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A romantic from Hippone? Romantic inspiration from *The Confessions of St Augustine*

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Abstract: The author of the article examines Augustine as a forerunner of the discussion shaped by Romanticism, a discussion about the human condition at a moment of breakthrough and exhaustion of the existing vision of the world and culture. Augustine is also considered as the creator of a particular genre, that of spiritual autobiography. Augustine, was one of the first authors to venture to diagnose himself in a situation of internal and historical breakthrough. The article identifies the less explored context of rooting romantic confessional literature in Augustine's *Confessions*. By highlighting the presence of his thoughts and aesthetic ideas in the expressions primarily of the leading Polish Romantic, Adam Mickiewicz, the author points, with examples from his works, to the tropes of dependence between the ancient rhetorician-philosopher and the Romantics.

Key words: reception of St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Romanticism, contexts of Romantic culture, romantic medievalism, Adam Mickiewicz

Romantyk z Hippony? Romantyczne inspiracje *Wyznaniami* św. Augustyna

Abstrakt: Autorka artykułu przygląda się Augustynowi jako prekursorowi wyznaczonej przez romantyzm dyskusji o kondycji człowieka w momencie przełomu i wyczerpania się zastanej wizji świata i kultury, a także jako twórcy szczególnego gatunku, jakim jest duchowa autobiografia. Augustyn bowiem jako jeden z pierwszych autorów odważył się też zdiagnozować samego siebie w sytuacji wewnętrznego i historycznego przełomu. Artykuł rozpoznaje mało eksplorowany kontekst zakorzenienia romantycznej literatury konfesyjnej w *Wyznaniach* Augustyna. Zaznaczając obecność jego myśli, pomysłów estetycznych w wypowiedziach przede wszystkim czołowego polskiego romantyka – Adama Mickiewicza, autorka wskazuje na przykładach z jego twórczości trop zależności między antycznym retorem i filozofem a romantykami.

Słowa kluczowe: Recepcja Św. Augustyna, *Wyznania*, romantyzm, konteksty kultury romantycznej, mediewizm romantyczny, Adam Mickiewicz

The enduring power of the creative impact of *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, a compelling testimony of the inner human experience, has persisted for centuries. This judgment is confirmed by the ongoing evidence

of intellectual and emotional engagement with this remarkable confession in contemporary culture.[1]

In this article, I would like to look at Augustine as the precursor to the discussion (marked by Romanticism and extending to the present day) about the human condition at a moment of breakthrough and exhaustion of the existing vision of the world and culture, and also as the creator of a particular genre, that of spiritual autobiography. For Augustine was one of the first authors who ventured to diagnose himself in a situation of internal and historical breakthrough. Charles Taylor writes that Augustine was the first to show that "radical reflexivity brings to the fore a kind of presence to oneself which is inseparable from one's being the agent of experience".[2] Disregarding the literary conventions of his time, Augustine made his most personal reflections public. In doing so, he was the forerunner of a particular genre of intimacy - the history of the soul - which later became so popular with Christian mystics and, in its secular variant, with writers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The Romantics, moreover, held Augustine's writings in high esteem. Maria Cieśla-Korytowska pointed out that he was an author who had "much in common with Romanticism",[3] linking his name to, among other things, the Romantic concept of cognition. He can also be seen as a precursor of Romantic existentialism[4] and a literary form of recording the testimony of the struggle with oneself. The links between the philosophy of the Bishop of Hippo and the later Romantics were pointed out by the aforementioned Charles Taylor.

The belief in the close relationship between the ancient rhetorician and Romanticism is attested by the lively reading of *Confessions*, by the precursor of this period in Poland - Adam Mickiewicz. Traces of engagement with Augustine's thought can be found in lectures delivered at the Collège de France, in letters to his friends whom the poet encouraged to read (necessarily in Latin) *Confessiones S-ti Augustini*,[5] and, above all, in his

[1] St Teresa of Avila, of whom Mickiewicz was also a voracious reader, admits in the confessional *Book of Life* to a strong experience of reading Augustine. Three centuries later, the eminent disciple of Husserl, Edith Stein, would find in the *Book of Life*, read in just one night, a truth that would lead her towards radical life choices. In the book of her life, Stein, already a Carmelite, Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, describes a journey of intellectual conversion in the face of which phenomenological language proved completely helpless, just as reason and the language of an ancient rhetor once proved helpless in the face of the experience of one's own soul and the language of the protagonist of the Dresden *Forefathers' Eve* (*Dziady*). I provide examples of twentieth-century literary inspirations from *Confessions* in the article*: „Wypełnić własnym tekstem…" Wyznania św. Augustyna jako źródło inspiracji twórczej Danuty Michałowskiej (rozważania wokół monodramu „Ja, bez imienia")*, „Colloquia Copernicana" in: no. 1 (41) 2022.

[2] Ch. Taylor, *Sources of the self. The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2012, p. 131.

[3] M. Cieśla-Korytowska, *O romantycznym poznaniu*, Kraków 1997, p. 99.

[4] Existentialism is, of course, a twentieth-century phenomenon, but some Polish scholars have pointed out the precursors of existential philosophy in native Romantics. See, for example, the work of Anna Kubale, *Dramat bólu istnienia w listach Zygmunta Krasińskiego*, Gdańsk 1997.

[5] See: the letter by A. Mickiewicz to Hieronim Kajsiewicz and Leonard Rettel, from Paris, 16 December 1833, in: A. Mickiewicz, *Dzieła,* Wydanie Rocznicowe 1798-1998, edited by

poetic cycle *Sentences and Remarks* (*Zdania i uwagi*). It is worth noting that when Mickiewicz was formulating his reading recommendations in a letter to his friends, Hieronim Kajsiewicz and Leonard Rettel, in December 1833 (in addition to Augustine - also Thomas of Kempis), more or less at the same time he himself was trying to translate *Confessions*.[6] This intention, which was ultimately unfulfilled, raises the question of why the author of *Forefathers' Eve* was so strongly attached to the autobiography of the saintly philosopher. What interpretative key could the Romantic author apply to it? Did the poet, like the ancient thinker from centuries before, experiencing problems with his own existence, seek in it a prescription for a good existence? For the author of *Forefathers' Eve* treated the text of life as the richest, most valuable book, and the directive to live as one writes[7] constituted his poetic *credo* from the time of his youth to his final years. Augustine, who, by his own admission, at a certain point in his life, "had become a great question to [himself]",[8] must have particularly caught the attention of a poet attentive to all the problems of existence of a man in a situation of a historical breakthrough. The ancient philosopher must have fascinated the author of *Sir Thaddeus* (*Pan Tadeusz*) also due to the philosopher's "romantic" (and at the same time tragic) love for a woman called "the Nameless One" described in *Confessions*, treated - also by Augustine himself - as a special cognitive experience. Above all, however, the Bishop of Hippo may have intrigued the Romantic because of the way he described his subjectivity. Augustine, as scholars of ancient literature unanimously emphasise, records his own existence in a way that was very innovative for his time. Nowhere before does literature depict such a direct and at the same time bold expression of a subject and his inner reality. The late antique rhetor "breathed a new spirit into literature because he understood", argues Andrzej Kijowski, "why [his contemporary] literature bored him and made him idle".[9] It bored him for reasons later articulated by the Romantics with regard to literary works of their age: because it was conventionalised and

Z.J. Nowak, Z. Stefanowska, Cz. Zgorzelski, vol. I-XVII, Warsaw 1993-2005, vol. XV (*Listy* cz. II), ed. by M. Dernałowicz, E. Jaworska, M. Zielińska, Warsaw 2003, p. 253. The references to this edition are provided with the abbreviation WR, the Roman numeral indicates the volume, and the Arabic numeral the page number.

[6] See M. Dernałowicz, *Kronika życia i twórczości Adama Mickiewicza 1834-1840*, Warsaw 1996, p. 113.

[7] Mickiewicz repeatedly returned to the thought of the need for coherence of life and writing, the unity of word and deed. Already G. Byron, according to the poet, proved "that one should live as one writes, that desire, words are not enough" (WR X, 22). Mickiewicz was to make a similar point to Sand, saying that she was a great spirit, "but does not know how to live as she writes. (...) either do as you write," Mickiewicz advised the writer, "or don't write at all." (A. Mickiewicz, *Dzieła wszystkie*, Wydanie Sejmowe, Warsaw 1933, vol. XVI (*Adama Mickiewicza wspomnienia i myśli*) ed. S. Pigoń, p. 287).

[8] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, transl. by T. Williams, Indianapolis, Cambridge, 2019, IV, p. 48. Further quotations from *Confessions* are provided from this edition according to the abbreviation: Roman numerals – the number of a specific book; Arabic numerals – the page number in this edition.

[9] A. Kijowski, *Dopiski do „Wyznań" św. Augustyna*, in: idem, *Tropy*, Poznań 1986, p. 163.

artificial. It was calculated to conquer the reading market, created by professional writers devoid of emotion, with Augustine, for some time, being one of them. Were he alive today, as Kijowski vividly puts it, the philosopher would perhaps "write for weekly magazines, prepare books for contracts, travel with readings, appear on television, participate in closed literary competitions", in short, in the pursuit of success, he would "sell his soul" as a "functionary of cultural convention".[10] However, at a certain stage of his life, the author of *The City of God* saw cracks in his contemporary culture, which led him to discover Christianity as a prescription for the decadence of his time and to discover a new formula for his writing vocation. Augustine was thus born as an interesting writer when he abandoned convention and decided to tell what really happened to him and, through writing, to explore 'what happens in him when he is transformed and why he is transformed'.[11] This is why he had to die as a "seller of words" in order to be born as an authentic writer, drawing inspiration from within himself. For this reason, Augustine far outstrips, it seems, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, considered to be the forerunner of modern autobiography[12] and the father of the romantic confessions of 'the children of the age'. Augustine conveying his "experience of inwardness"[13] was, however, by far the first.[14]

1

Proofs of literary readings of *Confessions* are, of course, fewer than philosophical analyses of Augustine's oeuvre. He, however, belongs vitally to literature, and his biography is captivating for its elaborate narrative, born out of the tension between the writer's deeply internalised rhetorical tradition, the intellectual style of a reader of Plato, and the new vision of the world he wished to express, for which he needed a new language. Seeking opportunities for expression outside of linguistic habits must have been quite a challenge for Augustine (a rhetor and a poet), which just as much troubled the Romantics centuries later for similar reasons. Moreover, Augustine was aware of the problems with the existing literary form, in which he could not 'fit in' as an artist of immense artistic self-knowledge. *Confessions,* therefore, abound in self-reflexive and metaliterary comments from an indefatigable seeker of truth and forms of conveying intimate experiences. The dilemmas of Konrad from the third part of Mickiewicz's drama *Forefathers' Eve* (*Dziady*), searching for an appropriate way of expressing

[10] A. Kijowski, op. cit., p. 158.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Cf. M. Janion, M. Żmigrodzka, *Romantyzm i egzystencja. Fragmenty niedokończonego dzieła*, Gdańsk 2004 (chapter *Rousseau i własne istnienie).*

[13] Ch. Taylor, *Sources of the self*..., p. 135.

[14] On the relationship (similarities and differences) between Augustine's and Rousseau's confessions, see A. Hartle, *The Modern Self in Rousseau's Confessions*, Notre Dame 1983.

his troubled thoughts,[15] accompanied (to a different degree, admittedly) earlier Augustine, who also perceived the barrier of language to express the history of his own soul.

Like many romantic literary biographies, *Confessions* is a coming-of-age story, the Christian *Aeneid* about transcending oneself, reaching the essence of one's own existence. In his *Confessions* Augustine recognised well before Rousseau (considered to be the patron of modern intimacy) that 'that knowledge of the soul itself and its states can become the key to the most essential reality - inner reality'.[16] He can be credited with the discovery that the painful act of self-knowledge is the only proper method of arriving at Truth. Therefore, this "existentialist - ardent and chaotic seeker of truth",[17] must have been particularly close to the Romantics. Similarly, the experiences of balancing on the borderline between faith and disbelief recorded by Augustine must have seemed particularly close to Mickiewicz's contemporaries. In fact, *Confessions* constitute a matrix of the existential anxiety and religious hesitation of modern man - as well as of the cognitive dilemmas in contact with the sacred.

Today, too, the modern reader, tired of fiction, is won over by the fate of the narrator of *Confessions*, by the authenticity of the experience subjected to literary narration. At once, however, it must be added that also in the case of Augustine, the attempt to express himself by means of a "spiritual plot",[18] was combined with the construction of a new aesthetic, with a stylistic revolution born of the necessity to convey a new vision of man. This is why Charles Taylor, tracing the birth of modern identity, devotes much attention to this author, pointing out that "Augustine was the first to make the first-person standpoint fundamental to our search for the truth".[19] He was able to narrate the experience of interiority through a new language and an avant-garde form for the time, which brought him close to the Romantic concept of creation and at the same time made him a forerunner of nineteenth-century confessional prose.

2

What is fascinating about Augustine's confession is the expressiveness of a particular dialogue conducted by its narrator. Its storyteller consistently constructs himself above all in conversation with the Absolute. This is

[15] This issue is most fully expressed in scene II of the so-called 'great' *Improvisation* of Konrad from *Forefathers' Eve*, WR III, pp. 156 et seq.

[16] M. Janion. M. Żmigrodzka, *Romantyzm i egzystencja. Fragmenty niedokończonego dzieła*, pp. 9-10. For the sake of order, it should be added that the author points to J.J. Rousseau as the author of the first secular confession.

[17] Z. Kubiak, *Pożegnanie w Ostii*, in: idem., *Półmrok ludzkiego świata*, Kraków 2001, p. 182.

[18] A. Kijowski, op. cit. p. 201.

[19] Ch. Taylor, op. cit, p. 133.

why Agostino Trape called *Confessions* "a long letter to God, in which the author addresses everything that concerns and interests him".[20] Such an understanding with the Creator was later sought by the Romantics, who, just like Augustine, saw the communicative paradoxes of such a relationship. Augustine does indeed begin the first book of *Confessions* with an apostrophe to God, but already its opening sentences reveal the peculiarities of such a relationship: the One who is supposed to be the first and most important recipient is unknowable: "Grant to me, Lord, [...] whether we must [...] know you before we can call upon you?"[21] - wonders Augustine. He seeks to resolve this dilemma by means of the truth of God's omnipresence, and by means of the Creator's presence in Augustine himself, which also acts as a conditioning factor for the author of *Confessions*. However, speaking to someone who is "unwavering and incomprehensible",[22] presents the narrator with an insurmountable obstacle. Right at the outset, Augustine poses the problem, familiar to mystics and romantics, of the tension between speech and silence.[23] Therefore he asks: "What does anyone say when speaking of you? But woe to those who keep silent about you". The oxymoronic figure of the speaking mute seems to be an image of the narrator himself. It evokes the intellectual difficulty of speaking to Someone who does not really need anyone's words, because in the ontic and epistemic order he is self--sufficient. "For what do I want to say, Lord,"[24] - cries Augustine confused by the fact that he wishes to express above all... his ignorance.[25] Obviously, the addressee of extraordinary confessions knows far more than the sender of the message. Man, writes Kijowski, "in telling God, tests his ability to speak the truth that God knows better than man does".[26] But Augustine's hope is that dialogue, judged in the logical and pragmatic order as apparent and paradoxical, in the order of love becomes a communication not devoid of meaning. But how and what should we tell someone who already knows the end of the story? Towards such a listener, the storyteller must be constantly vigilant, "he must be truthful and accurate, because God is testing him, ... concise and engaging, so that God will not be bored by reading a novel whose ending he already knows".[27] A non-prepossessing picture of God, although it must be admitted that Augustine, in recounting his life, is not at all meticulous, omitting some facts and emphasising others for didactic reasons.

[20] A. Trape, op. cit. p. 256.

[21] *Confessions*, I, p. 1.

[22] *Confessions*, I, p. 3.

[23] The issue of the relationship between solitude, speech and silence in the works of the Romantics is discussed by M. Kalinowska in her book *Mowa i milczenie. Romantyczne antynomie samotności,* Warsaw 1989.

[24] *Confessions*, I, p. 4.

[25] See: *Confessions*, I, p. 4.

[26] A. Kijowski, op. cit. p. 163.

[27] Ibid.

Furthermore, God is not the only projected recipient of confession. The other, perhaps the most appropriate, is 'mankind'. The philosopher quickly introduces a second addressee into the pages of *Confessions,* to whom he offers the effort of experiencing and reflecting on the human condition together. The authorial narrator clearly projects a model reader, on whom he imposes a strategy for reading and interpreting his own spiritual biography. At the beginning of Book X, he makes an intriguing confession to God in this regard: "And so, my God," he says, "the confession that I make in your sight is made to you both silently and not silently: my speech is silenced, but my affections cry out. For if I tell other people anything of value, it is only what you have already heard from me; and if you hear any such thing from me, it is only what you have already told me".[28] Augustine's speaking thus takes place through two different languages: the language of silence, which conditions communication with the Creator, and verbal communication, 'loud', with his creation. In doing so, Augustine constantly reflects on his creative activity, weaving a tense, 'romantic' reflection on the relationship between author and audience: "So what does it matter to me that human beings should hear my confessions - as though they were the ones to heal all my diseases?" - Augustine asks himself - "They are a race that is energetic in prying into other people's lives but lethargic about correcting their own. Why should they seek to hear from me what I am when they refuse to hear from you what they are?"[29] After all, the purpose of creativity should be, above all, therapeutic, thus saving self-recognition. Augustine's account is therefore self-reflexive throughout, and the narrator speaks with the hope, albeit sometimes shaky, that writing can help him transcend his own weakness. This is why, in the passages of *Retractions* which contain self-commentaries on *Confessions*, Augustine writes of his work: "as far as I am concerned, they had this effect on me while I was

writing them and they continue to have it when I am reading them".[30] Thus, *Confessions* had the inextinguishable capacity to move their author, granting them the status of a meditative, self-contemplative, and finally self-therapeutic work. Was it not for similar reasons that Romantic heroes wrote down their confessions centuries later?[31] Subsequently in an argument from *Confessions,* Augustine writes reassuringly that he is not interested in his readers, even though *Confessions* "have pleased and continue to please many brethren".[32] Writing about himself, paradoxically, according to Augustine's comments, is most needed by himself, who knows that he

[28] *Confessions,* X, p. 164.

[29] *Confessions*, X, p. 211.

[30] St. Augustine, *Retractions,* transl. by M. I. Bogan, Washington D.C., 2017, p. 130.

[31] Cf. chapter one of A. de Musset's *Confession of a Child of Age*, significant in this respect, in which its protagonist and narrator in one person admits to the therapeutic and moralistic aims of his writing.

[32] A. Trappe, op. cit. p. 257.

is always speaking in dialogue with Someone who far surpasses him and who is the source of selfless love. And this, one might think, protects him from the hubris and selfishness typical of artists, with which Romantic heroes such as the aforementioned Konrad from Mickiewicz's arch-drama had to contend.

3

Although the poetics of *Confessions* departs far from the structure of a diary or memoir, it nevertheless makes use of many morphological features of these genres. One senses in Augustine's statement the need for constant self-presence. This need can be linked to the cognitive revelation that truth is located at the bottom of the human soul. The fact that the process of insight into oneself, of recognising one's own interiority, takes place in the presence of God (Mickiewicz - author of the cycle of *Sentences and Remarks* - knew this well!) also has a cognitive justification. For it is God who is the only and certain source of knowledge, and this discovery Charles Taylor saw as the fundamental novelty of Augustinian subjectivity. Above all, however, writing becomes a way of encountering oneself,[33] while the creative reading of one's own past serves to transcend oneself and reform one's own life. Therefore, as Kijowski aptly points out, the choice of the writing path was for the Bishop of Hippo an existential choice, an "equation of life and existence",[34] life and writing. Here Byron's and Mickiewicz's postulate of the coherence of life and creation immediately comes to mind. Who knows whether it was not in Augustine that the Polish author of *Forefathers' Eve* found one of the inspirations for such a conception of poetry. At the same time, the ancient philosopher captures the tension in the relationship between God and man that Romanticism would later expose so strongly: the paradox of the most hidden and at the same time omnipresent Absolute, "unwavering and incomprehensible, unchangeable but changing all things, never new, never old" - Augustine reveals a catalogue of these contradictions right away in Book I.[35] These considerations concern not only the ontology of God, but also his 'personality': "you are always at work, always at rest, gathering, but not from any need, upholding and filling and protecting, creating and nourishing and bringing to maturity, going forth to seek even though you lack nothing"; and further: "You love and do not burn with passion; you are jealous and free from anxiety; you repent and do not sorrow; you are angry and undisturbed. You change your works and do not change your plan. You take back what you find and have never lost".[36]

[33] Cf. ibid, p. 256.
[34] A. Kijowski, op. cit. p. 196.
[35] See: *Confessions*, I, p. 3.
[36] *Confessions*, I, p. 3.

Man, in this perspective, appears as the opposite of the Creator: he loves but burns himself out in love, he cares but is accompanied by an inherent fear, he hoards because he is an entity unbridled in needs... In Mickiewicz's work, full of dilemmas and questions of theodicy (expressed especially in the fundamental drama *Forefathers' Eve*), Augustinian questions about evil (*unde sic malum?*) and the condition of man in the face of a history marked by this evil constantly resonate.

The construction of a God-witness to man's intellectual inquiries creates a particular narrative tension from the perspective of these dilemmas: Augustine is speaking to someone who is so fundamentally different that it risks communicative misunderstanding. Despite many concerns, however, hope prevails in the author that the Creator is a God who supports cognitive inquiry, who appreciates man's intellectual struggles. This is a very modern image of the Absolute, who is both a goal, a source of cognition, and at the same time someone who provides a method of knowing Himself. The dialogue partner with the Creator, on the other hand, in *Confessions* is man, who does not separate his cognitive activity from other, even the most intimate, spheres of existence; everywhere and always Augustine is a chaotic yet immensely inquisitive seeker of the meaning of existence. A researcher whose life is a cognitive process.

Moreover, Augustine continually reveals doubts about his own work, about his ability to convey what is internal. He also speaks with reluctance about the attitude of potential readers, who want to read the history of his soul only to satisfy their curiosity, although at the same time he wishes to entrust his most intimate thoughts to them. Yet the author is not inclined to win over his audience by worrying about the intentions of potential readers. In his reflections, one can easily perceive the distance typical of the Romantic artist associated with the fear of being misunderstood and hastily judged, linked to the creative pride of the independent artist. Despite being aware of all these limitations, Augustine writes motivated by the feeling of compulsion to tell the story of his own life. Hence, in his biography, one finds defensive considerations regarding the truth of the literary account: "And from what source will they know, when they hear from me about myself, whether I am telling the truth, since no one among human beings knows what goes on inside a human being except the human spirit that is within?".[37] These words can be read as a defence of the right to subjectivity and, at the same time, a manifestation - worthy of a Romantic artist - of the unverifiability of the experience inscribed in the verbal message. The right to self-analysis, to diagnose one's own existence, is not combined with a consent to external evaluation - "But neither do I judge myself. May I be heard, therefore, in just this way",[38]

[37] *Confessions*, X, p. 164.
[38] *Confessions*, X, p. 166.

writes Augustine. For readers "have not had their ears up against my heart, where I am whoever I am".[39] The apologia of the inner man is coupled with a confession of the incommunicability of knowledge of the human being comprehended as "a great mystery".[40] Writing therefore offers only a substitute for knowing: he writes of the human recipient of spiritual confession: "So they want to hear as I confess what I am within myself, beyond the reach of their eye or ear or mind. Yet what they want, surely, is not something they will know, but only something they will believe".[41] After all, "yet the hairs of our head are easier to number than our affections and the movements of our heart"[42] - the author-saint states in Book IV. Werther's confession "my heart is mine alone"[43] could serve as the motto of Augustinian self-reflection. Augustine's paradox also lies in the peculiar conflict between his readers' acquiescence to his analysis of his life and his concomitant conviction of the other's inability to make a just judgement. For this reason, many a Romantic author might have found Augustine's reflections particularly close to his heart. This is why the 'human' reading in the Augustinian project of reading *Confessions* has, as it were, a peripheral significance; it presupposes the impossibility of a final understanding with a reader other than God. This observation, however, is not the result of pride and usurpation of greatness (as it was in the case of Konrad, the protagonist of *Forefathers' Eve*) but the result of an intellectual conviction that only turning towards one's own interior gives full cognition.[44] This experience, moreover, can only be communicated through the elitist and subjective language of the heart. Restraining others - but also oneself - from judging one's own choices and achievements is also a consequence of accepting the truth, close to the Romantics, about the partiality of human cognition and the impossibility of definitive penetration of human experience. Man, for Augustine, is thus an astonishing and cognitively enigmatic reading. he writes, "True, no one knows what is in human beings except the human spirit that is within; yet there is something in each of us that not even the human spirit within us knows. But you, Lord, know everything that is in us, because you made us".[45]

In a further passage of reflection, Augustine expresses an astonishing statement to this effect: "And as for me, though in your sight I despise myself and account myself dust and ashes, there is nonetheless something I know

[39] *Confessions*, X, p. 165.

[40] *Confessions*, IV, p. 55.

[41] *Confessions*, X, 4, 165.

[42] *Confessions*, IV, p. 55.

[43] J.W. Goethe, *Cierpienia młodego Wertera*, transl. by L. Staff, Warsaw 1986, p. 111.

[44] See: St. Augustine, *O naturalnym poznaniu Boga,* transl. by Fr. F. Drączkowski, in *Z filozofii św. Augustyna i św. Bonawentury*, Warsaw 1980, pp. 22-30.

[45] *Confessions*, X, p. 166.

about you that I do not know about myself".[46] Man is more veiled and complicated to himself than God, who paradoxically is a much simpler entity than man. But what can one conclude about the essence of a human being? Augustine's description of his effort to read himself appals the reader: "Certainly, Lord, this is a struggle for me, a struggle within myself. I have become for myself a stretch of ground to be worked with difficulty and much sweat".[47] The metaphor of man as a fallow field is intriguing. Further on, Augustine goes on to write that the source of this horror is "a various, manifold, and powerfully vast life. Behold the countless fields and caves and chasms of my memory, uncountably full of countless kinds of things: whether by means of images, as with all bodies, or through the presence of the things themselves, as with the liberal arts, or through some sort of notions or notings, as with the affections of the mind (for the memory retains these even when the mind is not experiencing them, and whatever is in memory is in the mind)".[48] Memory, which is the content of the soul, gives a sense of chaos, of unbearable, distracting multiplicity. Augustine declares, "So I will pass beyond even memory and reach the One who has separated me from fourfooted beasts and made me wiser than the birds of the air". This declaration, however, is the cause of another intellectual frustration; for how can one find God outside of memory, especially since it does not bear the image of God; "I have no memory of you. And how will I find you if I have no memory of you?"[49]

Augustine, however, makes no secret of the fact that the particular recipient of *Confessions* is primarily himself. 'Harkening back' to the past serves the purpose of self-analysis - *Confessions* repeatedly take the form of soliloquies according to the philosopher's intention. Augustine suggests a particular attachment to this form of expression, also writing that he would have liked *Confessions* to take this form. However, the encounter with himself in the past and present, which, in Augustine's own words, constitutes the proper content of the narrative, leads to some difficult recognitions: "I cannot contain everything that I am. Is the mind, then, too small to contain itself?"[50] - asks the narrator of *Confessions*. Uncertainty about his own being fills him with existential anxiety: "What am I, then, my God? What nature am I?"[51] This is why Augustine begs God to grant him knowledge of himself[52] - "Let me question myself again, and this time more sharply"[53] - he says.

[46] *Confessions*, X, p. 166.
[47] *Confessions*, X, p. 176.
[48] *Confessions*, X, p. 177.
[49] *Confessions*, X, p. 177.
[50] *Confessions*, X, p. 171
[51] *Confessions*, X, p. 177.
[52] *Confessions*, X, p. 197.
[53] *Confessions*, X, p. 197.

4

Confessions, therefore, have a special protagonist: it is Augustine – describing and being described, doing various deeds and making various choices – who, years later, comments on these events himself, selects and evaluates them, who often combines facts with judgments about them, builds a picture of his past self, but admits many times both to gaps in his memory and to a lack of certainty about the situations he recounts. He is a narrator sometimes confident in his judgements, sometimes doubting his memory. Close to himself, but often distant and 'alien' - external to himself. It is a narrator who is finally dynamic in the various dimensions of this dynamism. In the simplest, biographical sense, he is someone who undergoes a multifaceted existential transformation, which takes place through a multidirectional dialogue: with himself (his own biography), with God, with friends, with events in his life, with his readings, through participation in events such as visits to the circus, the theatre, participation in political gatherings. And everything is expressed by the 'mobile' storyteller.

Confessions are also an interesting collage of genres and styles, precursory to romantic syncretic forms. The work contains elements of a diary, memoir, soliloquy, theological treatise, philosophical discourse, biblical exegesis, prayer, hymn, short story (cf. the beginning of Book VIII), and perhaps even an oral tale (*gawęda*) or parable (like the famous story of the theft of pears told by the narrator in the second book of *Confessions*),[54] philosophical polemic, scientific treatise....

The narrator of *Confessions* also constantly thematises his writing, reveals his creative strategies, dilemmas and troubles with the particular material that is his own life. According to the author's intentions, it is a story of 'a child of the century' about conversion, love, friendship, wrestling with oneself and the world. It is the autobiography of a philosopher in search of meaning - with all the threads here being co-extensive, intertwined and interdependent. The depth and inspirational potency of this text is also linked to the variety of transmission strategies that reflect the pre-Romantic 'subject in a rough and tumble'[55] - certain but also doubting, naked but also hiding secrets, sincere and yet not avoiding understatement.

Thus, in the literary tradition, Augustine initiates an entirely new way of writing about himself. *Confessions* are marked by another paradox of Christian anthropology, stemming from the tension between the need to invalidate the self, to show human futility, and an egotistical attitude towards a deep, detailed self-analysis of inner states and stirrings of the spirit. By valuing the depths of intimate life, Augustine initiates with *Confes-*

[54] *Confessions*, II, pp. 21-27.

[55] A expression created by E. Kasperski (originally in Polish: 'podmiot w szamotaninie').

sions the current of subject-oriented literature and subjective self-reflection aimed at exploring the 'invisible' and unverifiable, yet intersubjective sphere of existence. He also creates a new language, capable (though never fully) of expressing the spiritual essence of man. The metaphor of the spiritual senses exploited by the Romantics (Mickiewicz's poem *Gdy tu mój trup* (*While my corpse is here*) and the already mentioned *Sentences and Remarks* are examples of this) has origins in Saint Paul,[56] but also in Augustine. This is why Augustine can be called a hero and narrator with a Romantic mode of existence who, like later authors, struggles with problems and with unhappy love and the form of its memory. Also with the reading of the "rogue books"[57] - after all, it was Augustine who saw that they could be paradise, but also hell at the same time. Wasn't he the first in the culture to do so? Consequently, Agnieszka Kijowska proposes to look at the philosopher's biography as a reading biography.[58] Moreover, Augustine reads human life "in Mickiewicz's terms" - as the most valuable book.

5

From what has been written above, it follows that Augustine's thought largely revolved around issues central to Polish (though not only) Romanticism: the interrelations between God, history, nature, and man, as well as good and evil in the world and within man. The early medieval philosopher, in the chaos of the surrounding reality (as a witness to the decadence of the ancient empire), also sought unity and harmony in the world, much like the Romantics did[59] - in the end, he found it in God. Mickiewicz, who from his early youth sought support for his difficult existence in the Creator, likely found in Augustine an example of coming to terms with God. For this reason, the author of *Confessions* was undoubtedly intriguing to the poet.

A work by Adam Mickiewicz in which one can particularly find traces of his favorite philosopher is the 1836 cycle titled *Sentences and Remarks* (*Zdania i uwagi*). The collection consists of 163 poems - mostly distichs inspired (as the poet reveals in the title of the cycle) by the thoughts of mystics such as Jakob Böhme, Angelus Silesius (Johann Scheffler), and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin. In addition to the direct inspiration from these readings, the poet also drew from other spiritual sources, as scholars have proven over the years, though they did not mention the legacy of St. Augustine. Meanwhile, the context of the philosophy of the Bishop of Hippo seems particularly

[56] Cf. Eph 3.

[57] The motif of the ambivalent influence of reading on the history of heroes is the subject of M. Cieśla-Korytowska's book, *Te książki zbójeckie...,* Warsaw 2021.

[58] Agnieszka Kijowska suggests looking at the philosopher's biography as a reading biography. Like the later Romantics, Augustine reads books, but also events, which he subjects to meticulous interpretation. See A. Kijowska, *Święty Augustyn*, Warsaw 2007, pp. 11-13.

[59] See: M. Cieśla-Korytowska, *O romantycznym poznaniu,* op. cit., p. 29 et seq.

important to me here. It is, of course, difficult to trace all the references leading to St. Augustine in *Sentences and Remarks* within the scope of this article. Therefore, I would like to highlight only the most significant ones.

The Romantic poet was primarily inspired by Augustine's concept of knowledge, expressed, among other things, in the motif of man as a rich, content-filled book or micro-library. The inner essence of the subject can become a place of revelation (a book), but as Michał Masłowski notes, in order to "become a text, one must undertake the effort of a full interiorization of faith"[60] in which God is located, waiting to be discovered. The person depicted in Mickiewicz's epigrams, much like Augustine's view, appears as a dynamic, continually torn being, but also one endowed with inner content by God. Thus, the subject of the epigrams constantly urges the reader to delve into themselves and discover the image of the Creator within.[61] Primarily, only by descending into the depths of the 'self' can one reach the Truth. To do this, as Mickiewicz writes in one of the poems in the cycle, one must become a text oneself and read it within.[62] The observation that "wisdom must be acquired through one's own effort"[63] is a particularly vivid reflection of Augustinian epistemology (*Nosce te ipsum!*) in *Sentences and Remarks*. Self-contemplation as the most reliable way to understand the Absolute and oneself undoubtedly links the thoughts of Mickiewicz and the Bishop of Hippo, who in his *Confessions* uses, just like the Romantic poet later, the metaphor of man as a text. Not only does Augustine recognize himself as the richest book, but he also demonstrates (followed by Mickiewicz) that others can be sources of contemplation, texts that must be read on one's own.[64] Augustine's story, as he himself presents it in his autobiography, is also (if not primarily) a testament to the journey of epistemological struggle, in which the ancient rhetor successively abandons readings (which at most might encourage a return to oneself[65]), worldly knowledge in which he sought the Truth, and finally comes to the realization that what is essential is beyond reason - within the human soul, where the image of God is imprinted. This contemplation is nothing other than a careful introspection, a meditative insight, which the author of *Sentences and Remarks* also encourages. Augustine's repeatedly described intellectual failures, including the cognitive impotence that tormented him for years, are linked by the author of *Confessions* to continually choosing false paths to Truth and meaning. The subject of Mickiewicz's distich "Gdzie niebo"

[60] M. Masłowski, *„Zdania i uwagi". Mickiewicz: mądrość i samotność*, „Pamiętnik Literacki" year LXXXIX, issue 4, 1998, p. 8.

[61] See: the epigram: *Jakiego Boga do ducha weźwiesz, na tego podobieństwo stworzony będziesz* WR I, p. 404. This distich, it should be noted for clarity, was written separately and, by Mickiewicz's choice, was not included in the 1836 volume *Poezje*.

[62] See: the distich *Reszta prawd,* WR I, p. 396.

[63] See: the distich *Mądrość* WR I, p. 390.

[64] See: A. Kijewska, *Święty Augustyn,* Warszawa 2007, p. 67

[65] See: St. Augustine, *Confessions,* VII, p. 171-172.

[Where is heaven] expresses a similar thought - that God cannot be discovered in space, even sacred space, without first achieving self-knowledge.

Looking within oneself, however, requires a non-corporeal vision. From the Augustinian tradition (though it primarily has a Platonic origin), Mickiewicz likely borrowed the metaphor of spiritual senses, as well as the dual concept of man. The motif of 'stripping away' the body, destroying corporeality to activate the inner man, appears multiple times in *Confessions*. To ascend towards God, the source of absolute truth, "I will pass through the power of mine by which I cling to a body"[66] - Augustine expresses a thought close to Mickiewicz's later reflection. The saint distinguishes between life and body: the senses and limbs, shaped according to proper proportions and supporting human actions, but at the same time enslaving the soul. In a passage from his *Confessions*, Augustine writes that "the body that is corrupted weighs down the soul, and its earthly dwelling place crushes its perception with thoughts of many things".[67] The cognitive activity of the soul is also a motif strongly present in *Sentences and Remarks*. God, whom man calls upon, "often moves about in secret and knocks on [closed] doors".[68] God knocks on the doors of the soul, but man rarely is at home in the spiritual house. The distich "Gość" [Guest] is thus less a directive and more a call to a contemplative stance, to inner stillness - God is not called upon but found in silence (cf. the distich "Cichość" [Meekness]).

In Augustine, *meekness* - constantly contrasted with the turbulent external life - is not merely a call for silence, as salvation is promised only to those who accept the directives of faith without inner conflict. It is hard to imagine that the reader of Augustine and Mickiewicz's verses was intended merely as a proponent of an unshakable doctrine. In the epigram "Błogosławieni cisi" [Blessed are the meek], the poet indeed refers to the New Testament context, but this distich should be understood in the presence of a broader tradition. Mickiewicz, being familiar with Greek, might have interpreted the word *praeis* in a way that Polish translations do not fully capture. "The meek" primarily refers to those who do not use violence and are characterized by qualities of gentleness and kindness. Therefore, *meekness* is not synonymous with thoughtless silence[69] but rather a guide to an inner attitude of the person that leads to the birth of God in the soul. This birth (expressively conveyed in Mickiewicz's distich "*Boże narodzenie*" *[Christmas]*) is associated with effort and depends on the will of the individual.[70]

[66] X 7, p. 168.

[67] VI 17, p. 113.

[68] See: the distich *Gość* WR I, p. 388.

[69] A. Grzywna-Wilczek wrote about how Mickiewicz utilized the Holy Scriptures in his cycle: *„Jest i więcej prawd w piśmie". Mickiewiczowskie „Zdania i uwagi" w kontekście Biblii,* Lublin 1994.

[70] M. Masłowski wrote about it in the article: *„Zdania i uwagi". Mickiewicz: mądrość i samotność*, op. cit., pp. 8-9.

The anthropology in *Sentences and Remarks* is based on antinomies, contradictions, and contrasts (cf. the distichs "Różnica" [Difference], "Król i kat" ["King and Executioner"], "Uwaga chromego" [The Cripple's Observation]). This approach justifies the concept of life as a continual struggle. Such a formula of existence may, on one hand, derive from the baroque background of the distichs (Mickiewicz acknowledges his inspiration from seventeenth-century mystics such as Angelus Silesius[71] and Baader in the title) but perhaps above all from adopting the Augustinian model of the human person. The dualism of spirit and body is linked with the necessity of constant choice between good and evil.

Mickiewicz, like the Bishop of Hippo in his intellectual autobiography, also dedicated much space in his epigrams to the issues of value, including the problem of evil. One of the distichs, "Skąd zło?" [Where does evil come from?], directly references Augustine's question: *unde sic malum*?[72] The distich expresses the essence of thinking about evil as a lack of good, with its source being the corrupted human will:

> God is good: so all that leads to spirit's lamentation
> originates from man: evil, death and damnation. (WR I, p. 385)

In the perspective of Mickiewicz's epigrams, evil takes on a personal dimension, often presented in various forms and versions. However, evil is always dependent on human will - as reflected in the dramatic and ironic distich "Własność osobista" [Personal Possessions]:

> Someone is using your possessions, you complain:
> Sin — your only personal possession shall remain. (WR I, p. 390)

Augustine similarly views sin as a derivative of corrupted human nature: man, subject to the influence of Satan, "delivered (...) into the power of the ancient sinner, the ruler of the kingdom of death",[73] is thus an exceedingly tragic entity. However, it seems that significant differences in the anthropology of Augustine and Mickiewicz can be discerned here. Augustine's dynamic concept of man leads him to the conclusion of human helplessness and, consequently, to the belief in the necessity of grace: "What are wretched human beings to do? Who will deliver us from the body of this death? Only your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord" - the philosopher asks, adding a thought close to Mickiewicz: "Those [Platonic] writings have none of this".[74] Meanwhile, the speaker in *Sentences and Remarks* could at times be suspected of an autosoteriological stance. This is particularly evident in those gnomes where the poet emphasizes the limitation of God by human will, as in the distich "Wzajemność" [Reciprocity]. The problem of

[71] The ways in which Angelus Silesius is present in Mickiewicz's epigrams have been most thoroughly presented by A. Lam in the book *Anioł Ślązak Mickiewicza,* Kraków 2015.

[72] See: VII 5, pp. 102-104.

[73] VII 21, p. 177.

[74] VII 21, p. 177.

God being deprived of salvific power without the cooperation of human will is illustrated in the distich "Figura nie zbawi" [The Figure Will Not Save].

> He will not be saved by the cross on Golgotha Hill
> Who will not raise the cross upon his own heart, still. (WR I, p.382)

Mickiewicz, drawing extensively (either directly or indirectly) from Augustine's anthropological ideas, was also sometimes polemical towards them. For Augustine wrote about the ontological chasm between the Creator and creation. In Augustine's thought, man is absolutely dependent on his Creator, who is characterized by immanence and independence from creation, "A various, manifold, and powerfully vast life",[75] which is a condition of man and determines his nature, is in a sense the opposite of the unchanging, homogeneous divine existence. Consequently, a troubling issue in Mickiewicz's epigrams is the problem of the transformation of man into God, the ontological similarity between creation and the Creator.

Mickiewicz repeatedly expresses in *Sentences and Remarks* the idea of the possibility of the birth of God in the human soul. This can occur not so much through grace, but through the effort of the individual, without whose will and action God cannot accomplish anything. Augustine, who also considered the issue of the co-essentiality of God and man, ultimately reaches the conclusion of a lack of identity with the Creator through his intellectual journey.[76] What brings Augustine's and Mickiewicz's reflections closer together - despite apparent differences - is the conviction that this radical assimilation of the self to the Creator always occurs through the effort and will of the individual.

The anthropology in *Sentences and Remarks* also depicts man as entangled in a temporal context, caught in the conflicting tension between time and eternity. Experiencing one's own fate and existence is, in a sense, an experience of moving towards timelessness. Therefore, as Adam Sikora writes, "acceptance of time is accompanied by a desire to be freed from time, an effort to reach a motionless eternity and the solace it brings".[77] The motif of time is one of the main themes in *Confessions*[78] and provokes Augustine to primary questions: Where was I before I was?, "Was I somewhere? Was I someone?"[79] Existence between time and eternity is, for man, according to the philosopher, a source of anxiety and unfulfillment. The philosopher turns to God, saying: "O Lord; you are my eternal Father. But I am scattered through times whose order I do not know".[80] The metaphor of time as a chain or shackles (cf. Mickiewicz's distich *Czas [Time]*)

[75] See: X 17, 177.

[76] See: P. Brown, *Augustyn z Hippony,* transl. by W. Radwański, Warsaw 1993, p. 92.

[77] A. Sikora, *Nad „Zdaniami i uwagami"*, in, *Mickiewicz mistyczny,* ed. A. Fabianowski, E. Hoffmann-Piotrowska, Warsaw 2005, p. 258.

[78] These issues are addressed by reflections of St. Augustine in Book XI of *Confessions*.

[79] I, pp. 4-6.

[80] XI, p. 222.

reflects Augustinian thought on time as an obstacle to full union with the Absolute, and thus to the fulfillment of the primary desire of a mature Christian soul. In the perspective of Augustine's reflections, as well as in Mickiewicz's gnomes, man can find solace only when the clocks stop ticking. This is not necessarily possible only after death, as in *Droga do wieczności* [The Way to Eternity], the subject, through spiritual effort, can transcend time and space and experience a sense of eternity (WR I, 381).

In the above reflections, I wanted to suggest a little-explored, but apparently fertile research context for the rooting of Romantic confessional literature in Augustine's *Confessions*. By indicating the presence of his thoughts and aesthetic ideas in the statements of Mickiewicz in particular, I wanted to point out, using this example, the trail of dependence between the ancient rhetor and philosopher and the Romantics. In-depth analyses and interpretations of individual works by Mickiewicz (and also by other Romantics) from the perspective of the reception of Augustine's thought would perhaps contribute to broadening the context of Romantic literature's references to the Middle Ages, an era with which its authors strongly identified.[81] Most often, however, its influence is reduced to aesthetic inspiration (Gothicism, local colour historicism, exoticism of the Middle Ages), ideological inspiration (valorisation of Christian values, counterculture to classicism), and less philosophical inspiration. Polish Romanticism drew on this inspiration abundantly, as it seems on cursory examination. However, this problem has yet to be explored in detail.

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[81] I took a closer look at Augustine's inspiration in the work of another Polish Romantic, Zygmunt Krasiński, in the article *Święty Augustyn i Zygmunt Krasiński – o romantycznej autoutożsamiającej lekturze filozofa z Hippony*, „Prace Filologiczne. Literaturoznawstwo", 2016, no. 6 (9).

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