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*Confessions* Book Nine: The Ascendancy of Speech

In an attempt to communicate the invisible movement within his soul, Augustine employs the known for the unknown in the *Confessions*, and the result is a work that is tirelessly metaphoric. After glancing back to the freeing of his mind and will, Book Nine begins an extended metaphor that will carry the reader through this last conversion of Augustine's person. Indeed, the rhetor's tongue will be converted by way of an ascent, climbing "up from the valley of tears" (9.2.182) to the eternal city, where sits Wisdom Himself. How is this journey made? Book Nine shows an ascent occurring through the power of language and, in particular, the power of speech.

Book Nine opens with a look back at where Augustine once was—in the abyss of lust, filth, and death. He decides to withdraw his tongue from the prostitution of lies, and he imagines this retirement as "climb[ing] up from the valley of tears, singing the song of ascent" (9.2.182). This language finds its significance in the songs of ascent in Psalms 120-34, psalms which the exiles sang during their ascent up to Jerusalem (Catholic Study Bible 733). The first of these, Psalm 120, pictures a movement out from an alien land of "lying lips, / from lying tongues," and a confidence in God's provision of weaponry to combat them. Because of these cunning tongues, Augustine decides to retire quietly. This image of a quiet rhetor, unwilling to discuss and debate his motives, unwilling even to dispute accusations of sin, seems unusual. But his unwillingness to speak is further

imagined as a literal illness at a figurative moment—he has lung trouble and cannot speak for long. One pictures a pilgrim out of breath from his climb towards his homeland of freedom. Finding its analog in the Psalms, this movement of deliverance up to the city of God neatly pictures the movement of this book, a journey upwards that will climax in the touching of Wisdom (9.10.197). Interestingly, this ascent will take place as Augustine begins to “talk to [God] freely” (9.1.181).

Freed from the vocation of rhetoric, Augustine journeys to the country house in Cassiciacum to pursue truth the way he had vowed to do after reading *Hortensius* fourteen years earlier. Still employing the image of ascent, he tells that he began to write, but he has trouble speaking and is “panting” in his journey from pride (9.4.185) although the journey is eased by God’s paving the “paths” and straightening their winding. Augustine, in the same way he learned as an infant to speak by watching and imitating others, now begins to learn how to speak to God. Because of his spiritual shortness of breath, however, he must use another’s words. Indeed, in another image of speechlessness, Augustine is rendered completely silent with a toothache, and he must rely on the articulated prayers of others, which bring healing to his mouth, freeing him to *praise* God and *rejoice* in his faith. Central to the work as a whole is the teaching that one who is able to speak can aid the one who is yet unable. The words of David, in praise and confession, set Augustine “on fire” with love for God. In reading the Psalms, he reads his own experience into the words, and, like the story of Ponticianus in Book Eight, the Psalms turn him around to see himself. When reading of the loathsome character of Israel’s hard hearts and pride, he says that he “had been just such a man” (9.4.187).

As Augustine walks on through Psalm 4 in praise of God and blame of himself, the very character of the *Confessions* as epideictic comes into clearer light. The *Confessions* are patterned in style after the *Psalms*; both are ceremonial types of oratory concerned with praise and blame. The power of this oratory is seen as Augustine's heart moves through the works of another, and this vicarious movement suggests the possibility of a same such stirring within the reader. Augustine writes of the Manichees:

How I wish that they could have heard me speak these words! And how I wish that I might have been unaware that they could hear, so that they need have no cause to think that my own words, which escaped from me as I recited the Psalm, were uttered for their benefit alone! And it is true enough that I would not have uttered them, or if I had, I should not have uttered them in the same way, if I had known that they were watching and listening. (9.4, p. 186)

Although without an audience in these moments, he of course *does* have an audience in his reader. With these words, the Bishop implicitly acknowledges that the *Confessions* is crafted in order that another—perhaps one not yet able to speak for himself—might move along with him in his journey. Thus, his work is rhetorical, for it seeks to persuade his readers as well as his own heart of God's worthiness for praise. Prompted by Ambrose to read Isaiah, Augustine attempts the first few chapters and quits, claiming he is unaccustomed to the style (9.5.189). He is not yet ready to hear the prophetic discourse, for his journey is still an upward one. The vision at Ostia still lies ahead, and he has not yet “[seen] the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne” nor had his lips cleansed with a

burning ember (Isaiah 6.1-6). He is not yet ready to “come . . . and . . . reason together” (Isaiah 1.18) with the prophet who speaks God’s words to God’s people.

As confessing bishop, Augustine includes in Book Nine four eulogies, which are very unlike typical praise of the deceased. *Eulogy* comes from the Greek *eu*, meaning “good,” and *legein*, or “speak.” This “good word” given, however, is surprisingly not in praise of the deceased but in praise of God. Speech, Augustine seems to be portraying, is highest when it is of the highest things. Indeed, in Chapter Eight Augustine vows to say all he can about his mother, but he qualifies this by saying that it is not her gifts he will laud but God’s gifts to her. His praise all concerns her mouth. According to biblical imagery, “the mouth is viewed metaphorically as an opening into the inner person, a window through which the soul may be viewed” (Dictionary of Biblical Imagery 575). Monica’s mouth is first spoken of as a means of temptation, for she developed a secret love for wine, but she is quickly corrected with, again, another’s speech; she is called a drunkard. Augustine then represents her mouth as exemplary. She is silent and talkative according to wisdom, and “her holy conversation gave rich proof” of God’s presence within her (9.9.196). Foils for her tongue are other women: they would gossip, complain, and meddle. The reflection on the power of mere pious speech, seen in her success with husband, mother-in-law, and friendships, continues into the vision at Ostia.

The mystical experience in Chapter 10 occurs at Ostia, a port city near the Tiber River. The mention of the city’s name calls to mind the Latin word *ostium*, meaning “mouth.” This vision indeed concerns the mouth, as the ascent of mother and son occurs by means of their conversation. The ascent in Book Seven, it should be noted, occurred alone, but this one will occur through speech. Augustine, a skilled rhetor, seems to be

highlighting the power of language, as their speech “led” them along, allowing them to climb, thinking and speaking.

And while we spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it. Then with a sigh, leaving our spiritual harvest bound to it, we returned to the sound of our own speech, in which each word has a beginning and an ending. (9.10.197)

This way of speaking about language recalls Book Four, where Augustine talks about speech; like the sun, words rise and set (4.10.80). But Augustine, whose training and profession were logo-centric, knows that words, transient though they are, are powerful, powerful enough to attain to Truth itself. A new height of language seems to be reached in this conversation at Ostia. William Banner, author of *The Path of St. Augustine*, asserts a difference between curiosity, or knowing things through the senses, and serious thought, or “knowing things in their cause or ground” (Banner 36). Augustine’s conversation with his mother was not led by curiosity but by “the flame of love” (9.10.197) and concerned the highest thing—God—represented as Wisdom itself, that which is eternal and is not made. The means of knowing here is speech, each word bullying and eclipsing the one before it. God’s grace seems to reach out and collapse signifier and signified into one—a sort of incarnation. Perhaps even more accurate would be to see language here as Augustine promises to represent it: as a bringing to birth (9.8.192). Language then seems to be an incarnation in the most poetic sense, for the speaker brings to bear the idea through his speech. After a “sigh,” which calls to mind the groanings of the Spirit that words cannot express (Romans 8.26), mother and son

descend into the sounds of their words, for “signs that do not signify are mere words to the hearer” (Banner 38). Strangely, they do not forsake speech after such a descent; they continue their musings, supposing further about the life of the saints. This freedom of musing and representing will come to bear in the remaining books of the *Confessions*.

While the vision of Ostia might be understood in a number of ways, the above being but one possibility, it is at the least a beautiful picture of ascending to God. What ratiocination cannot accomplish in moving the will or changing the heart, Augustine endeavors to do with an imaginative rhetoric as he relays this mystical experience of ascent. Very unlike the certitude of “seven plus three equals ten,” this poetic vision presents a rhetorically moving account of an encounter with God, represented as eternal Wisdom. The reader of the *Confessions* seems to be invited through words, not strong-armed, upwards with Augustine and Monica and then back down into a view of the world as “a paltry place compared with the life [they]spoke of” (9.10.198), back down to a newfound courage in the face of death. Augustine appears to have reached out and touched what he had begun to seek when reading the *Hortensius*—Cicero’s idea of wisdom as the link between knowledge and mere rhetoric.

After this experience of touching Wisdom, the unlearned Monica continues to surprise with her faith “of a man” (9.4.186). The power of her piety becomes clear when facing death. Before Monica dies, she surprises her sons by declaring her unconcern for where her body is buried. This courage in the face of death astonishes everyone, for she is an untaught woman. The classical conception of manly virtue is here achieved, even eclipsed, by a woman without a day of philosophical training. Strength in the face of the deepest struggles is shown to stem from God’s grace, not human resources.

The piety seen in Monica also may explain why hymns have a strange prominence in Book Nine. The first actual singing of a hymn mentioned follows Augustine's symbolic death in baptism (which is surprisingly not a major focus of the book). He says the singing moved him deeply, making his devotion to overflow (9.6.190). Immediately following he recalls the practice of singing hymns at the Church at Milan during the time of Justina's threat to Ambrose. Here, the faithful gathered "ready to die with their bishop" (9.7.191). And finally, a psalm is sung after Monica's death—Psalm 101, which asks a question of hope: "When will you come to me?" (Psalm 101:2). Hymn-singing, using another's words in praise of God, seems to have the power to strengthen one in the face of death in a way that is very unlike philosophy, which requires human resources of strength and manliness.

One suggested way of understanding the work of the *Confessions* that takes into account the work as a whole is to see the first nine books as the act of remembering, Book Ten as an analysis of memory, and Books 11-13 as a "community's 'recollection' of the beginning...of this whole process" (McGinn-Moorer 4). Perhaps a way that might better take into account Augustine's role as a rhetorician might be to see the first nine books as the conversion story of a rhetor, climaxing in the conversion of his tongue, and then, after an encounter with Wisdom Himself, an employment of a new rhetoric in the last four books. This encounter may be seen as the warrant for the following books—books no longer recollective but now speculative about ways of understanding. After a real encounter with Wisdom, discourse about God can now take place. This discourse, as at Ostia, will be a means of knowing. In Book Nine, movement to conversion is shown to be through speech, but not necessarily one's own. This is seen in Augustine's use of

David's psalms, in the prayer of Augustine's friends for his toothache, and even in the work of the *Confessions* itself. The reader, too, is invited to move through Augustine's language to an encounter with God that enables him to climb out of the "valley of tears," singing the song of ascent.

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