

~Other Speakers A-F: St. Augustine:

20. But what were the causes for my strong dislike of Greek literature, which I studied from my boyhood? Even to this day I have not fully understood them. For Latin I loved exceedingly--not just the rudiments, but what the grammarians teach. For those beginner's lessons in reading, writing, and reckoning, I considered no less a burden and pain than Greek. Yet whence came this, unless from the sin and vanity of this life? For I was "but flesh, a wind that passeth away and cometh not again."^[25] Those first lessons were better, assuredly, because they were more certain, and through them I acquired, and still retain, the power of reading what I find written and of writing for myself what I will. In the other subjects, however, I was compelled to learn about the wanderings of a certain Aeneas, oblivious of my own wanderings, and to weep for Dido dead, who slew herself for love. And all this while I bore with dry eyes my own wretched self dying to thee, O God, my life, in the midst of these things.

21. For what can be more wretched than the wretch who has no pity upon himself, who sheds tears over Dido, dead for the love of Aeneas, but who sheds no tears for his own death in not loving thee, O God, light of my heart, and bread of the inner mouth of my soul, O power that links together my mind with my inmost thoughts? I did not love thee, and thus committed fornication against thee.^[26] Those around me, also sinning, thus cried out: "Well done! Well done!" The friendship of this world is fornication against thee; and "Well done! Well done!" is cried until one feels ashamed not to show himself a man in this way. For my own condition I shed no tears, though I wept for Dido, who "sought death at the sword's point,"^[27] while I myself was seeking the lowest rung of thy creation, having forsaken thee; earth sinking back to earth again. And, if I had been forbidden to read these poems, I would have grieved that I was not allowed to read what grieved me. This sort of madness is considered more honorable and more fruitful learning than the beginner's course in which I learned to read and write.

22. But now, O my God, cry unto my soul, and let thy truth say to me: "Not so, not so! That first learning was far better." For, obviously, I would rather forget the wanderings of Aeneas, and all such things, than forget how to write and read. Still, over the entrance of the grammar school there hangs a veil. This is not so much the sign of a covering for a mystery as a curtain for error. Let them exclaim against me--those I no longer fear--while I confess to thee, my God, what my soul desires, and let me find some rest, for in blaming my own evil ways I may come to love thy holy ways. Neither let those cry out against me who buy and sell the baubles of literature. For if I ask them if it is true, as the poet says, that Aeneas once came to Carthage, the unlearned will reply that they do not know and the learned will deny that it is true. But if I ask with what letters the name Aeneas is written, all who have ever learned this will answer correctly, in accordance with the conventional understanding men have agreed upon as to these signs. Again, if I should ask which would cause the greatest inconvenience in our life, if it were forgotten: reading and writing, or these poetical fictions, who does not see what everyone would answer who had not entirely lost his own memory? I erred, then, when as a boy I preferred those vain studies to these more profitable ones, or rather loved the one and hated the other. "One and one are two, two and two are four": this was then a truly hateful song to me. But the wooden horse full of its armed soldiers, and the holocaust of Troy, and the spectral image of Creusa were all a most delightful--and vain--show!^[28]

23. But why, then, did I dislike Greek learning, which was full of such tales? For Homer was skillful in inventing such poetic fictions and is most sweetly wanton; yet when I was a boy, he was most disagreeable to me. I believe that Virgil would have the same effect on Greek boys as Homer did on me if they were forced to learn him. For the tedium of learning a foreign language mingled gall into the sweetness of those Grecian myths. For I did not understand a word of the language, and yet I was driven with threats and cruel punishments to learn it. There was also a time when, as an infant, I knew no Latin; but this I acquired without any fear or tormenting, but merely by being alert to the blandishments of my nurses, the jests of those who smiled on me, and the sportiveness of those who toyed with me. I learned all this, indeed, without being urged by any pressure of punishment, for my own heart urged me to bring forth its own fashioning, which I could not do except by learning words: not from those who taught me but those who talked to me, into whose ears I could pour forth whatever I could fashion. From this it is sufficiently clear that a free curiosity is more effective in learning than a discipline based on fear. Yet, by thy ordinance, O God, discipline is given to restrain the excesses of freedom; this ranges from the ferule of the schoolmaster to the trials of the martyr and has the effect of mingling for us a wholesome bitterness, which calls us back to thee from the poisonous pleasures that first drew us from thee.