

## *Monastic Literacy in John Cassian: Toward a New Sublimity*

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*In his two central monastic texts, the Institutes and the Conferences, John Cassian (c. 360-c.435) draws extensively on tropes of grammatical and rhetorical education. This language helps shape monasticism in ways that are culturally and socially acceptable to the elite, male audience in Gaul to which he is appealing. The effect of this language is not to create a monasticism that is comfortable for the elite but to transform his audience through a process analogous to their traditional education. He invents a new monastic reading culture that uses reading and writing to form the identity of a monk. Like all reading cultures, Cassian's requires a particular form of literacy, defined here as teaching certain reading methods and valuing particular texts. Indeed, Cassian's two works serve as the teaching texts for this monastic literacy and so compete against contemporaneous claims for other forms of monastic instruction. Cassian's texts function as monastic equivalents to rhetorical handbooks (the Institutes) and works of literary theory (the Conferences) and are themselves sublime replacements for "pagan" literature. The epitome of his monasticism, ecstatic prayer, is also described in terms of sublimity thereby appropriating rhetorical values and prestige into a new performance of the elite male self.*

“THIS is the sincere faith of the most ancient fathers, which endures pure with their successors [the monks of Egypt] all the way to now . . . They did not receive [this faith] in a worldly spirit by way of dialectical syllogisms (*syllogismi dialectici*) and Ciceronian eloquence (*Tulliana facundia*).”<sup>1</sup> Thus John Cassian, near the conclusion of

I wish to thank the three anonymous readers for *Church History* for their suggestions, which improved my arguments. I presented earlier versions of this article at the North American Patristics Society meeting (Chicago, May, 2010), to the Late Antique Religion in Central New York reading group (December, 2010), and at the American Society for Church History meeting (Boston, January, 2011). I thank all the audience members for their questions and suggestions. I am grateful to Catherine Chin for her comments on an earlier draft and to John Dugan and Caroline T. Schroeder for excellent feedback as I developed this project.

<sup>1</sup>*Institutes* 12.19. Latin text: Jean-Claude Guy, ed. and trans., *Jean Cassien: institutions cénobitiques* SC 109 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1965), 478. I have used Ramsey's translation throughout, though at various points with modifications for clearer expression of particularly educational or rhetorical language (John Cassian, *The Institutes*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, OP, ACW 58 [New York: Paulist, 2000]), here 265. This is also the case for the *Conferences* (John

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the *Institutes*, his handbook on monastic life, rejects both the means and the goal of the traditional education of the elite in late antiquity as antithetical to achieving his ideal of monasticism. In doing so, he takes his place alongside his Christian contemporaries who are negotiating their own positions as Christian monastic readers.<sup>2</sup> Cassian is less agonized than Jerome, and seems more like Basil in his “confident rejection” of a tradition in which he was thoroughly versed.<sup>3</sup> Despite this renunciation, however, Cassian’s language of monastic formation draws extensively on tropes of grammatical and rhetorical education, which would be culturally and socially acceptable to the elite, male audience in Gaul to which he is appealing. Investigation into these tropes shows that Cassian creates a new form of literacy, one that does not just teach the mechanics of reading, but shapes a monastic identity through defining what to read and how to interact with a text. Cassian teaches this literacy through two texts that deliberately echo the educational process he claims to repudiate, Latin rhetorical education, and that have the requisite sublimity to replace the works of the Latin literary canon. He establishes a reading culture that differs from others in late antiquity, both monastic and secular. The spiritual culmination of this pedagogical formation, Cassian’s “fiery” prayer, is likewise expressed in literary terms, that of sublimity. This performance, however, is wordless rather than the oratorical eloquence that Cassian specifically rejects. Because education is a locus of “cultural reproduction,” Cassian’s literary strategies show how he recapitulates within his monastic texts the cultural values of the Latin elite.<sup>4</sup> He necessarily replicates the educational system, even as he seemingly rejects it, to fashion the ideal monk.<sup>5</sup>

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Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, OP, ACW 57 [New York: Paulist, 1997]). Richard Goodrich argues that Cassian prioritizes experience over eloquence as the basis for authority in writing monastic texts in order to position himself against writers such as Basil and Jerome; see Richard Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian: Aristocrats, Asceticism, and Reformation in Fifth-Century Gaul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 66–75, esp. 68.

<sup>2</sup>For a recent discussion of this process see Catherine Chin, *Grammar and Christianity in the Late Roman World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 72–109, esp. 74–93.

<sup>3</sup>The description of Basil is Philip Rousseau’s (Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994], 48). Most scholarship on Cassian acknowledges that his writings reveal an extensive education, both rhetorical and linguistic; see Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 9–10; Karl Susso Frank, “John Cassian on John Cassian,” *Studia Patristica* 33 (1997): 418–33, at 425; Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4–5. Goodrich’s arguments about Cassian’s use of rhetorical arguments and Latin style depend on this premise.

<sup>4</sup>For how education can replicate a central system of cultural reproduction, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gina Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 57–65; and Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. R. Nice, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 1990), 71–102; cf. Chin, *Grammar and Christianity*, 7.

<sup>5</sup>Cassian here tries to articulate monasticism as something different, but still uses a language of tradition. In the words of Homi Bhabha, “The enunciation of cultural difference . . . is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the

In Cassian's monastic reading culture monks are defined as monks in relation to particular texts that express both monastic and literary values. Rather than a rule, hagiographies, or sayings, Cassian writes a handbook (the *Institutes*) and a work of theory set as a dialogue with past models embodying the ideals of the profession being taught (the *Conferences*). In these texts, Cassian shapes a monastic education system that taught what can be called an *ars monastica*: a "system of instructive rules" stemming from Cassian's own experiences in the Egyptian desert which he sets out "for the correct implementation of a perfection-oriented repeatable action that does not belong to the naturally inevitable course of events."<sup>6</sup> Because he links his own *ars* with the literary *artes*, grammar and rhetoric, his system imitates traditional education (*paideia*) both in its pedagogical and literary goals. These aimed at creating proper readers, and so speakers, who were formed through the best, or sublime, literature that was used as educational models.<sup>7</sup> Sublimity was particularly useful for Cassian because it marks excellence in both text and speakers, and has a philosophical quality that would appeal to the educational status of his elite audience. In short, Cassian taught a new monastic reading culture that valued the Bible and his own works but this educational process was no longer limited to producing a skilled speaker but also someone able to experience sublime prayer.

## I. TEACHING A NEW MONASTIC LITERACY: CASSIAN'S ARS MONASTICA

Reading has long been recognized as a vital activity in monasticism, perhaps most notably the famous requirement in the Pachomian rule that all monks be able to read, even if that meant being taught this ability upon entrance into the community. This obligation, and the subsequent literary tradition

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name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic" (*Location of Culture* [London: Routledge, 1994], 35). In other words, because Cassian is presenting the conferences as his "historical memory" and the abbas as ancient authorities, he must draw on notions of tradition that were culturally located in the educational process.

<sup>6</sup>For this definition of *ars*, see Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*, eds. David E. Orton and Dean Andersen, trans. Matthew T. Bliss, Annemiek Jansen, and David E. Orton (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1998), § 3. Conrad Leyser also investigates rhetorical tropes, including asceticism as an art, in Cassian's construction of an "ascetic holiness" and a "programme of reading" to appeal to an elite audience, but he focuses on the monk as a morally pure public speaker (Conrad Leyser, "Lectio Divina, Oratorio Pura: Rhetoric and the Techniques of Asceticism in the "Conferences" of John Cassian," in *Modelli Di Santità e Modelli di Comportamento*, eds. Giulia Barone, Marina Caffiero, and Francesco Barcellona [Torino: Rosenberg and Sellier, 1994], 79–105, here 79–80).

<sup>7</sup>Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 51.

associated with monasticism, has led to a focus in scholarship on reading and writing as spiritual practices,<sup>8</sup> particularly the monastic spirituality inherent in *lectio divina*.<sup>9</sup> Recent scholarship on ancient literacies allows an expansion of these approaches in analyzing the role of reading and writing in the development of ancient monasticism. Literacy, rather than simply a skill, reflects interactions with the acts of reading and writing that create a community identity. The focus is not on who can read and write, but how these activities become expressions of monastic identity. It is well known that Cassian presents reading and prayer in terms that the educated elite would recognize from their grammatical and rhetorical education. I will argue that in doing so, he creates an *ars monastica*, a monastic equivalent to an *ars grammatica* and rhetoric. This method of teaching positions Cassian's texts as superior to other monastic works that would also have been available to his audience, in particular biblical commentary. Because Cassian specifically posits an analogy between the two processes, literary education and monastic formation,<sup>10</sup> his two texts engage the technological process that scholars have examined in equivalent rhetorical works, for example, Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* and Cicero's *De oratore*.<sup>11</sup> The parallel method means that Cassian can refashion his aristocratic male audience into monks without renouncing a prominent marker of prestige,

<sup>8</sup>Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). His study is especially helpful for examining the tension between orality and writing in monasticism (see pp. 18 and 79–81 in particular). See also Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), particularly p. 170 for a discussion of the formation of monastic libraries; and more recently Guy Stroumsa, "The Scriptural Movement of Late Antiquity and Christian Monasticism," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16.1 (2008): 61–77.

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of the spiritual aspects of this reading method, see Pieter Roose, "Lectio Divina Among the Monks," *Communio* 13 (1986): 368–77. Cf. also Raymond Studzinski, OSB, *Reading to Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, Cistercian Studies Series 231 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2009).

<sup>10</sup>Cassian makes this analogy in *Conference* 10, discussed below.

<sup>11</sup>Gunderson's argument about Quintilian's text provides a parallel to mine about Cassian's: "Quintilian's own reader has been positioned to read and recover (properly) Quintilian's meaning: the author is confident that such is possible and that his readers will learn from reading him how they are to read. Quintilian thus makes reading possible in theory but impossible in practice barring the support apparatus of his own text" (Eric Gunderson, *Staging Masculinity: The Rhetoric of Performance in the Roman World* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000], 40–41). For an analysis of performance and masculinity in Cicero's *De oratore*, see Gunderson, *Staging Masculinity*, 187–22, and for worries about effeminacy, see John Dugan, *Making a New Man: Ciceronian Self-Fashioning in the Rhetorical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 157–63. Young argues for a similar relationship between the literature of oratorical education and biblical exegesis as I do for Cassian (Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, passim). Her categories of types of Christian literature, however, do not include the particular genres Cassian uses (220).

literacy and particularly sublimity, even as others, such as wealth, fell by the wayside.<sup>12</sup>

Ancient monastic texts often present a hagiographic picture of Egyptian monks as uneducated and anti-intellectual as part of their “anti-worldy” status. These accounts also emphasize the orality of the relationships in the desert, wherein disciples continually sought a “word” from elders.<sup>13</sup> Recent scholarship has suggested that at least some, and perhaps many, monks often had received enough education to engage in the philosophical questions of the day. Monastic formation in Egypt, far from being absent or existing solely to teach illiterate monks to read, was modeled on *paideia*.<sup>14</sup> As a result, reading and writing were central to this desert tradition. Writing becomes, as Derek Krueger has argued, an exercise in holiness, wherein ascetic authors fashion themselves as biblical authors or engage Christian rituals or virtues into their writing.<sup>15</sup> The role of libraries, long recognized as important to monasteries, also becomes a means by which writers like Jerome can asceticize the elite practice of scholarship.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, Guy Stroumsa has recently concluded that monasticism produced a “new culture of the book,” by which he means a culture that focused on reading the Bible as a “transmission of knowledge” and used writing as a confessional enterprise.<sup>17</sup> Another reason for writing monastic texts, of course, was pedagogical. A crucial question for examining reading cultures is how some texts became “canonical” less in the scriptural sense of the term, and more in the educational sense, where knowledge of a “canon” forms a shared identity.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Goodrich examines Cassian’s demands for renunciation of wealth, possessions, and social standing to argue that he created a radical alternative to his competitors who allowed the elite to maintain their “traditional prerequisites” (*Contextualizing Cassian*, 151–207, at 152). For a discussion of Cassian’s monasticism as itself elite, see Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 199–205, plus an examination of wealth in 205–20.

<sup>13</sup>Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 77, points out the commonality of this phrase.

<sup>14</sup>On this point, especially that the evidence in Anthony’s letters suggests a more philosophically educated writer than appears in Athanasius’s hagiography, see Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of Saint Anthony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). Guy Stroumsa makes a similar point about this tension, also pointing to Rubenson’s work (“Scriptural Movement,” 68).

<sup>15</sup>Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup>See Megan Hale Williams, *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>17</sup>Stroumsa, “Scriptural Movement,” 68 and 70. For an earlier precursor to this point, see Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority*, where he remarks on how “book conscious” monastic Christianity became in late antiquity (222).

<sup>18</sup>For a useful discussion of the notions of canon, see M. Finkelberg and G. Stroumsa, eds. *Homer, The Bible, and Beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World*, Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 2 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2003), esp. 1–9.

Re-examining monastic literacy means looking more closely at the process by which authors wrote texts that were meant to be formative to monasticism and at how particular monastic communities placed value either on specific texts or specific genres. Monastic writers in late antiquity produced many different genres of texts in their effort to idealize, define, promote, and regulate this new social institution.<sup>19</sup> In many forms of late antique monasticism, this monastic literature—rules, hagiographies, treatises, even letters—became “sacred texts” to be read for guidance alongside the Bible itself.<sup>20</sup> Conrad Leyser makes such an argument for Cassian’s understanding of his own texts, suggesting that he regards his record of the “*verba seniorium*” in the *Conferences* as “no less than the word of God” in terms of needing to be attended to by monks.<sup>21</sup> Monasticism as a complex social institution produced a diversity of monastic reading cultures because of the variance of the social and cultural conditions for monastic writers and for the readers who valued their texts.

Here the insights of William Johnson in his examination of the creation of reading cultures in antiquity prove crucial.<sup>22</sup> Johnson argues for an expanded concept of “literacy,” not simply in terms of what level of reading and writing constitutes literacy but rather in terms of how reading and writing are used in particular social circumstances.<sup>23</sup> He emphasizes the cultural, rather than the cognitive, aspects of reading. His analysis draws on newer definitions such as Shirley Heath’s “literacy event” where “written language

<sup>19</sup>For a discussion of the relationship among these literary styles, see Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority*, 68–76.

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, Krueger’s arguments about hagiographers seeing their texts as “biblical” (Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, 10). See also Lorenzo Perrone, “Scripture for a Life of Perfection. The Bible in Late Antique Monasticism: The Case of Palestine,” in *The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity: Proceedings of the Montréal Colloquium in Honour of Charles Kannengiesser, October 11–13, 2006*, eds. Lorenzo DiTommaso and Lucian Turcescu (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 393–417.

<sup>21</sup>Leyser, “*Lectio Divina*,” 90.

<sup>22</sup>William Johnson, “Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity,” *American Journal of Philology* 121 (2000): 593–67. While much of Johnson’s argument pertains to the effects of the bookroll on reading performance, his general insights into the idea that these practices, and how they are represented in an account of a reading community, point to the idea of a reading and writing system as a source of community identity. For a discussion about the shift from bookroll to codex as it pertains to studying monasticism, see Stroumsa, “Scriptural Movement,” 65–67, including the point that the codex made reading easier. For a more general discussion of the various theories for this shift, including a critique of each and a suggestion that this “rise” of the codex is a question of Romanization, see Roger Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 79–90. Both Stroumsa (67n20) and Bagnall (81–83) engage the work of Johnson as part of their analysis.

<sup>23</sup>For an examination of literacy as a measure of the ability to read, see Harry Gamble, *Early Christian Readers* and William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). For an examination of “levels” of literacy, plus a discussion of the “fluid notions of literacy,” especially in teaching language, see Robert Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 35–50.

is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies" and Brian Street's "literacy practices" which are "both behavior and conceptualizations related to the use of reading and/or writing."<sup>24</sup> While much of my argument below will examine the crucial role of reading as a part of monastic development, we can also see how Cassian uses writing to define and establish correct monastic literacy, that is, to teach lessons about monastic values.

One account in the *Institutes* presents copywork as an acceptable monastic labor, even when its product is so useless as to be discarded. The overall point of Cassian's story centers on the charity of an abba, but of equal interest is the object of this charity, a monk named Symeon who arrives in Egypt knowing only Latin. Because of Symeon's Greek illiteracy (*penitus graeci sermonis ignarus*), he was apparently unable to engage with any monastic labor. One elder became concerned about Symeon's lack of occupation (*otium*) since it could lead to mental wanderings (*peruagatio*) and meant Symeon had no means of material support.<sup>25</sup> Symeon's only skill was copywork and then only for the production of a Latin codex, that is, a book in a language that, Cassian claims, no one else knows. Symeon's Latin literacy is thereby useless in this monastic setting. The solution to this dilemma lay not in teaching Symeon Greek, but rather having the concerned abba engage in an elaborate fiction, claiming he had a "brother [biological, apparently] who is obligated to the noose of military service and is especially instructed in Latin (*adprime latinis instructum*)" for whom the abba commissions a copy of Paul's works. The elder himself paid for this book, in the form of "a full-year's pay in the form of everything [Symeon] needed to survive" and he provided "the sheets of parchment and utensils that were necessary for writing." In the end, the abba discards the Latin version of Paul's letters. Cassian emphasizes that since there was no one who could read the Latin codex, its value lay not in its existence but rather in the work it permitted Symeon to engage in throughout his year.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> As quoted in Johnson, "Sociology of Reading," 601.

<sup>25</sup> This tale appears in *Instit.* 5.39 (SC 109:252–54; Ramsey, 139–40). Cassian's use of the term *otium* in this story is telling, since its implications of the leisure time used to explore philosophical debates would not be lost on Cassian's audience. Cassian, however, is interested in transforming cultural expectations of *otium* in his monasticism, as both Chin and Goodrich have argued. Chin has shown that Cassian links *otium* onto prayer; thus, the hours of prayer are the "tools" the elite need to have access for a proper culture. See Catherine Chin, "Prayer and *Otium* in Cassian's *Institutes*," *Studia Patristica* 35 (2001): 24–29. Goodrich makes the case that Cassian resisted the ascetic accommodation of *otium* prevalent in his contemporaries like Augustine (Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian*, 152–54).

<sup>26</sup> This account should not be read to reflect the linguistic reality of late antique Egypt, but rather Cassian's claims about it. He specifically says the abba discarded the book since "no one in that region has any knowledge whatsoever of that language" (*Instit.* 5.39.3 [SC 109:254]; Ramsey,

In other words, Cassian's story points to the creation of monastic literacy—using writing to conceptualize monastic identity and define monastic behavior. Both Symeon's manual labor and the abba's charity are connected to writing. Cassian does not comment on the incongruity of an abba, who is supposed to have renounced his possessions, having the means to pay his fellow monk; nor does he say how or where the elder obtained the writing materials. Indeed, Cassian ends the story by reiterating both these elements, namely, the great cost and the acquisition of the "tools of his trade" as a scribe. Cassian transforms the "symbolic capital" of regular literacy into the "symbolic capital" for monastic literacy, since they are the material means now disposed towards the display of monastic virtue.<sup>27</sup> In addition, this story prioritizes this monastic literacy over Latin literacy. The ability to read and write in Latin, something that would be an achievement in Gaul, here is an obstacle to seeking the ideal monastic existence in Egypt. The figure of Symeon, linguistically lost in Egypt, would resonate with Cassian's audience and so serves as a reminder of the cultural divide between Egypt and Gaul, a divide Cassian is able to bridge with his new monastic literacy.

Cassian thus, like Latin grammarians and rhetoricians, uses his texts to define and teach this *ars monastica*, proper monastic formation. While Cassian is well known for his attacks against secular education, it is nevertheless this education that provides the structure for Cassian's monastic formation.<sup>28</sup> The person who wishes to practice monasticism has to follow the example of learning other arts; he must "hasten to acquire for himself and to assemble the implements of a given art" not as an end in themselves, but as a means to achieving the goal (*scopos*).<sup>29</sup> For monasticism, these tools include "the burden of fasting, intense reading, and the works of mercy, righteousness, piety, and hospitality" with the first two later specifically named as necessary for "cleansing the heart and chastising the flesh only in the present."<sup>30</sup> This move supports Cassian's overall claim that monasticism requires an agreed upon set of rules, namely, the ones he has learned in Egypt, rather than having each monastery follow the whims of its founder.<sup>31</sup>

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140); *quippe uniuersis in illa regione notiita linguae huius penitus ignaris*). In contrast, the *Historia Monachorum* recounts monks listening to an Abba's teaching in Latin (*HM* 10.25).

<sup>27</sup>Maud Gleason has shown that the orator drew on *paideia* as a form of "symbolic capital" (*Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>28</sup>For Cassian's antipathy, see Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 90.

<sup>29</sup>*Conf.* 1.7.3 (SC 42:85; Ramsey, 46). Latin text: Dominic E. Pichery, ed. and trans., *Jean Cassian: Conférences*, 3 vols. SC 42, 54, 64 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1955, 1958, 1959).

<sup>30</sup>*Conf.* 1.9 and 1.10.1 (SC 42: 119–20; Ramsey 48).

<sup>31</sup>Both Stewart (*Cassian the Monk*, 17–18) and Goodrich (*Contextualizing Cassian*, 49–59) examine Cassian's critique of Gallic monasticism for lacking proper rules.



His texts become the premier teaching texts: his monasticism required a particular instruction, available in his own writings. Cassian equates this instruction with teaching grammar and rhetoric, also *artes*.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Cassian has his main interlocutor in the *Conferences*, his travelling companion Germanus, alleviate his concern about being able to learn something “of such great sublimity” (*tantae sublimitatis*) as monasticism by equating it with the secular process of learning grammar and rhetoric:

For how shall any boy pronounce simple joinings of syllables if he has not previously carefully learned the letters of the alphabet (*elementorum characteres*)? Or how will he who is not yet capable of connecting short and simple phrases acquire the skill of reading rapidly (*citatam legendi peritiam*)? And in what way can someone who is poorly instructed in the skill of grammatical learning (*grammaticae disciplinae*) acquire either rhetorical eloquence (*rhetoricam facundiam*) or philosophical knowledge (*philosophicam scientiam*)?<sup>33</sup>

This analogy recalls a similar passage in the earlier *Institutes*, where Cassian concluded his fourth book of precepts of Egyptian monasticism by equating them with the “rudiments” of the alphabet.<sup>34</sup> Taken together, it makes clear that Cassian regarded his texts as the equivalent of the handbooks of grammar and rhetoric that would have formed the basis of an elite education.<sup>35</sup> Cassian uses these genres from pagan tradition, and their role in *paideia*, to fashion a new type of reader, rather than, as we shall see, using other forms of instruction, such as commentaries.<sup>36</sup>

Framing monasticism in this manner allows Cassian to tap into the already established cultural capital of literary education. His construction of a monastic education reveals what Pierre Bourdieu describes as “the presuppositions of a traditional system and the mechanisms of perpetuating it.”<sup>37</sup> For those monks in Gaul who cannot shed their aristocratic fashioning, Cassian creates a process of re-fashioning that idealized an elite Roman self into an idealized monastic self. Just as the ideal Roman was, as scholars of Roman rhetoric have argued, formed through rhetorical training with its

<sup>32</sup>Cf. *Conf.* 1.2.1 (SC 42:79; Ramsey, 41).

<sup>33</sup>*Conf.* 10.8.3 (SC 54:82–83; Ramsey, 377). Germanus continues by saying if this is true for this education, how much more so is it true for the “most sublime discipline” (*sublimissimae disciplinae*) of monasticism.

<sup>34</sup>Cassian says that the monastic elders “initiated” their younger brethren “with these institutes as with the rudiments of the alphabet (*elementis quibusdam ac syllabis*)” (*Instit.* 4.9 [SC 109:132; Ramsey, 82]).

<sup>35</sup>For the role of grammar and rhetoric in education, see Henri Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (London: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 274–86.

<sup>36</sup>See below for a discussion of the competition between Cassian’s genres and other Christian “teaching” genres.

<sup>37</sup>Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction in Education*, 99.

emphasis on correct language, so too Cassian uses monasticism as a new arena of a similar educational process.<sup>38</sup> The prestige associated with rhetoric now becomes associated with monastic literacy, as defined and taught by Cassian.

Because monasticism is now an *ars*, monks not only need textbooks but they also need a teacher. Cassian indirectly fulfills that role through his writing of these works, even as he subsumes his teaching to the authority of the abbas of Egypt. The teaching of an *ars* in general required an experienced practitioner, and monasticism was no exception, as Cassian pointed out.<sup>39</sup> Cassian's repeated claims to experience, therefore, not only elevate his texts over those written by the less or non-experienced competition.<sup>40</sup> They are also the basis for his authority to teach the monastic literacy he required for his monasticism. Just as the Latin grammarian in antiquity guarded the elite culture by teaching proper *Latinitas*, as Robert Kaster has argued, so too Cassian, in creating these teaching texts, becomes the grammarian of his monastic literacy.<sup>41</sup> This literacy still engages *Latinitas*. Part of Cassian's literary success includes the naturalization of a Greek, foreign practice into Latin terms.<sup>42</sup> The abbas themselves are, in a famous passage from the preface to the first part of the *Conferences*, "debating in the Latin tongue (*Latino disputantes eloquio*)" (with the implication that they are doing so through Cassian's pen).<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Cassian concludes *Conference* 17 (and so part 2) with an appeal to the "sublime thoughts (*sublimitas sensuum*)" and "renown of these remarkable men" which can overcome Cassian's "unskilled speech (*incultus sermo*)," "even awkward language," "that which is offended by the ignorance of our speech," and "blameworthy rusticity (*rusticitas*)"<sup>44</sup>—all of which, of course, call attention to Cassian's stylistic excellence.<sup>45</sup> These abbas combine the

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Gleason, *Making Men*; Kaster, *Guardians*; and Chin, *Grammar and Christianity*, esp. 3–5.

<sup>39</sup>"For since all the arts and disciplines that come from human genius and that do nothing more than make pleasant this short life cannot be properly grasped by someone who has not been taught by an instructor . . . how foolish it is to believe that this alone does not require a teacher" (*Conf.* 2.11.7 [SC 42: 123–24; Ramsey, 93]; cf. *Conf.* 2.16.4).

<sup>40</sup>Richard Goodrich has pointed out that Cassian had to argue for his authority to a Gallic audience, even though he himself was a "foreigner" (Goodrich, *Contextualizing*, 32). Goodrich analyzes Cassian's claims to experience as the basis for this authority (*Contextualizing*, 65–116), a point also in Stewart (*Cassian the Monk*, 95).

<sup>41</sup>The general thesis of Kaster, *Guardians*, but esp. 15–31. For the role of scribes in guarding the language of early Christian texts, see Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>42</sup>Columba Stewart, "From *λογος* to *verbum*: John Cassian's Use of Greek in the Development of a Late Monastic Vocabulary," in *The Joy of Learning and the Love of God: Studies in Honor of Jean LeClercq*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder, Cistercian Studies Series 160 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 5–31.

<sup>43</sup>*Conf.* Preface 1.5 (SC 42:76; Ramsey, 30).

<sup>44</sup>*Conf.* 17.30.3 (SC 54:283–84; Ramsey, 613).

<sup>45</sup>Goodrich has an extensive examination of Cassian's use of *insinuatō* (*Contextualizing Cassian*, 31–6, 71–3).

cultural capital of the new monasticism and of the old Latin elite into a new figure but it is Cassian who is the ultimate example of this new elite, because of his ability to write these monks.

Finally, the pedagogical language helps explain the relationship that exists between the two works, both in terms of Cassian's explicit distinction between them and his simultaneous moves to link them together. Cassian claims that the *Institutes* lays out the expectations and rules of the monasteries he visited in Egypt while the *Conferences* move from the "external and visible life" to the "invisible character of the inner man," and from canonical prayer to ceaseless prayer.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, both texts include accounts of stories and conversations Cassian claims to have heard from the abbas in Egypt; and, despite its different title, the *Conferences* repeatedly refer to the "institutes and precepts" that are the basis of these discussions.<sup>47</sup> It cannot be said that one text has the "rules" and the other discourse. Rather both texts teach the foundations of the Egyptian monastic way of life, according to Cassian, through two different genres. The structure of the two works, as equivalents to grammatical and rhetorical textbooks, helps explain how Cassian might have understood their relationship to each other.<sup>48</sup> They are meant to teach an *ars*. They do so in a manner equivalent to the *ars grammatica*, in terms of listing and defining aspects of monasticism, especially in the *Institutes*; and they are like rhetorical works that either define a correct education, such as Quintillian's *Institutio*, or fashion an ideal orator, such as Cicero's major rhetorical works.<sup>49</sup> Like these works, Cassian's texts "offer a special variety of 'reading lessons' designed to impart specific hermeneutic techniques," including being able to interpret "embedded" texts.<sup>50</sup> Cassian's reader-monk is placed in a sequence of readers so that reading itself becomes the teaching mechanism, rather than the charismatic words of the abbas.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup>*Instit.* Preface 1.7 (SC 109:28; Ramsey, 13) and *Conf.* Pref. 1.5 (SC 42:75; Ramsey 30).

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Karl Susso Frank's argument that the first four books of the *Institutes* conceals Cassian's rules for coenobitic life within a literary structure of telling stories that creates a normative authority for his teachings (Karl Susso Frank, "Johannes Cassian, *De Institutis coenobiorum*: Normativer Erzähltext, präskriptiver Regeltext und appellative Du-Anrede," in *Dialogische Strukturen/Dialogic Structures*, eds. Willi Erzgräber, Thomas Kühn, and Ursula Schaefer [Tübingen: Gunter, Narr, Verlag, 1996], 7–16).

<sup>48</sup>Cf. Stewart *Cassian the Monk*, 30. For an analysis of the two parts of the *Institutes* and the three parts of the *Conferences* as five volumes that teach coenobitic and anchoritic monasticism, see Julien LeRoy, "Les préfaces des écrits monastiques de Jean Cassien," *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 42 (1966): 157–80.

<sup>49</sup>For the role of lists in the teaching of grammar, and how it forms a reader, see Chin, *Grammar and Christianity*, 25–35. On the use of lists and dialogue, see Gunderson, *Staging Masculinity*, 35; for Quintillian and Cicero, see Gunderson, *Staging Masculinity*, 6; and for Cicero, see Dugan, *Making a New Man*, passim.

<sup>50</sup>Gunderson, *Staging Masculinity*, 35. For Cassian's use of other monastic sources (and his "embedding" of the Bible), see Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 35–37.

<sup>51</sup>I wish to thank one of the anonymous readers for his/her suggestion here.

The first reading lesson comes in the *Institutes*, a text that, like the grammars, is a work of *memoria*.<sup>52</sup> As Cassian concludes the part of the *Institutes* that presents the structure of monasticism (Books 1–4) and moves into the portion that examines the spiritual attacks of the vices (Books 5–12), he describes his work: a “brief” set of “rules and the ways of doings things” followed by a description of “certain deeds and acts of the elders that we have arranged to be carefully committed to memory (*quae studiose memoriae mandare disponimus*).” The work as a whole will be confirmed by the Egyptian abbas’ example and by the authority (*auctoritas*) of their lives.<sup>53</sup> That at least part of the text has been arranged in order to be memorized makes clear its roles as an instructional text, one that can be used as the *corpus* of authoritative writings was used in teaching grammar. Its presentation of stories about monks, one often running into another without much narrative connection suggests that, although longer than what appears in the grammars, they function as Catherine Chin argues the fragments and lists do in those handbooks: they construct a relationship between the sources (here “abbas”) in the list, which themselves are *antiquitas* and *auctoritas*, and the reader.<sup>54</sup> So too Cassian repeatedly stresses the notion that the Egyptian institutes he is reporting stemmed from “ancient” teachings.<sup>55</sup> He thus creates a relationship between past (biblical) foundations, past and present Egyptian abbas, and present Gallic readers, who are “inserted” into this relationship. In this way, the monastic reader is formed through the text, which is constructed with a newly imagined reader in mind.

The question of literary genre in Cassian’s *Conferences* is seemingly straightforward, in part because dialogue was the “teaching” genre but mostly because Cassian suggests that its genre is already determined by the monastic pedagogical structure he championed in the *Institutes*.<sup>56</sup> Cassian presents the *Conferences* as a re-creation of the conversations that taught him both the monastic practices and the reasons for them.<sup>57</sup> The seeming veracity of this

<sup>52</sup>Marrou notes the place of memory to create recitation of passages, which was “closely associated with reading and writing” (*History of Education*, 271); so too, Kaster points out that the grammarian is a man of *memoria* (*Guardians*, 205).

<sup>53</sup>*Instit.* 4.15.2 (SC 109:140; Ramsey, 85).

<sup>54</sup>Chin, *Grammar and Christianity*, 17 for her discussion of the *corpus* for “authoritative Latinity” and 24–25 for how a reader is “inserted” into a relationship with the text.

<sup>55</sup>A full examination of Cassian’s divisions between his “ancient” and “recent” examples remains to be done. Here, however, it is sufficient to note that he regards these teachings as passing on “ancient traditions,” see, for example, *Conf.* Preface 3.3; cf. Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian*, 117–50.

<sup>56</sup>For the claim that Christian authors used dialogue because it was the teaching genre, see Catherine Conybeare, *The Irrational Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 25.

<sup>57</sup>For the argument that Cassian uses dialogue to place the reader into his own earlier role as student, see Stephen Driver, *Cassian and the Reading of Egyptian Monastic Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003). For scholarly skepticism of Cassian’s claims to be an eye-witness, see Jean-

claim effaces the fact that Cassian still chooses to use a dialogue format, even if to portray it as an authentic replication of his own experiences. Cassian's *Conferences* would have been necessary, as he himself notes, to be able to address the "higher" learning not covered in the *Institutes*. As such, they move from what Robert Kaster has termed the "*ratio* and *memoria*" of the grammarian to the "artistry" of the rhetor.<sup>58</sup> While Cassian's use, and transformation, of the dialogue format warrants further analysis, here it is sufficient to point out its similarity to one of its rhetorical counterparts, Cicero's *de Oratore*.<sup>59</sup> Both men wrote dialogues set in their youth, in which they are (largely) silent, and which feature interlocutors who ended up embroiled in controversy (the fall of the Republic, including the purges of Sulla, for Cicero, and the exiles of the Origenist controversy for Cassian).<sup>60</sup> Both Cicero and Cassian, then, use the dialogues to rescue a past tradition, even as they use the authority of that tradition to strengthen their own prestige. Overall, Cassian fashions both his monastic texts in ways imitative of those in the rhetorical tradition both in order to teach his monks as orators were taught and because it shows Cassian's authority to write these texts, that is, to be a Cicero or a Quintillian for monasticism.

The notion that Cassian's works are monastic counterparts to ancient literary handbooks allows a corresponding analysis of their similar functions. Quintillian proposes a three-fold result from rhetorical educations: *ars*, artist, and work.<sup>61</sup> So too Cassian explains and theorizes monasticism (the *ars*), presents the abbas as models (the artists), and explores the goals of

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Claude Guy, "Jean Cassien, historien du monachisme égyptien?," *Studia Patristica* 8 (1966): 363–72. Julien Leroy takes a similar stance, but still argues that one can distinguish between Cassian's experience and construction of anchoritic versus coenobitic monasticism (Leroy, "Les Prefaces"). Augustine Casiday examines the historical veracity of Cassian's representation of Egyptian monasticism in order to rescue him from "attacks on the accuracy" of his account (Casiday, *Tradition and Theology of St. John Cassian* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007]), 119–60. Philip Rousseau examines Cassian's transfer of eastern tradition to the west, and the relationship between reader and writer in the *Conferences* (*Ascetics, Authority*, 183–88 and 221–22).

<sup>58</sup>The rhetorician was a "literary artist as well as a teacher," whereas the grammarian was "fundamentally and simply a man of *ratio* and *memoria*" (Kaster, *Guardians*, 205).

<sup>59</sup>In making this point, I am not presuming that Cassian either read the *De oratore* (though he would certainly have known Cicero, given his centrality to Latin education; see Marrou, *History of Education*, 278) or that he is intentionally mimicking Cicero's self-fashioning literary strategies, as discussed in Dugan, *Making a New Man*. Nevertheless, recent scholarship on dialogue in late antiquity suggests that an analysis of Cassian's use of this genre, beyond the recognition of its usefulness for his authority, is warranted.

<sup>60</sup>See Dugan, *Making a New Man*, 81–83 and 90–96 for Cicero's use of these figures.

<sup>61</sup>This is the formulation of Book 12 of Quintillian's *Institutio*, as opposed to the five-part structure that precedes it. See Quintillian, *The Orator's Education*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell, Loeb Classical Library 124 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 7–8. See also Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, §10.2 for the formulation of "*actor*, *ars* and *actio*" in Cicero's rhetorical theory.

monasticism. Having set the stage in *Conference 1* by placing monasticism in the realm of an *ars*, Cassian returns to this metaphor in *Conference 18*, which defines the different types of monk-artists. Cassian re-iterates his purpose in writing: to instruct his readers in what is “necessary” for the “perfect life.” This instruction is framed by literary terminology: “whenever a person wishes to acquire skill in some art, he must give himself over with all his care and attentiveness to the study of the discipline . . . and must observe the precepts and institutes of the most accomplished teachers (*perfectissimi magistri*) in that area of work or knowledge.”<sup>62</sup> As with Germanus’s speech above, here Abba Piamun, the Egyptian monk leading the dialogue, draws upon the educational model that all *artes* follow the same definable path. The path itself begins with the “first thing you must know,” namely “how and where the order and origin of our profession came about. For a person will be able to pursue the discipline of the desired art more effectively . . . when he recognizes the dignity (*dignitas*) of its authors and founders.”<sup>63</sup> Cassian then traces this history of monks, including biblical examples, the sole mention of a “religious woman” in the entire text, and those who are false monks. Alongside this particular conference, one can also include all the teaching abbots who appear throughout the text since they too have been presented, as Cassian describes it, as “embodied somehow in their own institutes.”<sup>64</sup> Cassian’s particular language reveals the cultural function of his text: the monks who appear, here and throughout both his texts, are not merely role models. They are “authors” who can be read, studied, parsed, and taught much like the canonical authors who make up the literary tradition that formed the basis of Roman education. These monks are not just teaching; they are being taught by Cassian in his writing of them.

Cassian’s monastic instruction performs the cultural work that also existed for grammatical education.<sup>65</sup> It roots the monks in an idealized past that Cassian constructs as a pedagogical tool to teach his form of monasticism, his *ars monastica*. Cassian’s terminology makes his audience categorize the monks into a recognizable role, the result of a process by which their selves are shaped through education, and by extension through reading. Just as the fragments and lists in grammatical handbooks created value for certain texts, Cassian achieves the same for the teachings that appear in his own text. Cassian’s texts teach monastic literacy, in the sense of “literacy” being not just the ability to read but the interactions with reading creating a conceptualization of self. His imitation of rhetorical works then does not just

<sup>62</sup>*Conf.* 18.2.1 (SC 64:12; Ramsey, 636).

<sup>63</sup>*Conf.* 18.4.1 (SC 64:13–14; Ramsey, 637).

<sup>64</sup>*Conf.* Preface 1.5 (SC 42:76; Ramsey, 30).

<sup>65</sup>As Chin has argued, grammatical education “formed a technology of the imagination that allowed its users to understand themselves as part of a coherent cultural system, one specifically oriented toward the valorization of an idealized past” (*Grammar and Christianity*, 7).

place monasticism alongside grammatical education. It situates his texts as the basis of his monastic reading culture; one has to be able to read, as taught by Cassian, to be part of that culture and to be able to achieve the perfection to which his *ars* is geared, a sublime experience of prayer.

## II. CASSIAN'S READING CULTURE

Monks were monks in part because of what, and how, they read, something that could vary from monastic system to monastic system. Because reading is not simply the cognitive act of deciphering letters and words but the process of “*negotiated construction of meaning within a particular socio-cultural context*,” Johnson argues that reading cultures need to be narrowly defined to be examined properly.<sup>66</sup> Cassian, having established his texts as the proper teaching texts for monasticism, also draws on particular ideas about how a text shapes a reader; in so doing, he continues to argue that only certain texts, namely, his own, will result in a proper monastic reader while other, competing monastic texts are to be shunned.<sup>67</sup> In addition, he has to create value for a monastic reading practice that much of his elite audience would disdain. He needs to do so both to construct a unified reading culture that can embrace monks from various educational backgrounds and to value a particular type of literacy whose purpose is less intellectual engagement and more spirituality. A literate monk in the Cassian system had to be ready to engage in ecclesiastical roles, as Conrad Leyser has shown, but he also had to develop an ethical dimension of reading in order to engage the sublime, as I will explore.<sup>68</sup>

Cassian's monastic reading culture stems from his integration and valorization of literary activities into monasticism. He presents the consumption (reading) and production (writing) of texts as a necessary, if at times problematic, part of monasticism.<sup>69</sup> He repeatedly includes reading,

<sup>66</sup>This is Johnson's definition of a reading culture (“Sociology of Reading,” 603, emphasis his).

<sup>67</sup>Most scholars on Cassian note his competition with Martin of Tours, and Richard Goodrich extends this competition to include especially Jerome. See Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 17–18; Leyser, “*Lectio Divina*,” 94–95; Goodrich notes Martin (28–30, 172–3, 192–3) and Jerome (66–75 and 81–85). Karl Susso Frank has argued that Cassian structures the first four books of the *Institutes* deliberately as story-telling rather than following the genres he was acquainted with from Basil and Jerome (Frank, “Johannes Cassian, *De Institutis coenobiorum*: Normativer Erzähltext,” 9–10).

<sup>68</sup>Leyser, “*Lectio Divina*,” 80. Cf. also his argument that “reading will not of itself produce understanding of Scripture; the only effective reading is conducted within the frame of ascetic *experientia*, directed towards moral purity” (“*Lectio Divina*,” 90).

<sup>69</sup>Cf. Leyser, “*Lectio Divina*,” 83–84, who notes that Cassian “virtually collapsed the whole of ascetic life into a programme of literary activity.” It remains to be determined the extent to which the literary and educational aspects of Cassian's monasticism are related to Evagrius's teachings. For a discussion of Evagrius, see Columba Stewart, OSB, “*Evagrius Ponticus on Monastic Pedagogy*,” in *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West*, eds. Andrew Louth, et al. (Crestwood, N.Y.:

particularly *lectionis instantia* (intense, or urgent, reading), in his list of ascetic activities.<sup>70</sup> This concept of reading draws on both the role of memory and the role of the body. In the Egyptian tradition, memorization of texts for the purposes of recitation was a central idealized activity. Cassian includes this view of reading, as both a bodily and intellectual activity, in his monasticism, previewing the combination of a body and spirit that characterizes the experience of prayer that serves as reading's goal.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, he makes clear that he considers reading the equivalent to other means of spiritual and physical discipline that was at the heart of the monastic enterprise. Not only were monks to memorize scripture but for the ideal monk "the intensity of his mind (*mentis intentio*) is occupied in reading and in providing readings (*in legendis ac parandis lectionibus*)."<sup>72</sup>

Cassian also engages in literary strategies that valorize reading as spiritual activity. Notably, Cassian includes it at the "origins" of monasticism while other endeavors, such as fasting and celibacy, go unremarked. In the second book of the *Institutes*, Cassian describes the earliest monks, whom he suggests received their way of life from the apostle Mark (whom tradition associated with Alexandria). At that point, "having retreated into more secret places of the suburbs they were living a thinned-out life of such great rigor of abstinence" which consisted of three main activities that filled their time: "day and night they gave themselves over to the reading of Holy Scripture, to prayer, and to manual labor."<sup>73</sup> Not only originary, the reading practices Cassian espouses stem from a supernatural authority, as established throughout the Egyptian monasticism he claims to preserve. Reading as liturgical practice, particularly the singing of Psalms, was established "for the group of brothers through the teaching of an angel."<sup>74</sup> Further readings, one from the New Testament and one from the Old, are a human addition, and so "as it were optional." Despite this seeming lack of concern, Cassian ends his description by requiring that both readings be from the New

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St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 241–71. See also Robin Darling Young, "Evagrius the Iconographer: Monastic Pedagogy in the *Gnostikos*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001): 53–71, for a discussion of Evagrius's creation of a monastic *paideia*, itself inherited from the Cappadocians.

<sup>70</sup>The phrase *lectionis instantia*, which Ramsey sometimes translates "intense reading" and sometimes "diligent reading" is used often throughout the *Conferences*; I have translated it as "intense reading." Here the reference is to *Conf.* 13.6 (SC 54: 154; Ramsey, 471).

<sup>71</sup>Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 104–05 for his description, for terms, and also for connections to passages on reading and memorization I discuss below.

<sup>72</sup>*Conf.* 14.10.4 (SC 54:196; Ramsey, 514–15).

<sup>73</sup>*Instit.* 2.5.2 (SC 109:66; Ramsey, 39).

<sup>74</sup>*Instit.* 2.6 (SC 109:68; Ramsey, 41) where the whole passage reads "thereupon the venerable senate (*senatus*) of fathers understood that, at the Lord's willing, a general canon had been established for the congregation of brothers through the teaching of an angel."



Testament on Saturdays, Sundays, and during Pentecost “by those whose concern is the reading and recalling of scripture.” This description of reading (and the memory of reading) as a “concern” seems to describe what activities should be of central significance to all monks, and not that only the most dedicated monks had this concern. Finally, reading is like other parts of spiritual discipline in that it is an activity that the demonic spirits, or vices, attack in their attempts to undermine the monks. Cassian says of the spirit of vainglory that it “seeks to wound the soldier of Christ in dress and in appearance, in bearing, in speech, in work, in vigils, in prayer, in reclusion, in reading, in knowledge, in silence, in obedience, in humility, and in long-suffering.”<sup>75</sup> Likewise, the spirit of acedia “does not allow him to stay still in his cell or to expend effort to reading.”<sup>76</sup> These varied depictions of reading combine to become “literacy practices,” to recall Street’s concept. Cassian uses behavior (the reading practices) and conceptualizations (what reading does) to construct a monastic literacy that serves as the basis for his reading culture.

Cassian’s reading culture delineates when, what, and how to read, particularly which types of monastic literature create a correct reader and how one should read to achieve spiritual results. Part of this culture includes when it was suitable to engage in communal reading of the bible. Since “literacy events” contribute to people’s interactions within a reading culture, Cassian’s distinction between Egyptian and Cappadocian reading practices shows how he is constructing a correct Gallic monasticism. Reading of “sacred texts” for Cappadocian monks needs to take place while the monks have gathered to eat in order to guard against talking while eating. Egyptian monks do not need reading to adhere to discipline during meals.<sup>77</sup> It would be better, in Cassian’s view, if all monks (including Gallic) were like the Egyptians and could eat in silence voluntarily. Since this is not the case, however, Cassian uses the Cappadocian reading practice to shape acceptable interactions among Gallic monks at their mealtimes.

Cassian also places value on some texts and practices, and so makes them necessary to proper monastic identity. His rejection of miracles and stories of the supernatural has been recognized as a means of elevating his texts above those of his contemporaries, particularly Martin of Tours.<sup>78</sup> Cassian here

<sup>75</sup>*Instit.* 11.3 (SC 109: 428; Ramsey, 241).

<sup>76</sup>*Instit.* 10.2.1 (SC 109: 386; Ramsey, 219). Evagrius, *Thoughts* 33, also explains the activities of demons against those engaged in reading.

<sup>77</sup>*Instit.* 4.17 (SC 109:142–44; Ramsey, 86).

<sup>78</sup>In both the *Institutes* and *Conferences* Cassian makes clear that these texts omit miracles in favor of “institutes and studies (*institutis studiisque*) of the holy men” and so contain “only what is necessary for instruction in the perfect life, and not a useless and vain object of wonderment without any correction for faults” (*Conf.* 18.1.3 [SC 64:12; Ramsey, 635]). For a full examination of Cassian’s exclusion of miracles, especially as part of his competition with other monastic authors, see Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian*, 74–75 and 111–12.

engages in a practice that parallels that which Johnson has described for creating reading cultures in modern American classrooms. Just as a modern teacher has to convince her students that the texts being read in class are “meaningful and relevant . . . a necessary tool . . . to apprehend knowledge” of the subject, so too Cassian has to make his texts the “necessary tool” for understanding, and being able to practice, monasticism.<sup>79</sup> Further, Cassian argues against biblical commentaries as such a “useful tool” because he argues they are not necessary or beneficial for biblical interpretation. In the fifth book of the *Institutes* Cassian reports that an Abba Theodore advised, “A monk who desires to attain to a knowledge of scripture should never toil over the books of the commentators (*commentatorum libri*). Instead he should direct the full effort of his mind and the attentiveness of his heart toward a cleansing of his fleshly vices.” Once achieved, “the very reading of Holy Scripture—even by itself—will be more than sufficient for the contemplation of true knowledge, and they will not stand in need of the teachings of the commentators (*commentatorum institutiones*).”<sup>80</sup> Abba Theodore serves as a particularly intriguing source of this teaching about what to read to understand scripture properly. Cassian’s reader has just learned that, although “endowed with great holiness” and equally great “familiarity with Scripture,” Theodore was able to “hardly understand or speak more than a few words of Greek.” The abba’s knowledge of scripture, Cassian writes, emerged from his “purity of heart” (*puritas cordis*) and not from a “zeal for reading or from worldly learning (*studium lectionis uel litteratura mundi*).”<sup>81</sup>

Cassian thus uses the paradoxical figure of the learned illiterate monk to symbolize his monastic reading culture. First, Abba Theodore’s knowledge of scripture, despite his lack of education, allows Cassian to define his particular form of monastic literacy: Abba Theodore knows the necessary text through Cassian’s monastic goal, “purity of heart,” rather than through reading per se. Cassian’s “monastic reading” is not meant as cognitive deciphering. Instead, reading is how a monk is taught who he is: through the relationship to a text, here even if he cannot “read” it.<sup>82</sup> Second, even though Cassian claims reading scripture will be sufficient for one monastic goal, “contemplation of true knowledge,” he establishes the need for a text

<sup>79</sup>Johnson, “Sociology of Reading,” 604.

<sup>80</sup>*Instit.* 5.34 (SC 109:244; Ramsey, 136).

<sup>81</sup>*Instit.* 5.33 (SC 109:242–44; Ramsey, 136). Stewart notes that Cassian also uses the figure of Abba Theodore to support his own claims to the importance of experience; it is “not so much that book learning is wrong, as that it cannot be a shortcut or substitute for the knowledge gained by monastic experience” (Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 91).

<sup>82</sup>This draws on the third of Johnson’s “propositions” about defining reading, that a “reading event” is “in part formed by . . . the reader’s conception of ‘who s/he is,’ that is, to what reading community s/he thinks to belong” (“Sociology of Reading,” 602).

that will teach the “cleansing of his fleshly vices,” which is necessary for the monk to read scripture correctly. In other words, he requires a text that will form a monk into a correct monastic reader of scripture. Since he makes this claim just as the *Institutes* begins to teach that very topic, namely, how to fight against the vices, his implication is clear: commentaries are useless to teach monastic reading, while the *Institutes* are essential. Cassian’s prioritization of his texts over and against commentaries makes a subtle statement about proper Christian teaching. Biblical exegesis itself, since the time of Origen, recapitulated the methods of teaching grammar and rhetoric.<sup>83</sup> Cassian’s contemporary competitor, Jerome, continued this tradition, by declaring the commentary an *ars* and requiring a particular educational method as a result.<sup>84</sup> Cassian shifts this “schooling” to his *ars monastica* which, while still including biblical exegesis, valorizes his genres over the commentary *per se*.

Likewise, in the *Conferences*, Cassian makes claims about the teachings of the abbas, especially, as Leyser notes, that they are necessary for the “purity” central to Cassian’s monasticism, a position that implies that the text that preserves them is sacred.<sup>85</sup> Despite the fact that both are “sacred” Cassian carefully distinguishes hierarchical roles for each text. The Bible is necessary for spiritual knowledge, while Cassian’s text teaches practical knowledge. Like the *Institutes*, the *Conferences* are necessary to produce a reader who can engage the knowledge that scripture provides, and so experience the divine, that is, to achieve the goal of sublimity. The practice of reading in these passages is not just decoding words on a page but of validating certain texts as central to the identity of the elite group that in turn contributes to the creation of a particular monastic culture.

The last part of this reading culture requires a definition of correct reading practices. For Cassian monastic reading practices need to replace secular values of extensive command of multiple texts with a monastic spiritual discipline. Cassian must address the question of how to read as a monk because he is cognizant that different ways of reading the Bible contribute to different monastic reading cultures. He also needs to balance the expectations of the educated elite with the needs of their illiterate monastic brothers to create a unified reading culture. Moreover, this proper reading

<sup>83</sup>Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 76–96.

<sup>84</sup>Chin discusses Jerome’s use of *ars* to define scriptural interpretation and so to require “a specific kind of schooling” (Chin, “Jerome Inside the Book,” in *The Early Christian Book*, eds. William E. Klingshirn and Linda Safran [Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007], 101–16, esp. 108). This article is expanded on in *Grammar and Christianity*, chapter 6.

<sup>85</sup>Leyser, “*Lectio Divina*,” 90–91. Leyser references *Conf.* 14.9, but many of these claims recur throughout the text.

method is necessary to achieve Cassian's monastic goal—pure prayer—the subject of *Conferences* 9 and 10.<sup>86</sup> In *Conference* 10, Germanus describes his (and Cassian's) favored reading process. Here, as Germanus puts it “when [the mind] has begun to reflect on this passage within itself, the recollection of another text shuts out reflection on the previous material . . . from here, with the introduction of another reflection, it moves elsewhere . . . the mind is constantly whirling from psalm to psalm, leaping from a gospel text to a reading from the Apostle.”<sup>87</sup> Conrad Leyser has noted that Germanus's description of this intertextual practice matches the elite reading habits that Cassian and his audience would have been adept at.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, Abba Isaac has been advocating a reading practice that focuses on one verse, which is “the formula for this discipline and prayer that you are seeking.”<sup>89</sup>

Cassian, however, is not simply instilling a spiritual discipline into a non-monastic reading process to “monasticize” it. He is arguing that what seems a simple reading practice—that is, one that nearly illiterate monks could master and so therefore would be regarded as inferior reading by the educated monks—is in fact more difficult than the complex reading procedure described by Germanus. In doing so, he creates value for the “lower” reading practice and so for his monastic reading culture as a whole. A monk with a strong educational background will not be reading beneath himself—something that might challenge his identity formed through his previous reading community—because Cassian claims this method “is considerably more difficult to observe than that practice (*studium*) of ours by which we used to run through the whole body of scripture (*omne scripturarum corpus*).”<sup>90</sup> This has the explicit benefit of making sure no one is “excluded from perfection of heart because of illiteracy or rusticity (*rusticitas*)”;<sup>91</sup> but it also valorizes this “beginner” practice. Cassian again makes literacy central to achieving the goal of monasticism. He does so, however, by creating a particular monastic literacy, that is, a way of reading that shapes a monastic spirituality, a “stability of mind” that readies the monk for the spiritual experience of prayer. The literate monk is not just the one who knows the most literature, but the one who is able to read the best, who is the most adept at these literacy events and practices, and so most able to achieve the “purity of heart” that leads to the monastic spiritual

<sup>86</sup>Cf. Leyser “*Lectio Divina*,” 87–88.

<sup>87</sup>*Conf.* 10.13.1 (SC 54:94; Ramsey, 385–86).

<sup>88</sup>Leyser, “*Lectio Divina*,” 88–90. Cf. Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 110–13 who examines this reading method as preparation for prayer.

<sup>89</sup>*Conf.* 10.10.2 (SC 54:85; Ramsey, 386).

<sup>90</sup>*Conf.* 10.14.3 (SC 54:95–96; Ramsey, 387).

<sup>91</sup>*Conf.* 10.14.3 (SC 54:95–96; Ramsey, 387); *inperitia litterarum* is literally “ignorance of literature” and not specifically lacking the ability to read at all. It speaks to more an elite expectation of what literacy would entail.

experience of ecstatic prayer, an experience Cassian will define through the rhetorical trope of sublimity.

### III. MONASTIC SUBLIMITY

Literary education among the Latin elite used a canon of literature that included works regarded as sublime.<sup>92</sup> This process, at its highest point, was meant to be able to produce some orators who might themselves, at particular moments, give a speech marked by sublimity. Cassian's *ars monastica* requires an equivalent canon and it implicitly posits his texts, alongside the Bible, as fulfilling this role. As such, they need to produce the same effects of sublime literature: producing an elite male self engaged in a new performance. The display that defines the prestige of the monk in Cassian's monastic culture is not rhetorical eloquence, which he specifically rejects, but prayer, which at times could achieve a particularly ecstatic state. In this section, I will argue that Cassian imbues his texts with a materiality, including a visual memory, that draws on literary notions of sublimity. As a result, reading his texts can replace the effects of having been educated through pagan literature. I will further suggest that these same ideas about sublimity shed light on his choice of language about "fiery" prayer. Both textually and orally, sublimity was particularly suited for Cassian's *ars monastica*: it blended the cultural and social value of sublime rhetoric with the spirituality of the new monasticism to create a new artist (the monk), reading new literature (the Bible and Cassian's handbooks), and engaging in new work (prayer). Rather than Cato's "good man skilled at speaking," Cassian's texts produce the monk who experiences the sublime "wordless" prayer.<sup>93</sup>

In Cassian's monasticism, both reading and engaging in *oratio* as prayer created opportunities for a new sublimity.<sup>94</sup> Sublimity, like rhetoric more generally, was an *ars* yet necessitated a link between the inner person and the external expression; that is, it had an ethical dimension. It was, in the

<sup>92</sup>The terms used for "sublimity" vary. Russell, in the definitive commentary on Longinus's treatise, notes that Longinus is loose with his terminology; Russell, accordingly, allows a variance in his translation ("Longinus," *On the Sublime*, ed. D. A. Russell [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964], 57). Cassian also uses words other than the cognate *sublimitas* to indicate sublimity; Ramsey, in his translation, likewise varies. What appears as "sublime" might have any number of Latin terms; conversely, *sublimitas* might be translated as "lofty" and not "sublime." This article is not a word study of Cassian's use of these terms, though I have included the Latin terminology for clarity.

<sup>93</sup>Amy Richlin begins her account with this "famous line" ("Gender and Rhetoric," 90); Gunderson (*Staging Masculinity*, 6) uses Quintillian's version (1.pr.9), though Quintillian also quotes Cato (12.1) to make clear "no one can be an orator unless he is a good man."

<sup>94</sup>For an examination of the relationship between sublimity and the use of quotation in biblical exegesis, see Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 100–01.

words of Longinus, the author of the sole surviving treatise on sublimity, “the echo of a noble mind.”<sup>95</sup> Having the requisite nature, however, was not something a person was necessarily born with, just as rhetoricians more broadly argued that nature was insufficient in and of itself to become skilled at oratory.<sup>96</sup> Rather Longinus makes the case that the necessary greatness should be subject to rules and study. All textbooks should both define its subject and teach how to achieve it, he says. Since his predecessor’s account lacked “how we can develop our nature to some degree of greatness,” Longinus implies he will include that in his.<sup>97</sup> It is by no means certain that Cassian had read Longinus’s treatise *On Sublimity*.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, the general notion of sublimity is an undercurrent to rhetorical theories in the period, allowing for an exploration of the spirituality of intellectual pursuits. Thus, for example, Cassian’s contemporary Martianus Capella also elevates philology to divine status in his allegorical account of her marriage to a god. It is particularly her role in the liberal arts, including oratory, which makes her “deserving of such a marriage” and allows her ascent into the “temples of heaven.”<sup>99</sup> Longinus’s treatise can thus be used to sketch the concepts associated with sublimity.<sup>100</sup>

In addition to the importance of the transcendence of sublimity, there are two other dominant effects of sublime literature that have counterparts for Cassian. According to Longinus, sublime literature creates lasting memories and makes the reader visualize what is being described. Longinus makes clear that “true sublimity contains much material for further reflection (ἀναθεώρησις), is difficult or rather impossible to resist, and the memory of it is strong and hard to wipe out.”<sup>101</sup> Part of this impression includes images, or “what some people call the actual mental pictures (εἰδωλοποιία),” which in the case of

<sup>95</sup>*On Sublimity*, 9.2 (Russell, 9–10). I have used D. A. Russell’s translation, at times with modification, available in D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, eds., *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 460–503, here 468.

<sup>96</sup>Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, §§ 37–41.

<sup>97</sup>*On Sublimity* 1.2 (Russell, 1; Russell, 462).

<sup>98</sup>This work is generally dated to the first century CE. For a discussion of the manuscript tradition, as well as my choice simply to refer to the author as “Longinus,” see Russell, “*Longinus*,” xxii–xxx.

<sup>99</sup>Martianus Capella, *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, 2.118–26, see 122 for oratory. The phrases quoted above repeat at the end of each muse’s song. Latin edition: Adolfus Dick, ed., *Martianus Capella* (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1969). Translation: *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts. Vol. II: The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, trans. William Harris Stahl and Richard Johnson, with E. L. Bunge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 40–45. I wish to thank the anonymous reader for bringing this passage to my attention.

<sup>100</sup>Likewise, a study of Augustine’s view of Scripture argues for the influence of this important theory, discernable in the works of educated Christians in late antiquity, even when there is no direct evidence of having read Longinus’s treatise. See Alain Michel, “Augustin et le sublime: les enarrations in psalms 41 et 42,” *Augustinus* 39 (1994): 357–63.

<sup>101</sup>*On Sublimity* 7.3 (Russell, 8; Russell, 467).

prose literature, is the ability of “writing to present things vividly.”<sup>102</sup> Sublime literature, once read, creates a visual memory that remains inescapable for the reader. This, in turn, is part of the “ecstasy” this literature generates in the reader; it “enslaves the hearer as well as persuading him.”<sup>103</sup>

This concept of the relationship between text and reader that underscores sublimity appears twice in Cassian’s responses to reading literature that interferes with monasticism. The first appears in the *Institutes* and recounts a monk who does not read any letters he receives from former friends and family. The specific concern lies in the effects of reading, that it will lead to the “memory of the words and faces” of the letter writers and so the monk would “see them again, live with them.”<sup>104</sup> This relationship between text and visual memory is also apparent in Cassian’s misery in his well-known lament in *Conference* 14 about the effects of having read pagan literature as part of his education. His distress is in response to Abba Nestorus’s instruction about proper reading, namely, the sacred reading that is the heart of Cassian’s monastic spirituality. Abba Nestorus advises, “once all world cares and preoccupations have been cast out, you must strive in every respect to give yourself assiduously and even constantly to sacred reading.”<sup>105</sup> Cassian’s concern stems from the fact that his mind is being held captive, by the “the knowledge of literature which I seem to have acquired to some slight degree.” Like monastic reading, his earlier education included “constant attention (*continue lectio*)” to reading. Now Cassian’s mind is “infected (*infecta*)” with these poems and the images they have left behind. In his description, Cassian uses terms his audience would recognize from being educated in the corpus of texts that was used in rhetorical handbooks and treatises as examples of the “sublime.”<sup>106</sup> “Even during the time for prayer,” Cassian says, his mind

“meditates . . . on the silly fables (*fabula*) and narratives of wars with which it was filled when I was a boy and had begun my studies. The shameless recollection of poetry (*inpudens poematum memoria*) crops up while I am singing the psalms or asking pardon for my sins, or a vision (*imago*) of warring heroes passes before my eyes. Daydreaming about such images (*phantasmatum imaginatio*) constantly mocks me.”<sup>107</sup>

<sup>102</sup>*On Sublimity* 15.1 (Russell, 21; Russell, 477). See Russell, “Longinus,” 120 for the role of the Greek term εἰδολοποιῖας in rhetoric and philosophy.

<sup>103</sup>*On Sublimity* 15.9 (Russell, 23–24; Russell, 479).

<sup>104</sup>*Instit.* 5.32.1–3 (SC 109: 240–42; Ramsey, 135–36).

<sup>105</sup>*Conf.* 14.10.2 (SC 54:195; Ramsey, 379). The Latin here is *lectio sacra*, not *divina*.

<sup>106</sup>Both Longinus, and earlier Cicero, dealt with the difficulty of defining the sublime by describing it through various examples. These fragmentations can be seen to function in ways similar to those that appear in the *ars grammatica* in terms of creating a past authority (see Chin, *Grammar and Christianity*, 20–25).

<sup>107</sup>*Conf.* 14.12 (SC 54:199; Ramsey, 516–17). In addition, the Latin term means “ghost, apparition,” whereas *phantasia* is the Latin transliteration of Longinus’s Greek term, meaning

Cassian is not simply concerned with the potential danger of a Christian reading pagan literature. Rather he expresses that anxiety in the language of sublimity, emphasizing the lingering visual memory of these texts, a visual memory that fits with Longinus's description of sublime poetry.<sup>108</sup> While an aristocratic Christian who has become a monk can stop reading the "classics," he cannot, seemingly, remove the inevitable result of his education, the effects of having read this literature in the past. Having been shaped as a "pagan" through that reading culture, the pagan self lingers and interferes with the monk's attempts to refocus and retrain the mind.<sup>109</sup>

The most obvious solution to "pagan" reading would be to re-shape the self through arduous reading and memorization of scripture. Indeed this is the model presented by the authoritative teacher of this conference, Abba Nestorus, who requires monks to memorize the entirety of scripture.<sup>110</sup> The status of scripture as sublime does not need explicit argument but Cassian on several occasions refers to biblical words and examples as sublime, particularly if God is speaking.<sup>111</sup> Here again he shares a position with Longinus who cites Moses quoting God, in the creation account of Genesis, to illustrate sublimity.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, the Bible has true *ornatus* over and against the false "skill in disputation and an ornate style" that Jews and heretics use to claim understanding of the Bible.<sup>113</sup> The process of reading the Bible, that is, of Cassian's monastic literacy of focusing on one particular verse, is praised by Germanus because it produces the height of sublimity: a "memory of God."<sup>114</sup>

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"imagined experience." Cassian's language here more refers to the effects on the reader (who is haunted), accomplished by reading (creating ghosts), rather than by the achievement of the speaker or writer (who has the ability to create the imagined experiences which cause this effect).

<sup>108</sup>It is intriguing that Longinus differentiates between sublime poetry and rhetoric when it comes to visualization. Here Cassian rejects poetry but not rhetoric; elsewhere his rejection of rhetoric is linked, as we have seen, to his concerns about eloquence.

<sup>109</sup>Cf. Chin, *Grammar and Christianity*, for how reading was taught "in a way that created classics" (11) and then "was instrumental in the merging of literary activity and 'paganism' in the minds of some late ancient readers" (41); cf. Leyser, "*Lectio Divina*," 89 for his discussion of this passage.

<sup>110</sup>*Conf.* 14.10.4 (SC 54:196; Ramsey, 514–15).

<sup>111</sup>See e.g. *Conf.* 3.10.4, *supremus* (SC 42:154; Ramsey, 130); 17.25.10, *sublimior* (SC 54:276; Ramsey, 607); 23.3.1, *praeclara* (SC 64:141; Ramsey, 791).

<sup>112</sup>*On Sublimity* 9.9 (Russell, 11–12; Russell, 470). See Russell, "*Longinus*," 92–93 for why this is no longer regarded as a later Christian interpolation, but can be treated as authentic.

<sup>113</sup>See *Conf.* 14.16.5 (SC 54:204; Ramsey, 521) vs. *Conf.* 14.16.1 (SC 54:203; Ramsey, 520). The correct application of *ornatus* to rhetorical style was a debated topic in antiquity, and Cassian's differentiation between correct and incorrect *ornatus* echoes those debates. Here I am indebted to Dugan's discussion of Cicero's defense of *ornatus*, especially in creating a "Ciceronian" sublime (Dugan, *Making a New Man*, 50–51 and 281–82).

<sup>114</sup>*Conf.* 10.12 (SC 54:93; Ramsey, 385). Ramsey has *memoria* as "awareness."



The Bible's sublimity is further evidenced by Abba Nestorus's concern about the pride that can result from a "pursuit of reading it" specifically aloud and particularly by younger monks. He expresses his concern in a rare direct address to Cassian: "Observe especially, then (most of all you, John, who should be more heedful of guarding what I am going to speak of, since you are still rather young) that you impose strict silence on your mouth, lest your pursuit of reading and the intensity of your desire be shaken by empty pride."<sup>115</sup> The Bible has to be sublime to have the requisite status for an elite audience, but not all aspects of sublimity are suitable to monasticism. Cassian removes pride by linking this effect with the errors of youth, in not being able to respond properly to the literature. Again, the underlying trope is that education moves an elite aristocrat from youthful indiscretion to maturity. So too monastic reading has to be silent (thereby reducing the vocal element from hearing sublime literature, as described by Longinus) for those who have not yet mastered their (new) relationship between self and text.<sup>116</sup>

In addition to the Bible, Cassian's *Conferences* itself functions as a sublime replacement for the literature that was used in a traditional education, by creating a new materiality as the basis of the text-reader relationship.<sup>117</sup> While not always visual images, these descriptions all fulfill Longinus's requirement that sublime prose "present things vividly," here to such a degree that the textual descriptions become material.<sup>118</sup> Cassian refers to the *Conferences* as a whole as "body," when he worries about possibly making a "blemish upon the body" by including a tale of one abba's disgrace among the "sublime institutes of the anchorites (*anachoretarum instituta sublimia*)."<sup>119</sup> On several occasions, Cassian refers to the teachings he and

<sup>115</sup>*Conf.* 14.9.4 (SC 54:193; Ramsey, 512).

<sup>116</sup>Longinus states that the "pride" brought about by sublimity is in those who have heard the text, not created it (*On Sublimity* 7.2 [Russell, 7; Russell, 467]).

<sup>117</sup>Likewise, George Walsh has argued about Longinus's treatise that "when Longinus claims to have written a treatise adequate to its subject matter, he means not only technically adequate but spiritual too" (George Walsh, "Sublime Method: Longinus on Language and Imitation," *Classical Antiquity* 7 [1988]: 252–69, at 268). Cassian does not claim his work is adequate in terms of his writing, but does argue that the teachings it contains are sublime.

<sup>118</sup>*On Sublimity* 15.2 (Russell, 21; Russell, 477). Cassian's writing here falls into the category of what Miller calls "corporeal imagination"; this describes "the techniques used by Christian authors to achieve the conjunction of discourse, materiality, and meaning . . . [it] designates a kind of writing that blurs the distinction between reading and text" (Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Antique Christianity* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009], 7). She focuses on examples of ekphrasis in Christian writing, drawn from "exercises in composition for students of rhetoric," which also depends on "vivid" description and so "turns listeners into spectators" (9). While that is certainly an effect of Cassian's texts—his audience is to imagine being part of these conversations—the language regarding the materiality of these teachings differs.

<sup>119</sup>*Conf.* 10.1 (SC 54:75; Ramsey, 371).

Germanus have heard (and Cassian has now written) in material terms. Cassian compares the teachings from the abbas to food, either as a “banquet with two courses of instruction,”<sup>120</sup> the “food of learning,” which is preferable to real food,<sup>121</sup> or food that strengthens;<sup>122</sup> so too Germanus and Cassian “thirst” for the teachings they travel to hear.<sup>123</sup> The teachings themselves can be so lucid as to be tangible. Germanus describes an instruction as “so vividly expressed that we believe that it has been made palpable for our hands.”<sup>124</sup> This notion that the oral teachings are touchable helps bridge the gap from their original setting to the written text that, of course, would have been held in the reader’s hand. Moreover, it creates a sense of materiality for those who would still have heard the text read to them.

Cassian also specifically uses a reference to visualization, again recalling Longinus’s account of sublimity. At the conclusion of the conference with Abba Serapion on the eight principle vices (each of which received its own book in the *Institutes*), Cassian remarks: “So lucidly did he [explain our vices] that we seemed to see them before our eyes as if in a mirror.”<sup>125</sup> Altogether then, the teachings themselves seem to fit the criteria that Abba Nesteros required when he described what must replace the images Cassian’s mind was still captive to: that spiritual knowledge become “as it were visible and palpable (*perspecta atque palpata*).”<sup>126</sup> Indeed, Cassian concludes the two conferences with Nesteros by, as he suggested in his first preface, embodying Nesteros in his teaching: “With this Abba Nesteros concluded his account of the true operation of the gifts and, as we hastened to the cell of the old man Joseph, which was nearly six miles away, he accompanied us by the instruction of his teaching.”<sup>127</sup> All these moments combine to show Cassian’s understanding both of the effect of reading a text (or hearing a speech, as related in a text) in general, and of this text in particular: the best texts have an almost material result. Cassian thus signals that his text, the *Conferences*, adequately creates the “visible and palpable” knowledge that is needed to replace the visual memories from sublime pagan literature. The “abbas,” made corporeal through their teachings, now accompany Cassian rather than the ghosts from his pagan past.

Cassian’s monastic reading culture locates monastic identity in valuing a new set of texts that have the same literary qualities as those he is rejecting.

<sup>120</sup> *Conf.* 2.26.4 (SC 42:137; Ramsey, 104).

<sup>121</sup> *Conf.* 12.1.1 (SC 54:121; Ramsey, 435).

<sup>122</sup> *Conf.* 13.18.4 (SC 54:181; Ramsey, 491).

<sup>123</sup> *Conf.* 8.25.5 (SC 54:37; Ramsey, 312).

<sup>124</sup> *Conf.* 4.18 (SC 42:181–82; Ramsey, 166); *euidenter expressum est ita ut eam ipsis quodammodo manibus nostris palpabilem factam esse credamus.*

<sup>125</sup> *Conf.* 5.27.2 (SC 42:217; Ramsey, 204).

<sup>126</sup> *Conf.* 14.13.3 (SC 54:200; Ramsey, 517).

<sup>127</sup> *Conf.* 15.10.5 (SC 54:220; Ramsey, 545).

The effect of his sublime texts is also similar. Just as Longinus described “great geniuses in literature” as having their sublimity “raise us towards the spiritual greatness of god,” so the monk has the goal of a transcendent experience of prayer, that is, a monastic sublimity.<sup>128</sup> When it comes to the monastic performance of prayer, however, Cassian still uses notions of sublimity but transforms the expression of it. There are, according to Longinus, five sources of sublimity, three of which are based on rhetorical style but two of which are connected to the speaker, namely, the “power to conceive great thoughts” and “strong and inspired emotion.” In addition, as we have seen, Longinus allows for a divine element as part of sublimity, both in terms of its source and its effects. Sublimity requires an ethical aspect, a discipline of “developing our minds in the direction of greatness” so that they are “always pregnant with noble thoughts.”<sup>129</sup> These are notions from literary criticism that shape Cassian’s descriptions of performances of prayer. These are performances that, if they stem from a suitable emotional expression of compunction, can bring the monk closer to God. Further, using this rhetorical theory to express a mystical experience in monasticism again protects the elite male self. Sublimity permits men to be enthralled, enslaved (δουλουται), possessed (ἐνθουσιᾶν) by words. Indeed this is the epitome of rhetoric and so, despite its effeminate overtones, was part of masculinity.

In the first conference on prayer, *Conference* 9, Abba Isaac provides a taxonomy of different types of prayers: supplication, prayer (“those acts by which we offer or vow something to God”), intercession, and thanksgiving. He then turns to a line-by-line description of the meaning and effects of the Lord’s prayer.<sup>130</sup> This method echoes Longinus’s use of passages from literature in his treatise on sublimity, especially when Isaac makes claims about “the sublimity of [a line’s] magnificence.”<sup>131</sup> That is, Cassian calls attention to the sublimity present in the words of the prayer, just as Longinus did for the words of the passages he used as examples. The words of the prayer perform the same work that Longinus argues for the words of sublime literature: they too “penetrate not only the ears but the very soul . . . the

<sup>128</sup>George Walsh has noted about this passage that one result is that Longinus implies that “a good deal of what he tells us about [sublime writers] applies also to himself . . . For example, if sublime writers are “more than moral and . . . sublimity raises them until they approach the magnanimity of god” (36.1), Longinus’s method should likewise confer a kind of divinity. Tekhne (method) will enable men to imitate the spiritual life of gods” (Walsh, “Sublime Method,” 253).

<sup>129</sup>*On Sublimity* 9.1 (Russell, 9; Russell, 468).

<sup>130</sup>Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 109, places this commentary in monastic context, including possible parallels with Evagrius.

<sup>131</sup>*Conf.* 9.21.1 (SC 54:58; Ramsey, 343).

combination and variety of its sounds convey the speaker's emotions to the minds of those around him and make the hearers share them."<sup>132</sup>

Yet, Cassian then immediately negates the role of words in his oft-cited description of "fiery prayer":

Although [this prayer] seems to contain the utter fullness of perfection inasmuch as it was instituted and established on the authority of the Lord himself, nonetheless it raises his familiars to that condition which we characterized previously as more sublime (*praecelsior*). It leads them by a higher stage to that fiery and, indeed, more properly speaking, wordless prayer (*ineffabilis oratio*) which is known and experienced by very few. This transcends all human understanding and is marked off not, I would say, by a sound of the voice (*vocis*) or a movement of the tongue (*linguae motu*) or a pronunciation of words (*verborum pronuntiatione*).<sup>133</sup>

True sublimity is here not distinguished by its traditional marker: well-spoken Latin (or Greek). Cassian's audience would have heard the rhetorical language in the last part of his description—these were the values of the orator, being able to pronounce words with his voice in such a way as to cause ecstasy in his audience. Instead, Cassian allows for a sublime experience to stem from something beyond words. Moreover, Cassian then insists that the mind's awareness of this state does not arise from "human speech" (which is "narrow") but from an "infusion of heavenly light."<sup>134</sup> Longinus earlier associated both fire and light with sublimity. Demosthenes's sublimity is like a lightning strike, whereas Cicero's is a flowing conflagration.<sup>135</sup> The sublime words Longinus quotes from the Bible are God's creation of light.<sup>136</sup> Cassian's descriptions of fire and light as part of this prayer, and his simultaneous rejection of rhetoric, combine to form a new sublime: an ecstatic experience whose ultimate form is beyond words, either in the experience itself or Cassian's report of it.

These passages also contain Cassian's rare inclusion of appropriate emotion, which we have seen Longinus included as a necessary element of sublimity. Part of the sublime experience necessitated, again famously in

<sup>132</sup>*On Sublimity* 39.3 (Russell, 47–48; Russell, 497).

<sup>133</sup>*Conf.* 9.25.1 (SC 54:61; Ramsey, 345). Cassian's phrase *ineffabilis oratio* is ambiguous: either the prayer cannot be said in words or it is an experience beyond description (or, perhaps, both). I have followed Ramsey's translation of "wordless prayer," rather than a more literal "indefinable prayer," because this translation is more consistent with the rest of Cassian's description. I thank my anonymous reader for raising this ambiguity.

<sup>134</sup>I am not discounting the influence of Evagrius's language about light here (see Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 120–21).

<sup>135</sup>*On Sublimity* 12.4 (Russell, 18; Russell, 475).

<sup>136</sup>*On Sublimity* 9.9 (Russell, 11–12; Russell, 470).

Cassian, the emotion of compunction and the tears it produced.<sup>137</sup> Like rhetorical sublimity, this state is not under one's control. It cannot be forced as when Germanus exclaims, "if only returning to [this condition] were in our power! For sometimes when I wish to excite myself with all my strength . . . I am unable to achieve again such an abundance of tears."<sup>138</sup> Rhetorical sublimity, if only an expression of its technical elements (as an *ars*), can fail since they neither provide true emotion nor convey the true nobility of the speaker (the nature that is necessary).<sup>139</sup> So too the *ars monastica*, its teachings and practices, alone does not lead to true sublimity. It is a rare trait reserved for those who are able to move beyond the limitations of language, if only momentarily. The highest monastic performance in Cassian breaks beyond the human realm, here marked by the spoken word.

There remains one last paradoxical point in this analysis of Cassian's use of rhetorical tropes in structuring his monasticism. Although his most famous description of prayer is this "wordless" "fiery" prayer, there are still moments when the voice remains a necessary element in the proper performance of the monk's work. First, Cassian uses the voice of some to instill an ecstatic experience in others, again along the lines of the effects of a sublime rhetorical speech. He describes the role of "the melodious modulation of a brother's voice (*canora fraternae uocis modulatio*)" as leading to "intense supplications" and singing psalms to "fiery prayer (*oratio ignita*)." In addition, the "clarity (*distinctio*)" (which calls on voice) and *gravitas* (which calls on personal qualities) "of the cantor" can add to the "fervor" of those listening.<sup>140</sup> These descriptions more fit with the traditional role of the voice, in being able to arouse feeling in others if correct speech is used. Second, in Cassian's descriptions of the effects of compunction (which is necessary for prayer), he includes moments when ineffable joy leads to a "shout" or when "groans" mark the monk's experience.<sup>141</sup> In other words, the voice remains necessary as a variety of

<sup>137</sup>Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 112 and 125–28. Cf. *Conf.* 10.8.1 (SC 54:82) and *Conf.* 9. 28.1 (SC 54:63; Ramsey, 347), where Germanus's statement—"I think there is nothing more sublime than this condition [the "unspeakable joy at the Lord's visitation" which results from compunction]—is an agreement with Abba Isaac's earlier description: "And so a still more sublime (*sublimior*) and exalted condition follows upon these kinds of prayer" (*Conf.* 9.18.1; SC 54:55; Ramsey, 340).

<sup>138</sup>*Conf.* 9.28.1–2 (SC 54: 63; Ramsey, 347).

<sup>139</sup>Some writers "fancy themselves possessed when they are merely playing the fool" (*On Sublimity* 3.2 [Russell, 4; Russell, 464]). The marks of sublime writing "are also causes and principles not only of success but of failure" (*On Sublimity* 5.1 [Russell, 7; Russell, 466]).

<sup>140</sup>*Conf.* 9.26.1–2 (SC 54:62; Ramsey, 436).

<sup>141</sup>Cf. Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 126 for discussion of this passage, *Conf.* 9.27 (SC 54:63; Ramsey, 346). It is intriguing that the "shouts" from joy are loud enough to be heard by neighboring monks, thereby creating an audience for this performance.

acceptable performances in the stages that precede sublime prayer. In these earlier stages, the monk is more like an orator in that he is distinguished by his voice. True sublimity then robs the monk of his voice; it closes his lips.<sup>142</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In a telling moment in the *Institutes*, Cassian describes an abba who was able to resist sleep even during the longest conference. This monk was himself teaching one evening when he “noticed [the brothers] had fallen into a kind of Lethean slumber and could not cast the weight of sleep from their eyes.” He “immediately introduced a foolish tale (*fabula*),” which led the monks to wake and “prick up their ears for the pleasure it gave them.”<sup>143</sup> Needless to say, the abba warns his monastic pupils against these demon-produced stories that, like the literature of Cassian’s education, serve only to distract from the proper monastic learning. Yet Cassian tells this story using a mythical reference, “Lethean slumber,” without any apparent irony. Its inclusion points to the overall paradox of Cassian’s texts: they are presented as the teachings of abbats that contain the “simple faith” which is to be valued over past educational mechanisms and goals, such as Ciceronian eloquence. But they are written in a style that recalls that same eloquence and they require a similar training to achieve its highest state, the sublime condition of fiery prayer, stemming from compunction.<sup>144</sup>

By using tropes borrowed from rhetorical education, itself laden with prestige, Cassian is able to present the new practice of monasticism in terms that were both explicable and valued by his audience. Cassian’s monk at prayer is a new performance but retains the status and masculinity associated with the orator. The monk’s voice is now engaged in sighs and groans, and eventually falls mute, but the ultimate goal—an elevation or ecstasy resulting from this performance—remains the same. Thus the entire literary pedagogical process now becomes geared towards monastic goals: Cassian’s texts, and not others that teach alternate Christian *artes*, teach the monastic literacy that result in this proper performance, and this ecstatic experience. They serve the same function as rhetorical handbooks and treatises: explaining the education, providing the models to be admired, placing the

<sup>142</sup>*Conf.* 9.27 (SC 54:63; Ramsey, 346); *Conf.* 9.35 (SC 54:71–72; Ramsey, 353); I am grateful to Catherine Chin for personal correspondence about points raised in this paragraph.

<sup>143</sup>*Instit.* 5.31 (SC 109:240; Ramsey, 135).

<sup>144</sup>Goodrich has a discussion of Cassian’s achievements in Latin literary style even as he denigrates them (Richard Goodrich, “Underpinning the Text: Self-Justification in John Cassian’s Ascetic Prefaces,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13 [2005]: 411–36, at 420).

reader into a relationship with the text itself, and throughout imagining the ideal form of its subject, which remains always implied in the author.

Cassian's literary strategies reveal what Pierre Bourdieu has argued about education in general: this moment of transformation creates a new system that is still "in accord with the logic in which the structure and function proper to the system continues to be expressed." Cassian in particular, and monasticism in general, should not be part of an "illusion of creative actors or acts springing forth *ex nihilo*."<sup>145</sup> Rather, Cassian recreates a main "mechanism" from the traditional system by creating readers who now have the new "linguistic capital" of monastic literacy: everything from learning the correct meaning of Greek monastic terms, to being taught which texts are of value for learning monasticism and how to read them, to descriptions of the sublime achievements of this education—all these contribute to the monastic reading culture Cassian constructs. As I have argued throughout, this interpretive lens makes plain the relationship between the two works, the genres Cassian uses, and the centrality of these texts to medieval Western monasticism, where the monk's identity as scribe becomes paramount.<sup>146</sup> In short, Cassian's monastic spirituality used the language and replicated the values of the Latin elite audience he was writing for so that his presentation of a new, foreign way of life does not abdicate elite masculinity but guards it even within a new monastic reading culture.

<sup>145</sup>Bourdieu, *Reproduction*, 95.

<sup>146</sup>See Mark Vessey, "From *Cursus* to *Ductus*: Figures of Writing in Western Late Antiquity (Augustine, Jerome, Cassiodorus, Bede)" in *European Literary Careers: The Author from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, eds. Patrick Cheney and Frederick A. de Armas (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 49–103, at 95.