

In an understanding of the work of the hand of the farmer on the land...

Rhetoric:— ~~What strikes one from the first in the wonderfully self-revealing writings of Augustine is~~ ^{of} the extent to which his notions are conditioned by a single institution, the ancient school of rhetoric. "The influence of the schools of grammar and rhetoric," writes Raby, "is apparent in every page of Tertullian, of Jerome, and of Augustine;" especially of ~~the last~~, however, who studied rhetoric for ten years, taught it for fifteen, and practiced it all his life. He is the complete schoolman, who never for a moment of his long life forsakes the four walls of an institution, and who in his old age confesses his inability to free himself of the habits and tastes acquired as a schoolboy. Those were the habits and tastes of an age steeped in rhetoric. Just as science swept the field in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so rhetoric dominated, but to a far greater extent, the fourth and fifth. ^{But rhetoric,} How did the world become enmeshed in the toils which were to confine it for well over a thousand years?

explanation is

The ~~process was~~ a simple, ~~enough~~ one. In the sixth century B.C. the Ionian philosophers had launched a great tradition of scientific research which, however, lacking adequate research techniques, soon began to run into one blind alley after another, save in the direction of certain studies which presently became so advanced that almost no one could comprehend them. Faced with ~~a~~ forbidding and growing mass of difficult and paradoxical problems, certain philosophers felt justified in deserting the field altogether, to specialize instead in a branch of teaching which ^{or} the days of Empedocles had followed the assumption that the riddles of the universe are inscrutable, and that the proper business of man ^{is} was simply to get along in the world. The art of getting along is the art of impressing one's fellows, and to ~~the~~ ~~technique~~ the cultivation of this skill a growing host of professors devoted their talents. In spite of a wave of revulsion at the callous ~~business~~ business of perverting man's capability and godlike reason to the calculated study of making an impression, "of making the worse appear the better reason," the ~~practitioners~~ practitioners of the new philosophy of success prospered mightily; for their methods were easy, popular and could actually be turned into cash. What they taught was ^{prescribed} determined by the fact that the center of ancient society was

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the law court and the legislative assembly, in which every citizen of any aspiration at all was sure of getting a hearing at one time or another, when it was his opportunity to establish himself in the community by his ability as a speaker. The secret of success was thus knowing how to speak and what to speak about, in a word, the rhetorical techne. Those who made a profession of teaching this techne were the Sophists, and the schools in which St. Augustine was raised bore the Sophist stamp, coming technically under the heading of the Second Sophistic movement and specializing in a lush and seductive type of oratory known as the Asianic. Everyone went to these schools, says Augustine, even as he did, because it was "the thing to do" and was the surest road to money, fame and office. Though rhetoric was but one branch of learning, from the middle of the second century A.D. it had rapidly begun to swallow up all the others. "Why study anything but rhetoric?" is Seneca's repeated challenge, "by it alone you can learn all you will ever need to know." Its easy and superficial treatment of everything led the seductive discipline to a complete and absolute tyranny over the whole of education by Augustine's time. "The curse of rhetoric," which Prof. Schanz calls "the clearest expression of this baroque age," had broken the back of philosophy with its fatal paradox and enigma, had ruined letters, and reduced scientific writing to a mere display of the "scientist's" metrical skill. By a Gresham's law of the intellect, bad thinking had forced out good. The rhetoricians were perfectly willing to admit that their art was a false and meretricious thing - like St. Jerome, they ^{could} love to damn rhetoric in the most rhetorical terms! Cicero frankly holds that it is permissible for the orator to sacrifice truth to rhetorical effect; the object, says Seneca, is less to put your case over than to put yourself over; Augustine, ^{as Prof. Combes} cannot suppress a smile in observing, often gives way to expressions of disgust at the art he is busily practicing on every page. By its very nature, says the saint, oratory is a false art, "the more misleading, the more highly praised," and this even while he recommends the same art as the most valuable weapon of the Church.

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Rhetoric did not choose to be untrue, but by the very nature of things it was

forced to be, as Rohde has pointed out. One was trained to deliver speeches on great occasions ^{panegyrics for heroic deeds and godlike qualities, suasoriae urging some friend or monarch or city to take or to withhold from some momentous step, deliberations in one's own mind upon some tremendous course of action, and the like.} One had to be prepared for the Great Moment; but how could one prepare except by rehearsing in make-believe situations? Month after month, year after year the student addressed imaginary nations on the brink of legendary wars or shed real tears for a mythical Hecuba. Augustine tells us, for example, that his first assignment in school was to declaim the words "that Juno would have spoken when she realized her failure to keep Aeneas away from Italy." His problem was to put real feeling into a totally ~~unreal~~ ^{unreal} situation, ~~throughout~~ ^{throughout} his soul in a fictive and artificial crisis. Drilled endlessly in this sort of thing (~~as students in Catholic schools have been thru the ages~~), it is hardly to be wondered at that Augustine, as Father Eggersdorfer points out, never knows how to evaluate real experience. An incurably shallow and ~~trivial~~ ^{a neat manipulation of} way of thinking is the mark of the rhetorical mind; one takes the wrong things seriously, ~~unwisely~~ ^{unwisely} words pass as thought, hackneyed and extravagant ~~declarations~~ ^{declarations} go far for feeling, where the rhetorical tradition is strongest, as in Italy, ^{we find} from Cicero to Mussolini a wanton inability to distinguish ^{actual} between the operative and the serious; ^{Caesar's show of courage, etc. party & etc.} mere forms of expression become all-important; underlying realities are forgotten.

^a Another significant product of his training is Augustine's profound faith in ~~the~~ ^{the} possibility of arriving at the ~~answer~~ ^{answer} to any question simply by talking about it. "By the discipline of disputation alone," he says, to cite but one case, "every type of question that arises in the holy scripture is to be penetrated and dissolved; but one must avoid the love of wrangling and the puerile desire of showing off by beating an opponent." The little warning is a good indication of the true indelectual level of the disputation; it is like giving children a drum with the gentle admonition to play it softly forever after; certainly it is not without relish that Augustine recalls his own triumph in a boyish disputation the description of which is most enlightening.

panegyrics for heroic deeds and godlike qualities, suasoriae

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