

Augustine on the Use of Liberal Education for the Theater of Life

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Among the attributes that conspire to make the plays of William Shakespeare the best of their kind in the English language, we should surely count Shakespeare's sensitive appreciation of the interplay between theatrical performance and human living. When Shakespeare's characters proclaim that "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players" or that "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage," they are declaring a truth that rises above the level of a self-congratulating plug by members of the actors' guild. Stage plays not only imitate the drama of life and are derived from it, but make life itself a kind of play. This parallel was recognized long before Shakespeare. According to Michael Davis, Aristotle's *Poetics* is a profoundly political book about the isomorphism of stage-acting and political action, that is, human action conducted before others.¹ Aristotle recognized that drama, more than any other art form, "reflects the distinction between doing and looking at doing—between acting and reflecting" that is so essential to the complex genealogy of human deeds.² Indeed, Davis argues, the title of Aristotle's little work, *Peri Poiêtikês*, would be better translated *On the Art of Action*.³

And lest these implications of Shakespeare and Aristotle appear too arcane, we need only look to three memorable quotes from political history. During the 1980 presidential campaign Ronald Reagan was asked by a reporter whether an actor could

¹ Aristotle, *On Poetics*, trans. Seth Benardete and Michael Davis (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2002).

² *Ibid.*, xvii-xviii.

³ *Ibid.*, xiii.



be president. Reagan quickly replied: “How can a president not be an actor?”⁴ Decades earlier, President Franklin D. Roosevelt told Orson Welles that they were “the two best actors in the world.”⁵ And centuries before that, Suetonius writes, the dying words of Augustus Caesar were a citation of a conventional ending in Roman comedies: “The play is done; applaud!”⁶

But would St. Augustine of Hippo also agree that there is an affinity between theater and life, especially man’s life as a *zōon politikon* or political animal? One would certainly not expect him to, for Augustine is usually numbered—and not without good reason—among the theater’s detractors rather than its admirers. After analyzing Augustine’s major discussions of theatrical drama, Donnalee Dox concludes that he held “theater and theatrical representation” to be “fundamentally incompatible with a Christian view of the world” because: 1) “theatrical shows encourage bad behavior” (lust, etc.), 2) “theater is rooted in pagan religion,” and 3) “theatrical representation interferes with Christians’ ability to know God.”⁷ Hard-pressed to disagree, scholars who advance a more positive assessment of Augustine’s thought on the theater usually feel compelled to portray him as a bifurcated thinker, torn between two different poles. What those poles are depends on the commentator. Jonas Barish praises Augustine’s “sympathetic attention” and patient disentanglements for transcending Plato’s blurry broadsides,⁸ but he faults Augustine for harboring a “residual Manicheism” that undermines the Bishop of Hippo’s psychological sophistication.⁹ James K. A. Smith, on the other hand, posits a fissure between an alleged residual Platonism in Augustine and

⁴ Edmund Morris, “Five myths about Ronald Reagan,” *Washington Post*, 4 February 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/04/AR2011020403106.html>, retrieved 10 May 2012.

⁵ Barbara Leaming, *Orson Welles: A Biography* (New York: Viking Press, 1985), 293.

⁶ *Life of Augustus* 99.

⁷ Donnalee Dox, *The Idea of the Theater in Latin Christian Thought: Augustine to the Fourteenth Century* (University of Michigan Press, 2004), 12.

⁸ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 54-55.

⁹ Barish, 60.



his Christian beliefs in creation and incarnation.¹⁰ Though Barish and Smith's diagnoses differ, both essentially render Augustine a mild schizophrenic in order to salvage a sunnier account of the theater from his writings.

There is no denying Augustine's rejection of contemporary theater. Nevertheless, it is the burden of the first part of this essay to demonstrate that in his earlier writings and possibly throughout his life, Augustine understood the theater as a metaphor for life in all its psychological and political complexity, for better and for worse. Once this metaphor has been brought to light, it will be left to establish in the second part how the liberal arts can, in Augustine's view, contribute to playing one's part well in the theater of life. Our chief focus will be *On Order* and the *Soliloquies*, the last two of the four so-called Cassiciacum dialogues, written during the autumn and winter of AD 386/387 while Augustine was preparing for baptism. By rubbing these two sticks together,¹¹ we will illuminate a path towards an Augustinian understanding of the liberal arts as valuable aids for acting on the world stage.

I. Life and Theater in the *Soliloquies*

The *Soliloquies*, which consists of a direct discourse between Augustine and Reason, stands apart from its sister works in the tetralogy. Whereas the first three Cassiciacum dialogues are written in the form of a Ciceronian dialogue, the *Soliloquies*, as will be shown below, is written as a kind of a theatrical play. Augustine keeps his first-person narrative remarks to a bare minimum, thereby lending to the text a script-like quality. He also refers to Reason as "two-faced" (*bifrons*), a possible allusion to the two masks that he himself is wearing in order to "perform" this dialogue before the

¹⁰ "Staging the Incarnation: Revisioning Augustine's Critique of Theatre," *Literature and Theology* 15:2 (June 2001), 123-39.

¹¹ This image is borrowed from Plato, *Republic* 434e.



reader (see 2.10.18).¹² Such a performance is distinctive in the philosophical and theological literature of antiquity, but it is not without precedent in the theater, which began in ancient Greece as a single actor soliloquizing on stage and only eventually became a dialogue between two or more actors.¹³ Moreover, the “performance” in the *Soliloquies* is redolent of Roman pantomime, which typically featured a single actor taking on more than one role with the use of different masks and sometimes with a single two-sided mask.¹⁴ That Augustine has essentially created a new genre by combining theatrical and philosophical convention suggests at the very least that he views theater as a useful metaphor or tool for philosophizing.¹⁵

This suggestion is corroborated and expanded beyond the philosophical life to all human living in an important passage that reveals the theatricality not only of the *Soliloquies* but of life itself. At 2.7.14, Augustine has just expressed shame for having earlier conceded a point rashly. Instead of simply moving on with their investigation, Reason addresses his feeling of shame with a single-paragraph response, the brevity of which is inversely proportionate to its significance. It is this paragraph that reveals for the first time the title of the work and the reason for its distinctive method:

It’s ridiculous for you to be ashamed, as if we hadn’t chosen for this very reason the sort of discussion which, because we are speaking with ourselves alone, I want to be called and written down as *The Soliloquies*. This is certainly a new

¹² In addition to the section in this essay on the *Soliloquies* as Therapeutic Theater, see Michael P. Foley, “The Theatrical Meaning of the *Soliloquies*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* (summer 2014), forthcoming.

¹³ See Paul Kuritz, *The Making of Theatre History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1988), 24.

¹⁴ Augustine’s familiarity with the conventions of pantomime are evident in *On Order* 2.11.34. For more on pantomime, see “Pantomimus,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed., eds. N.G.L. Hammond and H.H. Scullard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 776-777; “Pantomimus,” in Oskar Seyffert, *Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*, eds. Henry Nettleship and J.E. Sandys (New York: Meridian, 1957), 457. For the use of a two-sided mask, examples of which have been found in the ruins of Pompeii, see Quintilian, *Institutes* 11.3.74; Pollux, *Onomasticon* 4.144. A significant difference, of course, between the “pantomime” of the *Soliloquies* and the pantomime of the Roman stage is that the latter was a ballet-like dance where the meaning was communicated visually.

¹⁵ “Philosophizing” (*philosophari*) is a word that Augustine uses to denote the central activity being recorded in the Cassiciacum dialogues (*Against the Academics* 2.3.8).



name, and perhaps an unrefined one at that, but it is sufficiently suitable for indicating the gist of what we are doing. In fact, since there is no better way of seeking the truth than by questioning and answering, and since hardly anyone can be found who isn't ashamed of being refuted in a disputation (and for that reason it's almost always the case that the matter under discussion, one that's off to a good start, is booed off the stage by the rowdy hullabaloo of stubbornness; and all the while souls are being ripped apart, mostly out of sight but sometimes out in the open)—I most calmly, in my opinion, and agreeably decided to seek the truth with God's assistance by means of being questioned by my very self and giving answers to myself. Consequently, if at any time you have rashly tied yourself up in knots, there's nothing to fear in returning to them and loosening them; for otherwise one could never get out of them.¹⁶

Gently chastising Augustine for his shame, Reason mentions two horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, the best way for the human mind to seek the truth is dialectically and discursively, in a disputation that involves vigorous discussion with others. On the other hand, human beings have a low threshold for making a mistake in front of each other, since the appearances they wish to maintain for the sake of good standing are compromised when a failing of theirs is exposed. Put differently, the desire to know the highest things—things human and divine¹⁷—benefits from being exercised politically (that is, in community), but man's political instinct to excel in the eyes of others means that his fear of being shamed often takes precedence over his fear of being ignorant. We would rather be thought fools and remain silent than open our mouths and remove all doubt, even though the principal way to learn is by opening our foolish mouths and confessing our need for learning. This fear of being exposed as a fool even turns into a hatred of the truth, as Augustine explains in the *Confessions*:

They love truth when it enlightens them, they hate truth when it accuses them.¹⁸ Because they do not wish to be deceived and do wish to deceive, they love truth when it reveals itself, and hate it when it reveals them. Thus it shall reward them

¹⁶ All translations of the Latin texts of Augustine are, with the exception of a citation of Frank Sheed's translation of the *Confessions*, mine.

¹⁷ See *Against the Academics* 1.6.16.

¹⁸ See Jn. 3:20.



as they deserve: those who do not wish to be revealed by truth, truth will unmask against their will, but it will not reveal itself to them. Thus, thus, even thus, does the human mind, blind and inert, vile and ill-behaved, desire to keep itself concealed, yet desire that nothing should be concealed from itself.¹⁹

The villainous role of sinful thumos

The source of this double desire for self-concealment and self-exaltation is known in Plato's writings as *thumos*, the spirited part of the soul as opposed to its appetitive and rational parts. Augustine does not use a single Latin noun for *thumos* but employs different terms for it, especially in its sinful state. In the *Confessions* he calls sinful *thumos* the lust for holding first place (*libido principandi*)²⁰ and the pride of life (*ambitio saeculi*);²¹ in *On True Religion* it is the haughtiness of temporal domination (*dominationis temporalis fastus*);²² and in the *City of God* it is famously referred to as the lust for dominating (*libido dominandi*).²³ At Cassiciacum Augustine describes it as a "puerile showing-off of talent" (*ingenii puerilis jactantia*) and the love of victory over the love of discovering what is right and true.²⁴

The effect of thumotic sin on rational inquiry is grim. As Reason explains in the *Soliloquies*, even a discussion among friends that starts off auspiciously, initiated by the pure desire to know, can fall prey to egotistical derailing. One need only think of an altercation in the third Cassiciacum dialogue (*On Order*) between Augustine's two pupils as an example, where Augustine refers to their disruptive jockeying for supremacy instead of searching for knowledge as a pest "lowest in rank *yet more injurious than all the others*: that of toxic emulation and vain boasting" (1.10.30; emphasis added).

¹⁹ *Confessions* 10.23.34, trans. F.J. Sheed, ed. Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005).

²⁰ *Confessions* 3.8.16.

²¹ *Confessions* 10.30.41.

²² *On True Religion* 38.71.

²³ *City of God* 1.30.

²⁴ See *Against the Academics* 1.3.8.



Significantly, it is theatrical imagery that Reason uses in the *Soliloquies* 2.7.14 to describe this phenomenon. The undisciplined outcry of stubbornness “explodes” (*explodat*) good discussion, a word that literally means to drive someone off the stage with hissing, clapping, or booing. Taking this metaphor to its logical conclusion, it may be said that Reason understands human living and its disordered thumotic demands as a kind of theater. The world is a stage in which *thumos* in its sinful state wars against reason’s yearning to know and to exercise rational control, a control which alone can make *thumos* reasonable and useful. Our personal eagerness to come off well in the drama of our lives, to be good performers adored and esteemed by our audience, overshadows our curiosity about what is on the other side of the curtain. The desire to know reality, our only hope for escape from the theatrical house of mirrors in which our obsession with reputation places us, is booed off the stage by that very obsession. J. Elsner has written that Roman society was a “panopticon of spectatorship,”²⁵ a world of seeing and of being seen in which daily life is constituted by a “sequence of performances, rehearsed or extemporaneous.”²⁶ True, but Reason’s broader point here is that every human society is a panopticon of spectatorship, including Elsner’s and our own. Life’s theatricality, to offer a more contemporary similitude, is comparable to a conversation on an internet service like Skype, where the caller is not only looking at another person on the screen but at a smaller window which simultaneously shows how he or she is being perceived by the other person.²⁷

One of the consequences of all this play-acting, Reason tells Augustine in the *Soliloquies* 2.7.14, is an irrational stubbornness. We become attached to our opinions precisely because they are *our* opinions, and we resolutely defend them when they are

²⁵ Jas’ Elsner, “Caught in the Ocular: Visualizing Narcissus in the Roman World,” in *Echoes of Narcissus*, ed. Lieve Spaas (NY: Berghahn Books, 2000), 105.

²⁶ Rabun Taylor, *The Moral Mirror of Roman Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20.

²⁷ See Patrick Downey, *Desperately Wicked: Philosophy, Christianity, and the Human Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 74-89.



challenged, lest we lose face. These opinions are “undisciplined” or *inconditus* (crude, unformed, disordered), but that does not matter to us: if they are discredited we react furiously, like wounded animals.²⁸ Our souls are “ripped apart” by the correction or rejection of our opinions, Reason says, even though we are usually clever about hiding the wound “out of sight.” Our bruised *thumos* grows violent, either rising up and demanding vengeance “out in the open” or angrily sulking and plotting retribution for another day. But the real casualty is not the adversary who slighted us in the first place but our own capacity for dispassionate rational inquiry. Following Reason’s thespian metaphor, we may say that what is supposed to be a comedy, a story with a happy ending, becomes a tragedy fraught with violence committed in the dark.

The Soliloquies as therapeutic theater

Reason’s metaphor, however, also reveals something about the *Soliloquies* itself. This novel mode of writing—so novel that it elicited a neologism for its title—is itself a form of theater meant to correct the destructive theatricality of life. Soliloquizing as Augustine has defined it, then, is not so much a rejection of all theatricality but a substitution of one kind of theater for another. Among other things, the theater of soliloquizing involves the practical suggestion to be unashamed of admitting one’s flaws and returning to any question that one has “tied up in knots” (2.7.14). Christian humility is an effective antidote to the theatrics of humankind’s lust for playing the prima donna, although it does not dissolve one’s ties to the theater of life *tout court*. Rather, it effects a reorientation of one’s acting and feeling. Later as a bishop Augustine would recall an incident involving an extremely poor Christian usher who discovered a money bag containing almost two hundred gold coins and who, upon tracking down the owner, refused to accept even a modest finder’s fee. When the owner, indignant

²⁸ See *Academica* 2.3.8, where Cicero mentions people defending their own position rather than inquiring into the truth.



that he could not show his gratitude, refused to take the money, the poor man distributed it all to the other poor, making sure that not a single coin entered his own house. Summarizing the drama between the two men, who were each in their own way trying to be honorable, Augustine declares, *theatrum mundus, spectator Deus*: “the world is a theater and God is the audience.”²⁹ The alternative to the political theater of life is not withdrawing from the political and communal, but living the drama of one’s life as if God were the only spectator, the only critic that mattered. Such a life would involve not only perfectly harmonizing one’s inner feelings and desires with one’s outer actions but a total conformity of both the inner and the outer man to the will of God. As a kind of therapeutic exercise for the soul (see 1.13.23 and 2.20.34), the *Soliloquies* is intended to be an aid towards this new kind of acting and feeling upon the cosmic stage, a conversion and purification of *thumos* in the service of the reasonable and the good.³⁰

II. Theater and the Liberal Arts

At this point we may ask how the liberal arts are relevant to an Augustinian notion of life as theater. The answer is not initially obvious. For Augustine, the liberal arts are ineffective in taming our monstrous *thumos* that seems ever bent on self-projection rather than self-knowledge. By themselves, the seven liberal disciplines are morally impotent and incapable of combating sin.³¹ Worse, they even pose a moral danger of their own insofar as their beguiling beauty can detain the soul from seeking higher things. In the Cassiciacum dialogues, it is Augustine’s pupil Licentius who falls prey to this trap, having become obsessed with poetry (part of the art of grammar) to

²⁹ *Sermon* 178.8. Since this incident occurred when he was still living in Milan, it may have still been a fresh memory when he penned the *Soliloquies*. The *theatrum* to which Augustine refers is likely that of a gladiator game or chariot race, but it still contains the notion of a performance made for the sake of others.

³⁰ For a fuller treatment of the *Soliloquies’* theatrical character, see Foley, “Theatrical Meaning.”

³¹ See *Confessions* 4.16.30.



the detriment of his progress in philosophy;³² and something similar can be said about Augustine himself when he was Licentius' age.

Still, the liberal arts do at least serve as a reminder of some of the components of a moral life, such as self-restraint and harmony. In the first dialogue *Against the Academics*, Augustine tells Licentius that there should be a consistency between the ordering of one's loves and the ordering of one's verses (2.4.10). Years later a disappointed Augustine would write a letter to his former pupil, who was continuing to obsess in vain about his poetry, and ask him: "What is your golden tongue to me when your heart is iron?"³³ Even when not treating of ethical issues per se, the liberal arts disclose what in the dialogues is called *modus* or limit, and knowing and practicing the right limit in desire or action is crucial to living life well.³⁴

The seven liberal arts are also incapable of identifying the Divine Spectator by themselves, let alone augmenting our love for Him. Although the liberal disciplines are ordered to philosophy and theology as preliminary steps to what will perfect the liberal mind, they do not, of themselves, lead to the crucial cognitional breakthrough that differentiates sensible and intelligible reality and thereby enables the mind to understand that God is spirit rather than body.³⁵ After years of studying the liberal arts, for instance, Augustine still remained mired in his carnal conviction that God was a sort of shiny body and he a particle broken off from it.³⁶ That said, the liberal arts, when directed properly, can be a powerful means of effecting the intellectual conversion

³² See *Against the Academics* 2.3.7; *On Order* 1.2.5.

³³ *Epistle* 26.4. See also Seneca: "You teach me how the treble and bass are in accord with each other and how a harmony is produced from the different notes of the strings. Instead, make it so that my soul is in harmony with itself, and let not my plans be out of tune. You show me what the sorrowful keys are. Instead, show me how to refrain from making a sorrowful sound in the midst of adversity" (*Epistle* 88.9).

³⁴ See *On the Happy Life* 2.8 and 4.31-32 for a discussion on limit and the surprisingly "fruitful" virtue of frugality.

³⁵ For this cognitional breakthrough, see *Confessions* 7.10.16-17.23.

³⁶ *Confessions* 4.16.31.



towards intelligible reality that Augustine considers to be central to the philosophical and theological life, which is why examples from the liberal arts, chiefly geometry, figure so prominently in his dialogues like the *Soliloquies*.³⁷

Finally, the liberal arts by themselves cannot identify the true religion (not even philosophy can do that), although neither are they *per se* opposed to it. In the *Confessions* we learn that Augustine's liberal education facilitated his turn towards God and the Church only indirectly, helping him to recognize the logical fallacies and factual errors of Manicheanism and thereby freeing him to pursue the true.³⁸

Now is not the time to disentangle Augustine's complex attitude to the liberal arts or the ways in which his views may or may not have changed as he grew older.³⁹ What we can at least point out is that even the Augustine at Cassiciacum, the author who takes an ostensibly more sanguine view of the disciplines than he does later on, recognizes them as good but susceptible to abuse and insufficient on their own in successfully making a student become morally good and intellectually wise. However, when incorporated into a broader education that is guided by an architectonic science like philosophy or theology, the seven liberal arts become less dangerous and more efficacious—or to continue with our thespian metaphor, they help the soul hone the art of playing its God-given role in life, whatever that may be. One need only think of the impact of Cicero's *Hortensius* on Augustine's moral imagination or the books of the Platonists on his intellectual horizon to see the regal role that philosophy can play in elevating and strengthening the liberal arts. And that role is even more spectacular when filled by theology, which through divine revelation further expands the vistas of philosophical inquiry and purifies it of any errors it may have committed; indeed,

³⁷ See 1.4.9-5.11, 1.8.15, 2.19.33, 2.20.35.

³⁸ See *Confessions* 6.5.7.

³⁹ For a survey of this topic, see *Augustine and the Disciplines: From Cassiciacum to Confessions*, eds. Karla Pollman and Mark Vessey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ryan N.S. Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom: Augustine's Early Theology of Education* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012).



philosophy is impotent in fully finding what it seeks without God's assistance and self-communication.⁴⁰

Augustine does not explicitly depict the liberal arts as aids in the theater of life, but his politically-sensitive treatment of the disciplines at Cassiciacum, when held up against the backdrop of his architectonic and theatrical framework of soliloquizing, finds fresh meaning in the broad metaphor of life as a theatrical performance. It was Boethius who was responsible for the now-common terms *trivium* and *quadrivium* for the two divisions of the liberal arts,⁴¹ but it was Augustine who first explicitly made the division.⁴² Whereas Boethius introduces the concept of a *quadrivium* (sic) in a technical treatise on mathematics,⁴³ Augustine introduces his division in a discussion on the kind of life and education one would need to have in order to be happy and wise.⁴⁴ Augustine tells his interlocutors that there are three categories of the "reasonable": "One is in deeds directed to some end; the other is in speaking; the third is in delighting."⁴⁵ He goes on to explain that the first category pertains to morality while the second and third refer to the liberal arts. Specifically, the category of speaking comprises the trivium of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric, while the category of delighting comprises the quadrivium of music, numbers, geometry, and astronomy.

Although Augustine by no means reduces either the trivium or the quadrivium to the merely political, he nevertheless describes their significance vis-à-vis life in the *res publica*. This is especially the case with respect to both the origin and purpose of the trivium. The arts of speaking were drawn out "by a certain natural chain into the

⁴⁰ See *Confessions* 7.21.27.

⁴¹ Henri-Irénée Marrou, "Les Arts Libéraux dans l'Antiquité Classique", in *Arts Libéraux et Philosophie au Moyen Âge*, Actes du Quatrième Congrès International de Philosophie Médiévale (Paris: Vrin, 1969), 18-19.

⁴² Ilsetraut Hadot, *Arts liberaux et philosophie dans la pensée antique* (Paris, 1984), 101.

⁴³ *De institutione arithmetica* 1.1.

⁴⁴ For the purpose of the discourse in which Augustine's schema of the liberal arts occur, see *On Order* 2.8.25.

⁴⁵ *On Order* 2.12.35.



society of those with whom reason itself was held in common,” a claim that echoes Balbus’ depiction of speech as “enchaining” men and women into the society of justice, law, and the city in Cicero’s *De natura deorum* 2.59.148. Grammar emerges from the human need to communicate one’s thoughts to others, for otherwise “there could not be a very strong association” between individuals. And if grammar is the art of organizing language, dialectic is the art of organizing thinking and knowing; it is the pursuit and study of “the very power by which [reason] produces” arts such as grammar.⁴⁶ Significantly, Augustine refers to this branch of the liberal disciplines as “dialectic” (*dialectica*) rather than “logic” (*logica*), a Platonic-Stoic-Ciceronian term that retains a more interpersonal connotation. And significantly, the only other proper noun that Augustine uses in the Cassiciacum dialogues for this art of knowing is “disputation” (*disputatio*),⁴⁷ a term that he also associates with debate or dialogue (*On Order*, for instance, is called a *disputatio*⁴⁸). Finally, once reason organizes the “devices and tools” by which it can operate more profitably, there arises the political problem of communicating the truths discovered with the aid of these tools to a multitude that is not only ignorant of but often hostile to them. Rhetoric, then, is the art of translating the advice of the wise to the generally “foolish” masses by “stirring up” their emotions in such a way that it leads them to reasonable courses of action and reasonable opinions (2.13.38). Augustine uses a politically-charged “bread-and-circus” image of imperial agents throwing treats to plebeians as the point of comparison for reason’s dissemination of its good counsel through the somewhat “impure” power of rhetoric.⁴⁹ His assessment of rhetoric here echoes the political philosophy of Cicero, who

⁴⁶ *On Order* 2.13.38.

⁴⁷ For dialectic as “the disputatious art,” see *Soliloquies* 2.11.19, 2.11.21, 2.14.25, 2.15.27, 2.18.32, 2.19.33, and *On Order* 2.18.47.

⁴⁸ *On Order* 2.20.54. See also *On Order* 1.2.5, 1.3.9, 1.7.20, 1.8.25, 1.9.27, 1.11.31, 2.1.1, 2.2.7, 2.3.8, 2.5.14, 2.9.27, 2.10.29, and 2.16.44.

⁴⁹ “The part of itself [reason] filled with more need than purity that would do this, its lap heaped high with treats that it would scatter to the people so that they would deign to be led for their own good, it called ‘rhetoric’” (*On Order* 2.13.38).



characterizes eloquence rather than rational demonstration as the single best way to make the populace submit to justice without recourse to violence;⁵⁰ for eloquence is singularly “capable of moving the sensibility of the multitude.”⁵¹ Indeed, Augustine identifies “teaching correctly”—that is, successfully communicating truth or goodness to at least some fellow citizens on a level that is most beneficial to them—as the goal of the entire trivium (2.12.35).

The quadrivium, on the other hand, is characterized as a decisive series of “steps” that build a “path” to the “happiest contemplation of divine things” (2.14.39), steps that lead the soul above and beyond the world of the sensible—and the political. Music is the transition from sound *per se* to the numerical (that is, intelligible) underpinnings of sound (2.14.39–2.14.41); geometry is the study of number and dimension with respect to visible beauty; astronomy is the study of number and dimension with respect to heavenly bodies in motion (2.15.42); and number is the study of number alone (2.15.43). All of these disciplines are studied as intrinsically choiceworthy and increasingly delightful, yet that does not mean they lack any practical advantage. Astronomy, for instance, can be instrumental in exposing false religion, as when Augustine was able to draw from his knowledge of this science to reject the fables of Manichean astrology.⁵² And thoughtful reflection on the notion of unity in mathematics, Augustine opines, can lead to a better understanding of the human soul and its immortality (2.15.43–16.44). Towards the end of *On Order*, Augustine praises Pythagoras for passing on “the discipline of ruling the republic” as the very last thing to be taught and only to the best of men (presumably, those who have completed a liberal education of the kind he has just finished describing), not simply to those who have

⁵⁰ See *On Rhetorical Invention* 1.2.3.

⁵¹ *On Oratorical Classification* 23.79.

⁵² See *Confessions* 5.3.3–6.



completed the trivium.⁵³ Obviously, such praise also bespeaks the political value of all of the liberal arts in readying the soul for the weightiest responsibilities of political life, even if the proper ends of those arts are not, strictly speaking, political.

Augustine's larger point in book two of *On Order*, then, is not to establish a sharp dichotomy between the trivium and quadrivium in which the former is politically useful and nothing more and the latter is politically useless (in the Aristotelian sense of the word) and nothing less. Rather—to translate these remarkable passages into the language of the theater—Augustine appears to be saying that while the trivium is primarily although not exclusively beneficial in learning how to deliver one's lines, the quadrivium is primarily although not exclusively useful for knowing what lies beyond the stage or the play itself. While the trivium, among other things, equips men and women with tools to be political in the best and highest sense of that word, the quadrivium, among other things, teaches them to reach beyond the polis for their ultimate guidance and fulfillment—a reach that, paradoxically, makes them better actors in both senses of the word. Put differently, the liberal arts can be useful in cultivating both the political and the trans-political aspects of human nature as it struts and frets its appointed hour before the final curtain call. In the words of the Irish dramatist Seán O'Casey, "All the world's a stage and most of us are desperately unrehearsed." The liberal arts, grounded in and guided by both moral and religious excellence,⁵⁴ can help remedy this ill-preparedness.

Augustine, of course, uses mildly political rather than overtly theatrical terminology for the liberal arts in the Cassiciacum corpus, but it is telling that the theatrical terminology of the *Soliloquies* has (as we have already seen) political overtones, and thus there is a possible interplay between liberal education, political life,

⁵³ *On Order* 2.20.54.

⁵⁴ See Augustine's description of the "order of living"—which involves a life of virtue, good friends, and a worshipful faith, hope, and love of the true God—as a crucial part of the happy life and a complement to the "order of education" in *On Order* 2.8.25 and 2.20.52.



and theater. Further, by being the last of the Cassiciacum dialogues, the *Soliloquies* invites us to reconsider what we have learned from the earlier works in light of the paradigm now being disclosed to us. There is even an internal progression that points to such a hermeneutic. In *On Order* Augustine is the dominating Socratic figure who speaks on behalf of reason's activities; it is he, not Reason himself, who explains how Reason fashioned each of the disciplines, and it is he who concludes this explanation with an imaginary monologue by a personalized Soul, thereby anticipating the role of a personalized Reason.⁵⁵ In the sequel that is the *Soliloquies*, Augustine now assumes a subordinate role while Reason, speaking in his own and more authoritative voice, discloses the theatrical model of soliloquizing by which the various strands of the earlier dialogues may be more fruitfully revisited and reviewed.

Conclusion

In *On Order*, after Augustine has finished his discourse on morality, the liberal arts, and the worship of God, his friend Alypius erupts into praise:

You have truly brought it about . . . that we not only have no doubt about the memory of the most learned and great men (which, on account of the magnitude of their deeds, sometimes seemed incredible), but we can even swear on it if necessary. For what is it that you have disclosed to us today, almost before our very eyes? . . . You have pointed out the rules of life and not so much the paths of knowledge as its broad field and limpid seas, as well as where the very sanctuaries of truth are.

Like Firminus and Marius Victorinus, whom Augustine praises for using their liberal education to glorify God,⁵⁶ Augustine himself vigorously put his own education in the service of his Catholic faith, despoiling as much pagan wisdom as he could⁵⁷ and conducting himself on the global stage with an eye to his heavenly audience and

⁵⁵ *On Order* 2.18.48-19.50.

⁵⁶ *Confessions* 7.6.8 and 8.2.3, respectively.

⁵⁷ See *On Christian Doctrine* 2.40.60.



destination. Although such acting is more conspicuous during his tenure as the bishop of Hippo, it was apparently evident, if we are to attach any weight to Alypius' kind words, in a nascent form even when he was a catechumen. One of the greatest examples of a Christian use of the liberal arts in the theater of life before this great globe dissolves at the end of time may therefore be the very life and writings of Augustine.

