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The author is the meaning: narrative in Augustine's hermeneutics

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Abstract

The parallel between Augustine's preoccupation with language and the 'linguistic turn' of the last century has made him a valuable figure in recent discussions on hermeneutics and meaning. Still, he has yet to be brought into serious conversation with contemporary narrative hermeneutics. In this essay, I contend that narrative hermeneutics provides a lens through which we can appreciate the important role narrative plays in Augustine's hermeneutics and, in particular, how it shapes his account of meaning. Rather than casting his perception of meaning as a static reality that lies completely beyond the text, recognising the place of narrative in his thought allows us to appreciate the dynamic and personal aspects of meaning which it produces.

Keywords: Augustine, hermeneutics, language, narrative, postmodernism

Introduction

Over the past few decades, numerous attempts have been made to bring Augustine into conversation with recent trends in postmodern thought.[1] Augustine appears to be particularly suited for this project because he seems to straddle the ancient and contemporary in a way unlike any other thinker. In particular, the obvious parallel between his preoccupation with human language and the 'linguistic turn' of the twentieth century has given rise to an ongoing conversation between Augustinian and postmodern hermeneutics.[2] Indeed, as Frances Young has observed,

[1] The literature dealing with Augustine and postmodernism is vast. I only mention two of the more significant works here: John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (eds), *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); and L. Boeve, M. Lamberigts and M. Wisse (eds), *Augustine and Postmodern Thought: A New Alliance Against Modernity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009).

[2] This is seen most clearly in thinkers such as Wittgenstein and Ricoeur, but Augustine has been a key player in a range of more recent theological engagements with postmodern thought as well, ranging from works on hermeneutics (such as Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999)) to works focused more squarely on Augustine

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'Augustine's hermeneutics is both strange and familiar' to today's reader.[3] However, despite the similarities between Augustinian and postmodern hermeneutics, Young rightly maintains, it must be remembered that Augustine's hermeneutics belongs most properly 'to the world of ancient rhetorical criticism, not to postmodernism'.[4] Therefore, in contrast to those who treat Augustine as a precursor to postmodern thought, Young advocates for a historical approach, in which 'Augustine's hermeneutics must first be seen as "other" and "strange", and only then appropriated in a context that is both similar to, and different from, his world of understanding'.[5]

In what follows, I suggest that, while it is important to guard against the anachronism of making Augustine 'the first postmodern man', it is also true that some of the emphases in postmodern hermeneutics can help to illuminate aspects of Augustine's interpretive practice.[6] In particular, I argue, the development of narrative hermeneutics in recent years serves as a helpful lens through which we can recognise the important role narrative also plays in Augustine's hermeneutics and, in particular, how it shapes his conception of meaning.[7] Appreciating the place of narrative in Augustine's thought allows us to move past the easy caricature of meaning in his hermeneutics as a static reality that lies completely beyond the text to find a more dynamic and personal account of meaning at work.[8]

Narrative hermeneutics

Narrative hermeneutics is closely associated with what has often been described as the 'narrative turn' of the last century – an intellectual

(such as Paul Rigby, *The Theology of Augustine's Confessions* (Cambridge: CUP, 2015)). On the term 'linguistic turn', see Richard Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[3] Frances Young, 'Augustine's Hermeneutics and Postmodern Criticism', *Interpretation* 1 (2004), p. 44.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., p. 42.

[6] Michael J. Scanlon, 'Augustine and Theology as Rhetoric', *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), p. 38.

[7] It is worth noting that none of the works which address Augustine and postmodernism give any serious consideration to the theme of narrative.

[8] There is a copious amount of literature dedicated to Augustine's sign theory. Yet, by and large, his theory is presented as if meaning lies *only* beyond the text. For the standard treatments, see R. A. Markus, 'Augustine on Signs', *Phronesis* 2 (1957), pp. 60–83; and Darrel B. Jackson, 'The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*', *Revue des études augistiniennes* 15 (1969), pp. 9–50. While Markus in particular does allow for development in Augustine's sign theory toward a kind of incarnational and trinitarian model, he never abandons the assumption that meaning, for Augustine, is something that remains completely external to the signs.

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movement sparked by the development of structuralist theories of narrative in France during the mid to late 1960s. Thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Claude Bremond, Gérard Genette and A. J. Greimas were instrumental in what Tzvetan Todorov famously referred to as *la narratologie*.[9] As structuralism began to wane in popularity, these thinkers influenced an explosion of international interest in narrative, which has cut across virtually every academic discipline in recent years.[10]

Within this movement, narrative has been particularly influential in the realm of hermeneutics. Drawing on thinkers such as Hans-George Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor and Jacques Derrida – each of whom built on Heidegger's notion of *Weltverstehen* (world-understanding) in one way or another – contemporary narrative hermeneutics applies narrative as a primary category to the conviction that human life is fundamentally hermeneutical.[11] In other words, narrative hermeneutics sees every event in human life as an encounter in which the human subject creates or recreates meaning based on particular psychological, sociocultural and historical circumstances, and it makes use of the elements of storytelling in order to do so.[12]

Thus, narrative hermeneutics posits an 'active' and 'interactive' process of interpretation, in which the interpreter does not simply discern a pre-existent meaning in a text or event but participates in the process of 'meaning-making'.[13] As a result, narrative hermeneutics, by and large, rejects any theory of language which assumes that there are non-linguistic things called 'meanings' or 'facts'.[14] Similarly, it is not concerned with discerning a universal narrative, or with identifying common features of human nature or reality. As Rita Felski comments, rather than a 'hapless and hopeless pursuit of ultimate meaning', narrative hermeneutics sees interpretation as a process of 'coproduction' between the author and

[9] Tzvetan Todorov, *Grammaire du Décaméron* (Paris: Mouton, 1969).

[10] As an illustration of the influence of narrative studies, it is worth noting a few of the interdisciplinary book series that have been produced in recent years: *Studies in Narrative* (John Benjamins), *Theory and Interpretation of Narrative* (Ohio State University Press), *Narratiologia* (de Gruyter) and *Frontiers of Narrative* (University of Nebraska Press). Also worth mentioning is David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (eds), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[11] See Jens Brockmeier and Hanna Meretoja, 'Understanding Narrative Hermeneutics', *Storyworlds* 6/2 (2014). Gadamer speaks of this shift as an 'existential turn' or 'ontological turn' in Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, 2nd edn (New York: Continuum, 1997), pp. 259–64.

[12] Brockmeier, 'Understanding', p. 11.

[13] Ibid., p. 2.

[14] See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), p. 13.

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interpreter, a process that focuses on what a text or event 'un-furls, calls forth, makes possible'.[15]

Furthermore, key for narrative hermeneutics is the notion that 'coproduction', or, in the words of Gadamer, 'productive activity', is an individual affair.[16] Each person brings their story with them to every new interpretive experience. And, because every human experience grows out of a unique set of circumstances, no two interpretations of any event or text can be the same. In this understanding, meaning cannot reside in an external source, such as authorial intent or abstract forms, for it is individualised, shaped by cultural and historical circumstances, and ultimately constructed anew by each interpreter.

Narrative in antiquity

While narrative hermeneutics as it is known today is a fairly recent development, narrative as a category for communication and interpretation goes back to antiquity at least, becoming especially important within the Latin rhetorical tradition in which Augustine was schooled.[17] In that tradition, narrative (*narratio*) had two main senses. In the first, more technical

[15] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 32–3, 15.

[16] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 296.

[17] While the influence of classical rhetorical theory on Augustine's thought has been widely recognised at least since Henri-Irenée Marrou's classic, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, 4th edn (Paris: Éditions E. de Boccard, 1958), not until recently has scholarship begun to explore the importance of rhetoric for Augustine's hermeneutics in particular. This is a welcome development, since Augustine himself speaks of scripture as *eloquia divina* (*Ep.* 82.5). Gerhard Strauss (*Schriftgebrauch, Schriftauslegung, und Schriftbeweis bei Augustin* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1959), esp. pp. 74–148), was the first to point out the rhetorical nature of Augustine's perspective on scripture. However, it has only been in the past three decades or so that this observation has been developed in any significant way. Robert W. Bernard, for example, explored the idea of God as author of both scripture and history in 'The Rhetoric of God in the Figurative Exegesis of St. Augustine', in Mark S. Burrows and Paul Rorem (eds), *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective: Studies in Honor of Karlfried Froehlich on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 88–99. Kathy Eden and Robert Dodaro have also examined particular aspects of Augustine's rhetorical vision of scripture. For Eden's most important contributions, see 'The Rhetorical Tradition and Augustinian Hermeneutics in *De doctrina Christiana*', *Rhetorica* 8 (1990), pp. 45–63; 'Economy in the Hermeneutics of Late Antiquity', *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 28 (1995), pp. 13–26; and *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and its Humanist Reception* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). For Dodaro's contributions, see 'Literary Decorum in Scriptural Exegesis: Augustine of Hippo, *Epistula* 138', in *L'esegesi dei Padri latini: dalle origini a Gregorio Magno: XXVIII Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana, Roma, 6–8 maggio 1999* (Rome: Institutum patristicum Augustiniana, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 159–

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sense, it referred to the second main part of a well-crafted oration, the part of the speech that would outline 'the facts of the case' to be discussed and so set the stage for the logical argument to follow.[18] In the Greek rhetorical manuals, this part of the speech was known as the *diegesis* (διήγησις), and, when those manuals were translated into Latin, the term *narratio* was used. But, over time, *narratio* also came to refer to a more general means of conveying meaning. Cicero, for example, explains that *narratio* should not be reduced to its technical sense, but that it can be used to refer to a number of different genres, including *fabula* and *historia*, and can even speak of an author's *argumentum*.[19] Quintilian goes so far as to say that *narratio* describes the proper mode of rhetorical thinking itself, and he maintains that formal logic is 'trivial' (*minimis*) in comparison.[20] This increased attention to the importance of *narratio* for the author in the Latin tradition is further evidenced by the fact that Cicero's *De oratore* and Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* each devote

74; '*Quid deceat videre* (Cicero, *Orator* 70): Literary Propriety and Doctrinal Orthodoxy in Augustine of Hippo', in Susanna Elm, Éric Rebillard and Romano Antonella (eds), *Orthodoxie, christianisme, histoire* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2000), pp. 57–81; 'The Theologian as Grammarian: Literary Decorum in Augustine's Defense of Orthodox Discourse', *Studia Patristica* 38 (2001), pp. 70–83; and 'Language Matters: Augustine's Use of Literary Decorum in Theological Argument', *Augustian Studies* 45 (2014), pp. 1–28. Finally, Michael Cameron has made the most recent contributions to the ongoing discussion in, '"She Arranges All Things Pleasingly" (Wis. 8:1): The Rhetorical Base of Augustine's Hermeneutic', *Augustinian Studies* 41 (2010), pp. 55–67; and *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine's Early Figurative Exegesis* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

[18] The six standard parts of speech are outlined by Cicero in *De inventione* 1.19–20 as follows: (1) *exordium*, in which one announces the subject of the speech; (2) *narratio*, where the 'facts' to be discussed in the rest of the speech are rehearsed; (3) *partitio*, wherein one summarises what has been said and outlines the argument that will follow; (4) *confirmatio*, the main body of the speech, in which one provides the logical proofs of the argument being made; (5) *refutatio*, where one answers the counter arguments of one's opponent; (6) the *peroratio*, where one concludes the case being made and makes a final appeal to the audience. This six-part structure is an elaboration of the basic four-part judicial structure commonly found in Greek rhetorical manuals (προοίμιον, διήγησις, πίστις, ἐπίλογος). For a helpful overview, see Michael de Brauw, 'The Parts of the Speech', in Ian Worthington (ed.), *A Companion to Greek Rhetoric* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 187–202.

[19] Cicero, *De inventione* 1.19, 30. On the developing sense of *narratio* in Cicero and Quintilian, see Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Rhetoric*, ed. David E. Orton and R. Dean Anderson, trans. Mathew T. Bliss, Annemiek Jansen and David E. Orton (Boston: Brill, 1998), §289.

[20] Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 2.1.8–12; 1.10.5, 13 (LCL 124:214). See 2.11.7 (LCL 124:334), where Quintilian says that if one tries to provide such an account, it results in *congesta* ('piled up') *oratio* which most closely resembles a schoolboy's notebook.

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over forty pages to discussing *narratio*, while Aristotle's *Rhetoric* only contains roughly four pages dedicated to *diegesis*.[21]

Therefore, in contrast to the exclusive application of narrative theory to hermeneutics in recent work, narrative in late antiquity was primarily, though not exclusively, centred on its value for the author.[22] This is because it was recognised that a well-constructed *narratio* could uphold the rhetorical ideal in a way that other parts of speech could not. Quintilian tells us that rhetoric, in its broadest sense, is defined as *ars bene dicendi*, or as *bene decendi scientia*.[23] It has been noted that there is a 'double-meaning' of *bene* at work in these definitions.[24] That is to say, they point to the fact that rhetorical works were judged on two related grounds: on a technical level, they were judged on the strength of the composition; but on the moral level, they were judged based on the goodness of the author.[25] In a real sense, the author's moral character was thought to be transferred to the work through composition, such that the work ought to be a faithful representation of the author.[26] Both the moral goodness of the author and an artful composition were required for a rhetorical work to realise its highest form.

Yet, there was a common distinction made in classical rhetoric between knowing the authorial intent (*intentio* or *voluntas*) and knowing the objective reality of which the author speaks (*res*).[27] When treating difficult subjects, this distinction became problematic. If the author were tasked with speaking or writing on a philosophical topic to an audience ignorant of philosophy, for example, Cicero recommends that the author accommodate the message

[21] These quantifications, based on analysis of the Loeb Classical Library editions of *De oratore* 2, *Institutio oratoria* 2, and Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (3.16), are pointed out in John O'Banion, *Reorienting Rhetoric: The Dialectic of List and Story* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2006), p. 58.

[22] While it is true that, in a certain sense, the student being trained in grammar and rhetoric would treat narrative from the perspective of the reader, since the student would learn to make use of *narratio* by analysing the work of other authors in the first place, it is important to observe that this does not mean it was a *hermeneutical* category within the Latin rhetorical tradition. After all, one's grammatical and rhetorical training commonly served the aim of preparing one to craft persuasive speeches. However, in more recent developments in narrative hermeneutics, and, as we will see, in Augustine as well, narrative operates precisely as a hermeneutical category.

[23] Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 2.17.37; 2.14.5.

[24] Lausberg, *Handbook*, §32.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] This distinction must be understood within the context of the long-standing debate over the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy. For Cicero, rhetoric is rightly used to address philosophical questions.

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to the level of the audience.[28] When speaking of justice, one should refrain from including reflections on a perfectly ordered soul or a just way of life; even though these themes are, ideally speaking, the most proper elements of justice, they would likely be far beyond the understanding of the audience. In this case, Cicero advises the author to treat justice in the popular sense instead.[29] Therefore, when addressing an audience on such occasions, the author would face a dilemma in which he could either communicate beyond the grasp of the audience and remain faithful to the topic, or he could speak in terms he knew were not entirely accurate but be understood by his audience.

Narratio allowed the author to overcome this dilemma. When constructing a *narratio*, the author has the opportunity to communicate on different levels at the same time.[30] This is because the skilled author is able to draw on a variety of techniques, such as metaphor, repetition and word association in order to make connections between characters, events and terms and so communicate something beyond what appears on the surface.[31] Through the arrangement of these connections, one could communicate authorial intent (*voluntas*) that was at once also attached to objective reality (*res*) and thereby convey the author's own character in a more complete way than was commonly found in other departments of rhetoric. Because of how the elements within a narrative were arranged, an audience could then be taken into the *narratio* and discern the author's *voluntas* indirectly in accordance with their capacity, and, for the perceptive audience member, the *res* would always be accessible.[32] To the extent that an author took advantage of this unique quality, a *narratio* could serve as the truest reflection of its author and, therefore, the most complete preservation of the rhetorical ideal.

[28] Cicero, *De oratore* 2.310–11.

[29] Ibid. Ernst Fortin has described this as the 'ironic posture' of Cicero's orator, in which he becomes 'a liar, not because he wants to, but because he has no choice in the matter'. Ernst Fortin, 'Augustine and the Problem of Christian Rhetoric', *Augustinian Studies* (1974), p. 91.

[30] See Cicero, *De inventione* 1.27, where he explains that *narratio* can take a number of forms, ranging from the literal (*historia*) to the metaphorical or allegorical (*fabula*).

[31] In *De oratore* 2.81.330, Cicero states that, because of this ability, narrative is 'the fountain head from which the whole remainder of the speech flows' (LCL 348:448): *omnis orationis reliquae fons est narratio*. Cf. 2.15.63; 2.34.147; 2.39.166.

[32] The arrangement I speak of here is an aspect of *dispositio*, the arrangement of a speech or argument as a whole. However, the arrangement of the elements of *narratio* is not itself directly linked to a discussion of *dispositio* in any of the sources we have. Therefore, while there appears to be a logical link between the two, I have refrained from stressing this link in this article.

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Narrative in Augustine

When we turn to Augustine, we find that he stands in many ways between the more recent hermeneutical emphasis on narrative hermeneutics and the Latin rhetorical tradition's emphasis on narrative as an important tool for the author. The importance of narrative in Augustine's hermeneutics is, therefore, illuminated by the attention paid to narrative in postmodern hermeneutics. But, at the same time, he also provides an implicit critique of postmodern narrative hermeneutics by offering an alternative to the abandonment of authorial intent altogether. In this way, bringing Augustine into conversation with postmodern narrative hermeneutics both benefits our understanding of Augustine and contributes to current conversations around narrative hermeneutics.

While Augustine was shaped by the vision of the Latin rhetorical tradition, his own use of narrative differed from those who went before him in one very significant respect. In the Latin rhetorical tradition, *narratio* was author-centric, meaning that it was cast predominantly from an author's perspective. But, as Kenneth Burke and John O'Banion have both pointed out, Augustine pays very little attention to the importance of *narratio* for constructing rhetorical works. Rather, he treats *narratio* primarily as a hermeneutical category.[33] O'Banion explains that Augustine's use of *narratio* is marked by 'an exclusive interest in texts' which ignores authorial invention entirely:

> He emphasized the significance of brevity, clarity, and plausibility – the chief characteristics of narratio, but the art of narration itself received no attention in the sense of establishing the significance of one's case (as in a sermon). Narratio served mainly a hermeneutic function, to assist in the elucidation of the Bible, which, it was believed, contained the only story Christians were to tell . . . [F]rom a rhetorical perspective, narratio became restricted to expositio, an outline of the Christ story.[34]

Indeed, it is noteworthy that Augustine never discusses *narratio* in the context of *creating* an argument, even though, on a number of occasions, it would have been natural for him to do so. In *De catechizandis rudibus*, for example, Augustine writes to instruct Deogratias, a deacon in Carthage, how to construct the *narratio* of a catechetical oration.[35] While this would be an ideal place to discuss the importance of invention, Augustine remains entirely on

[33] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 2nd edn (New York: George Braziller, 1955), p. 75.

[34] O'Banion, *Reorienting*, pp. 121, 122.

[35] Augustine, De *catechizandis rudibus* 1.1.

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the plain of exposition throughout the letter. In fact, as Ernst Fortin has observed, Augustine does not reference the notion of plausibility (*probabilitas* or *credibiliter*) once in the work – a very important component when creating a *narratio*.[36] Or again, in book 4 of *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine discusses the art of preaching. This would seem to be another natural place to discuss the role of narrative in the preacher's construction of a sermon, yet he makes no mention of *narratio* whatsoever.

While his exclusive application of *narratio* to the task of interpretation does provide a parallel with more recent trends in narrative hermeneutics, it is vital to note that Augustine nevertheless remained indebted to the core characteristics of *narratio* as he knew it from the Latin rhetorical tradition – namely, *narratio*'s unique ability to convey the true authorial intent. Therefore, the importance of narrative for the interpreter was the result of its importance for the author.

This is made clear in Augustine's hermeneutical handbook, *De doctrina christiana*, where he directly discusses *narratio* in two separate places.[37] The first occurs in book 2, where he considers how secular learning can aid the reader in the task of interpreting scripture. Augustine's goal is to distinguish for his readers the kinds of extra-biblical resources that are helpful for interpreting scripture from those that are misleading. He identifies three categories: first, there are those resources invented by humans, such as astrology or the worship of demons, which mislead and so are not useful; second, there are other human inventions which are useful within certain limits, such as the works of sculptors or painters; third, there are departments of knowledge that are not the result of human invention but of divine order, and these are most helpful of all.[38]

Within this last category, Augustine identifies two sources of knowledge, which he refers to as a two species of *narratio*. The first source of knowledge he identifies is history because, when recorded faithfully, it reveals the divine arrangement within the natural order:

> In the course of an historical narrative (*narratione*) where former institutions of men are narrated (*narrantur*), the history itself is not to be counted among human institutions, since things that are in the past and finished and cannot be undone are to be counted as belonging to the

[36] Fortin, 'Augustine', p. 92. Daniel Doyle makes the same point in 'The Bishop as Teacher', in Kim Paffenroth and Kevin H. Hughes (eds), *Augustine and Liberal Education* (Idaho Falls, ID: Lexington Books, 2008), p. 81.

[37] *Narratio* or one of its variants occurs nineteen times in the work, though most of these are brief references not used in a way that is directly significant to my argument here.

[38] *De doctrina christiana* 2.18.28–2.27.41.

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> course of time, of which God is the author and administrator. For it is one thing to tell (*narrare*) what has been done, another to show what ought to be done. History narrates (*narrat*) what has been done, faithfully and with advantage; but the books of the haruspices, and all writings of the same kind, aim at teaching what ought to be done or observed, using the boldness of an adviser, not the fidelity of a narrator.[39]

Historical records belong to the third category mentioned above because they are not products of the human author's invention, but rather of transmission. They make the divine arrangement within the created order – the actual *narratio* – accessible.

The second species of *narratio* Augustine identifies is natural science. The study of animal and plant life, as well as astronomy, Augustine maintains, yields a kind of *narratio* because it, too, reveals divine arrangement within the natural order.[40] Just as with history, interpreting elements of natural science requires that one consider how the different, divinely arranged parts fit together into a coherent whole. While Augustine admits that science most properly resembles description because it deals with the present (*est etiam narratio demonstrationi similis*), he is especially concerned to show that it also constitutes a kind of narration because it allows one to interpret the movement of and relationships between natural bodies as well.[41]

It is noteworthy that Augustine makes a conscious effort to characterise divine revelation in terms of narrative. While it might seem somewhat obvious that history is characterised as *narratio*, Augustine makes clear that it is not due solely to history's chronological character. For him, history is *narratio* because it provides access to the divine author's masterful work, and it is that work which constitutes the true *narratio*. It is for this same reason that he is eager to show that natural science is a species of *narratio* as well. The common theme uniting them is the fact that, through both history and science, one has access to the *narratio* constructed by the divine author. That is why only these two departments are species of *narratio*; astrology, divination

[39] *De doctrina christiana* 2.28.44 (CCSL 32:142–3): *narratione autem historica cum praeterita etiam hominum instituta narrantur, non inter humana instituta ipsa historia numeranda est, quia iam quae transierunt nec infecta fieri possunt, in ordine temporum habenda sunt, quorum est conditor et administrator deus. aliud est enim facta narrare, aliud docere facienda. historia facta narrat fideliter atque utiliter, libri autem aruspicum et quaeque similes litterae facienda uel observanda intendunt docere, monitoris audacia, non indicis fide*. I have followed the NPNF translation of *De doctrina christiana* throughout this article, though I have modified it in places.

[40] *Ibid.* 2.29.45–6.

[41] *Ibid.* 2.29.45.

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and superstitions are not instances of *narratio* for Augustine because they do not make the divine *narratio* – the true *narratio* – accessible.[42]

In book 3, Augustine turns to addresses the importance of *narratio* within scripture itself. Near the end of the book, where he considers Tychonius' rule of 'recapitulation', Augustine explains that scripture, just like history and natural science, should be thought of in terms of *narratio*.[43] However, he goes on to explain that this should not be taken to mean that scripture is merely a chronicle of past events. In fact, he says, there are a number of passages that defy chronological sequence altogether.[44] Genesis 2:8–9, for example, indicates that God caused plants to grow and produce fruit after he placed the first man in the Garden of Eden. But, Augustine points out, this is contrary to the order recorded earlier in Genesis, where we are told vegetation was created before Adam was created.[45] Similarly, Genesis 10:32 says that each of the sons of Noah had families who spoke the languages of their respective nations. However, immediately after stating this, scripture tells us that 'the whole earth was of one language and of one speech'. Again, there is an inconsistency here: either there was a variety of languages or there was not.[46] Or again, Augustine points to Luke 17:29–32 as a more subtle example, in which readers are encouraged to heed the example of Lot's wife and not look back on their old lives when Christ returns. But, he asks, is it not true that Christians must not look back to their old lives even now?[47] In each of these cases, he suggests, a kind of recapitulation is at work in which the text does not follow a precise chronological sequence.[48] Nevertheless, he maintains, scripture is still properly understood as a *narratio* on the basis that it is divinely arranged and that it makes that arrangement accessible to the interpreter. Therefore, just as Augustine is concerned to characterise history and science as *narratio* because they reveal the *narratio* constructed by the divine author, so also scripture is characterised as *narratio* for this very same reason.

[42] This, for Augustine, is because of two main divine activities: the establishing of the *rationes seminales*, and the ongoing work of divine providence. I am suggesting that Augustine casts these notions in terms of divine authorship when discussing revelation. Thus while, for Augustine, all things are governed by divine providence, those things that are the products of human creation are, in a sense, a step removed from the divine authorial intent.

[43] *De doctrina christiana* 3.36.52.

[44] *Ibid.* 3.36.52.

[45] *Ibid.* 3.36.52.

[46] *Ibid.* 3.36.53.

[47] *Ibid.* 3.36.54.

[48] *Ibid.* 3.36.61.

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We can now see how narrative subtly emerges as a key category in Augustine's conception of divine revelation. For him, God is the ultimate author of history, science and, most importantly, scripture. His revelation is characterised as *narratio* because in it one is able to perceive how the divine author has arranged history, nature and scripture, and so discern the divine authorial intent (*voluntas*), which is always compatible with the *res*. It is because of its importance for the divine author, then, that *narratio* becomes an important category for the interpreter as well.

Narrative and meaning

With all this in in mind, I would like to turn to address more specifically how scripture's character as *narratio* shapes Augustine's understanding of interpretation and meaning. Throughout *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine is acutely aware that human language is paradoxical: on the one hand, it is powerless to convey meaning in itself; yet, on the other hand, we know from experience that it does convey meaning in some way. Books 2 and 3 are an attempt to explain this paradoxical character of language as it applies to scripture. For Augustine, language's ability to communicate indirectly – an especially valuable feature of *narratio* – is key. In his view, it is specifically by following the process of indirect communication in scripture that readers encounter the meaning of the text.[49] To trace how this takes place in Augustine's interpretive practice, it is important to pay particular attention to the relationship between sign and referent in his thought and especially to the narratival context in which he locates it.

Book 1 sets Augustine's whole discussion of the interpretation of scripture in the context of love for God. He begins by drawing a sharp distinction between things (*res*) and signs (*signa*). A thing, strictly speaking, is that which is an end in itself, while a sign is anything which points to a thing.[50] For example, the Latin word *bos* is a sign, while the physical ox to which it points is a thing. Here, while laying the foundation for his more detailed discussion of signs in book 2, Augustine adds a crucial innovative twist by bringing *caritas* to bear on his theory of signification: 'Of all, then, that has been said since we entered upon the discussion about things, this is the sum: that we should clearly understand that the fulfillment and the end of the Law, and of all Holy Scripture, is the love of an object which is to be enjoyed, and the love of an object which can enjoy that other in fellowship

[49] For Augustine, this was equally due to the limitations of language.

[50] *De doctrina christiana* 1.2.2. Augustine's theory of language is clearly representative, which is one of the principal points of distinction between his thought and that of postmodernism.

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with ourselves.'[51] By holding that only God is to be loved for his own sake, Augustine makes the conceptual connection between use (*uti*) and signs (*signa*) on the one hand, and enjoyment (*frui*) and thing (*res*) on the other. All signs ultimately point to God and are, therefore, to be used as a means of enjoying, or loving, him. Properly speaking, only God – as Father, Son and Spirit – is an end in himself, and therefore only he is properly called a 'thing'; everything else functions as a sign in some capacity, for everything else points to him.[52] From the outset, then, what is especially important for Augustine is the relationship between reader and text. If the interpreter traces the significatory relationships properly, they will ultimately be led into a contemplation of the life of the divine Trinity.

In book 2, Augustine discusses his theory of signification in greater detail. He begins by distinguishing between two basic classes of signs. Some signs, he says, are 'natural signs' (*signa naturalia*), based on a natural cause and effect relationship. Smoke as a sign of fire or footprints as a sign of an animal's presence are examples of natural signs.[53] Other signs, he tells us, are 'conventional signs' (*signa data*), the result of an agreed upon meaning. There are many examples of conventional signs, but Augustine is most interested in words which make up language.[54] For example, the word *bos* is a conventional sign which points beyond the arrangement of letters to a physical ox. It is the result of an agreed upon convention that this particular arrangement of letters will be the standard means of signifying an ox. It is at this point that Augustine introduces the problem that will inform much of what he has to say in the remainder of book 2. The relationship between a particular word and the thing which it signifies appears to be set up by Augustine as an arbitrary relationship. There is nothing inherent in the letters *b-o-s* which requires them to signify an ox when placed together in that order; because they are established solely by agreement, there is no necessary connection between conventional signs and their referents. This arbitrary relationship, as Augustine recognises, increases the potential

[51] *Ibid.* 1.35.39 (CCSL 32:28): *omnium igitur, quae dicta sunt, ex quo de rebus tractamus, haec summa est, ut intellegatur legis et omnium diuinarum scripturarum plenitudo et finis esse dilectio rei, qua fruendum est, et rei, quae nobis cum ea re frui potest, quia, ut se quisque diligat, praecepto non opus est. hoc ergo ut nossemus atque possemus, facta est tota pro nostra salute per diuinam prouidentiam dispensatio temporalis, qua debemus uti, non quasi mansoria quadam dilectione et delectatione, sed transitoria potius tamquam uiae, tamquam uehiculorum uel aliorum quorumlibet instrumentorum aut si quid congruentius dici potest, ut ea quibus ferimur, propter illud, ad quod ferimur, diligamus.*

[52] *Ibid.* 1.5.5.

[53] *Ibid.* 2.1.2.

[54] *Ibid.* 2.2.3.

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for misinterpretation.[55] There is no obvious, inherent connection between the sign and its referent which the interpreter can rely on. To interpret it properly, one must simply learn the convention.

Furthermore, the word *bos* signifying an ox is an example of what Augustine calls a 'proper' (*propria*) conventional sign, a sign which has a simple relationship with its *res*. This sort of simple relationship between *signum* and *res* is found in many things. Examples include pictures and sculptures, where the likeness between them and their referent is obvious.[56] Other signs, such as those made by actors upon a stage, could be difficult to understand, for the likeness between the signs and those things which they signify is not as easy to discern. Often an interpreter is required for one to understand them.[57] Similarly, the customs of dress and conduct in a particular place signify something beyond themselves, though a foreigner might not be able to ascertain what that is.[58] Still, these are all examples of 'proper' conventional signs, where the sign has a simple relationship with its referent. In cases where the 'thing' to which the sign points is not immediately obvious, knowledge of the signs themselves will often help to overcome this problem.

However, while conventional signs, when functioning as proper signs, connote a simple relationship between *signum* and *res*, Augustine maintains that conventional signs can also function figuratively. Here the process of signification becomes more complex. For example, *bos* refers to a physical ox, but that ox might in turn signify something else – a preacher of the gospel – when it functions figuratively.[59] The physical ox, which initially appears to be the 'thing' to which the word *bos* points, turns out to be a sign itself. Thus *bos* in this context has come to communicate indirectly, or figuratively, a preacher. What was a simple sign–referent relationship has become more complex by taking on a figurative meaning. In order to properly interpret figurative signs, knowledge of the signs themselves is not enough; one must also have knowledge of the thing to which the sign points.[60] In this case, one must not merely know that *bos* means 'ox', but also that an ox is known

[55] It is important to note that it is only one who is not acquainted with the customary meaning who finds the sign arbitrary. Those who are acquainted with the convention see a likeness between the sign and that which it signifies, for it was on this basis that the sign came to stand for the particular thing in the first place. *De doctrina christiana* 2.25.38.

[56] *Ibid.* 2.25.39.

[57] *Ibid.* 2.25.39.

[58] *Ibid.* 2.25.39.

[59] *Ibid.* 2.10.15; 1 Cor 4:9.

[60] *Ibid.* 2.16.23.

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for its value as a strong labourer, just as a preacher labours for the gospel. In a similar way, when Augustine considers the command in the gospel to be wise like *serpentes* in Matthew 10:16, he notes that this passage is meant to lead interpreters into the figurative signification process.[61] He observes that it is a well-known fact that the serpent will protect its head at all bodily cost when it is attacked, and so he draws the figurative implication that 'for the sake of our head, which is Christ, we should willingly offer our body to the persecutors'.[62] Such a figurative reading requires that one not only know that the word 'serpent' refers to a physical snake in its proper sense, but also that one know something about the serpent so that one is able to see what the image of a serpent figuratively points to. Based on a certain likeness, or *similitudo*, between the image and the figurative referent, one is able to follow the figurative process of signification, from the words ox (*bos*) and serpents (*serpentes*) to the respective animals themselves and, by observing the similarity of certain characteristics with the character of a preacher and a Christian, one can follow the figurative process on to its figurative meaning.

But this seems to open up endless figurative possibilities. How can one know when to interpret a sign figuratively and when to interpret it in accordance with is 'proper' sign–referent relationship? Here the importance of *narratio* becomes evident as the means by which the divine author's strategy of signification is communicated and, therefore, also becomes the key to being able to read the signs of scripture properly.[63] Signs that are normally 'proper signs' only become figurative when they are brought into scripture's 'narrative orbit', to use Rowan Williams' phrase.[64] In one's day-to-day life, *bos* ordinarily serves as a proper sign, pointing to a physical ox; it is only within the context of scripture's *narratio* that it takes on a figurative dimension. Augustine hints at this early on in book 1 when he introduces the distinction between *signum* and *res*. Augustine uses wood, stone and cattle as examples of 'things'. However, he adds a caveat, in which he makes a special exception for the wood which Moses cast into the

[61] *Ibid*. 2.16.24.

[62] *Ibid*. 2.16.24 (CCSL 32:129): *ut scilicet pro capite nostro, quod est christus, corpus potius persequentibus offeramus*.

[63] Rebecca Harden Weaver has made a similar observation: 'In effect, he bracketed his presentation on biblical signs with an insistence on the need for intimate familiarity with the sweep of scripture: its fundamental content, and style. . . . [I]t is only after gaining a solid grasp of the message of scripture ("the thing") that the interpreter should begin to consider the signs that refer to it'. 'Reading the Signs: Guidance for the Pilgrim Community', *Interpretation* 58 (2004), p. 36.

[64] Rowan Williams, 'Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's *De Doctrina*', *Journal of Literature and Theology* 3 (1989), p. 148.

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bitter water at Mara (Exod 15:25), the stone which Jacob used as a pillow (Gen 28:11) and the ram which Abraham offered instead of Isaac (Gen 12:13). They are excluded from being 'things' in the proper sense because, though they are 'things', they are also signs within the biblical *narratio*.[65] Ordinarily, physical wood, stones and cattle are 'things' signified by words; however, because of the conventional quality of language, these things can bear particular figurative meanings within the *narratio* of scripture. Because of the significant role wood plays at pivotal points within the narrative (as the means of salvation during the flood and at Christ's crucifixion, for example), it takes on a figurative function, in which it is closely associated with God's salvific work throughout the rest of the narrative as well. Similarly, because scripture explicitly makes the connection between an ox and a preacher (1 Tim 5:18), all other scriptural references to an ox naturally conjure up associations with a preacher. These terms have been metaphorasised by the divine arrangement found in the *narratio* of scripture. In this way, the *narratio* functions as an integral part of Augustine's theory of signification, providing both the possibilities and limits of the figuration process.

However, by placing such strong emphasis on *narratio* as the condition for interpreting the signs of scripture, Augustine seems to create another problem. It appears as though the system he has set up makes scripture completely self-referential, infinitely bound within itself and, therefore, cut off from any objective 'meaning'. It would seem as if Augustine's vision of scripture very closely resembles Roland Barthes' vision of the death of the author, in which 'the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation [of life] that is lost, infinitely deferred'.[66] It would seem that Augustine has become a 'postmodern man'. But this is only the case if one plucks Augustine's sign theory out of the particular kind of narratival context which conditions it. It is important to remember that, in Augustine's understanding of *narratio*, the author embeds his will and very character into the text itself. Whenever one engages the text, one encounters the author. It is a downward, or incarnational, movement at work in his conception of meaning, in which the divine author embeds his character into the *narratio* of scripture. There is, then, no need to go beyond the narrative to find meaning, regardless of whether that meaning is cast in terms of *res* or *voluntas*. Rather, by following the significatory process as it is conditioned by the arrangement of scripture's narrative, the reader encounters the very character of the author as the *voluntas* and *res*. After following the argument of Augustine's sign theory,

[65] *De doctrina christiana* 1.2.2.

[66] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), p. 147.

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one is able to look back and realise that his reliance on narrative produces a personal account of meaning. That is to say, for Augustine, the meaning of scripture is a person, and the process of interpretation constitutes an ongoing encounter between the interpreter and the divine author.[67]

Conclusion

I began this essay by suggesting that the recent rise of narrative hermeneutics serves as a lens through which we can more fully appreciate the place of narrative in Augustine's hermeneutics and the dynamic conception of meaning it produces. Throughout my argument, I have been mindful that Augustine's use of narrative must be set squarely in its late antique context, in which the primacy of authorial intent and the existence of objective meaning are both taken for granted. These are the most obvious two points on which Augustine's hermeneutics stands in contrast to contemporary narrative hermeneutics. Nevertheless, I have maintained that these differences should not deter us from appreciating the important place of narrative in Augustine's thought, specifically its role in producing a personal account of meaning. As Augustine himself makes clear at the beginning of *De doctrina christiana*, his theory of interpretation should not be construed as a rigid system in which the interpreter seeks to apprehend a static meaning that lies completely beyond the text; rather, he states that God, as the author, is the end to which all signs lead.[68] A careful reading of Augustine's interpretive theory reveals how this plays out in actual practice: he casts divine revelation in general, and scripture in particular, as a narrative in which the divine author's character is embedded. Then, through the process of interpretation, the interpreter encounters the character of the divine author as the meaning.

[67] While I have focused in this essay on the individual's reading of the text, this is not meant to imply the absence of interpretive standards for Augustine. To be sure, Augustine was very conscious of the role of the *regula fidei*, church and tradition, in his thought. For example, *Confessiones* 12.20–31 provides evidence of this at work in his thought.

[68] *De doctrina christiana* 1.5.5.

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