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St. Anselm's Technical Terms of Rhetoric

If Anselm had read Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*, he would have found there an attempt to work out principles on which might be based some sort of compromise between Christian and classical rhetoric. The problem presented urgent difficulties to Augustine in a way that it cannot have done to Anselm; Augustine's formal training in the schools of the late Roman Empire gave him a grounding in the study of pagan literature and — most importantly — taught formal techniques for handling argument, for constructing a speech or a piece of writing, a conscious stylistic artistry which penetrated deeply into the educated man's attitude to language (1). A Christian with such a training learned to take as models of excellence in writing authorities whose religious assumptions were at odds with his own convictions. He became accustomed to assessing the work of others and to composing his own works according to patterns of judgement laid down by a tradition of learning quite distinct in its history and roots from that of the religion he embraced. The traditions of Christian writing and the forms of Christian Latin were thus open to the influence of classical rhetoric not only in the case of St. Augustine; a number of other Christian writers of the early centuries experienced similar difficulties and made what resolution they could of the problem (2). Anselm was educated in a tradition which had long taken account of this tension between secular and Christian learning and which, if it had not altogether resolved it, had at least made attempts to come to terms with the problems it raised (3).

In the *De doctrina christiana* Augustine describes the kind of skill and grace in the handling of language which may be useful and appropriate to the Christian — although he is careful to stress that a formal training in rhetoric is not essential (4). The "Christian rhetoric" he calls *eloquentia*. Perhaps his most important conclusion for our purposes is that rhetoric in itself is neither good nor bad; its value or its potential dangers lie in the way it is used (5). The final book, written more

(1) H. Marrou discusses an aspect of this question in "Doctrina" et "disciplina" dans la langue des Pères de l'Eglise in Archivum Latinitatis Medii Aevi, 9, 1934, p. 5-25.
(4) 4, 3, 5.
than twenty years after the first three, brings together what synthesis Augustine was able to make towards the end of his life of the tradition in which he had been trained, and the special needs of the Christian reader or preacher. He quotes from, or refers to, the rhetorical textbooks (6). He discusses the applicability of rhetorical criteria to Scripture and to Christian writing (7). He criticises passages from Scripture in the light of his "adapted" rhetoric (8).

Augustine gives reasons for his guiding principles which seem to be based on a modification of the rhetorical principles in which he was trained, reexamined in his search for a basis of practical compromise on which to build the education of a Christian. He declares that style should be varied to suit its purpose:

*de omnibus generibus dictio varianda est* (9).

His reasoning here shows an orator's viewpoint: when a speech continues too long in one style it ceases to hold the attention of the listener:

*Nam quando prolixia est in uno genere, minus detinet auditorem* (10).

He goes on to consider the application of the principle in Christian writing. Similarly, when Augustine recommends the *eloquentia* to the Christian, he stresses that it is possible to learn to use language well and elegantly by reading and listening intelligently, and by imitation of the best models. It is not necessary for every Christian to undergo formal training:

*Cur eloquentes fieri non possunt nulla eloquendi arte tradita, sed elocutiones eloquentium legendo et audiendo et, quantum assequi conceditur, imitando?* (11).

Without abandoning the training he had himself received — a training which represented the only kind of advanced education available to his contemporaries — Augustine evolves a system of criticism and analysis which a Christian may apply to the study of Christian writings.

He finds in Scripture and in the early Christian literature a richness and an eloquence which display some of the finer characteristics of the classical rhetoric. It would be nonsense to argue that the Apostle Paul, for example, was a disciple of the rhetoricians (12); but rhetorical criteria of excellence may sometimes be appropriate in judging the style of the Christians, and the wisdom of St. Paul was not

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(6) 4, 5, 7; 4, 7, 11; 4, 12, 27.
(7) E.g. 4, 7, 14-15.
(8) E.g. 4, 7, 16; 4, 17, 35ff.
(9) 4, 22, 51.
(10) Ibid.
(11) 4, 3, 5.
(12) 4, 7, 11.
expressed without eloquence: secuta sit eloquentia (13). He gives examples of rhetorical devices to be found in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and other Scriptural passages are subjected to analysis on the same principle. Without pressing the method to an extreme, he demonstrates the value of the cultural ideals of a rhetorical education in assessing Christian writing. The purpose of the study of the literary example set by Scripture and by Christian writers would seem to be that they provide a model on which the Christian will do well to mould his own style, especially in preaching. Christian writing must be in the widest sense didactic, whether it teaches directly, or by delighting its reader, or by moving him to tears. Following Cicero, Augustine recommends these three forms of rhetorical persuasion:

\[ \text{ut scilicet docet, ut delectet, ut flectat} \] (14).

The Christian writer, by studying the best models, especially in Scripture, must learn to choose the stylistic devices which will give his writing the power to persuade in the most appropriate manner.

Augustine transmitted rhetorical principles which he had drawn from a comprehensive study of the rhetorical authorities available to him, while his successors may have imbibed their own rhetorical principles from a study of only a few of the textbooks he knew or — at second hand — from Augustine himself. The ultimate sources of rhetorical ideas and practice in the eleventh century thus appear so involved that it is perhaps neither desirable nor possible to attempt to make too clear a distinction between the influence of a training in rhetoric based on the Ad Herennium and the De inuentione and a set of "rhetorical" practices drawn from the Augustinian eloquentia or from imitation of examples. The difficulty becomes particularly acute in the case of a writer such as Anselm, who may have been exposed to both influences at different stages of his life (15), and who certainly seems to owe a great debt to Augustine in his style as well as in his thought.

Perhaps one main division may be made, which seems to correspond roughly with a distinction between the influence of the eloquentia of Augustine, and that of the rhetorical textbooks. We might usefully separate the stylistic aspects of rhetoric from those which have to do with "rhetorical argument" and the formal structure of compositions. If we look for evidence of the influence of classical rhetorical notions of compositional structure in Anselm's treatise we find that, tightly-argued though the treatises are, they do not in general follow the pattern laid down for

(13) Ibid.
(14) Cicero, Orator, 21, 69, and De doctrina christiana, 4, 17, 34.
(15) In Italy, we are told, Lanfranc excelled as a budding orator, and he probably lectured on the "Ciceronian Rhetorics" at Bec. Anselm might have met the texts in his youth in Italy, or at Bec (cf. D. P. Henry, The Logic of St. Anselm, Oxford, 1967, p. 8).
composing a speech. The *Cur Deus Homo*, for example, deals with a succession of aspects of its central problem, and Anselm allows himself to explore a particular point of controversy at length (16) without any apparent sense that he is disrupting the unity of the composition. In the *Proslogion*, prayer and meditation mingle with exposition and argument (17). The absence of any specifically rhetorical notion of "unity", of overall coherence of structure within a work, seems to suggest that in Anselm's experience, the formal canons of structure were not applicable in the writing of treatises. The five parts of the classical speech appear in only one specialized area of composition among his contemporaries: the art of writing letters alone conformed to the pattern (18).

Mary Dickey points out that the commentaries on the *De inventione* and the *Ad Herennium* of the eleventh century "stress the logical rather than the stylistic interest of rhetoric" (19). One important reason for this would seem to be that the *De inventione* is not a complete treatise on the art of rhetoric; it deals chiefly with the finding of arguments — with *inuentio*. The *Ad Herennium*, too, concerns itself with points of style only in the fourth book. "Already in the eleventh century", in Mary Dickey's view, "Manegold adopted and emphasised the dialectical approach of Victorinus to rhetoric" (20). In the twelfth century, Thierry of Chartres "is fascinated by the mental process which leads to the creation of an argument, and analyses imaginary cases, so that his pupils may learn how to construct a rhetorical argument to suit any desired end" (21). This preoccupation with aspects of rhetorical argument is perhaps only to be expected in an age in which the further possibilities of dialectical argument were causing renewed and developing interest. The commentaries on the *De inventione* may be compared with those commentaries

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(16) E.g. 1, 7 (F. S. Schmitt, *Anselmi opera*, Rome/Edinburgh, 1938-68 = S); S 2, 55-59. See, too, R. W. Southern, *St. Anselm and his Biographer*, Cambridge, 1963, p. 85-88. In so doing, Anselm may have been following the developing technique of the *quaestio* or digression on a point of current controversy within the schools — the more probably in the case of the digression in question, since we know it to have involved just such a controversial issue.

(17) Compare Chapters 2 and 3 with Chapter 1, S 1, 97-103.

(18) Sermons, too, might be said to come into this category, but the handbooks of the art were not written yet. Guibert of Nogent's *Liber quo ordine sermo fieri debeat* (*PL*, 156, 21-32) suggests that what original sermons there were were composed and valued for their edifying content, rather than for their literary excellence. Anselm's sermons have been lost. See A. Wilmart, *Les homélies attribuées à S. Anselme in Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, 2, 1927, p. 5-29 and 339-341.


(20) *Some Commentaries on the "De inventione" and "Ad Herennium" of the eleventh and early twelfth centuries in Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies*, 6, 1968, p. 41.

on the "Topics' works of Boethius (22) written by Abelard (23) and other scholars of
the succeeding generation (24). Although Cicero's Topics, at least, were designed for
the use of orators, the mediaeval scholar is chiefly interested in the additional scope
with which the study of "topics" may provide the dialectician. The distinction be-
 tween "rhetorical" and "dialectical" argument remains: Abelard remarks on the
superiority of the formal syllogism to the alternative forms and methods of
argument suggested by the study of rhetoric (25). But it is because they are drawn to
dialectical studies that the students of the De inuentione in particular place so firm
an emphasis on "the logical rather than the stylistic interest of rhetoric".

The problem of determining precisely what range of formal technical skills of
argument were available to Anselm has preoccupied a number of scholars (26), and,
as is the way with Anselmian studies, no incontrovertible evidence as to his sources
has presented us with a comprehensive picture. It has been argued that he knew
Boethius' commentary on Cicero's Topics (27), and that he did not (28). But what-
ever the nature of his grounding in the study of the rhetorical textbooks, Anselm's
preference for demonstration by means other than plain syllogism suggests a
willingness to employ a variety of means of argument which may be ultimately
rhetorical in inspiration. Possessed of only the logica vetus at best, Anselm must
have found that purely dialectical methods of argument were inadequate for his
purposes; perhaps his varied methods suggest rather the striving of his mind for
space in which to turn round problems too large for the compass of eleventh cen-
tury dialectical method. There is insufficient evidence to warrant the conclusion
that Anselm's variety of argumentative method is a direct legacy of his study of the
rhetorical textbooks which were available to his contemporaries.

If we look at the technical terms which are related to the rhetorical art of
argument we find that two of them, at least, are used by Anselm: exemplum and
similitudo constitute forms of argument by analogy (29), and the Anselmian material
collected in the Memorials of St. Anselm (30) includes numerous instances of
analogies which are explicitly called exempla and similitudines. There is good

(22) Commentaria in topica Ciceronis, De differentitis topicis, in PL, 64.
(24) See a number of treatises edited by L. M. de Rijk, Logica modernorum, Assen,
(26) See, for example, the work of D. P. Henry and J. Hopkins, A Companion to the
Study of St. Anselm, Minneapolis, 1972, p. 246-53.
(28) J. Hopkins, op. cit., p. 34.
(29) See logica modernorum, 2, 119, 24 ; 2, 194, 2 ; 2, 362, 22 ; Abelard, Dialectica,
p. 463, 22-25.
rhetorical precedent for these usages of the terms in the classical textbooks (31), but there is also a series of parallels among Anselm’s contemporaries. Otloh of St. Emmeran, for example, says: *assumpsisti similitudinis argumentum* (32), or:

*Duobus igitur exemplis prolatis addamus et tertium* (33),

or: *exemplis sufficientibus monstrauimus* (34); in preference to employing syllogisms, he, like Anselm, makes use of argument by analogy, or by single parallels. There is thus some evidence for the view that argument by analogy was an accepted form of alternative to the more formal argument by syllogism. Certainly Anselm never uses the rhetoricians’ general term for this type of argument in its rhetorical sense: *inductio* in Anselm has to do with leading into temptation (35). Even within the area of the “logical interest” of rhetoric, then, Anselm appears to have found little of use to him in the technical terms which were made available to him by the rhetorical textbooks and perhaps by the Boethian work on “topics”. That is not to imply that he does not in fact make considerable use of the method of argument by analogy; it is something of a favourite with him. But the technical terms of the art do not themselves appear to have been helpful to him. He is far fonder of using *similitudo* in the sense of “likeness” (especially in the *Monologion* (36)), than as a technical term for “an analogy”.

It is as difficult to be sure that any specific notion of stylistic excellence apparent in Anselm’s work is to be attributed to his study of rhetoric, as it is to isolate a special obligation to rhetoric in the fields of argument or compositional structure. A number of principles belonging to the theory of style were traditionally included in the study of grammar. Isidore lists *De schematicibus* and *De tropis* (37) in his book on grammar, although *De figuris uerborum et sententarum* falls into the province of rhetoric (38). One difficulty common to all students of rhetorical devices in early writers is that of attempting to distinguish the conscious use of a named stylistic device from the instance of a figure to which it is perfectly possible to put a name, but which may not have been used deliberately by the author. In writers with Anselm’s background of careful reading of the best models, stylistic tricks might be expected to find their way into fresh compositions without necessarily being

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(31) See, for example, *Ad Herennium*, 4, 45, 59.
(32) *PL*, 146, 64.
(33) *PL*, 146, 86.
(34) *PL*, 146, 89.
(35) S. 1, 234, 15; S 2, 168, 10; cf. *Matthew*, 6, 13.
(36) See S 6, 336-338 for a convenient list of some of Anselm’s usages, and S 1, 24, 12-14 for the tantalizingly inconclusive example: *exemplum, situe aptius dictur forma vel similitudo aut regula.
provided with the appropriate tag in their author’s minds. Much is to be gained from an examination of Anselm’s style or styles (39), but to attempt to draw from such a study direct evidence as to Anselm’s command of rhetoric is futile.

We are thrown back on Anselm’s technical terms of rhetoric, and they are few. He mentions rhetoric by name only once, in the De incarnazione uerbi, where he protests that not even rhetorical colours can persuade him of the rightness of heresy:

_Certus sum nullum hoc rethoricis coloribus mihi posse persuadere_ (40).

Elsewhere, colours are not the “colours” of rhetoric, but plain colours, such as black and white (41). Other technical terms of rhetoric appear in non-technical senses, or in senses which belong to other arts. _Causa_, for example, is employed in the sense of “origin”, or in opposition to “effect”; the dialectical problems of necessary and efficient causes capture Anselm’s interest (42). The only sense to derive ultimately from rhetoric is that of a “cause” or “dispute”, with its forensic connotations, and when Anselm speaks of the _causa_:

_quae est inter Carnotensem ecclesiam et comitissam_ (43),

he makes use of a familiar contemporary term for dispute. _Locus_ is used only in its literal sense, or as one of the Aristotelian categories, and never for the “topic” of rhetoric. _Testimonium_ is used for “evidence” or “testimony” (44), but only in the context of theological debate, and not in the strict rhetorical sense of evidence in a court of law; again, the Christian sense derives ultimately from rhetoric, but the rhetorical textbooks would not have been Anselm’s own direct source of the usage. Anselm’s vocabulary of recognizably rhetorical terms would probably have been much greater, but it is evident that they furnished him with little material of direct relevance to his purposes.

Two further terms may be worth considering because they were in process of becoming technical terms of a new branch of rhetoric in Anselm’s day. The _ars dictaminis_ was to link the work _dictamen_ with the art of letter-writing, and the term _cursus_ belongs to the rediscovered art of bringing sentences to a graceful con-

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(39) R. W. Southern takes up the point in several places in his _St. Anselm and his Biographer_, Cambridge, 1963. I have made a small beginning in “Mens devota”: the Literary Community of the Devotional Works of John of Fécamp and St. Anselm in _Medium Aevum_, 43, 1974, p. 105-115.
(40) S 1, 282, 26.
(41) S 1, 160, 8 (De grammatico), S 2, 10, 7 (De incarnazione uerbi).
(42) S 1, 59, 2 (Monologion), S 1, 190, 11 (De veritate), S 2, 205, 18 (De processione).
(43) S 5, 278, 4 (Letter 340), S 5, 301, 5 (Letter 360).
(44) S 2, 8, 9 (De incarnazione), S 2, 133, 13 (Cur Deus homo).
clusion — to the contrivance of cadences. In Anselm, *cursus* normally refers to a course of events (45). *Dictamen* poses larger problems. In several cases it evidently means "composition" in general, and not the writing of letters alone:

*ut cui dictamen tuum non placeat, pulchrius non scribat* (46).
*non solum dictandi, sed et legendi et meditandi sitae orandi opportunitatem* (47).

In two letters to his nephew, Anselm exhorts the young man to practise composition:

*in dictamine et plus in prosa quam in uersibus, te exerce* (48).
*uirtutem grammaticae studie cognoscere, dictare cotidie assuesce, et maxime in prosa* (49).

Here, *dictamen*, or composition, is an aspect of the study of grammar, and it appears to possess no especially rhetorical properties. Again, Anselm disappoints the searcher after his sources.

Yet this is precisely what we should expect. Anselm did not glory in the possession of the skills of secular studies for their own sake — even if he could not resist giving a virtuoso performance on the instrument of Christian eloquentia in the early devotional works. Anselm’s knowledge of dialectic is perhaps the one exception to the rule that in general neither the direction of his thought nor its expression is governed by the limitations imposed by a strictly technical language.

All Quintilian’s sensible and experienced advice on the proper use of the techniques of oratory, on the avoidance of excesses, on the best way to achieve a given end in composition and delivery, seems to have been absent from the basic rhetorical training available in the schools (49). Instead, rhetoric was taught from

(45) For example, in *De concordia*: *Nec eius voluntas per usuatum cursum suum operaretur* (S 2, 153, 29), or: *ut naturae et voluntates secundum ordinem sibi traditum suum opus in rerum cursu persolverent* (ibid., line 20).
(47) S 3, 163, 11 (*Letter* 50).
(48) S 4, 210, 7 (*Letter* 290).
(49) S 5, 260, 21 (*Letter* 328).
(50) But see A. Mollard, *La diffusion de l’"Institution Oratoire" au XIIe siècle* in *Le Moyen Age*, 43, 1934, p. 161-175 and 1935, p. 1-9, where he suggests that one of the "points de départ" for the diffusion of the work in the twelfth century may have been the Abbey of Bec (1934, p. 161). He traces back to Lanfranc a succession of masters who seem to have been acquainted with the work.
the work of a young orator who had only just become master of his material (51), and from the work of an unknown contemporary of Cicero's. The advancement of the art in Cicero's own hands as he matures, and the experience of the succeeding centuries, was largely lost to medieval readers before the later Middle Ages; where Quintilian's work was later known, it seems to have been regarded as an advanced textbook, rather than as the compendium of the whole art, elementary and advanced, which it really is. It seems that no single comprehensive source of rhetorical knowledge is likely to have furnished Anselm with an all-round grasp of the subject; his reconciliation and synthesis of his compound sources is his own. Any attempt to distinguish the strands must be very tentative.

We are left, then, with a rule-of-thumb division between the predominantly "stylistic" influence of the eloquentia and the putative influence of rhetorical theory on certain aspects of argument and compositional structure. As a working hypothesis, this distinction provides a means of approach to the complex question of the ideas and influences which underlie the changing and developing artistry of Anselm's writing. There can be little doubt that it is a conscious artistry; like Augustine, Anselm demonstrates in everything he wrote his awareness that different styles fit different purposes. For Anselm, the act of composition is perhaps always the exercising of an art; his attitude, as it is revealed in his writings, does not seem very far from the view of Augustine's contemporaries that rhetoric — in the widest sense — embraces all learning. Yet we have seen how slender is the evidence of Anselm's use of actual rhetorical terms in their "technical sense"; I think it would be misguided to attempt to press the view that Anselm made any significant use of whatever rhetorical training he may have had. Perhaps the interest and importance of an investigation of elements of rhetorical influence in his work lies in the very paucity of information which it yields. In an age of developing technical skills of grammar and dialectic, rhetoric appears to have been neglected at large. Anselm is no exception. Yet in a sense which Quintilian would have recognised, Anselm is preeminently a rhetorician; in the fullness and richness of his sensitivity to language, in his powers of persuasiveness, in his skills of argument, he would not have disgraced a Roman master.

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(51) I.e. Cicero, De invenzione.