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Literary Fiction according to Augustine's *Soliloquia*

Abstract

In this paper, I focus on some passages from Augustine's *Soliloquia*. I show that they contain the idea of literary fiction as a non-deceptive lie, in which voluntariness and necessity coexist. I pay particular attention to the case of mythical fiction, which on the one hand leads to Cicero's theory of narration and on the other hand to Augustine's conception of imagination.

Keywords: fake; imagination; lie; literary fiction; myth.

Ancient and medieval studied Authors: Augustine; Cicero.

La finzione letteraria secondo i Soliloquia di Agostino

Abstract

Questo articolo, concentrandosi su alcuni passi dei *Soliloquia* di Agostino, mostra che essi contengono un'idea della finzione letteraria come menzogna non ingannevole, in cui convivono volontarietà e necessità. Viene dedicata particolare attenzione al caso della finzione mitica, ricondotta da un lato alla teoria ciceroniana della narrazione e dall'altro lato alla concezione agostiniana dell'immaginazione.

Parole chiave: falsità; immaginazione; menzogna; finzione letteraria; mito.

Autori antichi e medievali: Agostino, Cicerone.

The aim of this article is to make explicit some implications regarding literary fiction in a few passages from the second book of Augustine's *Soliloquia*. These passages, to my knowledge, have not yet been adequately explored by the

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existing scholarship from the point of view of literary theory. First, I show how Augustine classes works like comedies as voluntary fakes, which are defined as fakes by fiction, and distinguishes them from other voluntary fakes by virtue of their intention to not deceive but delight (§ 1). Second, I argue that Augustine, without contradicting himself, also regards dramatic works as necessary fakes, insofar as they are necessarily different from the things they represent (§ 2). Thirdly, I examine myth as a case of literary fiction in which the coexistence of voluntariness and necessity is particularly evident, and emphasise the fact that, according to Augustine, myth imitates truth not in the events narrated but in the form of narration (§ 3). Finally, I argue that this conception of myth is better understood in the light of Cicero's distinction between history, argument and myth in *De inventione*, and that Augustine is able to justify this distinction on a gnoseological level thanks to his doctrine of imagination (§ 4).

1. Literary fiction as a non-deceptive lie

Statements on literary fiction in Augustine's *Soliloquia* can be found at the end of the section of book II devoted to the discussion on the notions of "true" and "false"¹. The general purpose of this section is to lay one of the premises from which to deduce the immortality of the soul as the "subject" (in the sense of the Aristotelian *hypokeimenon*) of a truth devoid of any falsehood. Here we are not interested in analysing the logic of the arguments that unfold during book II of *Soliloquia*². Instead, what is interesting for us is the presence, in the definition of the concept of "false", of references to literature from which it is possible to infer a certain conception of literary fiction.

The first of these references is found in § 16, in which the fourth and final definition of "false" is proposed by Reason³:

For I can see that, now that we have tried all possible avenues, only two descriptions remain of

¹ Cfr. Augustinus, *Soliloquia*, ed. W. Hörmann, (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, 89), Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, Wien 1986, II, iii, 3 – x, 18, pp. 49-70.

² For further details on this point, vd. G. Catapano, «Augustine's Treatise *De Immortalitate Animae* and the Proof of the Soul's Immortality in his *Soliloquia*», *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 25 (2014) 67-84.

³ The first three definitions, rejected as inadequate, are as follows: (1) false is that which appears different from what it is (II, iii, 3 – iv, 5); (2) false is that which has some resemblance to the true (II, vi, 10-12); (3) false is that which is dissimilar to the true (II, vii, 13).

what would rightly be called the false (*falsum*), 1) that something pretends (*fingit*) to be what is not, or 2) that it strives (*tendit*) towards being absolutely (*omnino*) and yet does not exist. But the first form of the false is either deception or lying. That which is properly called “deceptive” (*fallax*) is that which has a desire to deceive (*fallendi*). This is inconceivable without a soul. But it results partly from reason and partly from nature: reason, in the case of rational animals like man, and nature in beasts like the fox. “Lying” (*mendax*) is to be found in the case of those who lie. They differ from the deceptive in this, that all deceptive creatures have a desire to deceive, but not everyone who lies wishes to deceive. For mimes and comedies and many poems are full of lies (*mendaciorum*), but they are there from a wish to give pleasure rather than to deceive (and indeed nearly everyone who tells a joke [*iocantur*] tells a lie). But that man is properly called deceptive or deceiving (*fallens*) whose business it is that someone should be deceived. But those who do not act in order to deceive, but simply make something up (*fingunt*), are only liars (*mendaces*), or, if that’s too strong, no one doubts but that they should be said to be telling lies (*mentientes*)⁴.

I will explain in section 2 the distinction between the false as that which «pretends» (*fingit*) and the false as that which «strives» (*tendit*), placed at the beginning of this passage. Here I point out that mimes, comedies and poetic compositions (*poemata*) are cited as examples of non-deceptive lies: they are «full of lies» (*mendaciorum plena*) said or represented with the intention to not deceive but delight, and in this they are similar to jokes. Those literary genres therefore exemplify a kind of fake that is said to be so not because it was created by someone who deserves the title of fallacious or deceptive but because their authors pretend (*fingunt*) something – that is, they simulate something that does not actually exist – without wanting their audience to actually believe in the existence of the simulated thing. Literary fiction, in other words, is a type of lie that is produced for the purpose of delighting and is free of deceptive intent.

The absence of the will to deceive distances the shadow of a negative moral judgment from fictions such as literary ones: the negative moral connotation in the passage quoted by *Soliloquia* appears limited to the intention to deceive – that is, to make someone believe the fake. To say the false consciously – that is, to lie – without wanting to make the audience believe that the false is true is not in itself a morally reprehensible act. Authors of literary fictions as such do not deserve to be negatively judged as “deceptive” or “people who deceive” (*fallentes*) but should

⁴ Augustinus, *Soliloquia*, ed. W. Hörmann, cit., II, ix, 16, pp. 65-66. The translation of the *Soliloquia* passages quoted in this article is taken from: Saint Augustine, *Soliloquies and Immortality of the Soul*, with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary by G. Watson, Aris & Phillips, Warminster 1990. I explain in the footnotes the points in which I depart from this translation.

simply be described – like all others who pretend without willingness to deceive – as “liars” or rather, in an even more neutral sense and devoid of derogatory connotations, as “people who lie” (*mentientes*). Literary fictions, together with jokes, are clear examples of lies that are not guilty of deception: delightful lies that cannot be blamed for a false purpose.

The idea that there are non-deceptive lies and that these include literary fictions and jokes will disappear in Augustine’s works following *Soliloquia*, which – it is useful to remember – date back to autumn–winter AD 386–387. From *De vera religione* (AD 390) to *Enchiridion* (AD 421/422), Augustine will assert a different conception of lies, for which the willingness to deceive will become an essential requirement⁵. At the same time, Augustine’s moral judgment on lies will become much more severe. Though he will distinguish in *De mendacio* between eight different types of lies with decreasing severity, he will conclude that none of these types is right⁶. As Maria Bettetini noted, Augustine’s thought in *De mendacio* is summed up in the phrase: «The good never lie»⁷. There are no lawful lies, and there are no dutiful lies. Augustine will say «Whoever lies behaves unjustly» in *De doctrina christiana* (AD 397); in *Enchiridion*, he will repeat that «every lie

⁵ On Augustine’s conception of lying, especially in *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacium* (c. AD 421), cfr. A. Fürst, «*Mendacium*», in C. Mayer (ed.), *Augustinus-Lexikon*, vol. 3, Schwabe, Basel 2010, coll. 1261-1266 and the bibliography cited therein, plus at least the following titles: M. Colish, «St. Augustine’s Rhetoric of Silence Revisited», *Augustinian Studies* 9 (1978) 15-24; ead., «The Stoic Theory of Verbal Signification and the Problem of Lies and False Statements from Antiquity to St. Anselm», in L. Brind’Amour – E. Vance (eds.), *Archéologie du signe*, (Papers in Medieval Studies, 3), Brepols, Turnhout 1983, pp. 17-43; T. Feehan, «Augustine’s Own Examples of Lying», *Augustinian Studies* 22 (1991) 165-190; E.T. Hermanowicz, «Augustine on Lying», *Speculum* 93 (2018) 699-727; R. Gramigna, *Augustine’s Theory of Signs, Signification, and Lying*, De Gruyter, Berlin – Boston 2020, pp. 143-179; G. Catapano, «“La bocca che mente uccide l’anima”. La menzogna nel pensiero di Agostino di Ippona», in F. Mariani Zini – N. Vienné-Guerrin, *La malebouche. Histoire des paroles blessantes en Europe du Moyen Age aux Lumières*, Champion, Paris (forthcoming). For the relationship between Augustine’s positions and medieval theories, cfr. G.C. Alessio, «Verità e menzogna nella teoria letteraria del Medioevo», in C. Natali et al., «*De mendacio*», «*Contra mendacium*» di Agostino d’Ippona, Città Nuova, Roma 1997, pp. 117-141; M. Bettetini, «Pietro di Blois a proposito di *mendacium* e *fabula*: influenze agostiniane», *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 14 (2003) 65-78.

⁶ Cfr. Augustinus, *De mendacio*, ed. J. Zycha, (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, 41), Tempsky-Freytag, Praha-Wien-Leipzig 1900, xiv, 25, pp. 444-445; xxi, 42, pp. 463-465.

⁷ *Ibid.*, ed. J. Zycha, cit., viii, 11, p. 430. Cfr. Aurelio Agostino, *Sulla bugia*, Introduzione, traduzione, note e apparati di M. Bettetini, Rusconi, Milano 1994, p. 15; M. Bettetini, «Il *De mendacio*: bugie ed ermeneutica», in C. Natali et al., «*De mendacio*», cit., p. 43.

is a sin»⁸. The fault of those who lie, as he will explain in *De mendacio*, is the desire to deceive (*fallendi cupiditas*)⁹: a desire that, as we know, does not animate the authors of literary fictions.

One could rightly observe that the evolution of Augustine's thought about lies in any case preserves literary fiction from a general moral condemnation or at least from the accusation of tending to deception. This is true; however, it should also be noted that overcoming the distinction of *Soliloquia* between *falsum* as *fal-lax* and *falsum* as *mendax* has the disadvantage of no longer guaranteeing a specific space to a kind of *falsum* such as the literary one. The identification of lies with false statements for the purpose of deception leads Augustine, after *Soliloquia*, to distinguish in fact only two types of false statements: those said in the conviction that they are true, which are therefore erroneous but not guilty, and those said knowing that they are not true but with the intention to make people believe the contrary, which therefore involve guilt even if not error. With the first type of falsehood, one does in fact deceive oneself, but obviously without having the will to deceive oneself; with the second, one voluntarily tries to deceive others¹⁰. What is no longer taken into account is the falsehood that is said knowing that it is such but without the desire to deceive and is therefore without error or guilt. This conscious but not deceptive falsehood is precisely what distinguishes jokes and literary fictions. From the moral perspective in which Augustine considers and defines lies from *De mendacio* onwards, literary fiction qua fiction becomes irrelevant; Augustine negatively judges certain poetic or scenic fictions of antiquity on the moral level because of their content and not their simulative nature¹¹. To

⁸ Augustinus, *De doctrina christiana*, ed. M. Simonetti, (Scrittori Greci e Latini), Fondazione Lorenzo Valla – Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano 1994, I, xxxvi, 40, p. 66; id., *Enchiridion ad Laurentium, seu De fide et spe et caritate*, ed. E. Evans, (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 46), Brepols, Turnhout 1969, vi, 18, p. 58.

⁹ Id., *De mendacio*, ed. J. Zycha, cit., iii, 3, p. 415.

¹⁰ Cfr. id., *Sermo* 133, 4, ed. F. Dolbeau, «Quatre sermons prêchés par Augustin au début de son épiscopat», *Augustiniana* 66 (2016) pp. 46-47.

¹¹ The condemnation of “the poets’ lie”, after all, was a commonplace among Christian poets themselves: cfr. P.-A. Deproost, «*Ficta et facta*. La condamnation du “mensonge des poètes” dans la poésie latine chrétienne», *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 44 (1998) 101-121. On the relationship between Augustine and poetry, cfr. G. Clark, «In Praise of the Wax Candle. Augustine the Poet and Latin Literature», in J. Elsner – J. Hernández Lobato (eds.), *The Poetics of Late Latin Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, pp. 424-446. On Christian condemnation of spectacles, cfr. L. Lugaresi, *Il teatro di Dio. Il problema degli spettacoli nel cristianesimo antico (II-IV secolo)*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2008.

find ideas for a non-moralising reflection on literary fiction in Augustine's works, we must return to the ontological perspective of *Soliloquia*¹².

2. Voluntariness and necessity in literary fiction

In the passage of *Soliloquia* II, ix, 16 mentioned above, Reason distinguishes between two kinds of fake: the fake that pretends (*fingit*) to be what it is not – which is divided, as we have seen, into fallacious and mendacious – and the fake that seeks (*tendit*) to be and is not. For convenience, we call the first kind of fake as “fake by fiction” and the second as “fake by tendency”. This second kind of fake is mentioned in § 17 of book II. The examples are the same as those already indicated in § 10 about the definition (later rejected) of falsehood as that having some resemblance to truth: images in a mirror; paintings, portraits and all artistic products (*omnia opificum*) of this kind; dreamlike visions and hallucinations; and finally, optical illusions (to speak solely of the sense of sight). In these cases, which all concern sensory perception¹³, what tries to be a certain thing and is not is called “false”: a face reflected in a mirror is a false person; a painted tree is a false tree; a dreamed dog is a false dog; an oar immersed in water is a false broken oar and so on. “Augustine” (the character of the dialogue) at this point asks Reason, in § 18, why Reason felt it should separate from this kind of fake «poems and jokes and other kinds of illusion (*fallaciae*)» – that is, fictions and especially those not intentionally deceptive such as poems and jokes. The answer of Reason is as follows:

Well, the reason is that it is one thing to wish to be false and it is another not to be able to be true. So we can¹⁴ put human activities like comedies or tragedies or mimes and other things of

¹² The fact that Augustine's thinking on lying evolved over time and that it is not all found in *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacium*, his most studied works on the subject, has been underlined by E.T. Hermanowicz, «Augustine on Lying», cit. A detailed comparison between *Soliloquia* and the developments in Augustine's understanding of lying, poetic *fabula* and rhetorical *fictio* found in other works goes beyond the scope of the present article. Readers wishing to explore this in more detail will find useful pointers not only in Hermanowicz's article but also in the book by M. Kempshall, *Rhetoric and the Writing of History*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2011, especially on pp. 369-388.

¹³ One might ask whether it is just a coincidence that the literary examples cited later in § 18 are examples of scenic arts, perceptible with the eyes. I am not able to give a plausible answer to this legitimate question.

¹⁴ Watson translates «we cannot», following a variant reported in two manuscripts: *H* (Würzburg,

that sort on the same level as the results of the activities of painters and image-makers (*factorum*). For a painted man, even though he is trying to look like a man, as much cannot be true¹⁵ as what is written in the books of writers of comedy. These works¹⁶ do not wish to be false and are not false because of any desire of their own, but because of a certain necessity, to the extent that they follow on aims of the maker (*fingentis arbitrium*). But on the stage Roscius was by his own will a false Hecuba, but by nature a true man. By that same will he was a true tragic-actor, by the very fact that he was carrying out what he intended to do (*institutum*), and a false Priam, because he made himself like (*adsimilabat*) Priam, but was not Priam¹⁷.

This answer is surprising. It should justify the placement of poetic compositions and jokes in a kind of fake different from that to which paintings and portraits belong; in fact, Reason begins by stating the difference between wanting to be fake and not being able to be true. The reader is thus led to believe that poems and jokes are examples of voluntary fakes, i.e. fakes by fiction, while pictorial works are examples of things that cannot be true, i.e. fakes by tendency. Fakes by fiction would therefore be voluntary, whereas fakes by tendency would be necessary. Let us assume, until we have proof to the contrary, that this interpretation is correct. Reason, however, immediately afterwards affirms the possibility of combining comedies, tragedies and mimes with the products of painters and sculptors, asserting that even the things represented in comedies do not have the possibility

Universitätsbibliothek, M.p.th.f.49, f. 61v: *non possumus*) and *J* (Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Aug. perg. 195, f. 12vb: *non possimus*; ‘*non*’ is added by another hand). The negation ‘*non*’ is absent from the other thirteen manuscripts on which Hörmann based his critical edition of *Soliloquia*. In my opinion, ‘*non*’ was added by some reader put in trouble by the apparent inconsistency of what Reason says in that passage.

- ¹⁵ Watson: «a man, cannot be as true». The Latin text is: «Tam enim verus esse pictus homo non potest, quamvis in speciem hominis tendat, quam illa, quae scripta sunt in libris comicorum». Watson thinks that after ‘*quam*’ Reason implies “*vera sunt*”, but I think that Reason implies “*vera esse non possunt*”.
- ¹⁶ Watson: «Pictures, images etc.». In the Latin text the subject of the sentence is implicit. I think that this implicit subject is “*haec opera*”, referring to both “*opera hominum*” (i.e. comedies, tragedies and mimes) and “*opera pictorum factorumque*”.
- ¹⁷ Augustinus, *Soliloquia*, ed. W. Hörmann, cit., II, x, 18, p. 68. Given the crucial importance of this passage, I provide the full Latin text: «Quia scilicet aliud est falsum esse velle, aliud verum esse non posse. Itaque ipsa opera hominum velut comoedias aut tragoedias aut mimos et id genus alia possumus operibus pictorum factorumque coniungere. Tam enim verus esse pictus homo non potest, quamvis in speciem hominis tendat, quam illa, quae scripta sunt in libris comicorum. Neque enim falsa esse volunt aut ullo adpetitu suo falsa sunt, sed quadam necessitate, quantum fingentis arbitrium sequi potuerunt. At vero in scena Roscius voluntate falsa Hecuba erat, natura verus homo, sed illa voluntate etiam verus tragoedus eo videlicet, quo implebat institutum, falsus autem Priamus eo, quod Priamum adsimilabat, sed ipse non erat».

of being true, just as paintings. In § 16, mimes and comedies were listed together with poetic compositions as examples of non-deceptive lying fictions within the genre of fakes by fiction. Here, instead, they are associated with pictorial and sculptural works, which immediately before in the text had been separated from poems as examples of a different kind of fake: fake by tendency.

The interpreter is here at a crossroads: will he or she think that Reason has corrected its opinion expressed in § 16, dissociating plays (comedies, tragedies and mimes) from poetic fictions and jokes and thus making them cases of fakes by tendency; or will he or she think that by mentioning comedies, tragedies and mimes, Reason also is implicitly referring to poetic compositions and jokes themselves, which therefore would all become examples of fakes by tendency? Neither interpretation is satisfactory. The first, in fact, is forced to hypothesise the dissociation between plays and poetic compositions, of which no justification can be seen¹⁸, while the second is obliged to conclude that in a few lines, Reason contradicts itself by explicitly stating and immediately after implicitly denying that poetic compositions are cases of voluntary fakes.

However, a third possibility of interpretation exists, which is perhaps less problematic than these two. This interpretation involves thinking that Reason has changed its mind neither with respect to the homogeneity of plays and poetic works nor with respect to the belonging of both to the genre of fake by fiction but that in § 18, it wishes to underline a double aspect of their nature, which allows them to be cited, *from another point of view*, also as examples of fake by tendency. In fact, in one respect, comedies, tragedies, mimes and poetic compositions (and jokes) are products of the human will, and in this sense, they are false by fiction. In another respect, however, what they pretend, because it is fake, cannot be true and therefore it is false by tendency: by necessity. This is where their resemblance to pictorial and sculptural works lies: these also are works of human beings (*opera hominum*) and therefore voluntary products (from this point of view, they could be listed among the cases of fake by fiction). Yet, their representative nature *necessarily* makes them false, i.e. they tend to reproduce something they will never be. In other words, works of art – both figurative and literary, both scenic

¹⁸ A justification may consist in the fact that in plays, real human beings represent other human beings (not always, however: sometimes actors play the part of a deity), whereas in poetic compositions, representation is always made by signs of a different nature than that of the characters represented. In the text of *Soliloquia*, however, this distinction is never explicitly stated.

and non-scenic – in so far as they are imitations of reality, are false in a simultaneously voluntary and necessary way: in a voluntary way as the deliberate effects of the artist's simulating will and in a necessary way as inevitably different from the reality they simulate. To create a work of art in a representative way means to *voluntarily* produce something *necessarily* different from what is represented¹⁹.

The example of Quintus Roscius Gallus, the actor *par excellence* who lived in Cicero's time, illustrates the ambivalent nature of art, in this case dramatic art. Roscius was willingly a false Hecuba or a false Priam – that is, he represented these characters on the stage in a deliberate and intentional way; he was therefore a false Hecuba or a false Priam by fiction. However, the more he faithfully adhered to his established role (*institutum*), i.e. the more he was a true tragic actor, the more he was a false Hecuba or a false Priam; as a true actor, he was *inevitably* a false character, i.e. he was a false Hecuba or a false Priam by necessity. Roscius, in short, was a false Hecuba or a false Priam both by will and by necessity.

3. The mythical fiction

The simultaneous presence of will and necessity in artistic fiction (including literary fiction) helps to overcome a too rigid distinction between fake by fiction and fake by tendency and to arrive at what Reason itself defines as «something extraordinary» (*quiddam mirabile*):

¹⁹ This third interpretative possibility may give rise to some perplexity, insofar as it implies that, according to Augustine, everything that is fake by fiction is also fake by tendency, since no false thing *can* be true (in other words, every false thing is *necessarily* a fake). One might ask, then, in what sense the two types of fake are then distinguished. An answer might be that they are distinguished not as two species of the same genus, but as the species and the genus itself, or as the part and the whole. For everything that is fake by fiction is also fake by tendency, but not everything that is fake by tendency is also fake by fiction. The fake by fiction, therefore, can be considered as a species (or, if you prefer, a subset) within the fake by tendency. The opposition, in other words, is not between fakes by fiction and fakes by tendency, but between fakes by tendency *with* fiction and fakes by tendency *without* fiction. Another objection could be that, since every fake by fiction is also fake by tendency, the characteristic of being simultaneously both fake by fiction and fake by tendency is possessed not only by works of art (including literary works), but also by everything that is fake by fiction. This is true, but not necessarily a problem. Augustine may have criteria for distinguishing works of art from other kinds of fake by fiction: for example, literary fiction is different from a fraud because, as we have seen in section 1, it is produced for the purpose of not deceiving but delighting.

This: the source of what is true in some things is identical with the source of what is false. The only thing which helps to their being true is that in another respect they are false. So they can in no way achieve what they wish to be or what they ought to be if they avoid being false. For how could Roscius whom I have just mentioned be a true tragic-actor if he were unwilling to be a false Hector, a false Andromache, a false Hercules and countless others? Or how would the picture be true, if the horse were not false? Or how could the image of the man in the mirror be true, if it were not a false man?²⁰

The amazing element of this conclusion is that in some cases, what makes something true is, paradoxically, its very falsity. Therefore, a falsehood must be accepted and, far from being rejected, must be implemented to the end so that actors, paintings and images can come true. No real actors, no real paintings and no real images would, in fact, exist if they were not at the same time false characters and false objects painted and reflected. The more a representation is a true representation, the more it is a false represented thing. To pursue at all costs the truth of the thing represented, in the absurd effort to identify with it, means to prevent artistic representation from being realised as such.

If this is true for works of art that intend to imitate some existing reality, it is even more true for those works that instead simulate something that does not exist: that is, that – to say it in the language of § 16 – “lie”. In these works, the falsity that characterises them reaches its maximum degree because the object itself that is represented is (and has always been) absent in reality. The kind of artistic lie that *Soliloquia* takes into consideration is myth (*fabula*)²¹. In § 19, myth is defined as a lie built for the sake of utility and delight as well (*compositum ad utilitatem delectationemve mendacium*). According to the classification proposed in the previous sections, myth is therefore a type of fake by fiction, a lie but not a deception, because it is a lie produced for a purpose other than deception. Myth also falls within those fictions (*figmenta*), in this case clearly false (*aperte falsa*) and therefore not misleading, that are dealt with by “grammar” (in the ancient sense of the term). As an example of an invented myth (*ficta fabula*), Reason

²⁰ Augustinus, *Soliloquia*, ed. W. Hörmann, cit., II, x, 18, pp. 68-69.

²¹ On Augustine’s concept of *fabula*, cfr. J.-M. Roessli, «*Fabula*», in C. Mayer (ed.), *Augustinus-Lexikon*, vol. 2, Schwabe, Basel 2002, coll. 1221-1225. That Augustine at the time of the *Soliloquia* considered myth to be a lie is confirmed by *De ordine*, ed. T. Fuhrer, (Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana, 2022), De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2017, II, xiv, 41, p. 173, where he says that «by a reasonable lie (*rationabili mendacio*), when reason now favoured the poets, it was pretended (*confictum est*) that the Muses were the daughters of Jupiter and Memory».

mentions the flight of Daedalus – an example also used in two contemporary dialogues, *Contra Academicos* and *De ordine*²². The teachers at school who teach the story of Daedalus as a myth precisely speak of it with truth because they present the story as mythical and not as real:

For if it were true that Daedalus had flown, but children understood this to be a fabricated tale (*pro ficta fabula*) and gave it out as such, they would have a false idea in their heads because of the very fact that the things which they were giving out as false were in fact true. And so we have the result which we were surprised to learn before: there couldn't truly have been a fable (*veram fabulam*) about the flight of Daedalus, unless it were false that there was a flight of Daedalus²³.

The truth of the myth of Daedalus as a myth precisely depends on the falsity of the event it narrates. If the event had really happened, the story of Daedalus would not be mythical – that is, fake – but it would be something else: it would have a different nature from that of a literary fiction. To be a true myth, this story must *necessarily* be false and must be *deliberately* false as a lie.

Yet, the falsity of myth is not a sufficient condition of it being a fiction. It is also fake because it simulates something that is true: it represents as true something that is not true. To represent an event as true – that is, as if it really happened – a myth must somehow imitate the actual reality. Reason explains how this is possible a few pages later, in § 29, about another mythical flight: that of Medea. Although the passage is long, it is worthy to be reported verbatim:

R: Is not the false something which is constructed so as to be the likeness of something, but nevertheless is not that which it appears to be like?

A: There's nothing else I can see which I would more readily call false. Nevertheless, that also is customarily called false which is far distant from the likeness of truth.

R: Who would deny that? It must, however, possess some imitation (*imitationem*) of the true.

A: But how? For when it is stated that Medea flew through the air on snakes with linked wings, that in no way imitates the true, since it is nothing, and something which is entirely non-existent cannot imitate anything.

R: Correct. But you are failing to notice that something which is entirely non-existent cannot even be called false. For if it is false, it exists; if it does not exist, it is not false.

A: So we will not be able to say that that extraordinary story about Medea is false?

²² Cfr. Augustinus, *Contra Academicos*, ed. T. Fuhrer, (Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana, 2022), De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2017, III, ii, 3, p. 49; *De ordine*, ed. T. Fuhrer, (Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana, 2022), De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2017, II, xii, 37, p. 170.

²³ Augustinus, *Soliloquia*, ed. W. Hörmann, cit., II, xi, 20, p. 72.

R: No. For if it came into being, how is it false, and if it did not come into being, how is it an extraordinary story?

A: This is most surprising. So then, when I hear “huge winged snakes linked before the chariot”²⁴, I am not to say it is false?

R: You may, of course, say so. For there is something which you can call false.

A: What, might I ask?

R: The statement (*sententiam*) which is enuntiated in that very verse.

A: And what imitation of truth does it contain?

R: An imitation in this sense, that a statement would be made in similar fashion if Medea had truly done that. So a false statement, by its very enunciation (*enuntiatione*), imitates true statements. And if the false statement is not believed, it is an imitation of true statements in one respect only, that it is so stated, and it is only false, and not also deceptive (*fallens*). If, however, it manages to achieve acceptance, it also imitates true statements which are believed.

A: Now I can grasp that there is a great difference between the statements which we make (*illa, quae dicimus*) and the situations about which we make them (*illa, de quibus dicimus aliquid*). So now I agree – for this was the only thing that was holding me back – that we are not justified in calling something false if it does not contain an imitation of something true. Someone, for instance, who says “a stone is false silver” would quite rightly be laughed out of court. Yet, even though we can say that a man who says “a stone is silver²⁵” is saying something false, that is, is making a false statement, it is, nevertheless, not foolish, I think, to call tin or lead “false silver”, because such metal does, as it were, imitate silver. The result is that it is not our statement which is false, but the object about which the statement is made²⁶.

The purpose of this exchange of cues between Reason and Augustine is to establish that no falsehood is without some imitation of truth. This applies to all types of fake, i.e. both fake by fiction and fake by tendency. Even myth, which is fake by lying-but-not-deceiving fiction, therefore imitates truth. This at first sight seems particularly problematic because myth is, as mentioned in § 19, an openly false lie. The events narrated in the myths, such as Medea’s flight on a cart pulled by winged dragons, have clearly never occurred. Then, in what sense does the myth of Medea’s flight imitate truth? The answer given by Reason involves moving the imitated truth, and correspondingly the imitating false, from the plane of facts to the plane of language. In fact, there is neither a real flight of Medea nor a false flight that imitates the real one; as opposed to the fact that there is real silver and false silver that imitates it (tin or lead). The fake in the case of myths is found elsewhere – that is, in the way in which unreal facts are narrated: these facts that never existed are narrated in a way that is similar to the way that those same facts

²⁴ Pacuvius, *Tragoediarum fragmenta*, ed. O. Ribbeck, (*Scaenicae Romanorum poesis fragmenta*, vol. 1), Teubner, Leipzig 1871², v. 397, p. 130.

²⁵ Watson: «a stone is (false) silver». In Latin: «lapidem argentum esse».

²⁶ Augustinus, *Soliloquia*, ed. W. Hörmann, cit., II, xv, 29, pp. 84-86.

would be narrated if they had really happened. The mythical imitation of truth is therefore in the form of the enunciation: that is, not at the level of what is said about something (*de quibus dicimus*), because at that level there is nothing, but at the level of what is said (*quae dicimus*). We could say that the verisimilitude of myth (it being similar to the truth without being true) lies in its form and not in its content.

Combining this explanation of the mimetic character of myth with what has been said in the previous sections shows that myth is a false tale because it simulates a true story in such a way that it is clear that it is not a true story. Its purpose is not to deceive, by pretending to relate real facts to the truth of which the reader or listener should believe, but to procure delight or benefit through the representation of events that are clearly perceived as unreal and yet are represented as if they were real.

4. Narrative imagination

Augustine probably knew the verse of Pacuvius cited by Reason in § 29 thanks to Cicero (while he could read the myth of the flight of Medea in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*)²⁷. In fact, in book I of *De inventione*, the Arpinate precisely mentions that verse to exemplify the *fabula* – that is, myth – which he defines as that type of narration (*narratio*) which concerns events (*negotia*) and which contains things that are neither true nor plausible²⁸:

The *narrative* (*narratio*) is an exposition of events (*rerum gestarum*) that have occurred or are supposed to have occurred. There are three kinds: one which contains just the case and the whole reason for the dispute; a second in which a digression is made beyond the strict limits of the case for the purpose of attacking somebody, or of making a comparison, or of amusing the

²⁷ Cfr. Ovidius, *Metamorphoses*, ed. W.S. Anderson, (Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana), Teubner, Leipzig 1977, VII, 217-237, pp. 153-154. On the sources of the myth of the winged dragons of Medea, cfr. M. Elice, «Il *mirabile* nel mito di Medea: i draghi alati nelle fonti letterarie e iconografiche», *Incontri triestini di filologia classica* 3 (2003-2004) 119-160.

²⁸ Cicero, *De inventione*, ed. E. Stroebel, (*M. Tulli Ciceronis scripta quae manserunt omnia*, vol. 2), Teubner, Leipzig 1915, I, xix, 27, pp. 24-25. The translation is taken from: *Cicero in Twenty Eight Volumes, II: De inventione, De optimo genere oratorum, Topica*, with an English Translation by H.M. Hubbell, Harvard University Press – William Heinemann Ltd, Cambridge, Massachusetts – London 1949, p. 55.

audience in a way not incongruous with the business in hand, or for amplification. The third kind is wholly unconnected with public issues, which is recited or written solely for amusement but at the same time provides valuable training. It is subdivided into two classes: one concerned with events (*negotiis*), the other principally with persons (*personis*). That which consists of an exposition of events has three forms: *fabula*, *historia*, *argumentum*. *Fabula* is the term applied to a narrative in which the events are not true and have no verisimilitude, for example: “Huge winged dragons yoked to a car”²⁹. *Historia* is an account of actual occurrences remote from the recollection of our own age, as: “War on men of Carthage Appius decreed”³⁰. *Argumentum* is a fictitious narrative which nevertheless could have occurred. An example may be quoted from Terence: “For after he had left the school of youth”³¹.

The untruthfulness and unlikelihood of the events narrated in myths distinguish the latter from the other two types of narration of events, which are history (*historia*) and “argument” (*argumentum*)³². History is about events that took place in the distant past, far from the memory of our time, such as the Punic Wars. Argument is the narration of a fictitious event (*ficta res*), which however could have happened. In other words, history tells true facts, argument tells not true but plausible facts and myth tells neither plausible nor true facts. History, argument and myth therefore differ according to their content – that is, according to the degree of truth of the fact narrated. Based on their form, however, they belong to the same genre, which is that of the narration of events. Against the background of this Ciceronian classification, we can say that Augustine’s *Soliloquia* conceives myth as a narrative that simulates historical narrative but does so in an evidently fictitious way, unlike argument, which instead simulates historical narrative in such a way as to represent a historically possible situation.

To understand how history, argument and myth can similarly narrate facts with different degrees of truth, opening a brief digression on the role of imagination is necessary³³. Imagination, in fact, is never completely creative: it can

²⁹ Vd. footnote 24 above.

³⁰ Ennius, *Annalium fragmenta*, ed. J. Vahlen (*Ennianae poesis reliquiae*), Teubner, Leipzig 1854, VII, 223, p. 40.

³¹ Terentius, *Andria*, ed. A. Fleckeisen, (*P. Terenti comoediae*), Teubner, Leipzig 1874, v. 51, p. 4.

³² It is difficult to find an English term corresponding to the meaning of the Latin ‘*argumentum*’ used in this context. By this word, Cicero means an invented story, the subject of which is verisimilar but did not really happen. Interestingly, in ancient Latin the term ‘*argumentum*’ often means the subject-matter of a poetic or dramatic text.

³³ I develop this digression more extensively in an essay on which this article is based: G. Catapano, «Il volo di Medea e la voce della Ragione. Metaletteratura e autoriflessività nei *Soliloquia* di Agostino», in J. Hernández Lobato – Ó. Prieto Domínguez (eds.), *Literature Squared: Self-Reflexivity in Late Antique Literature*, (Studi e Testi TardoAntichi, 18), Brepols, Turnhout 2020, pp.

produce images that do not correspond to any perceived object only by disassembling or assembling images of objects actually perceived or modifying them in some other way. For example, as Augustine will say in a much later treatise, *De trinitate*, we can depict things like a green sun, a black swan or a quadruped bird only because we have had perception of what is meant by each term of these pairs separately and we can mentally join their respective images³⁴.

The mythical representations, therefore, although not a direct effect of perceptions, are built with iconic components individually derived from sensory experience and preserved in memory. We can imagine Medea's flight if and only if we preserve in our memory the images of women, snakes, wings and carts that we have perceived: images that we can compose into a complex image to which no real object corresponds. The historical representations are formed in a similar way to the mythical ones: even if we have not had experience of the (remote) historical characters and their deeds, we can represent them because we have had the perception of other human beings and other human actions – that is, of other objects of the same species as those that are narrated to us. Moreover, owing to the images of people and human actions that we have perceived and of which we preserve the memory, we are able to imagine, by analogy, the people and actions that are told in a historical narrative. Although not all mental images are memories, they are all based on memory; imagination, therefore, is never completely independent of memory itself.

The fact that creative imagination, with which we produce the images that do not correspond to real objects, is based on reproductive imagination, with which we instead form images of truly perceived objects – images that are then preserved in memory – can be considered a condition of possibility of the similarity between history, argument and myth. These narrative forms are all based on the ability of the imagination to portray unperceived events by drawing from the reservoir of images derived from experience. History, argument and myth represent absent events by making us imagine them – that is, by making us visualise them mentally as if we had witnessed them: as if the mental images with which we imagine them were memories of actual past experiences. This is possible because

151-174. In that essay, I also try to see to what extent Augustine's theory of mythical fiction is applicable to *Soliloquia* themselves as a literary work, which I propose to consider as a case of "quasi-mythical" fiction.

³⁴ Cfr. Augustinus, *De trinitate*, ed. W.J. Mountain – F. Glorie, (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 50), Brepols, Turnhout 1968, XI, viii, 13, p. 350; XI, x, 17, p. 354.

the mental representations aroused by these narratives are built with an iconic material that is still drawn from our memory, even if reworked with analogical, divisive or compositional procedures. Moreover, because memory reminds us of real experiences, the narrative form *par excellence* is the historical one, in which the narrated facts have really happened; argument and myth, instead, simulate the historical narration in a different way, narrating verisimilar or evidently false events as if they had really happened³⁵.

5. Conclusion

Here I summarise, in conclusion, what has emerged from this brief analysis. The reflection on the types of fakes in book II of *Soliloquia* leaves an open space – which soon Augustine will close – on the essential characteristics of literary and, in general, artistic fiction. In particular, plays such as comedies are first and foremost cited as examples of lying fakes, which is a kind of fake by fiction other than deceptive fiction and is characterised by the desire to provide delight rather than deception. Within a few lines of text, the plays are then included with paintings and sculptures as examples of necessary fakes, which would at first glance seem to result in their reclassification under the genre of fake by tendency, which is the other kind of falsity previously distinguished from the fake by fiction. This can be interpreted in the sense of an indissociable coexistence of voluntary fake by fiction and necessary fake by tendency in works of art. The case of myth clarifies this coexistence; the nature of myth demands the evident falsity of the event narrated and at the same time the representation of it as if it were true. Against the background of Augustine's conception of myth as an imitation of the enunciative form of the narration of true facts, a text and a doctrine can be seen. The text is Cicero's *De inventione*, with its theorisation of myth and history as subspecies of the same kind of narration. The doctrine is that of the dependence of productive imagination on reproductive imagination.

³⁵ On the relationship between narrative thought, images and memory, cfr. B. Stock, *Augustine's Inner Dialogue. The Philosophical Soliloquy in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, pp. 181-228, which however does not refer to Cicero's conception of *narratio*.

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