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## RHETORIC IN THE SERVICE OF CONTEMPLATION IN ST. AUGUSTINE

ABSTRACT. Stróżyński Mateusz, Rhetoric in the Service of Contemplation in St. Augustine

Augustine, an excellent rhetor, in some of his texts used his skills not only to convince the reader, but to open him or her to the state of contemplation, of seeing God. This use of language to directly influence the reader's consciousness is showed in the analysis of the passage from the *De Trinitate* VIII.1.2.

Key words: Augustine, contemplation, rhetoric, spiritual exercises.

St. Augustine, an outstandingly learned and gifted teacher of rhetoric, was one among the many educated people of his time who attempted to reconcile Athens and Jerusalem, that is, to use benefits of classical *paideia* to proclaim the Gospel.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noticing that the future bishop of Hippo in his early philosophical writings gave the ancient idea of education a very special role to play. He claimed that the mastery of the *artes liberales* is a necessary purification and preparation of the mind for the direct seeing of God (*videre Deum*).<sup>2</sup> Although Augustine later came to the conclusion that

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<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon has been widely discussed in the literature. An example can be W. Jaeger, *Wczesne chrześcijaństwo i grecka paideia*, transl. K. Bielawski, Bydgoszcz 2002, pp. 66-108 (bibliography: pp. 109-116). About Augustine's relation to the Greek and biblical tradition there are two main perspectives. Robert O'Connell emphasizes the Neoplatonic character of Augustine's thought, while his adversaries (e. g. M. Clark, J. Rist, G. O'Daly, F. Van Fleteren) stress the essential biblical inspiration in it. The recent and highly esteemed book by R.J. Rombs provides a summary of this discussion and suggests ways beyond the controversy: R.J. Rombs, *Saint Augustine and the Fall of the Soul. Beyond O'Connell and His Critics*, 2006 Washington, D.C. In my view of Augustine I would incline more to O'Connell's position. There is also an essential work by J.M. Rist: *Augustine. The Ancient Thought Baptized*, Cambridge 1994.

<sup>2</sup> That is a recent, interesting interpretation of Philip Cary whose view seems to be firmly based on O'Connell's, although he does not explicitly refer to him. Cary proves that

contemplation of God is possible also without the help from the *artes liberales*, which he clearly shows by the example of his mother, Monica, in the *Confessions*,<sup>3</sup> it seems that this early conception influenced his way of thinking until the end of his life.

Rhetoric was extremely important for Augustine. If we believe in what he writes in book I of the *Confessions*,<sup>4</sup> already in his childhood he was unusually sensitive to the influence of the word and he often experienced its almost magical power, as when he cried while reading the *Aeneis*. Later on he became a great master of the word himself and after his conversion in 386 he quit a public job as a teacher of rhetoric, but he did not abandon the *ars* itself. In his polemical writings and numerous sermons Augustine began to use rhetoric for new, Christian purposes, but in accord with its traditional usage – to convince, and through that to influence a person both morally and intellectually.

What I would like to take a look at is a very specific use of rhetorical tools by the bishop of Hippo, the use which can be observed above all in his mature philosophical works: the *Confessions* and the *De Trinitate*. In those texts the purpose of the discourse is primarily not to convince the reader of the author's views, but to open the reader's mind to the state of contemplation, that is, the direct seeing of God.<sup>5</sup> In this article I am going to present in the most general fashion my concept of a philosophical text which by means of its rhetoric leads the reader to the experience of contemplation.

Such a use of rhetoric or such a way of philosophical writing was not an exceptional phenomenon or something peculiar to the works of Augustine. It can be found in the whole Neoplatonic tradition, both Pagan and Christian, and especially in Plotinus, the founder of the school.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that it is Plotinus who Augustine learned this way of writing from, the way which not so much *informs* the reader as *forms* him or her, by directly influencing consciousness in order to open it up for the experience of God.

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Augustine had a whole idea of education in *artes liberales* as a preparation for the vision of God. P. Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self. The Legacy of a Christian Platonist*, Oxford 2000, pp. 66-94.

<sup>3</sup> *Confessiones*, IX.10, ed. J. J. O'Donnell 1992, <http://www.stoa.org/hippo>.

<sup>4</sup> *Confessiones*, I.13.

<sup>5</sup> My view is based on some observations made by P. Hadot in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, transl. M. Chase, Oxford 1995, pp. 107-109. The status of the text and of the process of reading in Augustine has been discussed in this recent book: B. Stock, *Augustine the Reader. Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation*, Cambridge, MA and London 1998. Stock, however, does not concentrate on spiritual exercises and their transformative effects.

<sup>6</sup> The best and, as it seems, only book about spiritual exercises in the Neoplatonic tradition is: S. Ahbel-Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism. Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius*, Cambridge 2000.

In book VII of the *Confessions* Augustine describes his encounter with some treatises from Plotinus' *Enneads*.<sup>7</sup> While reading them the young rhetor undergoes a spiritual breakthrough and has his first mystical experiences which totally change his life and way of thinking. I suppose that this spiritual enlightenment which Augustine experienced while meditating on Plotinus' texts inspired him in writing his own texts whose rhetorical structure enables the mind to pass from discursive thinking and conceptual knowledge (*rationatio* – *scientia*) straight to the direct seeing of God and mystical cognition (*ratio*, *intelligere* – *sapientia*).<sup>8</sup>

Two elements of Plotinus' teaching seem to me especially worth mentioning in order to make it possible to grasp the core of Augustine's writing method. The first was concisely expressed in the treatise *On the Good or the One*:

it [the One] cannot be spoken or written, but we speak and write impelling towards it and wakening from reasonings to the vision of it (ἐκ τῶν λόγων ἐπὶ τὴν θέαν), as if showing the way to someone who wants to have a view of something. For teaching (διδάξας) goes as far as the road and the traveling, but the vision (θεᾶ) is the task of someone who has already resolved to see.<sup>9</sup>

We have three essential tenets here: (1) God cannot be expressed in words or grasped by thought in the process of discursive logos. (2) The goal of philosophical discourse is not knowledge about God, but showing a way on which awakening from discursive thinking about God (ἐκ τῶν λόγων) takes place and which finally leads to seeing God (θεᾶ). (3) Philosophical text is then a protreptic impulse to travelling, a map and a description of the

<sup>7</sup> *Confessiones*, VII.9. Scholars have different opinions on these *libri platonicorum* which Augustine refers to. We can be sure that at least some of Plotinus' treatises were read by Augustine in Latin translation. See the essay by R. Crouse, *Paucis mutatis verbis. St. Augustine's Platonism*, in: *Augustine and His Critics*, ed. R. Dodaro and G. Lawless, London & New York 2004.

<sup>8</sup> *De ordine*, II.11.30: *Ratio est mentis motio, ea quae discuntur distinguendi et connectendi potens, qua duce uti ad Deum intellegendum*. Augustine seems to distinguish here between intuitive faculty of *intelligere* and discursive *ratio*. Different terminology is used in *De quantitate animae*, XXVII.52-53, where he describes *ratio* as intuitive light and *rationatio* as a discursive movement in which this light shines on things. Similar difference between *sapientia* and *scientia* can be found in the *De Trinitate* XIII.19.24 and XIV.1.1-3. About Augustine's concept of the mind and cognition see, for example: G. O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of the Mind*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1987, pp. 162-216 and G.B. Matthews, *Knowledge and Illumination*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. E. Stump, N. Kretzmann, Cambridge 2001, pp.171-185. For the importance of the experience of God, see: P. Cary, *Inner Vision as the Goal of Augustine's Life*, in: *A Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, ed. K. Paffenroth, R.P. Kennedy, Louisville and London 2003, pp. 107-126.

<sup>9</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.9.4, t. I-VII, transl. A.H. Armstrong, Cambridge & London 2000-2003.

way, but the desired seeing takes place in the awareness of the reader or listener, and it is not a knowledge that can be found in the text. The end of Neoplatonic philosophy is not knowledge about God by means of discursive logos, but rather seeing, which is something different from discursive thought.

Now I am going to show that Augustine has very similar goals, and I am going to use a passage from the *De Trinitate* as an example. Among the texts of the bishop of Hippo known to me it might be the most clear instance of how the rhetoric power of the word can be used not to convince or convey knowledge, but to in a way induce the state of contemplation in the reader.

Ecce vide, si potes, o anima praegravata corpore quod corrumpitur, et onusta terrenis cogitationibus multis et variis; ecce vide, si potes: Deus veritas est. Hoc enim scriptum est: Quoniam Deus lux est; non quomodo isti oculi vident, sed quomodo videt cor, cum audit: Veritas est. Noli quaerere quid sit veritas; statim enim se opponunt caligines imaginum corporalium et nubila phantasmatum, et perturbabunt serenitatem, quae primo ictu diluxit tibi, cum dicerem: Veritas. Ecce in ipso primo ictu quo velut coruscatione perstringeris, cum dicitur: Veritas, mane si potes; sed non potes. Relaberis in ista solita atque terrena.<sup>10</sup>

What is the effect intended here by Augustine? It is an impact that the text has on reader's awareness. What he uses here is a rhetorical figure of apostrophe: *vide* (which evokes a technical term: *videre Deum*, a Latin equivalent of the Greek  $\theta\acute{\epsilon}\alpha$ ). One of the key elements of Augustine's method is an invitation for the reader to enter a relationship with the author of the text. The author breaks out of a situation in which the reader could watch philosophical discourse from a safe distance, and creates instead a shared space for both sides, a space in which something important may take place. At the same time, Augustine does not put himself in a position of a spiritual master, since he addresses the human soul as such; he suggests that he is a disciple too: a master, yes, but, also a disciple.

The Augustinian *vide*, firstly, puts into question a distanced attitude towards the content of the text, being a call directed potentially at each reader – it is you who should see! Secondly, it tries to place the reader (and, perhaps, the author himself) outside the dimension of discourse which at its worst is merely a play of concepts, and at its best is an attempt to speak about something that nothing adequate can be spoken about. Thinking about God (*cogitare*) may, though does not have to, be an escape from facing the experience of God (*videre*), which is unsafe, since God is said to be a liv-

<sup>10</sup> *De Trinitate*, VIII.1.2, *Sancti Augustini Opera Omnia* edited in <http://www.santagostino.it/latino/index.html>.

ing God, a consuming fire. God as an object of a distanced reflection is much more tame and predictable. Cool, theological thinking might not always be the best way to meet the consuming Fire. Augustine also tries to bring about a certain awakening in the reader, when he rhetorically uses the same phrase twice: *ecce vide* (it might be quite reasonable to associate this with the famous *tolle lege* from the symbolic scene of conversion in the *Confessions*<sup>11</sup>). *Ecce vide* means *right here, in the present moment, open your eyes and look, instead of getting lost in your own thoughts, even in thoughts about God*.

And what happens if the reader does respond to this invitation and enters the space of *ecce*, of the here and now? What are they supposed to see in it? *Deus veritas est*. What the reader is to see is God as the Truth. I will not go into details of the Neoplatonic view, but suffice it to say that God endows creatures with his own absolute realness and trueness, because they, being created out of nothing, are in themselves deprived of any realness. Augustine calls the reader to see the fact that what makes the world true and present is God. *Veritas*, on the one hand, is the actual presence of the world, and, on the other hand, it is God himself, who only is truly real, and who reveals himself in the realness of things: an infinite and simple being, uniting everything in itself. In book VII of the *Confessions* Augustine writes that he, while meditating with Plotinus' texts, at a certain point broke through *ad id quod est*.<sup>12</sup> *Veritas*, in its second meaning, is just *id quod est*, and the reader can see that nothing else but God is what really is.

Augustine invites the reader to enter the actuality of this moment and experience being of the world, presence, trueness of what is, since that is God. The reader knows so far *what* is to be seen, but a further question is, *how* is it to be seen? Augustine's answer is that *Deus lux est*. That is not about the light by which the eyes see, but the light by which the heart sees, that is, the inner sight that Plotinus talks about. God is, then, at the same time, a reality that is present here in human experience, and the only sight which can see that reality: God (*veritas*) can be seen only by God (*lux*). That which is seen and the seeing itself are the same thing. God present in the world (Truth) is recognized by God present in the human heart (Light) and, although Augustine does not say it here, the two are obviously one.

All this happens whenever one hears these words: *Veritas est*. Augustine says: *Videt, cum audit*, and here his intention reveals itself. These simple words said by him, *Deus veritas est*, are supposed to be something like a sound of a bell which wakes the reader from the sleep of thinking to seeing God. Not only does the author of the text establish contact with the

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<sup>11</sup> *Confessiones*, VIII.12.

<sup>12</sup> *Confessiones*, VII.17.

reader, but, as we might infer, he is convinced that his words have a very concrete impact on the reader's mind. Not in order to persuade, but to open for a while the eye of the mind to the Truth.

That is rhetoric pushed to its farthest limits: the psychagogic power of the word is in Augustine's view amazing, because just hearing the sentence *Deus veritas est* makes the inner sight immediately awake and makes the mind enter the state of contemplation. It does not work as simply as an enter key which starts in the soul a program of seeing God, but Augustine says very clearly that whenever the heart hears that God is the Truth, something important occurs (*videt, cum audit*). The reader is certainly required to listen with great attention and openness, but it is the author as a spiritual guide who influences the mind with the word. There is something more going on here than presenting the author's point of view to the reader or even convincing him or her to accept it. Rhetoric here is an instrument of a potential transmission of a certain experience from the author's to the reader's mind.

Augustine overtly admits that in that particular text his objective is to open the mind to a state of seeing, which is something essentially different from familiar discursive thinking. He distinguishes two dimensions: *serenitas*, which takes over the mind when it sees God as an actual presence, and *caligines imaginum* and *nubila phantasmatum*, that is, thoughts which cover for the mind the light of God. Augustine's imagery is very concrete: the clear sky shining with sunlight is the moment of contemplation, participation in the actuality of life, and the sky darkened with clouds is the state of mind lost in its own fantasies and thoughts, not noticing God.

The state of clarity and openness arises immediately when the heart hears that God is the Truth, but right after that, thoughts arise in the mind, and they make it slip back again into ordinary consciousness. Augustine addresses the reader: *noli quaerere, quid sit veritas*. He suggests to refrain from thinking, since at this moment it can only disturb the calm and clarity of the mind (*perturbat serenitatem*). What is present here is a distinction between two levels or dimensions of the mind: *ratiocinatio* and *ratio*. The former is discursive thinking, and the latter a sort of an intuition, a seeing which takes place beyond thinking. *Ratiocinatio* plays an important role in relation to the world, but in the context of contemplation *cogitationes multae et variae* which the mind produces incessantly, make it harder, not easier, to approach God. I would briefly point out that the ideas of our time concerning the mind, both in the field of common knowledge and academia, appreciate greatly the meaning of *ratiocinatio*, while ignoring totally or denying the existence of the intuitive faculty of the mind. In psychology or cognitive sciences we could search in vain among the cognitive processes of the mind

for something remotely like the Augustinian *ratio*, which he defines as an inner light that does not need words or images, but sees things directly.

The habit of incessant thinking or rather getting lost in thoughts as if in a dream is for Augustine so strongly embedded in the mind that he doubts if anyone can stay for longer in the state of contemplation (*mane, si potes; sed non potes. relaberis...*). It is, however, available for everyone to enter the moment of luminous and peaceful *serenitas, quae diluxit*, and which is present in the mind before any thought arises. It is ever-present, but revealed fully only when the heart sees the simplicity and unity of the Truth. It sees it in the first or primordial moment or ray (*primo ictu*), primordial, because it precedes all thought. *Ictus* in Augustine's terminology is both a timeless moment in which eternity enters time, and a ray of light which strikes the mind like a lightning.

Augustine shows an extraordinary mastery of the word here. He begins with a simple sentence: *Deus veritas est*, because discursive thought has to recede and make space for intuitive seeing. But even this simple sentence is reduced, as if Augustine wanted to come from the multiplicity of words to the simplicity of the one, absolute word. The second time the key sentence is *Veritas est*, so no longer is one thing (God) another thing (Truth), but simply: *Truth is*. Augustine is not satisfied even with that, because the third and the fourth time we hear only a short and powerful: *Veritas*. And this one word wakes the reader up from a dream, in the symbolic imagery of the text this word is like a lightning which suddenly shines through the sky of the mind, dispelling the darkness of the clouds. The light of God penetrates the veils of thoughts and the heart can see God as the ever-present unity of being.

Towards the end of the *De Trinitate* (15.27-28) Augustine prays that God deliver him from the multiplicity of thoughts (*libera me a multiloquio*) and lead him to the one Word that is God. Having read the text analyzed above, we might get an impression that already here Augustine attempts to help himself and the reader to overcome the limitations of discursive thinking, bringing it to the one word: *Veritas*, the word that, if only for a moment, wakes the heart to seeing God, who is the most real and present of all, and that is why he is the most difficult to see. Discussing this fact that God is experienced by human beings in every instant of their lives, but most of the time unconsciously, Karl Rahner points out that it is easy not to notice God, although he is the most obvious and real part of our experience. That is mostly due to the fact that God is not an object like other finite objects we normally experience externally or internally.<sup>13</sup> It is also what Augustine

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<sup>13</sup> K. Rahner, *Podstawowy wykład wiary*, transl. T. Mieszkowski, Warszawa 1987, pp. 48-51.

seems to talk about and he suggests a remedy in the form of a meditative reading of a text which by its rhetoric influences the mind of the reader. In the passage analyzed here the method is amazingly simple, because it is the word itself that points to what is always already present in our experience, the word that shows and calls – *ecce vide: veritas est*.