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AUGUSTINIAN STUDIES

The 1995 Saint Augustine Lecture

- Reading the Bible and Learning to Read:
The Influence of Education on St. Augustine's Exegesis
Joseph T. Lienhard 7

Articles

- Ecstasy and Charity:
Augustine with Nathanael under the Fig Tree
Andrew McGowan 27
- Voice Re-Cast: Augustine's Use of Conversation
in *De ordine* and the *Confessions*
Laurie Douglass 39
- The Influence of Augustine's Just War:
the Early Middle Ages
David A. Lenihan 55

The 1995 St. Augustine Lecture

Reading the Bible and Learning to Read: The Influence of Education on St. Augustine's Exegesis

Joseph T. Lienhard
Fordham University

*Dedicated to Fr. Robert J.
O'Connell, S.J., who has led
many of us to a new vision of
St. Augustine's mind and heart.*

The way the Bible is read depends on how people are taught to read: this is the thesis that I hope to explain and defend in this lecture. To establish the context, let me make a few comments about our contemporary culture.

First of all, we trust the written word and distrust the spoken word. "Put that in writing," we often hear. Many hunters follow the paper trail. It would never have occurred to Augustine to set up a Bible in the Church and burn a candle in front of it, for God's word was the word proclaimed and preached, not written.

Secondly, we are flooded with so much print – thick daily newspapers, paperback books, junk mail – that much is read hastily, more discarded unread; we think we have to skim documents for the "main idea." The message is this: most words are not worth our attention.

Thirdly, the flood of print is offset, in a perverse sort of way, by declining skills in speaking and expression. Clichés replace wordcraft. There was the drowning Californian who shouted, "Like help! Like help!" A college sophomore wants to say that an event impressed her, and utters the intriguing sentence: "It was, like I mean, it was really like wow." Fifteen minutes of "Beavis and Butthead" make the point well. We also distrust eloquence, as the common phrase "mere rhetoric" shows. A recently-published book entitled *The Inarticulate Society* bemoans the loss of articulate speech, eloquence, and old-fashioned debate, and their replacement by insults, complaints, and psychobabble. Ironically, a reviewer criticized the book sharply for its poor writing and expression.¹

Let me invite you into a different world: a world in which the spoken word took precedence over the written word; a world in which almost all reading, and even writing, were done aloud; a world in which books were written to be heard; a world in which a valued text was read slowly, and every word pondered; a world in which persuasive speech – "mere rhetoric" to us – was a highly-cultivated and much-admired art; a world in which the ability to conduct astute and articulate debate was one of the finest skills a man could acquire; let me invite you into the world in which St. Augustine lived.

I would like to consider three facts about ancient education that mark it as distinctly different from ours. Two concern reading, and one deals with the ways of speech and thought. First, all reading in antiquity, even private reading, was done aloud. Secondly, literary texts were routinely studied word by word. And finally, the art of dialectic was highly cultivated. These three facts go a long way toward explaining some of the more puzzling techniques that Augustine uses in understanding and explaining the Bible.

Henri Marrou, in an old but still intriguing book on St. Augustine and the end of ancient culture,² describes the transfer of skills and attitudes from the pagan world to Christianity as "cultural osmosis."³ In osmosis, fluids on two sides of a membrane gradually achieve a state of balance. Christianity and pagan culture seemed at first incompatible, even mutually hostile. St. Paul rejected "the wisdom of the world,"⁴ and Tertullian asked, "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?"⁵ Yet elements of pagan culture inevitably passed through to Christianity, often received by the Christians as "the spoils of Egypt."⁶ An outstanding example was the approach to a sacred book.

Homer's two epics were culturally sacred texts for the Greeks, as Vergil's *Aeneid* was for the Latins,⁷ and Greeks and Latins devised elaborate systems of interpretation to preserve the high dignity of these texts and to extract the profound meaning that they knew had to be there. Christians eventually transferred most of these techniques to the interpretation of their sacred text, the Bible.

Educated people in the late Roman Empire cultivated *curiositas*, the desire to know, even if the knowledge was not useful.⁸ Marrou writes of St. Augustine's era, "the study of the Bible does not serve only to nourish the Christian soul. It becomes the pretext, the occasion, for a properly cultural activity, gratuitous, and a kind of play."⁹ Thus the Bible came to serve, besides its religious role, a cultural one also.

Moreover, as Marrou writes simply but to the point, "La Bible est un livre difficile."¹⁰ The Latin Bible presented special difficulties to the cultivated Roman who became a Christian, as Augustine did. Our English Bible, at least in the Authorized or King James Version, is a magnificent classic of English prose. Macaulay could write of "the English Bible – a book which if everything else in our language should perish, would alone suffice to show the whole extent of its beauty and power."¹¹ The Latin Bible that Augustine read was different. Its language was uncultivated, awkward, grammatically deficient, sometimes barbarous, and occasionally incomprehensible. A man trained to exquisite good taste, who sneered at those who said *omo* instead of *homo*,¹² might well find the Christian Bible repulsive. And Augustine did. "When I first turned to that Scripture," he writes in the *Confessions*, "I did not feel towards it as I am speaking now, but it seemed to me unworthy of comparison with the nobility of Cicero's writings. My swelling pride turned away from its humble style, and my sharp gaze did not penetrate into its inner meaning."¹³ Ten years or more were to pass before he would be able to see beyond that humble style and appreciate the Bible's inner meaning, by looking past the letter to the spirit.¹⁴

As an exegete, Augustine was self-taught; in his letter to bishop Valerius,¹⁵ written just after he was ordained a priest, he begs for time to study the Scriptures. Or better, he took his splendid secular education and applied it to the Bible.

Hence Augustine read the Bible very differently than we do. I will try to make my point under the three headings I mentioned: reading aloud, word-by-word study, and dialectic.

1. All Ancient Reading Was Reading Aloud

My first concern is ancient reading. The ancients read aloud, even when they read privately. And they did not just murmur; they put all the rhetorical and emotional play that they could into their reading. Augustine, as we shall see, could bring himself to tears by his own private reading.

With few exceptions, people could not read, even privately, except by pronouncing the words in full voice. Everything – literature, letters, even graffiti, we can presume – was read aloud. Moreover, reading was often social; the publication of a book took place by an act of public reading. Even more surprisingly, perhaps, the act of writing was also accompanied by speech.

From the end of antiquity to the nineteenth century, the fact that ancient reading was reading aloud was forgotten. Then one text was noticed again, and it led scholars to many others. The ancient author who led modern scholars to the rediscovery of reading aloud was Augustine.

In a famous scene in the *Confessions*, Augustine walks into St. Ambrose's study in Milan – in the year 384 – and sees Ambrose reading. Augustine is amazed at how Ambrose's eyes move over the page, but his voice and tongue are silent.¹⁶ As so often, Greeks and Romans never mentioned the ordinary, only the exception. Augustine naturally expects to *hear* what Ambrose was reading; he is amazed that he cannot.

The Hungarian scholar Josef Balogh, in an article published in 1927, collected and studied a large body of evidence on the practice of reading aloud.¹⁷ As soon as one is aware of this practice, the significance of familiar passages becomes clear. In the Acts of the Apostles Philip *hears* the Ethiopian eunuch reading the prophet Isaiah.¹⁸ John Cassian writes that monks should go to prayer at the signal, whether they are reading or keeping silence.¹⁹ St. Benedict allows his monks, after the midday meal, either to sleep or to read; but those who read are not to disturb the others.²⁰

Some stories from pagan literature also make sense only after we realize that reading, even private reading, was regularly done aloud. Plutarch records that during the Catilinarian crisis, Julius Caesar and Cato were debating in the Senate.²¹ A note arrived for Caesar, and he read it silently – apparently he, like Ambrose, possessed this unusual skill. Cato objected, shouting that Caesar was receiving messages from the enemy.

Caesar handed the note to Cato, who read it aloud, as expected. The note was an embarrassing love-letter addressed to Caesar by Cato's own sister, Servilia, and Cato was humiliated.

Another delightful example comes from the literature of love.²² Acontius is in love with Cydippe. In order to win her hand, he carves into an apple the words: "I swear by Artemis that I shall marry Acontius," and rolls the apple into Cydippe's garden. Cydippe's maidservant picks it up and hands it to her mistress. Cydippe reads it, and thereby swears to marry Acontius, for once an oath is uttered, it binds. The whole point of the story depends on the fact that, of course, Cydippe read aloud.

As we learn from the case of Julius Caesar and Cato, letters in antiquity were not considered private, as they are now; the senators had *expected* Caesar to read the letter aloud. And reading aloud often meant reading in a group. Paulinus of Nola imagines Augustine receiving his letter and reading it with his monks gathered around him.²³ Jerome complains that a letter Augustine had written to him circulated widely in Rome before he himself received a copy in Bethlehem.²⁴

Prayer, too, was done in full voice. In the First Book of Samuel, the priest Eli sees Hannah's lips moving but cannot hear her voice; so he assumes that she is drunk, and abruptly tells her to sober up.²⁵ The priest *expected* to hear even a private prayer. Augustine describes his deeply emotional praying of the psalms at Cassiciacum in these terms: "What cries did I send up to you, my God, when I read the psalms of David What cries did I send up to you when reading those psalms! ... I wish that [the Manichees] had been somewhere near me at that time, ... so that they could see my face and hear my voice as I read Psalm 4 at that time of rest, and perceive what that psalm wrought within me. ... Would that they could have heard me."²⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus attests that reading Basil of Caesarea's *Hexaemeron* – precisely aloud – brought him into a kind of mystical transport.²⁷

The act of publishing a book consisted in the author's reading it to an audience. "Literature," Harry Gamble writes, "and above all poetry, was traditionally made public not by multiplying and distributing copies of the text, but in oral performance The tradition of public performance was rooted in the belief that literature yields its full sense only through the interpretive rendering of the writer."²⁸ Augustine learned of a heretical treatise being *read* in the marketplace at Carthage.²⁹ He expected people to *hear* his *Confessions* as well as read them; he writes

that: "the confessions of my past sins" "are read and heard."³⁰ Pelagius was horrified when he *heard* Augustine's prayer, repeated three times in Book 10 of the *Confessions*, "Da quod iubes et iube quod vis," "Give what you command and command what you will."³¹

Even more surprisingly, ancients *wrote* aloud, too, perhaps because writing paralleled dictation, which was how most ancients wrote. Near the beginning of St. Luke's gospel, Zachary, the father of John the Baptist, has been struck dumb because he would not believe the angel. John is born, and is to be named. Zachary asks for a writing tablet. Here the Greek text reads *egrapse legōn*, "he wrote, saying."³² Translations often obscure the meaning of the phrase, but Luke wants to convey a charming vignette, which makes sense only if people wrote aloud. Acting as he was accustomed to, Zachary speaks as he writes and then, hearing his own voice, realizes that his power of speech has been restored. Again, Ambrose was an exception; his biographer takes the time to note that Ambrose did not dictate, but wrote silently with his own hand.³³

Writing in the ancient world was done without space between words and in columns of equal width, so that words were broken wherever the column ended and continued on the next line. Writing was also done without punctuation, and without capital letters to mark the beginning of a sentence. Thus reading had to be an aggressively active process, and the reader constantly had to make judgments, deciding which syllables should be joined together to form a word, where phrases and clauses began and ended, which clauses belonged together to form a sentence, and whether a sentence was to be taken as a statement, a question, or an exclamation. In other words, the very act of reading was an act of discerning and interpreting. Before he could read a text accurately, the reader had to make it his own. Understanding took time; Paulinus of Nola writes to Augustine that he planned to spend a whole day reading a letter that he had just received from him.³⁴

Augustine offers a philosophical explanation for the priority of the spoken word over the written word. Spoken words are signs that point to an object, whereas written words are only signs of signs, at a second remove from reality. In the dialogue *On the Teacher*, his moving tribute to his dead son Adeodatus, Augustine writes: "A word is a meaningful articulate sound, and sound is perceived by no other sense than hearing. When a word is written, a sign is given to the eyes whereby something that properly belongs to the ears is brought to mind."³⁵

For the Roman, the act of reading was a double act, seeing and hearing together; and reading and understanding were parallel acts. Augustine can say in the *Confessions*, “et exclamabam legens haec foris et agnoscens intus,” “and I was crying out, reading these words externally and acknowledging them internally.”³⁶ Reading required understanding, but right reading led to deeper understanding. Balogh writes: “It is obvious that reading aloud is the original and natural form of reading. Writing is the petrification of living speech. Reading releases the dead word into living speech. In reality, in the ancient understanding, the letters are properly notes, musical signs.”³⁷ The written letters remind the reader’s eyes of a sound, and his mind of a word. As Augustine writes in his work *The Principles of Dialectic*, “Every word is a sound. For when the word is in writing, it is not a word, but the sign of a word. When the letters are studied by the reader, the word occurs to the mind, and the voice brings it forth. For what else do written letters do but show themselves to the eyes, as words show themselves to the soul?”³⁸

It is not easy to say when reading aloud went out of fashion; the rise of monasticism, and monastic silence, surely fostered the change. But as so often, Augustine signals the change from the classical past to a new, Christian future. In that famous scene in the garden at Milan, when Augustine is racked by his inability to decide to receive baptism, he rushes over to the copy of St. Paul’s letters lying on a table, opens it at random, and reads one sentence. Ten years later he was to describe that moment in the words: “et legi in silentio,” “and I read in silence.”³⁹ This act of silent reading is, symbolically, Augustine’s rejection of his past and the beginning of his new life, a life that he will later characterize as rooting out *vitia morum* rather than *vitia verborum*, and seeking a *cor castum*, not a *lingua exercitata*.⁴⁰ The move from *lingua* to *cor*, from “tongue” to “heart,” encapsulates Augustine’s life.

But, back to the topic: how did reading aloud affect Augustine’s understanding of the Bible?

First of all, Augustine the reader had to decide where words began and ended. He puzzles over the first word in Job 36:32, “in-manibus contexit eum”: is it “inmanibus,” “unforgiving” (as he takes it), or “in manibus,” “in the hands”?⁴¹ Did this verse mean “he hid his light from the unforgiving,” or “he hid his light from the works of their hands”?

He also had to decide whether a vowel was long or short, for the length of a vowel could change the meaning of a word. In his book *On*

Christian Doctrine, Augustine asks whether Ps 138:15 says "My bone is not hidden from you" or "My mouth is not hidden from you." The difference was a short or long "o" in the word *os*. And he asks whether, in Gal 5:21, Paul wrote "I predict" or "I proclaim." The difference is a long or a short "i," and the reader had to decide.⁴²

Care had to be taken with pronunciation. "B" and "v" were not always distinguished, but John 5:20 says, "greater works than these *will* he show him," not "*has* he shown him," *demonstrabit*, not *demonstravit*.⁴³

Augustine would also need to decide whether a phrase was a statement, a question, or an exclamation. Nathanael's remark about Jesus in John 1:46 is usually read this way: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" But the Latin could just as well be read this way: "From Nazareth? Something good could come from there."⁴⁴

In these cases, intelligibility and good sense determined the correct choice. In other cases, however, the orthodox faith was in question, and the rule of faith, not grammar, had to determine the meaning.

In one example, Augustine shows how the wrong division of clauses could favor the Arian heresy. The ordinary reading of John 1:1 is this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." But the verse can also be read this way: "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and God existed. This word was in the beginning with God."⁴⁵ By not reading "and the Word was God," the Arians deny the divinity of the Word. Grammatically, nothing militates against their interpretation, but the rule of faith shows that it is wrong. "When words used literally cause ambiguity in Scripture," Augustine writes, "we must first determine whether we have mispunctuated or misconstrued them. When investigation reveals an uncertainty as to how a locution should be pointed or construed, the rule of faith should be consulted as it is found in the more open places of the Scriptures and in the authority of the Church."⁴⁶

Thus my first point: understanding the ancient practice of reading aloud, and knowing the difficulties (or better, the mysteries) of ancient reading, help us understand one dimension of Augustine's way of reading the Bible. Now I would like to move on to the second point: the way schoolboys were taught to read literature.

2. The Art of Interpretation

An ancient author has left us a terrifying example of a typical school lesson, a lesson on the first line of Vergil's *Aeneid*:

Teacher: Scan the line.

Pupil: *Arma vi/rumque ca/no Tro/iae qui / primus ab / oris.*

Teacher: How many caesuras are there?

Pupil: Two.

Teacher: What are they?

Pupil: The penthemimera and the hephthemimera.

...

Teacher: How many "figures" has it?

Pupil: Ten.

Teacher: Why has it got ten?

Pupil: Because it is made up of three dactyls and two spondees.

Teacher: How many words are there?

Pupil: Nine.

Teacher: How many nouns?

Pupil: Six: *arma, virum, Troiae, qui, primus, oris.*

Teacher: How many verbs?

Pupil: One: *cano.*

Teacher: How many prepositions?

Pupil: One: *ab.*

Teacher: How many conjunctions?

Pupil: One: *que.*

Teacher. Study each word in turn. Let us begin with *arma*. What part of speech is it?

Pupil: A noun.⁴⁷

And so on – and on, and on. They continue with a long discussion of the noun *arma*. I'm not sure which educational technique is worse: discussing one line of the *Aeneid* in this fashion, or requiring students to read the *Aeneid* over a weekend and write a two-page reaction paper on the topic, "How I feel about Vergil's *Aeneid*."

We know how Augustine learned to read the *Aeneid*, and other Latin classics, in school. From the time of Varro – that is, the first century B.C. – on, the process of reading literature was taught in four steps: *lectio, emendatio, enarratio, and iudicium*.⁴⁸

Lectio, or reading, was a true exercise. The text was read out in full voice, with emotional expression and interpretation. Reading could be strenuous, and a few ancient authors ranked reading and speaking with playing ball or fencing as forms of physical exercise.⁴⁹ Such a reading, of course, took skill and practice.

Emendatio, the correction of the written text, was the next step. Until the invention of printing, no two copies of a book were identical. The reader had to assume that the copyist had made mistakes. He might make the corrections himself (and perhaps thereby introduce new errors), or he might compare his copy with others' copies.

Enarratio was commentary – generally done word by word, with special attention to definitions, distinctions between synonyms, and etymology, as well as history and literary background. *Enarratio*, of course, is the title Augustine chose for the largest work he ever wrote, the *Enarrationes in psalmos*, his running commentaries on all 150 psalms.

The last step was *iudicium*, an aesthetic judgment on the work under study.

It does not take much reading in Augustine's commentaries on Scripture to realize that the one-time teacher of grammar had not changed his habits all that much. Substitute "theological" or "pastoral" for "aesthetic" in the *iudicium*, and you have Augustine: the old professor lectures now in the church rather in the classroom, but his technique is about the same.

For Augustine, as for almost all the Fathers, the first and most basic unit of understanding was the single word.⁵⁰ Augustine had the Scriptures read in church as we do, in coherent passages. But when he explained them, he did not ask first about the meaning of the passage as a whole, or even of the single sentence, but about the meaning of each word. Augustine had been made to puzzle for hours over the word *arma* in the first line of the *Aeneid*; surely every word of the Bible was worth at least as much time. Augustine could write that God deliberately made the Bible obscure, so that we would remain interested in it.⁵¹ Every word in the Bible was important, because the Holy Spirit had inspired it. The Holy Spirit was never wrong and never trite, and the Holy Spirit always said something useful to us.

The most spectacular example of Augustine's seeking meaning in single words is his treatment of numbers and names. Readers of Augus-

tine soon note his fascination with numbers. For Augustine, as for his contemporaries, numbers were no mere designations of quantity. Each number had a personality, an existence of its own, and was fraught with meaning. The Bible revealed some of these meanings.⁵² One stands for God, three for the Trinity, twelve for the apostles. Two stands for charity, since charity lives in the two great commandments. Four stands for universality, since there are four points of the compass, four seasons of the year, and four winds in the air. Five stands for the Law, which is contained in the five books of Moses. Six stands for the ages of the world.⁵³ Seven means totality.⁵⁴

Augustine also works out the interrelation of numbers. Six is a perfect number, attained both by adding its parts ($1 + 2 + 3$) and by multiplying them ($1 \times 2 \times 3$). Eleven stands for sin, for it transgresses ten, the number of the commandments. Thirty-eight means sickness, because the totality of the Law (4×10) lacks two, the number of charity.

Augustine continues. Forty-six, the number of years it took to build the temple,⁵⁵ is the sum of the four letters of Adam's name in Greek, when they are read as numbers; so forty-six stands for Christ's flesh. The four letters of Adam's name are also the initials of the four points of the compass in Greek, for Adam is the father of all nations.⁵⁶

But Augustine's most famous numerological interpretation is probably the 153 fish of John 21:11.⁵⁷ The number 153 is a triangular number, the sum of the integers from 1 to 17, and hence has the same value as 17. But 17 is the sum of 10, the commandments, and 7, the number of the Holy Spirit, who enables the elect to fulfill the commandments. Thus 153 stands for the whole number of the elect, who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit. But further, 153 is also 3 times 50, with 3 added for the Trinity. And 50 is the square of 7, the number of the Holy Spirit, with 1 added for the unity of the Spirit, who was sent on the 50th day.⁵⁸

Hebrew names, which seemed so strange to Greek and Latin ears, also fascinated Augustine, as they did other Fathers. Origen had borrowed the art of interpreting names from Philo, and Augustine took it up. A few examples will suffice: Cain, he writes, means "possession," Enoch means "dedication," and Enosh means "man," which are possible. Seth means "resurrection," which is impossible.⁵⁹ But Enosh was Seth's son,⁶⁰ and Augustine believed that Enosh meant "son of the resurrection." Naamah means "pleasure,"⁶¹ Babylon means "confusion,"⁶² Isaac means "laughter."⁶³ Saul means "request," Doeg means "move-

Once more, dream with me for a moment. In our educational system, a teacher stands in front of a room filled (or not quite filled) with students, and talks. The students write down what the teacher says. The invention of printing in 1448 or so made this practice obsolete, but we learn slowly.

Now picture an entirely different sort of education. A teacher meets his pupil – one pupil – early in the morning, in the cool shade of a colonnade or in a garden. They begin to walk back and forth together. The teacher proposes a topic, and he and his pupil undertake to discuss it. The teacher may ask the pupil to define a word: “if,” or “nothing,” or “from.” The pupil attempts a definition, and the teacher objects to some part of it. The pupil tries again, but the teacher is still not satisfied. Sometimes the pupil objects to something the teacher says. The chosen topic leads them to a larger question: perhaps, how do words function as signs? In the course of two or three hours, the teacher sharpens his pupil’s oral skills. The pupil learns to think clearly, to answer questions precisely, and to ask questions astutely. He learns the art of disputation, the art of seeking the truth through dialogue – in other words, he learns dialectic. The scene I have just described is a lesson Augustine gave his son Adeodatus, preserved in his dialogue *On the Teacher*, a dramatic instance of Augustine’s training his son in the art of dialectic.

Jean Pépin thoroughly studied Augustine’s thought on dialectic in the Saint Augustine Lecture he gave here at Villanova in 1972.⁷⁶ “Dialectic” is derived from the same word as “dialogue.” Dialectic is an educational technique in which two or more persons seek the truth, or explore the consequences of a hypothesis, through dialogue. Dialectic uses either questions and answers, or statements and objections. Often the starting point is a simple question or a request for a definition. Every point is explored, even if it leads to a dead end, either until the interlocutors are satisfied or until they agree to postpone the discussion.

Augustine defines dialectic as “skill in disputation,” or “the science of good disputation.”⁷⁷ Half a dozen of Augustine’s early works are dialogues, exercises in dialectic.

Dialectic first came to prominence in Greece, in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. According to Aristotle, Zeno of Elea (5th cent. B.C.) was the originator of dialectic. The Sophists, itinerant teachers in Greece who flourished in the fifth and early fourth centuries, made much use of dialectic. According to their enemies, they made dialectic simply an in-

strument for winning a dispute; Protagoras claimed he could "make the worse argument appear the better." Socrates distinguished himself from the Sophists by claiming that he sought the truth rather than victory in arguments. The truth that he typically sought was the definition of a concept. He often carried on a prolonged cross-examination, in which he refuted his opponent's thesis by getting him to draw from it a consequence that contradicted it. Plato regarded dialectic as the supreme philosophical method, and even the highest of the human arts. The very antithesis of passivity in education, it formed the climax of the educational program he proposed in the *Republic*: a man was to study dialectic as the last step in his education, from age 30 to 35. Plato – and Augustine – saw dialectic as the surest way to reach the truth. Aristotle held that logic was superior to dialectic, since it was less prone to error. A later age was to put its trust in the scientific method, induction. In Roman education, training in dialectic became one of the seven liberal arts, divided into the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, dialectic) and the *quadrivium* (music, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy).

Among the Fathers, the art of dialectic was the object of sharp attacks. Ambrose's statement, "Sed non in dialectica conplacuit deo 'salvum facere populum suum,'"78 is renowned, but hardly unique. Tertullian wrote: "Wretched Aristotle! who taught them dialectic, the artifice of constructing and destroying, fickle in its opinions, forced in its conjectures, stubborn in its arguments, labored in its contentions, tiresome even to itself, rehashing everything to avoid concluding anything,"79 and rejected "a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic Christianity."80 Origen takes the plague of mosquitoes in Egypt to mean the art of dialectic, "which bores into souls with minute and subtle stings of words and surrounds them so cunningly that the one deceived neither sees nor understands whence the deception comes."81 Gregory of Nyssa rejects dialectic as a way to affirm Christian dogmas.82

In contrast, Clement of Alexandria held that dialectic served both as a defense against heresy and as an aid to understanding the Scriptures.83 Cassiodorus, too, praised dialectic as a help in understanding the Bible.84 No other Father, however, praised dialectic as highly as Augustine did. There is no better way to find the truth than dialectic, he writes.85 He called dialectic the "disciplina disciplinarum"86 and perfect dialectic "ipsa scientia veritatis,"87 and held that either dialectic is wisdom itself, or wisdom cannot exist without dialectic.88

It is not easy to bring single examples of the influence of dialectic on Augustine's exegesis because it pervades all of his writings. Marrou does point out the curious fact that Augustine often prefers to present two hypotheses about a biblical text rather than one.⁸⁹ The reason for this habit, I think, is his dialectical mind. Students and others often grow restless when they read Augustine, because he seems so often to digress, and lose the thread of his argument; or, at other times, to offer several theories and leave the point unresolved. But these phenomena are typical of dialectic. Once a point was raised, the interlocutors had to pursue it until both were satisfied, or until both agreed to stop or move on. In some cases, they might not reach agreement. No point could be excluded from the discussion, and raising every possible objection to an assertion was encouraged. When Augustine talked about Scripture, what he said was sometimes as much exploration as conclusions; and the art of dialectic, which he learned as a schoolboy, continued to pervade the processes of his thought.

4. Conclusion

What I have tried to lay out for you is a world very different from ours: a world in which real words are spoken words, and written words one step removed from language; a world in which words fascinate, and reading is an act of interpretation; a world in which words were precious, and their sound a thing of beauty.

Is it possible to give a name to this world, this culture? A book by Walter Ong, entitled *Orality and Literacy*,⁹⁰ may point us in the right direction. Ong describes a primary oral culture, one in which writing is unknown and everyone is illiterate. It is a culture where no one can ever "look something up." Words are sounds, and only sounds. The spoken word has power, and a certain mystery about it.⁹¹ Since nothing can be written down, the way to remember is to "think memorable thoughts."⁹² Orality is also agonistic, Ong continues; that is, disputation plays a large role in its speech patterns. Education is memorization.⁹³ Ong himself draws the comparison with St. Augustine's world, a world in which literacy was still the exception rather than the norm, by pointing to the significance of memory for Augustine. This is why, for Augustine, Ong writes, "living in a culture that knew some literacy but still carried an overwhelmingly massive oral residue, memory bulks so large when he treats of the powers of the mind."⁹⁴

Over against this residue of an oral culture, Augustine inherited a reverence for writings – first from Greek and Roman education but then,

much more powerfully, from the Jewish roots of Christianity. Few written texts in history have been revered as the rabbis revered the Torah. So Christians, too, were to revere their Bible – three-fourths of it taken over from the Jews – as God's definitive Word. The sense of orality remains to this day: Christians always refer to the Bible as God speaking to us, not as God writing to us.

Thus in Augustine, the powerful residue of an oral culture, preserved alongside a sophisticated secular literacy, encounters the deepest reverence for a written text, a text that is God's own word. The genius of Augustine is that he drew the best from each of the three – orality, literacy, and the Word of God – and shaped a body of biblical interpretation that continues to this day to fascinate, to puzzle, and to intrigue – as indeed it should.

Notes

1. Tom Shachtman, *The Inarticulate Society: Eloquence and Culture in America* (New York: Free Press, 1995), reviewed by Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*, Friday, July 14, 1995, p. C26.
2. Henri-Irénée Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, 4th ed. (Paris: Éditions E. de Boccard, 1958). The first edition was published in 1938.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 469.
4. 1 Cor 1:20.
5. *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7.
6. *De doctrina christiana* 2, 40, 60 and often in Augustine's works.
7. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, p. 496, notes that by Augustine's time Vergil enjoyed Homeric authority among Latins.
8. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, p. 470.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 148-57; cf. *De vera religione* 49, 94.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 478.
11. *On John Dryden* (1828).
12. *Confessions* 1, 18, 29.
13. *Confessions* 3, 5, 9 (trans. John K. Ryan, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1960], p. 82).
14. *Confessions* 5, 14, 24.
15. Augustine, *Epistula* 21.
16. *Confessions* 6, 3, 3.
17. Josef Balogh, "'Voces Paginarum.' Beiträge zur Geschichte des lauten Lesens und Schreibens," *Philologus* 82 (N.F. 36; 1927) 84-109, 202-40.

18. Acts 8:30.
19. *De institutis coenobiorum* 4, 12.
20. *Regula Benedicti* 48, 5.
21. Plutarch, *Life of Brutus* 5.
22. Aristaenetus I, 10 (ed. R. Hercher, *Epistolographi graeci* [Paris: Didot, 1873], p. 140).
23. Paulinus, *Epistula* 50, 1.
24. Augustine, *Epistula* 72, 1.
25. 1 Sam 1:12-14.
26. *Confessions* 9, 4, 8 (trans. Ryan, p. 210).
27. *Oratio* 43, *Panegyric on St. Basil*, 67.
28. Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven and London: Yale U. P., 1995), p. 84.
29. *Retractationes* 2, 58; Augustine refutes the treatise in *Contra adversarium legis et prophetarum*.
30. *Confessions* 10, 3, 4.
31. See *De dono perseverantiae* 20, 53. The prayer recurs in *Confessions* 10, 29, 40; 10, 31, 45; 10, 37, 60.
32. Luke 1:63.
33. Paulinus of Milan, *Vita Ambrosii* 38.
34. Paulinus, *Epistula* 45, 1.
35. *De magistro* 4, 8 (trans. John H. S. Burleigh, *Augustine: Earlier Writings* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953], p. 75).
36. *Confessions* 9, 4, 10.
37. Balogh, "Voces paginarum," p. 225.
38. *Principia dialecticae* 5 (PL 32, 1410).
39. *Confessions* 8, 12, 29.
40. *De catechizandis rudibus* 9, 13.
41. *Adnotationes in Job* on Job 36:32 (PL 34, 867).
42. *De doctrina christiana* 3, 3, 7.
43. *Tractatus in evangelium Iohannis* 19, 4, 1; 21, 5, 2.
44. *De doctrina christiana* 3, 3, 6.
45. *De doctrina christiana* 3, 2, 3.
46. *De doctrina christiana* 3, 2, 2 (trans. D. W. Robertson, *Saint Augustine: On Christian Doctrine* [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958], p. 79); see also *De doctrina christiana* 3, 3, 6, and *Tractatus in evangelium Iohannis* 18, 1, 2, on the rule of faith.

47. Priscian, *Partitiones duodecim versuum Aeneidos principalium* 1, 9-10, in idem, *Institutionum grammaticarum libri XVIII*, Grammatici Latini III, ed. H. Keil (Leipzig: Teubner, 1859), p. 461, quoted by H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 376.
48. See Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, pp. 20-26.
49. Balogh, "Voces paginarum," p. 225, n. 73.
50. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, p. 480.
51. *De doctrina christiana* 2, 6, 7.
52. For what follows, see Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, pp. 452-53, and Marie Comeau, *Saint Augustin exégète du quatrième évangile* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1930), pp. 129-40.
53. *Tractatus in evangelium Iohannis* 15, 9, 1.
54. *De consensu evangelistarum* 2, 4, 13.
55. John 2:20.
56. *Tractatus in evangelium Iohannis* 9, 14, 2; 10, 12, 1-2; cf. *De diversis quaestionibus* 83, 56.
57. *Tractatus in evangelium Iohannis* 122, 8.
58. See Gerald Bonner, "Augustine as Biblical Scholar," in *Cambridge History of the Bible*, I. *From the Beginnings to Jerome*, ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), p. 560.
59. *De civitate dei* 15, 17.
60. Gen 4:26.
61. *De civitate dei* 15, 20.
62. *De civitate dei* 16, 4; cf. 18, 41.
63. *De civitate dei* 16, 31; see Comeau, *Saint Augustin exégète*, pp. 123-27.
64. *Enarratio in psalmum* 51, 2 and 4.
65. *De doctrina christiana* 2, 16, 23.
66. See Comeau, *Saint Augustin exégète*, p. 81.
67. *Institutio oratoria* 1, 4, 25.
68. *Tractatus in evangelium Iohannis* 77, 5.
69. *Tractatus in evangelium Iohannis* 47, 11.
70. *Tractatus in evangelium Iohannis* 9, 8.
71. *Tractatus in evangelium Iohannis* 87, 3.
72. *De musica* 1, 10, 17. The prefix comes from *semis* and *que*. See Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, p. 128, n. 2.
73. John 5:39; see Rolf Gögler, *Zur Theologie des biblischen Wortes bei Origenes* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1963).

74. *De doctrina christiana* 3, 26, 37.
75. On Psalm 1, in *Philocalia* 2, 3 (ed. Marguérite Harl; SC 302 [Paris: Cerf, 1983), p. 245. See Joseph T. Lienhard, "Origen as Homilist," in *Preaching in the Patristic Age: Studies in Honor of Walter J. Burghardt, S.J.*, ed. David G. Hunter (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1989), pp. 47-48.
76. Jean Pépin, *Saint Augustin et la dialectique*, The Saint Augustine Lecture 1972 (Villanova: Villanova U. P., 1976).
77. "Peritia disputandi": *Contra Cresconium* 1, 13, 16; cf. *Confessions* 10, 9, 16. "Sollertia disputandi": *De civitate dei* 8, 7. "Disciplina disputandi": *Contra Cresconium* 2, 2, 3. "Disciplina disputationis": cf. *De doctrina christiana* 2, 31, 48; *Soliloquia* 2, 11, 19 and 21. "Scientia bonae disputationis": *De ordine* 2, 18, 47.
78. Ambrose, *De fide* 1, 5, 42, citing Matt 1:21.
79. Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7, 6.
80. *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7, 11.
81. Origen, *Homilies on Exodus* 4, 6 (trans. Heine, FC 71, p. 269 [altered]).
82. Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione* (PG 46, 52B).
83. See Jean Pépin, "La vraie dialectique selon Clément d'Alexandrie," in *Epektasis. Mélanges J. Daniélou* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1972), pp. 375-83.
84. Cassiodorus, *Institutes* 1, 27, 1. Book II, 3 is a treatise on dialectic.
85. *Soliloquia* 2, 4, 14.
86. *De ordine* 2, 13, 38.
87. *Contra Academicos* 3, 13, 29; cf. *Contra Cresconium* 1, 15, 19.
88. *Contra Academicos* 3, 17, 37.
89. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, p. 456.
90. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).
91. The mysterious aspect of language in an oral culture may explain why an African congregation rioted over the change of one word in the Latin Bible; see Augustine, *Epistula* 71, 3, 5.
92. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 34.
93. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
94. *Ibid.*, p. 36.