.2; Harmless 2010: 56).

Why, then, cannot we step away and see how the grand mosaic of the universe fits together? His answer: “The primary cause of error is that the human person himself is unknown to himself” (*Ord.* 1.1.3; author’s translation). We are the problem. It is not the universe; it is us. Our self-ignorance mucks up everything, blinding us from standing back and savoring the grandeur of the universe’s symphonics. Here Augustine announces human mystery. It is an argumentative gambit. In chess, one typically begins with a pawn move. It is a quiet move, a small matter, yet it sets in motion the moves to follow, whether one’s pieces are white or black. Augustine’s gambit here, this declaration of human self-ignorance as the source of universal error, announces the mystery of the human heart in dark terms. How it fits into the order of the universe takes a while to unfold.

Augustine, after the preface, shifts into dialogue. *On Order* is a four-man, one-woman play. It begins in darkness, at night. And it begins with the sound of water. Augustine (the writer) portrays Augustine (the character in the dialogue) lying awake, sleepless, listening to washes of water running through the plumbing out into a nearby stream, a faint quiet flow, then sudden gushes, loud outspills. Others sounds alert him that he is not the only one awake. He hears wood struck against wood. One of his students, Licentius, the son of his patron Romanianus, had swatted the bedstand with a stick to scare off a mouse. A second student, an on-leave soldier named Trygentius, is also awake. So the three begin their dialogue in darkness. The sound of water, the disorder of gurglings and gushes, occasions its beginnings. Is there a hidden order beneath the sound? Licentius, an aspiring poet, had an observant eye and a proposed solution. The cause: autumn leaves, their yellowed fallenness blocking, for a time, the water’s outflow, until pressure built and built, and blockage gave way to gushes and spillage. Where Augustine listened, Licentius observed. The question shifts: from disorder of sound to disorder of sight. Licentius charted the impossibilities: Who can grasp the order of falling leaves, first this one, now that one? Who can predict the genesis of a leaf’s letting go? Then there is the spindrift, each unique. A numberless array of unknowables, each leaf’s weight and shape and glidepath, each spinning in a unique moment of unforeseen airflow of gust or stillness. An order, perhaps, but too many indeterminacies. Further questions: how did trees get ever there? a human planter? thus conscious planning? and if so, why this place? perhaps a soil made for birth? There may be order, but it defies the mind’s grasp (*Ord.* 1.3.6-4.11).

The dialogue of Book One then embarks on a grand meditation on the natural order and its divine author. Definitions are proffered, hashed out, set aside, revised, revisited. The discussion moves fitfully through epiphanies, squabbles, scoldings. Inconclusiveness seems the order of the day. The topic resists answers. At one point, Augustine’s mother appears, asks how things are going, complains when her words are added to the record (*Ord.* 1.11.31). For a discussion on order, it all seems rather disorderly. But Augustine is too much the artist, too self-conscious about literary matters that this disorder on order be unintended. There are oblique nods to Plato who 800 years earlier made the dialogue the genre of choice for ventures into the philosophical and more obvious ones to Cicero who 400 years earlier gave the genre its Latinity (Foley; Doignon: 31-35). Despite Augustine’s claims that this dialogue records spontaneous voices preserved by an anonymous *notarius*, there is simply too much literary

elegance here, too many well-placed quotations, too many allusions to philosophical arcana.²¹ The disruptions of the dialogue tradition seem no less conscious, as with Augustine's mother who is, at times, simply Augustine's mother, other times, a symbol of unlettered insight, iconic either of Lady Wisdom or Mother Church or both (Conybeare 2006: 63-92, 107-113). Augustine the artist seems to yearn to mix literary craft, philosophic perspicacity, and rambling spontaneities, attuned to elite readers and their lofty expectations and no less determined to capture the messy inconclusiveness of actual thinking as it takes place in the disheveled genius of his classroom (and with teenagers who mix textbook answers, startling moments of originality, and predictable immaturities).

The dialogue of Book Two is set a few days later, set in sunlight, a day warm by autumn standards, on a stretch of grass. Alypius, Augustine's one-time student, now closest friend, had returned from Milan. He's a quiet presence, embodies what happens when virtue stabilizes the unsteady, foreshadows the image of the wise man set out at the dialogue's end, encapsulated in a quote from Virgil: "Calmly he stands, like a motionless rock in a turbulent sea-surge" (Virgil, *Aeneid* 7.586, quoted in *Ord.* 2.20.54; Russell: 331). As Augustine says of him: "though I am your teacher of words, you, on the other hand, have become for me the exemplar of their practical content" (*Ord.* 2.10.28; Russell: 306; cf. *Cat. rud.* 12.17). The dialogue in its restart returns for a time to the grand theme of the universe's order, but only for a time, until the students find themselves stumped, with little to say. Augustine steps in as *magister*, as teacher. Dialogue gives way to monologue, disorderly converse to orderly speech. In his oration, the theme shifts: from the cosmic order to the more troublesome task of human self-ordering, especially the interior of the heart.²² He had broached the issue earlier in Book I in his own preliminary definition: "Order is that which will lead us to God, if we hold to it during life; and unless we do hold to it during life, we shall not come to God" (*Ord.* 1.9.27; Russell: 264). How then does one order the disorderly self so as to come to wisdom and so come to the God who is Wisdom? To begin to see the order of things in order to journey to the Orderer of things, one must order one's self, one's heart. And that inner ordering of the human heart requires a step-by-step path. One cannot skip steps. In mountain-climbing, skipping steps, as he notes, risks precipitous downfall (*Ord.* 2.14.39). He cites an illustration close to his experience as a teacher of words: One doesn't teach the breakdown of words into syllables to a student who doesn't already know the alphabet (*Ord.* 2.7.24). So there is a path, a pedagogy, an *ordo studiorum* that leads one upward by ordering oneself inward.

Augustine comes to set out seven steps, a sequence of seven academic disciplines: grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, music, geometry, astronomy, and philosophy. Here, more or less, are the so-called "liberal arts." I say "more or less" because arithmetic is missing and philosophy has been added. This outline for a comprehensive program of study has attracted

²¹ *Contra Academicos* 1.1.4, which speaks of hiring a *notarius*. In *De ordine* 1.5, Augustine says: "we used to employ the writing instrument so that all our discussion would be recorded" (see Conybeare 2006: 27-35).

²² At the end of his career, Augustine noted the shift: "But when I realized that this [ordering of divine providence] was something difficult to understand and that it was almost impossible to make the matter comprehensible to the people with whom I was discussing it, I decided to talk about the order of studies . . ." (*Retr.* 1.3; Ramsey 2010: 31).

the scrutiny of contemporary scholarship.²³ The Middle Ages would later construct its educational edifice around seven liberal arts, a *trivium* of words and a *quadrivium* of numbers, and the Middle Ages was deeply conscious of its debts to Augustine. Thus scholars' concerns: What was Augustine's contribution to the later curriculum? How Augustinian was the medieval scheme? And what of Augustine's own sources? Was he taking over a traditional scheme, adapting it to Christian purposes? Or was the synthesis original to him, made from choices among competing proposals and programs? Augustine mentions, in passing, the great educational theorist of the classical world, Marcus Terentius Varro (116 BCE–27 BCE) (*Ord.* 2.12.35). It is a tantalizing allusion since Varro's key text, *The Books of the Disciplines* (*Disciplinarum Libri*), has not been preserved. We are also missing key books by Augustine. He says at the very end of his career, in *Revisions*, that "I also tried to write books about the disciplines," that of these, he finished one on grammar and had lost that, and later wrote six books on music, specifically, on a single element of music, namely, rhythm. That alone was completed and preserved as *On Music* (*De musica*). He sketched the beginnings of those on dialectic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic (thus, adding another discipline to his original list), and philosophy; these rough drafts too had gotten lost, "but I think that they are in the possession of others" (*Retr.* 1.6; Ramsey 2010: 37). (It turns out that one, *On Dialectic* [*De dialectica*], seems to have been preserved). Augustine's liberal arts project resembles an ancient ruin: a surviving architectural perimeter with stump-pillars here and there. Unlike ancient ruins, Augustine's grand scheme seems deliberately abandoned (*Retr.* 1.3.2).

We are left with *On Order*, a vision, a precis, a blueprint. It is not just a list of disciplines. He proposes an order, linkages from discipline to discipline. Augustine the pedagogical architect had grand designs, a pedagogy for ordering the disordered self, that self that does not know itself, that self that in its self-ignorance damages itself and mis-views the grandeur of the universe. These seven liberal arts were to be harnessed as tools for liberation by the Christian seeker of wisdom. They were an order of studies to free up the mind, wrest it from the dizziness of life in the senses, give solidity to the unstable self, make possible a life of contemplation, and "arrive at incorporeal things by way of corporeal ones, and to do so as though by sure steps" (*Retr.* 1.6; Ramsey 2010: 37). They bring together the best of human knowledge and human civilization to instill not only discipline of mind but also a way to grasp the intricate divine ordering of existence so that the ordered music of the universe's outer spheres may come into view as our own inner spheres come to order, to rest and stillness. The disciplines are mediators, a lifeline, linking human to the divine.

These disciplines were to erect their edifice on the foundations of human nature. Augustine (the character in the dialogue) then cites a definition that he attributes to "ancient philosophers" (actually, it comes from rhetorical textbooks by Cicero and Quintilian): "The

²³ For an overview of the scholarship, see Vessey, who traces out the disputes and developments. English-speaking Augustinian scholarship has generally followed Marrou's view, which saw Augustine taking over and adapting a traditional scheme from Varro. That has been challenged by Hadot: 52-57, 137-55, who argues that Augustine is drawing on Porphyry. New arguments have been set forth for Augustine's dependence on Varro; see Shanzer. For a careful assessment of Augustine's shifting understandings of the Liberal Arts and his central concern, namely, the ascent of the mind (or soul) to God, in *De ordine* and after, see Ayres: 121-33.

human being is a mortal, rational animal” (*Ord.* 2.11.31; Russell: 309).²⁴ “Reason” (*ratio*) distinguishes us from “brute animals”; mortality, from God. Reason is “that movement of mind capable of distinguishing and connecting things that are learned” (*Ord.* 2.11.30; author’s translation). Reason distinguishes, reason connects. Human reason, he argues, manifests itself in two ways: within human artifacts which are seen and in human words which are heard. Eye and ear are thus the mind’s “twin messengers” (*Ord.* 2.11.32; author’s translation). The eye grasps beauty by the harmony of parts (he thinks here of architecture, noting the unharmonious asymmetries of the local bathhouse), the ear grasps beauty by the harmony of words’ rhythms (he thinks here of poetry). Harmony “pervades all the arts and creations of humanity,” he argues, but whenever he wants an example, Augustine the ex-orator instinctively cites products of the ear: “This is more easily noticed in the case of hearing: whatever has a pleasing sound . . . entices the hearing itself. What is signified by that sound, this is carried to the mind through the messenger of our hearing” (*Ord.* 2.11.34; Russell: 312). Outer sounds are seducers. They entice the ear-messenger with their beauty. The seduced ear-messenger then translates beautiful sounds into meaningful messages for the mind to take in. Outer sounds, inner words, then. Two worlds. And incommensurable. Yet there is a miracle of translation.

Augustine (the character) in his grand oration tells an allegory of sorts, how Reason invented human civilization. And Reason’s very first creation: spoken language:

Now, what is rational in us – that is, what uses reason and either does or seeks out rational things – saw that names, or meaningful sounds, had to be assigned to things, so that people might use the sense [of hearing] almost as an interpreter to link them together as much as they could to perceive one another’s minds. For reason was held fast by a certain natural bond in the fellowship of those who possessed it as a common heritage, since people could not be most firmly associated unless they conversed and thus poured out, so to speak, their minds and thoughts back and forth to one another (*Ord.* 2.12.35; Russell: 31, modified).

This is the pivot point of the whole treatise. This both names who we are and sets out the genesis point of the ascent to God. Here, for the very first time, Augustine sets out the paradoxes of the human heart, the paradoxes he would later elaborate at length in public sermons (as we saw) and published treatises (as we will see). He insists, on the one hand, that we human beings are bound together. We are “held fast” by “fellowship.” We are not loners. We are made to be together, bound by “a certain natural bond,” built for friendship, for communion. At the same time, we are separate-nesses, locked out from one another’s interiorities. We are unknowns to one another. We need an interpreter. To bridge the chasm, what is rational in us seeks a medium. Sound is the medium of first choice. By agreed upon “names or meaningful sounds,” we speak to one another. By this exchange of specially encoded sounds, we “pour out” our minds “back and forth” into one another.

²⁴ Augustine is drawing on Cicero, *Academica* 2.7.21 (LCL 494): “Si homo est, animal est mortale, rationis particeps”; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 5.10.56 (LCL 394): “Homo est animal . . . mortale . . . rationale.”

Here in a dialogue that began with gushes of water, Augustine turns to other sounds, to the water of words. Words are the liquid; minds, their containers. The overcoming of our mutual unknown-ness comes from the pouring of the precious liquid of words from the outflow of one human mind into the receptive vessel of another human mind. Spoken words possess a privileged capacity to overcome our mutual inaccessibility. They enable us to pour something of who we are into another. Note Augustine's vocabulary here. He speaks of "minds" (*mentes*). He has yet to embrace the Bible's language of "hearts." This is important to savor. While certain key convictions about the human condition have already begun to come into place, his vocabulary at this early juncture remains that of philosophers and rhetors. At this point, religiously speaking, he is still a catechumen. His biblical aptitude at this early stage is still hit-and-miss and untutored. He has yet to make the Bible's language his own. And so it is no surprise that he had yet fold the Bible's language of "heart" into the texture of his thought. But that would come soon enough.

Even so, already, at this early stage, he is busy sketching out and meditating upon genesis narratives and their profound consequences for the human heart. Here he says that in the beginning were ears and sounds. Only then does Reason make letters for the eye, which is the ear's helpmate. Because human minds "could not hear the words of those not present, therefore, Reason, having carefully noted and discriminated all the sounds of the mouth and tongue, invented letters" (*Ord.* 2.12.35; Russell: 313). This genesis narrative seems to rely on Cicero's. We have only the fragments of Book 3 of Cicero's *On the Republic* (*De re publica*), and in one of those, he says:

[Reason], when it found men uttering unformed and confused sounds with unpracticed voices, separated these sounds into distinct classes, imprinting names upon things just as distinguishing marks are sometimes places upon them, thus uniting the race of men, solitary before, by the pleasant bond of communication by speech. Reason also marked and represented all the sounds of the voice, which seemed innumerable, by a few characters which it invented, so that conversation could be carried on with persons at a distance, and indications of our desires and records of past events could be set down (Cicero, *De re publica* 3.2.3; LCL 184).²⁵

In Cicero's telling, we human beings were in our genesis locked in aloneness, solitaries, cut off from one another. We spoke, but only a jumbled baby-talk of unformed and confused sounds. Reason stepped in, brought us together, making speech the great unifier, that "pleasant bond of communication." It all came about because Reason taught us to chop up the flow of formless sounds into separable bits, using this bit to name this thing and that bit to name that thing. Reason then went a step further and joined even those remote "persons at a distance" by inventing a "few characters," letters, alphabets. We now enjoy a new uniting, so that conversation by ear opens into conversation by eye. Thus was made literature, eye-talk. And with it, the possibility of a collective memory, "records of past events."

²⁵ We know Augustine knew this passage because years later he would summarize Cicero's discussion from Book 3 in *On the City of God*. In fact, Augustine is our sole source of the broader argument of this segment of Cicero's dialogue, which survives only in fragmentary form.

Augustine, it seems, made Cicero's genesis narrative his own. But he added to it, adding not, as the Book of Genesis has it, seven days but rather seven disciplines. These are at once the wellspring of human civilization and a ladder for the self-ignorant human heart to come to self-knowledge and to God. And so in the beginning Reason created as its *first* step "the science of grammar," what we would now call (and what Augustine himself called) "literature," the study of classic texts (*Ord.* 2.12.37; Russell: 314-15). Following Cicero, Augustine added that "history was added to this science" (*Ord.* 2.12.37; Russell: 314-15). After Reason "systematized" grammar with "definition, division, and synthesis," it stepped back, abstracted out the deeper ordering principles by which it had done the systematizing, and became self-aware. And so Reason, now awakened to itself, discovered a *second* discipline, "dialectics," that "discipline of disciplines" whereby Reason "reveals its own nature, . . . not only wishes to make people learned but also can make them so" (*Ord.* 2.13.38; Russell: 315). Reason, in Augustine's telling, also became aware that "unwise men generally follow their own feelings and habits rather than the very marrow of truth" and so invented a *third* discipline of "rhetoric" (*Ord.* 2.13.38; Russell: 316). Here, Augustine, the one-time orator and now self-styled philosopher, followed the line in the sand that the older philosophic tradition had drawn, giving over reasonable argument to the domain of philosophy and ceding irrational passions to the domain of rhetoric. Rhetoric had the unsavory task of managing the undisciplined, irrational passions of the human heart, passions that drive the decision-making of the vast mass of humankind; rhetoric charmed the wild beasts, so to speak, "so that the crowd might deign to be influenced for its own good" (*Ord.* 2.13.38; Russell: 316). Rhetoric was, so to speak, verbal candy that sweetened and won over otherwise unruly hearts over to the truth.

And so "it began with the ears, because they claimed as their own the very words from which it had fashioned grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric" (*Ord.* 2.14.39; Russell: 316). The "jurisdiction of the ears" continued to the *fourth* discipline: music. Reason sought for, longed for, beauty, a beauty beyond the senses, even though the senses "shout with noisy importunity that they possessed truth" (*Ord.* 2.13.39; Russell: 316-17). So Reason turned back to the sense of hearing, noted three categories of sounds – sung lyrics, wind instruments, percussive instruments – then abstracted the beauty beneath or within them. What united them was rhythm. Rhythm was number enacted in sound. Music then was mathematics, a mathematics evident in all human sound-making, whether instrumental or verbal (and that, most nobly and most self-consciously in poetry). Here the disciplinary ascent turns from ear to eye, and the search for beauty turns to the beautiful abstractions of design, of line and curve. And thus to the *fifth* discipline, "geometry." The eye then turns upward to the movements of the sun and planets and stars, the cycles of time, and thus the *sixth* discipline, "astrology" ("star-study"). And then, at the pinnacle is the *seventh* discipline, philosophy. As the master discipline, its focus is twofold: the soul and God: "The first makes us know ourselves, the second, our origin; the first is more delightful, the second, more precious; the first, fits us for a life of happiness; the second, makes us happy" (*Ord.* 2.18.47; Russell: 323). And by this we grasp "the two worlds," the sensible and the intelligible, and God, the Author of them both.

On Order is intricate, a symphony of paradox. In its climactic speech, Augustine (the character) sets out a grand (even grandiose) vision, mapping how the self-ignorant human heart might find a path to self-knowledge and to God. Yet its vision is verbal, a spoken-thing, spoken words transcribed into written ones, orderly words after disorderly ones, a long

monologue after days of dialogue. Along the way, amid the climactic oration's orderly step-by-step, Augustine the ex-orator with the expert ear can't help himself and repeatedly digresses into excurses on sound: on proper pronunciation (sounds from parted lips vs. sounds from pressured lips vs. sounds in-between), on syllables (feet, accents, longs, shorts, segments, numbers), on a pungent self-defense of his African accent against complaints from local Italians (*Ord.* 2.12.36; 2.13.40; 2.17.45). He can't get past his ears. *On Order* began in the sound of watery disorder. At its pivot, in the genesis of its genesis narrative, it celebrated the genesis of ordered sound, liquid words poured from mind to mind, or, as he will later put it, heart to heart. These words bind us together and rescue us from our mutual mysteriousness and inherent self-isolation. There is no hint here that words may not prove dependable, that what is shared may not remove our isolation or our mystery. As verbal vision, it moves from ear to eye, from the music of words to the music of the spheres. Yet Augustine remained haunted by the beauty of sounds, of music. And he remained convinced that we remain dwellers in two worlds.²⁶

The Impossibility of Teaching: *De magistro*

Fathers teach sons; teachers teach students. Obvious, perhaps, but Augustine – strangely – denied both. And he did so despite long years' experience as a father and a teacher. In a philosophic dialogue entitled, *On the Teacher (De magistro)*, conducted between himself and his 16-year-old son Adeodatus, Augustine argued for a remarkably counter-intuitive conclusion (on *Mag.*, see Madec 1975; Crosson 1989; Rist; Madec 2001; Cary: 87-11). He summarized it decades later in *Revisions*: “I wrote a book entitled *On the Teacher*, in which there is discussed and sought and found that there is no teacher except God who teaches the human person knowledge, in accordance with what is written in the gospel: ‘One is your teacher, the Christ’ (Mt 23:10)” (*Retr.* 1.12[11]; Ramsey 2010: 58). This terse notice might be taken – or mistaken – for an odd brand of biblical fundamentalism. Augustine was, of course, anything but a fundamentalist, and his thesis flowed from a carefully reasoned, if eccentric, philosophic perspective and laid the groundwork for evolving positions on language, knowledge, human relationships, and the mystery of the human heart.

On the Teacher was published in 389, three years removed from *On Order*. Much had happened in the intervening years. Augustine had definitively renounced his government-sponsored post as rhetor and all the accolades and high-society access it made possible. And, momentously, at the Easter Vigil, April 24, 387, he was baptized by Ambrose. Soon after, he and his family, friends, and students packed up and left Milan for good. They had planned to return to Africa, but a civil war had erupted, and so he and his circle spent the next year stuck in Rome. In that year, his mother Monnica died. In 388, Augustine and his entourage finally sailed back to Africa, and he returned to his hometown of Thagaste a changed man, a successful if now retired careerist, and no longer a Manichee, but now an orthodox, baptized Christian. He and his friends set about creating an organized, passionately committed, ascetical Christian community. To outsiders, it would have recalled the venerable tradition of *otium*, the

²⁶ In *Retractationes* 1.3.2, Augustine discusses the “two worlds” formula at length and, in this instance, defends his usage rather than retracts it. He clarifies it, adds an eschatological slant, and says that he regrets only that he had used something that was not an “ecclesiastical formula.”

rigorous “leisure” of the philosophic life. But Augustine’s community was part of a religious cutting-edge then sweeping the Christian world of the late fourth century, a movement we now call “monasticism” (on early Christian monasticism, see Harmless 2004a; also Guillaumont; Goehring; Dunn; Harmless 2008). The word “monk” (*monachos*) would have sounded foreign. It was a Greek word and in its origin meant “solitary.” And to speak of creating “monastic community” would have sounded like a contradiction-in-terms: that those living alone live together. Augustine authored one of the earliest monastic rules, *Praeceptum*, a document born from and honed by this early experiment. His rule drew not on the model of Pachomius who had created a vast monastic coalition at the bend of the Nile in southern Egypt in the 340s, nor on the experiment that Basil of Caesarea had set up in Pontus, overlooking the Black Sea in the 360s. Augustine’s model was the Jerusalem community described in Acts of the Apostles. According to the *Praeceptum*’s opening words, “The basis on which you are gathered into one community is that you live in a single-minded unity in the house and that you be of ‘one soul and one heart in God’” (Acts 4:32) (*Praeceptum* 1.1; Lawless: 80; Harmless 2010: 108; on Augustine’s monasticism, see Verheijen; Brown 2012: 167-84; Kenney). This Thagaste community yearned for single-mindedness, for single-hearted-ness. The paradox, or perhaps, irony, was that, philosophically speaking, Augustine denied that we can unite hearts through that most human, most communitarian of instruments: words.

On the Teacher was composed in this highly charged religious atmosphere. Augustine’s interlocutor, Adeodatus, appears very much his father’s son: insightful, articulate, dogged. Years later, in *Confessions*, Augustine remarked that even at that young age Adeodatus “surpassed many serious and learned men in intellectual endowments.” That is evident through the dialogue’s repartee. Adeodatus quickly sizes up questions, surmises implications, ventures rejoinders. He is also intellectually honest enough to concede when a proposed idea lacks legs. Certain early readers must have questioned whether the dialogue accurately reflected a sixteen-year-old’s mind since Augustine later felt compelled to defend the account, calling upon God as his witness: “O God . . . You know that all the views included in [*On the Teacher*] as coming from my dialogue partner were his” (*Conf.* 9.6.14; Harmless 2010: 29). Augustine was certainly a proud father: “His talents left me awestruck.” Adeodatus’ very name meant “given by God,” and in *Confessions* Augustine thanked God for the giftedness and the gift of his son: “I am but confessing to You Your gifts, O Lord my God, Creator of all, who has great power to reform our deformities. . . . To You I confess Your gifts” (*Conf.* 9.6.14; Harmless 2010: 29). His son, he also confessed, was almost entirely God’s doing: “I was responsible for nothing but the sin in that boy.”

In human life, there are few experiences more anguishing than a parent who has to bury a child. Adeodatus, the talented son of a talented father, died soon after this dialogue. One is tempted to speculate: Was its very publication a memorial of sorts – more evocative than those laconic inscriptions left on ancient tombstones? Was it an expression of Augustine’s deeply troubled heart, a way both to vent grief and to honor a lost son? Of such intents and sentiments, the text itself is silent. There is not even a mention of his son’s demise within its pages. Only a decade later, in *Confessions*, could Augustine publicly acknowledge, and then only in a few sentences, the depths of his loss and, in those few sentences, speak mainly of his and his son’s shared experience of baptism and of the baptismal instructions they received: “My memory of him is free of concern. . . . We associated him with us as our contemporary in Your

grace to be trained in Your studies. So we were baptized, and the anxiety of our past life fled from us” (*Conf.* 9.6.14; Harmless 2010: 29).

The dialogue, as the title announces, is about teachers. Since teachers mostly teach via words, this dialogue is words mostly about words. And the teacher teaching about words is a father to a son who is also his student. In its opening words, Augustine asks his son: “What would you say that we are trying to do when we speak?” “We either want to teach or to learn,” Adeodatus answers (*Mag.* 1.1; Harmless 2010: 67). Augustine accepts the first, denies the second. The sole purpose of language, he insists, is teaching. Well, Adeodatus asks, if it’s not about learning, why do we ask questions? Augustine (the character in the dialogue) is in a reductionist mood and argues that asking questions is simply teaching in a different guise: questions do no more than teach others what we want to know. His son challenges the reductionism: What about singing? We make music, he argues, for the sheer fun of it. Music isn’t about teaching anybody anything. Augustine counters by paring off melody from lyric. Pleasure comes from the melodious ordering of sound. What’s more, even the non-human can make melodies. Flutes can, lyres can; so too can birds. And one can always hum – wordless singing. Words and melodies are different things (*Mag.* 1.1). And words, even sung words, are for teaching, even if it is only teaching ourselves. For the Augustine of 389, music possessed no communicative capability. It’s pleasure-sound, not meaning-sound. Years later, he would revisit this and to some degree reverse himself, giving music a place in the heart’s self-expression. But at this early and austere moment, given the seductions of sound for a recent convert with an acoustically-oriented temperament, its allures remained too potent perhaps, too threatening to allow into his heart (*Conf.* 10.33.49).

Adeodatus then suggests a second counter-example to Augustine’s claim we speak only to teach: What about prayer? Here the devotional ambience of the Thagaste community – never directly noted in the text – intrudes. Adeodatus argues that in prayer one uses words to pray to God and, of course, those words of prayer do not really teach the all-knowing God anything. It seems an apt rejoinder. Augustine counters with an appeal to the human heart. It is quite early in the dialogue, only the second paragraph. Here, as with *On Order*, the heart is invoked at the outset, a theological gambit which, like a chess gambit, is an early move that gets things moving. Augustine recalls Jesus’ admonitions on prayer: we are to pray “in the secrecy of our bedroom (*cubiculus*)” (*Mag.* 1.2; author’s translation). In domestic architecture in Augustine’s North Africa, the bedroom was not usually on the second floor as it so often is today (see Thébert). It was the interior room, the most private, least accessible space. Augustine reads Jesus’ instruction symbolically: this bedroom where prayer takes place refers not to an architectural space but a psychological one. That “bedroom” Jesus really refers to is “the innermost sanctum of the mind” (*Mag.* 1.2; author’s translation). Here Augustine repeats what Ambrose had taught him and Adeodatus three years earlier, during the secret instructions of Easter Week that had followed their baptism, what was called *mystagogia*, the “teaching of the mysteries” (Ambrose, *De sacramentis* 6.12-15; see Harmless 2014).

To reinforce this notion of an interior space, Augustine appeals to a trio of biblical verses. Two from St. Paul imply that that inner space is sacred ground: “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells *within* you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16); “Christ dwells *within* the inner person” (Ephesians 3:17). A third comes from Psalm 4: “Speak in your hearts and repent on your beds; offer a sacrifice of justice” (*Mag.* 1.2; author’s

translation).²⁷ Augustine here invokes the biblical word “heart.” The heart, he says, is “the place of sacrifice and the place of prayer.” At this juncture, Augustine equates “heart” and “mind.”²⁸ Prayer, he says, takes place interiorly “in the mind’s temple and in the heart’s bed.” In this mind-heart “there is no need of speech – that is, of vocalized words – when we pray.” This claim seems to disallow, or at least, devalue liturgical prayer. He admits that while priests may pray aloud in liturgy, they do so “not that God may hear, but that people may hear and, by this verbal reminder, fix their thoughts upon God” (*Mag.* 1.2; author’s translation).²⁹ Sacerdotal words are solely reminders, admonitions to turn inward to the heart.

In the thick of this initial skirmish on teaching, language, prayer, and the heart, Augustine offers a definition of human speech: “When one speaks, one gives an outward sign of one’s will through some articulated sound” (*Mag.* 1.2; author’s translation). Teasing out this idea occupies much of the remaining dialogue. Spoken words, he argues, are outward signs. Signs are things that points to other things. A finger points to a wall. The finger is not the wall. A pointing-finger is a thing that is also a sign, a signal, that turns our eyes and our mind to the reality of wall (*Mag.* 3.6). In the same way the word “wall” is a sign, a vocalized pointing-finger, that turns our eyes and our mind to the reality. Words, Augustine argues, are “two things, sound and meaning. We perceive the sound when it strikes our ear, while the meaning becomes clear when we look at the thing signified” (*Mag.* 1.2; Burleigh: 93). Words thus lead a dual life. They dwell in two worlds. On the outside they are sounds; on the inside, meaning-bearers. This finger-pointing way of thinking about language may work for words that are nouns. But what about verbs? Adeodatus suggests that to explain a verb like “walking,” the teacher may teach by doing, simply by walking, and if the student and teacher happen themselves to be walking, then the teacher can just walk a little faster. How, Augustine challenges, would a student know if the teacher was explaining “walking” or “hurrying” (*Mag.* 3.6). This all may sound a little odd since normally the students Augustine and Adeodatus are talking about would be old enough to know what a word like “walking” means. But they had in mind, it seems, the experience of teaching a foreign language in a foreign language. For that, a teacher needs to demonstrate. Like a game of charades, the demonstration may communicate too much, too little, or simply the wrong thing.

The walking/hurrying example is just one of many that show that Augustine was fascinated not only with what happens when languages work properly; he was no less fascinated with what happens when they don’t work right, when there are linguistic glitches, ambiguities, misreadings, errors. This example and others they discuss illustrate that language is a clumsy, inexact instrument for communicating mind to mind, heart to heart. Augustine notes how people fight over words with multiple meanings. The Latin word *virtus*, for example, can mean “strength” or “virtue.” If someone claims that a lion has more *virtus* than a human

²⁷ Augustine’s meditation on Psalm 4 was a critical text in his gradual adoption of the language of “heart.”

²⁸ This linkage of “heart” and “mind” is noted by various commentators. While it is true in the main, there is an evolution in his usage of the word, and with *Confessions*, it begins to acquire a distinctly affective quality.

²⁹ In this mention of “fixing thoughts upon God,” he seems to be referring somewhat obliquely to the *Sursum cor* (“lift up your heart”) that was part of the dialogue that opened the eucharistic prayer; this is precisely the interpretation of the meaning of the phrase that he later gives in his sermons (see *S.* 227, 229.3, 229A.3 [= *S. Guelf.* 7]).

being, the speaker may mean that a lion is stronger than a human being, but a listener may mishear the speaker's heart and assume that the speaker is claiming a lion has more "virtue" than a human being. And, as Augustine notes, a squabble is almost sure to ensue (*Mag.* 13.43).

For the most part, he argues, we explain words with words. To use a modern example, I look up a word in a dictionary; the dictionary explains the word I'm looking for by using other words. A dictionary is a sort of self-contained, self-referential entity, words explaining words. That, Augustine thinks, is what most teaching is about: words explaining words. This comes out early as Augustine and his son parse a line of Vergil's poetry and wrestle with parts of speech such as conjunctions ("if"), prepositions ("from"), as well as negative nouns ("nothing") (*Mag.* 2.3-4). Mostly words are explained by words, signs by signs. The idea is rather involuted. So too Augustine's dialogue. Their back-and-forth often takes playful, self-referential turns. How, Adeodatus queries, does a teacher teach what teaching is or a speaker speak about what speaking is? (*Mag.* 3.6).

The dialogue is also peppered with illustrations. Many are single-purposed. They simply illustrate an abstract point under discussion. Others seem more than that, more like parables. To explain the idea of words as signs, Augustine cites how the deaf use visual signs to communicate:

Have you never seen people holding a sort of conversation with deaf persons by means of gestures, and the deaf themselves also using gestures to ask questions or to answer them, to communicate or indicate most, if not all, of their wishes? When this is done, surely not only visible objects are manifested without words, but also sounds and savors and all sorts of other things (*Mag.* 3.5; Burleigh: 73, modified).

The illustration elucidates a key point: words are signs, sound-signs as opposed to the visual ones used by the deaf. But it points to something deeper, more fundamental: we human beings are sign-makers. Even deprived of the ability to speak, we instinctively create signs. But Augustine hints here at something more. The struggles of the deaf are parabolic of the human condition. We struggle to translate what is within us to those outside us. Those signs called words are precious, for they are two-world dwellers: outwardly sounds, inwardly meanings. They translate the heart's inner meanings to the senses' outer world. We are thus all code-talkers, whether we use the visual hand-signals of the hearing-impaired or the vocalizations of the hearing-enabled. In either case, we lack transparency. All of us, then, are mute in heart and seize upon signs to overcome the space between hearts and come to wield this intricate, hard-to-master, often ambiguous sign-set called language.

Teaching is thus a matter of sign-making. Augustine then notes that there is another way teaching occurs: by silent demonstration. He cites the case of a bird-catcher who in ancient times carried around a grab-bag of equipment (reeds, birdlime, a trained hawk). If one attentively watched a bird-catcher practicing his art, one could, in principle, learn the art for oneself, simply taking in the lessons by a silent performance. This, Augustine adds, is but one instance of "thousands of things which are manifested by themselves, without any sign being given." In other words, the world itself teaches. Augustine then ventures a quick religious aside: "Does not God, and does not nature, exhibit and manifest directly to the gaze of all this sun and the light that bathes and clothes all things present?" (*Mag.* 10.32; Burleigh: 93). Both

nature and God, the author of nature, teach us without sign language – but only if we take the trouble to see the pedagogy played out daily, constantly, before our often-inattentive eyes.

The dialogue then takes an abrupt turn. Having argued that the way teachers teach is via signs called words, Augustine then argues their utter insignificance: “through these signs called words we learn nothing” (*Mag.* 10.34; author’s translation). For all the effort education invests in teaching via these sign-language exchanges called words, nothing, he argues, is truly taught and nothing is truly learned. He sets out his counter-intuitive argument with a terse either/or logic:

When a sign is given to me,
if it finds that I don’t know the reality the sign refers to,
then there’s nothing it can teach me;
if it finds that I already know the reality,
then what do I learn via the sign? (*Mag.* 10.33; author’s translation).

Signs teach me only about signs. They can’t teach me reality. I have to already know the reality if the sign is to make any sense. If I hear the word “head” and don’t know what a head is, hearing the word teaches me nothing. All I hear is a sound. I don’t know the meaning. But if I do know what a head is and hear the word “head,” I may learn a new word, a new sign, but I haven’t really learned a new reality (*Mag.* 10.34). True teaching, Augustine argues, requires teaching not about signs but about realities. Human teachers teach signs; they don’t teach realities as such. That would seem to make teachers unnecessary and turn education into so much foolishness. But Augustine doesn’t go there. Instead, he argues, words as signs function as reminders. They remind us of what we already know and (perhaps) have lost sight of: “The most I can say for words is that they merely intimate that we should look for realities; they do not present them to us for our knowledge” (*Mag.* 11.36; author’s translation). Teachers, in this sense, don’t really teach. Rather they admonish us. They point us – hopefully – in the right direction. They remind us of knowledge we already possess, mysteriously, deep within our hearts.

Augustine’s argument here bears a kinship with Plato’s theory of reminiscence. Plato in the *Meno* had speculated that truths were not learned but remembered, truths learned earlier in previous lives, previous existences (Rist: 30-31, and Madec 2001: 52). There have been scholarly disputes among Augustinian scholars, whether, perhaps, at this stage Augustine may have agreed, to some extent, with Plato, that he may held to some version of the idea of preexistent souls.³⁰ Augustine certainly found elements of Plato’s account congenial: learning is not really learning something new; it is remembering what we have already come to know personally. But Augustine turns this theory of reminiscence in a decidedly Christian and a decidedly un-Platonic direction. In a famous passage, the climax and pivot point of *On the Teacher*, Augustine asserts:

As for the universals that we understand, it is not the outward sound of a speaker’s words that we consult, but the Truth who presides over the mind itself within us, though we may have been led to consult it because of the

³⁰ O’Connell famously argued the thesis, won some support, and roused considerable opposition. For an account of the debate, see Rombs.

words. Now the One who is consulted and who is said to “dwell in the inner person” (Eph 3:17), He is the One who teaches us, namely, Christ, that is, “the unchangeable Power of God and everlasting wisdom” (1Cor 1:23-24). This is the Wisdom that every rational soul does indeed consult, but Wisdom reveals itself to each one according to one’s capacity . . . (*Mag.* 11.38; author’s translation).

The real teacher, Augustine argues, is not the outer teacher, the human teacher who uses words. The real teacher is Christ within each of us. Christ teaches within the “inner person,” that heart-mind. It is within where we learn the great realities – not just realities like walls and heads that come from our senses, but spiritual realities, intellectual realities, deeper truths beyond the senses.³¹ Augustine repeats here Ephesians 3:17, one of the three prooftexts he had cited at the dialogue’s outset, when he and Adeodatus were discussing what prayer is, what it means to pray in the “mind’s temple and heart’s bed” (*Mag.* 1.2; author’s translation). The argument had circled around: Where we pray is where we actually learn about realities that matter. For Augustine, true learning is not remembering stuff from past lives, as it perhaps was with Plato. It is remembering what Christ the Word of God, the second Person of the Trinity, teaches us in the very depths of who we are. This inner domain, where remembering takes place, is sacred ground. Christ, God’s very Wisdom, presides over that inner temple, that heart-mind. In Plato’s parable, the philosophically enlightened climb out of the cave, having awakened from long years of watching a shadow play of puppets and ascend into the light and see for themselves the real world of unchanging, eternal paradigms, the so-called Forms or Intelligibles.³² In Augustine, one doesn’t climb out; one climbs inward into an illuminated space, an inner classroom. One doesn’t see that light on one’s own. Instead, there is a mediator. Christ mediates the truth of things by enlightening us about realities that lie behind the cloud-cover of sound-signs. Christ, the mediator of human salvation, is also, for Augustine, the mediator of all knowledge. Christ the inner teacher leads us from outward sounds and signs into an inner light where we are taught what is intelligible and where we gain knowledge and, perhaps, a bit of wisdom. The truths discovered come via this inner “consultation.” That sounds like a dialogue, a speaking between persons, or perhaps, an inner dialogue between our heart-mind and Christ the inner teacher. But Augustine switches metaphors: this inner consultation is a seeing (*Mag.* 12.39-40).³³ One may be tempted to call this Augustinian epistemology “mystical,” but he is speaking here about our most ordinary, our most rational modes of learning. Or perhaps one could say that he is arguing that the mystical is the ordinary. He implies that the most obvious is the most mysterious: that we know anything at all and that we really can speak to one another.

So Augustine, formally speaking, denies fathers teach sons and teachers teach students. But in only one sense, only if we envision human communication in the commonplace way:

³¹ *De magistro* 12.39, where he notes that “intelligibles” grasped by the “mind” are spoken of by “our own authors” (i.e. biblical writers) as “spiritual.”

³² Augustine gives an early and extended account of his understanding of Platonic theory in *De diversis quaestionibus* 46.

³³ This visual metaphor would go on and have long history in medieval epistemology (see Schumacher).

that teaching and speaking are bi-lateral, two-sided, a direct exchange between two persons. For Augustine, true teaching is tri-lateral, three-sided (Madec 2001: 53). Two persons may voice their word-signs to one another, but any real teaching and any real communication between them takes places with God at the very center of their common humanity. God mediates and unlocks the possibility of genuine knowledge. God bridges the gap between our otherwise deaf-and-mute hearts. For Augustine, the very process of knowing any thing is divinized.

All this reconfigures how one should think about education. The illusion of teachers teaching students comes from the sheer rapidity of the process. A teacher speaks words that are pointers-reminders-admonitions. The student who hears those pointers as admonitions takes himself into his heart-mind and consults Christ the inner teacher who, if the outer human teacher has spoken truly, then lights up the truth. Augustine argues: “Since they learn on the inside so quickly, having followed the cues of the word-speaker, they tend to think they have learned via the outside from the one giving admonitions” (*Mag.* 14.45; author’s translation). Augustine, who in this dialogue was both a father and a teacher to his son, echoes Jesus’ double command in Matt 23:9-10 (“Call no one on earth your father . . . Do not be called “Teacher””) and argues:

Now we should not only believe but also begin to understand how truly it is written by divine authority that we are to call no one on earth our teacher, for One is our teacher, the One who is heaven (Mt 23:10). What ‘in heaven’ means is that He will teach us, He who admonishes through the instrumentality of human beings via external signs to turn to Him interiorly and be instructed (*Mag.* 14.46; Burleigh: 101, modified).

For Augustine, we know little with certainty. Most of the time we have to believe in order to begin to know anything important. Belief is useful. Trusting in authorities, believing authorities of the right sort, is knowledge per se, but it leads to it. Augustine would write an entire treatise on the topic a few year later and with just that title: *On the Usefulness of Believing* (*De utilitate credendi*). Here, in *On the Teacher*, he invokes a scriptural encapsulation of the idea that, over the course of his career, he would quote again and again and again: “Unless you believe, you will not understand” (Isaiah 7:9, LXX) (*Mag.* 11.37).³⁴ Here, at the dialogue’s close, he argues that the very idea of Christ as inner teacher is no longer believed on the basis of the Bible’s authority. It is something that he and his son now know, now understand. In *Revisions*, written decades later and in which he feels compelled to revise many claims in his early writings, in the case of *On the Teacher*, he revises not a single point. In summarizing the dialogue’s thesis, he asserted, as we saw, that not only is it “discussed and sought” that “there is no teacher . . . except God who teaches the human person knowledge”; it is “found” (*Retr.* 1.12(11); Ramsey 2010: 58). Augustine never reversed himself on these counter-intuitive ideas, never stepped away from claiming that we do not really teach one another directly. He continued to hold that human communication is three-sided, or better, is God-mediated. In *On the Teacher*, he gave his son, who would die soon after, the last word on evaluating

³⁴ The year before, while in Rome, he composed book I of *De libero arbitrio* where he cites and discusses this text for this first time (1.2.4).

Augustine's own argument: "there's nothing affirmed by your words that the hidden Oracle did not give me as the very same answer" (*Mag.* 14.46; author's translation). Adeodatus in his last recorded words discovered for himself who his true father was and who his true teacher was by consulting a hidden Oracle in the very depths of his heart-mind.

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