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LANGUAGE
Guest Editors: John Milbank, Paul Morris

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LANGUAGE, REALITY AND DESIRE IN AUGUSTINE'S DE DOCTRINA

Rowan Williams

De doctrina Christiana. Augustine’s treatise on Christian education (not ‘doctrine’ in the modern sense), has been called the first Christian essay in hermeneutics. It is not simply a discussion of biblical exegesis and the skills necessary for this, but a general consideration of how to understand strange texts, texts of an alien culture and language. Just how strange the Christian scriptures were to the literate late antique mind is almost impossible for those formed in an even residually Christian culture to imagine. Augustine is writing about the literature of what, from the ‘civilised’ point of view, is unmistakably a counter-culture. The Latin of the North African Bible would at times have been as bizarre to the educated reader as is the distinctive religious English of a Rastafarian for most of us. There is a good deal of room for exploration here—of the function and effects of specialized forms of language in the life of a religious community, of how this affects the way in which a community is perceived from outside, and, not least, of how it is possible for individuals to be bilingual and bicultural—like Augustine—in this respect; but my present task is less ambitious. Augustine’s account of interpretation in the de doctrina (henceforward DDC) is a set of variations on a single theme, the relation of res and signum, thing and sign, reality and representation: I want simply to outline his account of this, and to look at one or two aspects of this scheme which may perhaps have some contemporary interest and pertinence. I have not entered into detailed consideration of the whole of the saint’s thinking about language as it appears especially in de magistro and early in the Confessions. Nor have I tried to examine in detail the background of the ideas in DDC, a job already done with distinction by others. The following pages are a reading of DDC designed to bring into profile some features of Augustine’s thinking on language that are both heavily theologically conditioned and in certain respects in tension with his professed theories of language. As so often with Augustine, he is most philosophically interesting when not being self-consciously philosophical.

‘Things’, says Augustine (DDC I.iii), ‘are learned about through signs’; a res is, first and foremost, something whose being is not determined by the function of meaning something else. It is what it is, and does not belong in a system of representation. It may become part of such a system, and be both res and signum; and there are some things whose being is in practice wholly determined by the signifying function—words (clusters of sounds), whose reality has come to be bound up in pointing beyond themselves (though, as we shall see, this is convention: the clusters of sound remain res in that they do not signify by nature, being just vibrations of the air). This is not a wholly novel, nor, at first sight, a very sophisticated picture. There is an obvious problem with the notion of definable things standing independently of systems of representation, and Augustine does not help with this when he insists on the arbitrary nature of the relation of words to things (DDC II.i and ii), and the distinction between natural—involuntary—signa and conventional signs that refer to groundless consent. But, unlike his classical predecessors, Augustine also insists that a doctrine of signs is a step towards a more general theory of language, and goes on to fuse this with a much more characteristic theme of his own. The world of res is not, after all, so simply defined. There are things which, on one analysis, do not ‘speak’ of anything further or ‘make known’ anything other than themselves; but human beings do not live only a cognitive life. We are engaged with the world, moving through it as subjects of will and of love, and each res operates in one of two ways upon our willing and loving. It may be something to be ‘enjoyed’, something which gives us a satisfaction entire in itself, not leading to or demanding interpretation in terms of anything further; or it may be something to be ‘used’, a means to a more final satisfaction, meaning or ‘intending’ more than itself. And, adds Augustine there are things—subjects—that do the enjoying and the using—an important addition; Augustine assumes that ‘signifying’ is a threefold, not a twofold affair, involving the subject for whom signs signify. We cannot miss the point that discussion of signification is also discussion of those beings who are involved in meaning or ‘intending’ or understanding. The distinction between frui and uti (I.iii) is thus superimposed on the res—signum distinction, and pervades the whole of DCC; it is the means whereby Augustine links what he has to say about language with what he has to say about beings who ‘mean’ and about the fundamentally desirous nature of those beings—a link which is undoubtedly the most original and interesting feature of the treatise.

For the Christian, God is supremely res (I.v); he alone is what he is, determined by nothing else, confined by no function, requiring no context or interpretation. He is the ‘context’ of everything, paradoxically not a res at all in the strict sense, not one in a series (non alius, as a later theological tradition would put it). He is beyond all naming (I.vi); though Augustine
does not so express it, it could rightly be said that no *signum* is adequate to his being. Yet he has himself provided a *signum* in the Word made flesh (xi–xiii). By God’s own act and initiative, there is a speech available for talking of him: the mind of God is embodied in Christ as our thoughts are in our words, and by this means God can be truly enjoyed by us, perceived, contemplated and loved in his self-sufficient being.

God is *res*, and, in respect of him, all else is *signum*; God alone is to be enjoyed in and for himself, and in respect of him all else is to be used (xxii). As Augustine himself was well aware, such language is misleading if taken at its face-value; there is something odd in saying that the proper love of neighbour is a ‘using’ of the neighbour to draw closer to God, and there are very considerable problems (xxxii) in applying the scheme to God. The difficulties have been often noted. But we must be careful to avoid a superficial reading. Augustine is consciously playing here with a notion both ambiguous and challenging. Our last end is to enjoy self-sufficient truth and reality; since it is the glimpses and intuitions of this that make any understanding, any intellectual life, at all possible, it is not conceivable that anything should be preferable to this (xii). Thus our last end is the contemplation of that which in no way depends on us or is defined in terms of us (we, rather, are defined in terms of it); and so we cannot for this end use other objects of love in a self-interested way. To ‘use’ the love of neighbour or the love we have for our own bodies (a favourite example of Augustine’s) is simply to allow the capacity for gratuitous or self-forgetful *dilectio* opened up in these and other such loves to be opened still further. The language of *uit* is designed to warn against an attitude towards any finite person or object that terminates their meaning in their capacity to satisfy my desire, that treats them as the end of desire, conceiving my meaning in terms of them and theirs in terms of me. ‘If you settle down in that delight and remain in it, making it the end and sum of your joy, then you can be said to be enjoying it in a true and strict sense’ (xxxiii); and no such cessation of desire is legitimate in relation to finite objects of love. It is painfully absurd, as well as deceptive of self and others, to conclude our exploration when we are in reality still *in via*, still being formed and transformed by what we receive (xxxiii).

The first book of DDC therefore offers a definition of moral and spiritual error in terms of confusing means with ends. God alone is the end of desire; and that entails that there is no finality, no ‘closure’, no settled or intrinsic meaning in the world we inhabit. And God is not an object among others, a point in the world to which other points relate and in terms of which they naturally and plainly organize themselves—except in the sense that there is indeed one ‘point in the world’ entirely transparent to God: the incarnate Word. There is one authorized ‘sign’ which for once we cannot mistake for anything but a sign. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are *res* in the world’s history, yet they are *signum* in a unique sense: they are God’s speech, and so, like our speech, defined by what they teach, what they point to. Here is a worldly *res* that cannot mislead us into thinking that it is to be enjoyed in and as a purely worldly object. Because it is entirely and authoritatively marked out as an object of ‘use’, it can and does lead us to the ultimate *friendum*, insofar we can ever lay hold on this within our history. Thus the way God is present in our history preserves us from the proud illusion that we can step outside history or halt it (and we can compare Augustine’s critique of the Platonists in Confessions VII, which echoes closely so much of DDC I on the incarnation). The Word’s taking of flesh is not a dissolving of history as eternal truth takes over some portion of the world: it is not, says Augustine (l.xii), that God comes to a place where he was not before. Rather the incarnation manifests the essential quality of the world itself as ‘sign’ or trace of its maker. It instructs us once and for all that we have our identity within the shifting, mobile realm of representation, non-finality, growing and leaning, because it reveals what the spiritual eye ought to perceive generally—that the whole creation is uttered and meant by God, and therefore has no meaning in itself. If we do not understand this, we seek for or invent finalities within the created order, ways of blocking off the processes of learning and desiring. Only when, by the grace of Christ, we know that we live entirely in a world of signs are we set free for the restlessness that is our destiny as rational creatures.

The coming of the Word in flesh establishes, we might say, the nature of fleshly being as word, as sign, the all-pervasiveness of ‘use’. That is to say, we live in a world of restless fluidities in meaning: all terms and all the objects they name are capable of opening out beyond themselves, coming to speak of a wider context, and so refusing to stay still under our attempts to comprehend or systematize or (for these go together) idolize. As Augustine says at the very beginning of his discussion (l.i), ‘wood, stone and cattle’ are all *res* at first sight; but there was a piece of wood with which Moses sweetened the waters, a stone on which Jacob laid his head and saw a vision of angels, a beast that Abraham slaughtered in place of his son. ‘Not everything is *signum*’ in the ordinary course of things (ibid.); but in the light of Christ, no *res* is left alone. It can be used, and so become a sign: it can mean what it is not.10

Book II of DDC turns to apply all this to Scripture. In Book I, Augustine has assumed that Scripture is a sort of primary derivative from the work of Christ, a unique object of ‘use’. If we were perfected in charity, we should not need Scripture (l.xxxix)—just as, if we had known how to ‘read’ the created order, we should not have needed the incarnation (xii). As it is, Scripture arouses in us an appropriate love and delight when read properly.
the delight fitting to a vehicle that is carrying us forward efficiently (xxxv). It is thus the supreme signum after Christ, and Book II reflects on the practical consequences of this in our study. Signs are various, and we need skills to read them; much of this discussion is, accordingly, a treatment of the linguistic, semantic and historical skills required. But in the light of what has gone before, one of the most significant passages is a rather awkward and inconclusive chapter early on in this second book (II.vi). Scripture is full of ‘obscurities and ambiguities’; it does not lie open to the casual reader. If it is meant to be a pointer to the ultimate res beyond—the Trinity—why should such difficulty pervade it? The main point of Augustine’s reply is that we do not properly value what we discover rapidly or easily, an argument familiar from elsewhere in ancient rhetoric and patristic theology. But this is combined with another fairly standard argument, that the unravelling of obscurity occasions delight. ‘I don’t quite know how’, says Augustine, ‘but I understand the saints in a more agreeable way when I see them as the teeth of the Church, cutting people off from their errors’ (ibid.)—alluding to the allegorical interpretation of a passage in the Song of Songs. ‘Thy teeth are like flocks of sheep’ (4.2). The similitude contains no extra information, but, for reasons Augustine says he cannot understand, it makes reading proceed suaviter.

Augustine lived in a culture that prized literary difficulty, and these words of his were to be a charter for later generations attempting to defend the legitimacy of difficulty, of polysemic and metaphorical fluidity in the understanding of Scripture. The Bible becomes a paradigm of what the late antique reader valued. But Augustine is doing more than simply commending it as a suitable field for the exercise of over-sophisticated literary critics. When he recapitulates the argument in the (later) Book IV (vi and viii), he stresses even more the function of difficulty in guaranteeing that learning from Scripture is a process—not a triumphant moment of penetration and mastery, but an extended play of invitation and exploration (the resonances of these metaphors are deliberate, and not wholly absent from Augustine’s vocabulary). The Christian life itself, as we have seen, is in constant danger of premature closure, the supposition that the end of desire has been reached and the ambiguities of history and language put behind us; and thus the difficulty of Scripture is itself a kind of parable of our condition. We cannot properly enjoy what we swiftly and definitively possess: such possession results in inaction and ultimately contempt for the object (II.vi).

Obscurity in the words of revelation is one of the things that anchors us in our temporal condition: the search for instant clarity and transparency is like the Platonist’s search for ‘unattended moments’ of ecstasy, as Augustine describes it elsewhere. A language which indefinitely postpones fulfilment or enjoyment is appropriate to the Christian discipline of spiritual homelessness, to the character of the believing life as pilgrimage. Yet Scripture is equally, as we have noted, an effective vehicle for the journey home, and its purpose is to perfect that unqualified and self-forgetting caritas which human beings are made for. And so the tracing of the intricacies of scriptural symbol, the unending decoding of revealed obscurity must remain a morally controlled matter. It is not suggested that the difficulty of the sacred text offers a kind of elevated recreation for advanced souls, as an unsympathetic reading of Origen on allegory might imply.12 The recognition that revelation is not obvious to the fallen mind is humbling, and humility is the indispensable soil for caritas to grow upon. Things are plainly stated elsewhere, Augustine admits (II.vi), there is nothing central to the Christian revelation that is restricted to those possessed of advanced hermeneutical skills: but the many transformations of what is plainly stated warn us of the folly of supposing we have rapidly and definitively grasped what is being said in a single successful event of communication.

Obscurity can also, for Augustine, include grotesqueness—the stylistic horrors of the Old Latin, the moral horrors of the Old Testament. The infidel reader may be simply put off (IV.viii), and this is probably just as well, since such a reader lacks the key to the text, which is conversion to Christ; though on the other hand, grotesquerie and strangeness may serve as at least a partly converting invitation. But, for the believer, these are a prophylactic against ‘fastidiousness’, the assumption that we have nothing to learn from what startles or offends our taste (we may recall Thomas Merton’s remarks13 about the ‘difficulty’ of the writings of Thérèse of Lisieux—a very considerable challenge to the young Merton’s modernist sensibility). We are again being warned against closure: we can and shall learn from the unexpected and from what is not readily culturally assimilable. The bizarre as well as the ambiguous has its place in preserving our openness to the final non-representable end of desire.

The fact that we live in a world where, in a sense, everything is potentially signum, potentially speech, where the boundaries of meaning that seem to delineate the clear outlines of a res that is uncontroversially what it is are constantly being broken by the apparent metaphorical anomaly evident in Augustine’s own exegesis—all this does not amount to a self-indulgent relativism, an exaltation of rhetoric and semantic ingenuity for their own sake. So much is clear from the later chapters of DDC II, especially xxiv to xl. We understand the all-pervasiveness of use and sign only in the light of that reality which, as we have seen, points unequivocally to God and shows once and for all that creation is not our stopping place. Scriptural exegesis may have its surface anarchy—you never quite know what may stand for what—but ultimately its exchanges and substitutions converge on the cross, ‘On which all Figures fix their Eyes’. II.xli spells this out a little further: the
cross stands for the whole of discipleship; as we live it out, we learn the depth and riches of the caritas of Christ. The cross is the final ‘passover’, the point of disjunction between slavery and freedom; but only humility can grasp this—the humility, presumably, that has learned to live in the realm of time and symbol and not to ‘enjoy’ it as complete or final, the humility signified in the passover narrative by that insignificant plant, hyssop. ‘Rooted and grounded’ in this humble and accepting love, we see the scope of Christ’s love in the cross. Relating this both to earlier passages, and, once again, to the almost contemporary Confessions VII, we can say that the scope of Christ’s love lies precisely in his own supremely gratuitous acceptance of the limits of history: what is uniquely res, the eternal wisdom of God, becomes uniquely and entirely signum, a worldly thing meaning what it is not. To look to the cross, then, and to ‘sign’ ourselves with it, is to accept the same limits, and thus to live in hope—and, Augustine adds, oddly at first sight, to have proper reverence for the sacraments; not so odd if we see this as a further illustration of the need to see the symbolic life of the Church itself as pointing beyond itself, rather than providing a ground for spiritual complacency and stasis (as for the Donatists, perhaps, whom Augustine certainly has in mind here).

The cross in particular, and the incarnate life in general, display the distance between God and creation in displaying their union. How is God present in the world? In a death, in weakness, inactivity, negation, the infirma divinitas of Confessions VII.18, the weak God lying at our feet. It is the ‘void’—in worldly terms—of Christ incarnate and crucified that establishes the difference of God; it is this emptiness of meaning and power that makes Christ supremely signum. He is God’s speech because he is worldly ‘silence’; he is what cannot be enjoyed or rested in. We can do nothing but ‘use’ this (if we relate to it at all)—that is, we can only allow it to detach us from self-sufficient satisfaction, from image and expectation. The unbridgeable distance between the eternal res and all earthly representation opens up through this ‘anti-representation’ that is the cross; yet in the recognition of distance is also buried the apprehension of gift or revelation. Here is an event that, in itself and in its long-term effect in the formation of the Church, speaks of abdication or re-creation, of grace; in challenging our ‘possessing’ of objects or events, challenging our urge to ‘enjoy’ the world, and so too the urge to close the question of meaning, it rescues us from the stasis of pride, the self-paralysis Augustine so vividly describes in the Confessions as the fruit of misdirected and misconceived desire. In the Confessions, Platonism serves first to liberate desire, to stop us enjoying limited objects, so that our longing can turn towards what is not in the realm of things; but desire must undergo a second purification. It is not to seek for timeless vision, for the true and the eternal, as a kind of place to escape into from the vicissitudes of the material world; it must enact its yearning through the corporate life of persons in this world (through the Church, ultimately, for Augustine). And it is directed or instructed and enabled in this by the fact that the crucial liberation from pride is effected by encountering the utter difference, the transcendence, of unchanging truth in the life, death and resurrection of a mortal man.

All this remains buried in what is very often a quite unreconstructed set of Platonic antitheses: yet in the works of the later 390’s, the breach with Platonism (Platonism as Augustine understood it and had experienced it) is perhaps more clearly marked than in any earlier or later writings. Having sketched with some care the Platonic vision of the superiority of the incorruptible and immaterial, Augustine is then obliged by his commitment to the incarnate Christ to deny that the incorruptible and immaterial can ever as such be an object for the cognition of material, historical and ‘desirous’ beings. Only in the non-finality of historical relationships and historical ‘satisfaction’, and in the consequent restlessness that keeps us active and attentive is unchanging truth to be touched. The language and the setting of Confessions IX.x, the famous Ostia ‘vision’, bring this out vividly: it is in the mutual stimulus, the urging further and further, of a conversation that there comes a momentary glimpse of sheer fruition. Cast as much of it is in the terminology of a purgative ascent through creatures to the soul and thence to the highest being, this account is nonetheless a powerful challenge to the ‘Platonic’ model of individual escape from words and matter, because of its conversational character. Heaven would be a perpetuation of the moment of fruition, the shared reaching out itci trepidantis aspectus of Augustine and Monica; and now all that can be said or understood of that fruition is through the image of the moment of mutual transparency that can issue from the intense exchange of words: where the fluidity of utterance itself, a play of words that is also the modification and re-arranging of a relationship between material persons, so indicates or rather embodies its own unfinished nature that it expresses or introduces the irreducible ‘difference’ of God.

There is no absolute knowledge but rather a textual infinite, an interminable web of texts or interpretation (Geoffrey Hartman). Allowing—as one always must with such statements—the widest possible sense to ‘textual’ (as relating to any structure of intelligible representation in words or acts), it is possible to see Augustine’s treatment of reality and representation as moving in this direction. In the sense that no worldly res is securely settled as a fixed object ‘meaning’ itself, or tied in a fixed designation, that no worldly state of affairs can be allowed to terminate human desire, that all that is present to us in and as language is potentially signum in respect of the unrepresentable God, and despite the surface crudity of his distinction between things and names, Augustine’s scheme in DDC certainly has
affinities with the popular notion that everything is language, everything is interpretation. What we know is what we 'read'. But the point at which this ceases to be an adequate characterization of Augustine is precisely the point where this discussion began: the canonical text that witnesses to the canonical (normative) representation, Christ; the text that exists not simply for 'play', but for the formation of caritas. It is not textuality that is, ultimately, infinite, but the love of God, shaping our love.

Scripture is a text with a centre: it is to be interpreted in the light of Christ crucified and only so.16 The central displacement of fixed concepts involved here—God, flesh, time, eternity, mortality, creation, dissolution, power and impotence—reminds us that the sign-quality of the world is not to be trivialised into a mere system of ciphers, puzzles that yield solutions, fixed material symbols for a fixed immaterial object or set of objects (when you know the code, you read off the content). When Augustine in DDC III.v-x warns against the fundamental error of mistaking signum for res, he is not so much complaining that some people are ignorant of the code of scriptural symbolism as noting the importance of the central hermeneutical collision that occurs between Christians and Jews. In Augustine's eyes, the problem for the Jews is that they have long lived unconsciously under useful signs; without any theological overview to make full sense of it, the people of the Old Covenant knew how to 'use' the signs established in the Law, symbolic acts, ceremonies, modes of behaviour. By God's providence, these signs began to teach caritas; they did not invite enjoyment. But in fact the whole of this symbolic order looks forward to the point at which it is shown to be such, when it is finally revealed to be signum: with the coming of Christ and his passion and resurrection the full scope of divine and human caritas appears, so that the previous history in the light of which Christ is intelligible, and which he in turn makes newly intelligible, is seen to serve, to be 'useful', in relation to this decisively liberating event. Faith in Christ now renders the exact observance of the old symbolic forms redundant: from practices, they become words only, the written record of the Law, because the relevant 'useful' practice is now the resurrection life in the Church, with its new and more restricted and austere symbolic life (III.ix).

A sign may be usefully observed in ignorance; but when it is shown to be a sign, a choice is introduced. To observe a symbolic form or deliberately go on inhabiting a symbolic structure of words and images in the old way, when the definitive sign appears that draws together all law, all rites, all images, is to turn the old order of signs into something different, to begin to 'enjoy' it, to choose it for itself, and so to refuse the summons to time and history and the possibility of caritas which the sign is meant to carry. The sign chosen for itself is against the liberation towards the one true res offered by the final sign of Christ is being turned into a pseudo-res: symbolic practice has lost its innocence.

Although this discussion is predictably cast in the rhetoric of anti-Jewish polemic (Augustine does not ask, for instance, what a Jewish exegete might want to propose as a focusing or definitive signum, or indeed what exactly the Law is a sign of for the Jew), he allows that the problem of confusing res and signum is a more general one. The Christian may so treat the sacraments of the Church as to cease properly 'using' them: there are useless interpretations of useful signs, and it is better to be ignorant of the explanation of a sign's use than to have a wrong understanding of it—presumably an understanding divorced from caritas (III.ix). But the importance of the application of all this to Scripture is that Augustine has in effect defined Scripture as the paradigm of self-conscious symbolic awareness: it is a pattern of signs organized around—and by—the incarnate Word in such a way that all the signs remain signs, all are kept open to the horizon of God, in virtue of their relation to the central acting out in cross and resurrection of God's otherness from the realm of representation. Only the God who is irreducibly different in this way (non aliud not another in a series or class) can finally open up desire to the dimension of caritas, love which is both passionate (engaged, actively committed, exposed) and disinterested, self-forgetful. To know the difference between res and signum is, for the Christian believer, to know the difference of God, and so to be equipped for life in God's image, the unending expansion of love.

'It would be a great relief', writes Hartman,17 'to break with the idea of the sacred, and especially with institutions that claim to mediate it. Yet the institution of language makes every such break appear inauthentic. It keeps us in the 'defile of the word' meeting, slaying, purifying what is held to be sacred or sublime again and again. The very persistence, moreover, of so many and various ideals of language purification betrays something religious in spirit, if not in name'. Hartman, like some other contemporary critics, comes close to a 'natural theology' grounded in the facts of language and interpretation, the unfinishable nature of discourse: the Other is inescapable, in that, once anything has been said, its incompleteness, silences or embarrassments require a different utterance, 'friend or antagonist' to what has already been said.18 When all has been said, we still face a question, even a claim, which expresses itself in language’s pressure to self-purgation. This is a theme that needs careful handling (like all supposed natural theologies, it delivers only an abstract conclusion); but it could at least be agreed that no religious world-view could survive without an account of the unfinished and fluid character of the linguistic world, a conviction that atomistic 'systems of representation' purporting to label discrete objects are a snare and a delusion. The interest of Augustine's scheme is that he avoids giving a
simplistic version of this conviction. He goes further than the argument, familiar from the Cappadocians, \(^{19}\) that names leave a ‘residue’ undescribed and indescribable in things. Because he is ceaselessly attentive to the inseparability of knowledge from love, Augustine’s own concern is not to secure such a residue, but to understand how language in its fluidity and displacements is inescapably interwoven with the restlessness and openness of desire that is what is fundamentally human. Language is not a set of discrete acts of unsuccessful naming any more than it is a set of discrete acts of successful naming. ‘Success’ in our discourse is the skill of *continuing with* the shifts of interconnecting perceptions that material history and relationship produce. To return to Augustine’s example, we may start with the supposition that an animal is a *res*, a distinct object bearing a name: but the ram, once brought into the narrative orbit of covenant and sacrifice, slaughtered to redeem Isaac, is not to be so easily shepherded and penned in. Even the most trivial talk about rams is now liable to be haunted by this metaphorization. Only God means nothing but God.

And further, Augustine, by directing our attention to the particular set of signs we call Scripture, explains how the interweaving of fluid language and open desire is the locus of transforming grace. Cross and resurrection, to which all scriptural signs lead us, free us once and for all from the threat of an idolatry of signs. They are both inescapable and provisional. God has ‘placed himself in the order of signs’ (de la Taille’s famous phrase), and so brought to light the nature of all signs in respect of his own nature as uniquely *res*. *Caritas* is the goal that lies in and beyond the skill of ‘continuing with’ the shifts of discourse; since, for the Christian, language is no more capable of being a ‘neutral’, closed, self-reflexive pattern of play than is human being itself. The ‘realism’ of such a view—to open up a rather unmanageably large issue—is implicit in the directedness of interpretation towards love, and the conviction that adequate interpretation begins with the primordial ‘non-worldly’ love enacted in Christ. The world of human discourse, is, for Augustine, extended between the love of God in creation and redemption, and the Beatific Vision.

The omnipresence of metaphor, then, is ‘controlled’, not by a break-through into clear metaphysical knowledge (though Augustine constantly struggles with the pull towards this resolution, not always successfully), but by a central metaphor to which the whole world of signs can be related, a sign of what all signs are. The Word incarnate and crucified represents the absence and deferral that is basic to *signum* as such, and represents also, crucially, the fact that absence and deferral are the means whereby God engages our desire so that it is freed from its own pull towards finishing, towards presence and possession. Christ can only be shown to be the enactment of God if, as bearer of ultimate promise, he at the same time defers and transforms that promise by a death that presages our baptismal death as believers (and our daily losing of and longing for the face of God in the practice we call faith), and a resurrection that does not destroy our creatureliness but at least strips it of creaturely ‘attachment’. Wisdom elects to be mortal; and what prevents this from being a straightforward theophany that would lead us to identify Wisdom with the world of mortality is that it is precisely *mortality* itself, limit, incompleteness, absence, that is the speech of Wisdom with us. A world of mortality can only be theophanic (in the sense of pure ‘presence’) if its mortal elements are erased: theophanies are seen in ‘orient and immortal wheat’. But whatever the religious significance of such ‘timeless’ moments (and it is not something the mature Augustine dwells on: he is more inclined to see terror and mystery in the natural world than to sense God in it in any undialectical way), it is not here that Wisdom is active in the transformation of the world, but in the presence—in-absence of Christ hastening towards his death and calling us after (DCC I.xxxiv; the same image is found in *Confessions* IV.12). Wisdom is mortar for us and with us not to destroy but to affirm and then transfigure the world in which we actually live, the world of body, time and language, absence and desire. There is indeed a *requies* promised to the people of God, the ‘presence’ of heaven and the vision of God’s face; but by definition this cannot now be talked about except in the mythological language of future hope (as if it were a future state like other future states, like what I shall feel tomorrow). It is the presence of God at our own end, our death, the end of time for us, and in some sense the end of desire in *fruitio*: not, therefore, for possession now in the language of belief, or any other language.

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**REFERENCES**

1. *Eg. Conf. 1.8.
3. It is outlined in *de magistro* IV and VIII. Markus, op. cit., pp. 60–63, summarizes the classical debates about signs, and notes Aristotle’s definition of the sign as something that involves in its being the being of something else.
4. He is eager to avoid the Stoic doctrine that signs are a natural effect of things, and his inclusion of words among signs is a highly important step towards freeing semiotics from a kind of naturalistic determinism and allowing room for a more culturally oriented account of language and meaning. U. Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (London, Macmillan, 1984), 33ff. points this out, though considers that Augustine refuses to follow the path he himself opens up. This is largely true; but part of the purpose of the present paper will be to argue that he goes rather further than Eco believes—at least, if one reads his semiotic theory in close connection with his theological programme in DDC. I am enormously indebted to John Milbank’s paper, ‘Theology Without Substance: Christianity, Signs, Origins’, in *Literature and Theology* Part I, Vol. 2, No. 1 (March,
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5 Markus op. cit., p. 72, brings this out with exemplary clarity.
6 On its possible sources, see Lorenz, and, much qualifying Lorenz's conclusions, O'Donovan, op. cit., pp. 365–7.
7 Its contradictions are set out by O'Donovan, op. cit., p. 383ff: he argues that Augustine attempts to identify fructus with love (so that what is not enjoyed is not strictly speaking loved), and that his understanding of uti wavers between an instrumental and an 'ontological' sense (the latter simply having to do with an object's place in the scale of being. I am not myself convinced that this latter point holds, as will become clear in what follows in the text.
8 On the dependence of all intellectual perception on the tacit and occasionally realized awareness of eternal and unchanging truth, see, e.g., Conf. VII. 10 and 17, de libero arbitrio II.xii, 53–4.
9 Conf. IV.4–9 sets out the traps of loving other human beings as if their ultimate meaning and one's own were mutually definatory.
10 It is the point that must lead us to qualify Eco's conclusions: Augustine still operates with a semiotic world of individuated substances referring to or pointing to each other, admittedly, but the way in which objects may be absorbed into the realm of sign does suggest something more than 'denotative unambiguity'. The word may, trivially, denote an object, and the object another object (as the ram 'means' Isaac); but the point of the ram denoting Isaac, and, through Isaac, Christ, is not either information or rhetorical decoration, but a warning against supposing we know exactly what 'ram' as a word means, and what the ram of Mount Moriah means, independently of the 'culture' of Christian caritas.
11 E.g., Gregory Nazianzen, Second Theological Oration (Or.28), 12.
12 Origen, de principiis I.praef. 3 and 8 sets out the principles on which his allegorical readings are based.
14 For a brilliant interpretation of the tensions in Augustine between Platonic metaphysical resolution and questioning faith, see Joseph S. O'Leary, Questioning Back. The Overcoming of Metaphysics in Christian Tradition (Minneapolis, Winston Press, 1985), ch.4.
17 Criticism in the Wilderness, p. 249.
18 Ibid. p. 260.
19 Basil, adversus Eunomium I.6.III.4, Gregory of Nyssa, contra Eunomium X, etc.

AUGUSTINE ON LANGUAGE
Andrew Louth

The obvious place to begin a discussion of St. Augustine's ideas on language is his discussion of signs at the beginning of de doctrina christiana, book II.¹ There he picks up the distinction he made between res and signum—thing and sign—at the beginning of Book I and sketches an understanding of language as significant discourse, the signs used in discourse being words, verba. Very briefly, Augustine distinguishes between things and signs—or rather, within the realm of things, between things per se, which are just themselves, and things used as signs, that is, to refer to other things—and he says, res per signa discuntur, things are learnt by signs. Book I is devoted to things and turns out to be a treatise on love: what we are to do with things is to love them, so to speak, with a properly ordered love (see especially I.35.39). Book II then turns to signs. Again a distinction, between signa naturalia and signa data, natural signs and given signs (usually translated 'conventional signs'): natural signs signify automatically (smoke as a sign of fire), given signs only signify because they are given meaning, given by it rational, intending beings. 'A sign', as Augustine puts it, 'causes us to think of something beyond the impression made'; and that movement beyond the immediate impression is either in the nature of things (smoke rising from a fire) or is intended by the one who gives the sign (using a fire to make smoke-signals: not an example Augustine uses). Either way signs only function if they are understood. But with signa data what is understood is not inherent in the sign, but given it by some intelligent being. Such signa data can, in principle, be given by means of any of the senses, but in practice it is a matter of things seen and heard, and signs heard, words, are pre-eminent, though sight reasserts its traditional primacy when Augustine considers the advantages of permanence provided by recording aural words in writing.

There are two striking things that Augustine says about this system of signs that we call human speech or language. First, it is a way of communicating between mind and mind. The first thing he says about signa data is that they are those signs 'which living creatures show one to another for the purpose of conveying, in so far as they are able, the motions of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood. Nor is there any other reason for signifying, or giving signs, except for bringing forth and transferring to another mind the action of the mind in the person who makes