1. Introductory Remarks

When we speak of allegory we need to differentiate between allegoresis as a reading strategy (and, as such, a hermeneutic approach) and, on the other hand, the allegory proper as a rhetorical trope, that is, as an intentional form of speech. A text which can be read allegorically need not have been designed to be allegorical, though it may have been. Allegorical writing is evident whenever a narrator or speaker uses personified abstracta in order to illustrate facts or circumstances (e.g. Hercules at the Crossroads, Prudentius’ Psychomachia). It encodes the text with a meaning that has to be decoded by allegorical reading; in other words, allegorical writing assigns the text a meaning that has to be explained with words which have no semantic relation to the words that express the literal message of the text (for instance: Hercules stands for the human soul, the female figures for virtue and vice).

In ancient literature, the act of allegorical writing is preserved in texts with allegorical figures, and the act of allegorical reading—allegoresis—in texts that interpret a pre-text allegorically, as in Augustine’s Confessions 13. Allegorical readings are usually labelled as such. It is more difficult

---


2 E.g. Aug. Gn. Man. 2,1–3 (cf. Gn. litt. 8,2,5); ep. 102,33; en. Ps. 33,1,2; 51,2; 59,1.
to identify allegorical writing. This is unproblematic in cases where the allegory is made explicit: Prudentius lets virtues and vices appear as fighting figures, with the effect that an allegorical reading is unavoidable. But whenever texts from Homer, Moses, Vergil, Ovid etc. are read allegorically, it is only done on the assumption that they were written allegorically.

The following interpretation also has, to a certain extent, the character of such an assumption. I will try to show that Augustine’s Confessions do not just document allegorical reading—that is, of the biblical creation story in Genesis 1 and 2 in book 13,13–46—but rather that the first ten books (the autobiographical part of the Confessions) may be read allegorically, which implies that they are written as a pretext to an allegorical interpretation. Augustine himself does not set us the task of doing so but, nonetheless, the text of the Confessions contains a series of signs that may be interpreted as allegorical signals.

It is important to consider first the differences between the allegoresis of myths and of the Bible. When one tries to assign a deeper meaning to a mythical story or a mythical figure, it is irrelevant whether the myths are historical or not. Questions such as who Hera, Zeus, Ares, Hercules or Odysseus were and what they did or suffered are only relevant for an allegorical reading insofar as they refer to a specific, philosophically significant phenomenon. The myth here serves only as a carrier of meaning that conveys the real message without actually containing it. In contrast, the object of biblical allegoresis is a text (the Bible) which claims to report historical events or to reflect upon phenomena, as in non-narrative books like the Psalms or the Song of Songs. The model for the method is the Epistle to the Galatians 4,22–24, where Paul interprets the two sons of Abraham, one of whom he begot with the slave Hagar, the other with the freewoman Sarah, as allegories of the Old and New Testaments; the historicity of the circumstances described is not put in doubt by the allegorical interpretation. So, the history of Creation, the history of the people

---


4 Cf. trin. 15,15 where Augustine calls this interpretation allegoria in factis. He does the same with 1 Cor 10,1–11 in util. cred. 11–18; cf. B. Stock, Augustine the Reader.