

MATEUSZ STRÓŻYŃSKI

Instytut Filologii Klasycznej Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza
ul. Fredry 10, 61-701 Poznań
Polska – Poland

OLD AGE BEFORE THE COURT: MONNICA AND SOCRATES IN BOOK NINE OF AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS*

ABSTRACT. Stróżyński Mateusz, Old Age before the Court: Monnica and Socrates in Book Nine of Augustine's *Confessions*.

The paper is an analysis of the four last chapters of Book Nine of Augustine's *Confessions*. Saint Monnica's "trial" before the court of God, imagined by Augustine, is compared with the trial of Socrates in terms of two opposite models of ethics: Christian and Pagan.

Keywords: old age, Augustine, Saint Monnica, Socrates, ancient ethics.

INTRODUCTION

In this article I am going to focus on the last four chapters of Book Nine of Augustine's *Confessions*, where Augustine prays for the salvation of the soul of his mother, Monnica (*Conf.* 9.13.34 – 37). A large portion of Book Nine (from 9.8.17 until the end) is devoted solely to Monnica. First, after a brief statement that she died shortly after Augustine's baptism in 387 (*cum apud Ostia Tiberina essemus, mater defuncta est*), we have something that Colin Starnes called Monnica's "little *vita*",¹ in which Augustine portrays his mother in quite a realistic way, emphasizing her infantile, sinful habit of drinking wine and subsequent healing of this habit, followed by the praise of her character and life (9.8.17 – 9.9.22). Then, the bishop of Hippo describes the famous, mystical "vision at Ostia", which he shared with his mother towards the end of her life (9.10.23 – 9.10.26). Thus Monnica's *vita*, follows the literary and philosophical pattern of the whole *Confessions*: the picture of human fall and return to God through conversion.² In a few days after the vision at Ostia (*interea vix intra quinque*

¹ Starnes 1990: 261.

² As Starnes points out, in both cases, it is „the complete movement of the human soul from its

dies aut non multo amplius, 9.11.27) Monnica dies and Augustine describes in a considerable detail both the moment of her death and his complex emotional reaction to it (9.11.27 – 9.12.33).

Peter Brown begins his biography of Augustine by describing Monnica not merely because it seemed reasonable, when he described the childhood of the future bishop of Hippo, to say also something about his mother. Monnica's influence on Augustine's life, personality and even his philosophy is hardly disputable.³ This influence as well as the importance of Monnica as a character in the first nine books of the *Confessions* has been discussed by many scholars from biographical, literary, theological, philosophical and psychological perspectives.⁴ In this paper I will focus my attention on one aspect of Monnica's picture in the *Confessions*, that is, on the final prayer of Augustine, in which he imagines his deceased mother before the court of God. I will try to show that this short, but powerful scene, has a significant meaning and serves the purpose of conveying, in a nutshell, the essence of Augustine's break with the ethical tradition of Paganism. This imaginary "trial of Monnica", interestingly, has not drawn scholarly attention and this short study intends to contribute to our understanding of the way in which Augustine confronts the Pagan and Christian traditions in his masterpiece.

THE TRIAL OF MONNICA

When Augustine tells the story of his mother's death, he describes two kinds of tears (*genera lacrimarum*, *Conf.* 9.13.34) that he was shedding. First, he cried, because of the loss of his beloved mother, whose life, Augustine confesses, was so deeply united with his own (9.12.30). This first *genus lacrimarum* was presented, perhaps, in a much more vivid way, because at first Augustine could not cry at all, even though he suffered greatly; only after evening prayer, with God's help, he could shed tears, which brought him relief. This part of his narrative deals with many ethical problems of Christian philosophy, such as moral assessment of emotions and human relations, and was discussed in detail by Kim

birth in nature, through rebirth in grace, to its eternal life in the heavenly *patria*" (Starnes 1990: 266).

³Brown 2000: 16–22.

⁴For more philosophical-theological considerations see e.g.: O'Ferrall 1975; Ferrari 1975; Coyle 1982; Starnes 1990: 257–66 and 1992: 51–65; Paffenroth 1997; Opper 2004; Djuth 2009. There is also a variety of psycho-historical studies, based mostly on psychoanalysis, which focus more or less on Monnica's influence on Augustine: Dodds 1927–1928; Kligerman 1957; Dittes 1965 and 1986; Havens 1965; Clark 1965; Bakan 1965; Pruyser 1966; Woollcott 1966; Fredriksen 1978; Miles 1982; Rigby 1985; Capps 1985; Gay 1986; Fenn 1986; TeSelle 1986. For a critique of those psychoanalytic studies see: Daly 1978.

Paffenroth and Catherine Opper.⁵ The second *genus lacrimarum*, however, deals also with serious ethical problems, but the fact of crying is not the problem at all. What is important is the picture of Monnica standing before God's tribunal.

Augustine writes:

Although she had been brought to life in Christ and although, while still not released from the flesh, her life was such as to bring praise to your name for her faith and moral character, nevertheless I would not venture to say that, from the time that you gave her new life in baptism, not one word passed her lips that was contrary to your teaching (9.13.34).⁶

Even though Augustine quotes Matt 5:22 to support his fear,⁷ it is easy, at first, to dismiss his words as yet another sign of his scruples. But Augustine in the *Confessions* does not merely describe historical people committing sins, many of which seem to the late modern reader far from being grave, such as his adolescent theft of pears or his mother's excessive fondness of wine in childhood, but he uses them as allegorical figures, representing human condition as such. It seems at times that Augustine deliberately does not choose grave, dramatic sins, such as murder or adultery, but daily sins (which are hardly considered as sinful in the contemporary Western culture), in order to emphasize that it is the whole human condition that is permeated to the core by what he called *peccatum originale* (*Ad Simplic.* 1.10). We are all sinners and we cannot be good on our own, despite all our efforts; whatever we do on our own, whether grave or not, deserves God's just punishment – the punishment of eternal damnation.

When Augustine relates his tears and his fear that his mother might have uttered some sinful words in her life, he is not just being neurotic; he wants to picture in a vivid way that no-one can feel secure, no-one can claim to be a "good person", because sin is unavoidable and demands punishment. Monnica, as an allegory of human kind, of Adam's offspring, is a sinner too, despite of the fact that she is the most saintly person in the *Confessions*. In previous chapters of Book Nine Augustine described the vision of God that he shared with his mother towards the end of her life and described her life as a continuous *santa conversatio* with God (*Conf.* 9.9.22). But now, at the very end, he trembles with fear, imagining that she stands before the court of God and, despite of what we might think, justly deserves sever punishment and nothing else.

⁵Paffenroth 1997; Opper 2004.

⁶„quamquam illa in Christo vivificata etiam nondum a carne resoluta sic vixerit, ut laudetur nomen tuum in fide moribusque eius, non tamen audeo dicere, ex quo eam per baptismum regenerasti, nullum verbum exisse ab ore eius contra praeceptum tuum”. Latin text: Augustine, Saint Bishop of Hippo, *Confessions*, ed. J.J. O'Donnell, Oxford 1992. Translation: Augustine, *The Confessions*, transl. and ed. by P. Burton, New York – Toronto 2001.

⁷“But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.” (I use *English Standard Version* for all Bible citations).

In a trial the defendant tries naturally to bring to light his good deeds. But Augustine points out that we do not have any good deeds of our own to enumerate, because what we call “good deeds” are actually God’s gifts and not our achievements. We have only our sins and that is hardly a line of defense. That is why Augustine – who pictures himself to be an active witness of this trial – says: “I set aside for a little while her good actions, for which I give thanks to you with rejoicing” and he prays for his mother’s sins (9.13.35).⁸ He begs God to be merciful and forgive Monnica, not to “enter into judgement” with her (cf. Ps. 143:2). Now Augustine becomes a real advocate of his mother and his language becomes even more judicial. Monnica, as every human being, has infinite debts (*debita*) to God and a just sentence – as for everyone – would be eternal damnation. She was merciful to others, says Augustine, which could be taken into consideration, since in the Lord Prayer Jesus taught his disciples to say “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12), but ultimately it cannot help Monnica either, since she was merciful only because God gave her the grace to be so, not because she decided or practiced to be.

The only thing that can save Monnica before the court is the fact that she has already been forgiven by virtue of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Augustine mentions that she received communion everyday and that by this sacrament “the record of the debt that stood against us was cancelled” (9.13.36; cf. Col. 2:14–15).⁹ Augustine does not argue that Monnica does not deserve punishment; on the contrary, he accepts that, but recalls the fact that God, out of his mercy, has already forgiven human sins in Jesus Christ’s sacrifice which is repeated during every eucharist. He only appeals to God’s mercy, carefully avoiding any other line of defense.

James Farrell has recently showed in his analysis of the pear theft in Book Two of the *Confessions* that Augustine used there a rhetorical method, employed mainly in judicial cases, which can be found in Cicero and *Ad Herennium*. Augustine in Book Two refutes all the arguments for his innocence, as if he was himself the prosecutor and the defendant in court. He leaves to himself – as the only way out – a plea for mercy. A normal judicial practice would be to emphasize the virtues of the defendant, but Augustine reverts this perspective, doing something contrary – *confessio*. He shows his perversity and deprives himself of any other way of defense.¹⁰ The strategy discussed by Farrell can be found also in the now analyzed section of Book Nine, but, first, the abandonment of any defense is even more clear in this case, and, second, this “trial of Monnica”

⁸ „sepositis paulisper bonis eius actibus, pro quibus tibi gaudens gratias ago, nunc pro peccatis matris meae deprecor te”.

⁹ „deletum est chirographum quod erat contrarium nobis”.

¹⁰ Farrell 2008: 271–275.

counterparts and earlier “trial of Augustine”, as “the fall of Monnica” (her drinking habit) is a counterpart of the fall of Augustine in the pear theft.

The Monnica’s trial scene is, however, much more complex, since Augustine introduces two other *dramatis personae*: Jesus Christ and the Enemy. The Son of God plays a role of a true advocate, the one who can say something in Monnica’s defense, even though this defense will not be based on hers, but on His own justice. The Devil, on the other hand, is pictured as a prosecutor who accuses Monnica (and every human being) of the sins she committed. He “reckoned up our sins, and sought to make some against him in whom we conquer, and found no grounds for accusation” (9.13.36).¹¹ The *dramatis personae* of this trial scene, then, are God – the Judge, Monnica – the defendant, Christ – the advocate, the Devil – the prosecutor, while Augustine and his readers are the public of this trial.

The powerful impact of this whole narrative lies in the fact that Monnica has just been described in her *vita* as an example of a saint and the one who saw God even in this life. Certainly, she is depicted as closer to God than Augustine himself. At the same time, the just sentence for her (as for everyone) would be eternal death of hell. The only thing that can save Monnica is freely given mercy of the divine Judge, the mercy that has been already shown on the cross and is still shown in the eucharist, to which she “bound herself with the bond of faith” (9.13.36).¹²

And yet Augustine does not describe Monnica as completely passive before God. It would be a misunderstanding of his theory of grace to suppose that the best thing for us is to do nothing at all and let God do everything for us. What is of utmost importance in this trial is Monnica’s attitude and behavior. Augustine writes:

Let no one tear her away from your protection. Let not the lion and the serpent interpose themselves, be it by force or by guile; for neither will she reply that she owes nothing, and be shown guilty and overcome by the cunning Accuser, but will reply that her debts have been forgiven by him to whom no one will repay what he, though no debtor, paid for us (9.13.36).¹³

The real danger to Monnica is not even the fact that she is accused by the Devil of all her sins, but the possibility that she will reply that she is not guilty, that she does not deserve punishment. Monnica is given a fundamental choice – the first choice is to present her life as a fruit of her own good will, of her

¹¹ „computans delicta nostra et quaerens quid obiciat, et nihil inveniens in illo, in quo vincimus”.

¹² „ad cuius pretii nostri sacramentum ligavit ancilla tua animam suam vinculo fidei”.

¹³ „nemo a protectione tua dirumpat eam; non se interponat nec vi nec insidiis leo et draco. neque enim respondebit illa nihil se debere, ne vincatur et obtineatur ab accusatore callido, sed respondebit dimissa debita sua ab eo cui nemo reddet, quod pro nobis non debens reddidit”.

moral efforts and virtue, in order to turn it into evidence against the Devil's accusations. The second choice is to acknowledge and confess all her sins, stand defenseless, overwhelmed by the sins which justly deserve eternal punishment, and not to defend herself, apart from saying that God has already forgiven her in Jesus Christ.

What is interesting in this is that Augustine, who, before his conversion, was trained to become a rhetor and was to be a state official, and now is a Christian bishop whose duty is to be a judge in his diocese, writing for the readers familiar with the noble Roman culture of law, is suggesting the worst possible attitude in any human court.¹⁴ His proposition would be absurd for any person in court, because it entails a complete rejection of any defense. Only this "absurd" attitude, however, can save Monnica and every other human being, before the court of God. The first strategy, to defend oneself by enumerating the good actions, reasonable from a human point of view, is the Devil's most dangerous snare. It is based on the common view that human beings are capable of performing morally good deeds based on their own good intentions and efforts that transform those intentions into actions. But this is an illusion, because for Augustine there is no such thing as a good deed that can be strictly called "our own". What we perceive as our or someone else's good deeds are the effects of God's grace, God's gifts to his chosen ones, and we cannot claim that they came from us. On the other hand, everything that we do on our own, with our own effort only, is sinful, however morally good it might look to us and others.

This ethical position that Augustine developed around his "Pauline revolution" around mid 390ties¹⁵ breaks with the tradition of Pagan ethics, which claimed that some people can achieve moral excellence, even though there are very few of them. Some years after the *Confessions*, Augustine will attack this Pagan theory incarnated in Pelagius' moral teaching with a force that will influence the whole western Christianity, but even in the *Confessions* he is very clear about the fact that human nature in itself is completely paralyzed by sin. This pessimistic ethical position will be repulsive for many moralists, especially for the anti-Christian moralists of the French Enlightenment tradition and for the disciples of Carl Marx, but one of the true atheists of the 20th century, Albert Camus, will praise Augustine for his "terrible *nemo bonus*", probably, because Camus, unlike the majority of French intellectuals of his time, had an intellectual courage to face the interior logic of the Communist hell on earth, created by those who assumed that people are intrinsically good, while the evil lies in the external conditions of social life.¹⁶ It is worth noticing that the main argument

¹⁴ Starnes emphasizes the fact that Augustine takes a position of a bishop in those last chapters of Book Nine, but only in the context of his intercessory prayer for Monnica and for his father, Patricius; he does not mention the judicial aspect of those chapters (Starnes 1990: 265).

¹⁵ See, among others, the recent Dobell's work (Dobell 2009, e.g. 228–236).

¹⁶ Camus 1994: 162.

of the majority of the leftist French intellectuals against comparing the Communist terror to the fascist one was the fact that the source of the Communist carnage of the 20th century were their good, humanistic intentions. Augustine probably would have fully recognized and appreciated the Manichaean flavor of this argument.¹⁷

THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES AND AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIO*

The Pagan belief in the possibility of moral perfection, embodied in the philosophical ideal of the sage, is most visible in the life and death of Socrates who was considered to be the greatest of sages by virtually all philosophical schools. It seems probable that Augustine's short "trial of Monnica" is a polemical allusion to Socrates' trial, even though the greatest Pagan sage is not mentioned by name anywhere in the *Confessions*. We do not know, if Augustine ever read either Plato's *Apology*, or that of Xenophon, but it is generally assumed that his poor knowledge of Greek would make it impossible.¹⁸ He might have read a Latin translation, but he did not need to, because Socrates' trial was so important part of philosophical tradition, that he must have known from various sources how Socrates behaved before the Athenian court, according to his disciples' narratives. For example, one of Augustine's rhetorical and philosophical mentors, Cicero, recalls Socrates' trial in the first book of his *Tusculanae disputationes* (*Tusc.* 29.71).

If we assume that the "trial of Monnica" is Augustine's polemical reaction to the trial of Socrates described by Plato and Xenophon and – through this – to the whole ethical position that it expresses, the reason for the "absurd" line of defense suggested by the bishop of Hippo can be understood as a simple reversion of Socrates' line of defense and, actually, of his philosophical stance.

What was probably widely remembered and puzzling for Socrates' disciples, was Socrates' *μεγαληγορία*, (lofty utterance), that Xenophon tries to explain in his *Apology* (*Xen. Apol.* 1). Xenophon's reason for Socrates' pride is that the sage did not want to live any longer, because he did not want to suffer the inevitable weakness of old age. But Xenophon's Socrates also regards his whole life as a long preparation for defense – that is why he does not have to prepare a speech before going to court (*Apol.* 3). What is particularly clear in Xenophon's account is that Socrates openly says to the judges that he is completely innocent: "all my life I have been guiltless of wrong-doing" (*Apol.* 3). Socrates admits that he will

¹⁷The perpetual tension between those two ethical and political ideas – the man is intrinsically good vs. intrinsically evil – has been pointed out, see e.g. Berlin 2000: 68 and Arendt 1991: 175.

¹⁸See a short, but interesting criticism of this assumption by Marcia Colish who suggests that Augustine might have also had access to Greek sources (Colish 1985: 144; she also refers to: Solignac 1958 and Holte 1962: 112).

not use the usual strategy of the accused, that is, bringing little children to court, crying, begging the judges for mercy etc., simply because he is convinced he is completely blameless. Socrates does not need to defend himself by enumerating his good deeds, but not like Monnica, who believes there are no good deeds to call her “own”, but since he believes that his whole life was perfectly virtuous.

The advocate and witness that Socrates calls is also divine. But unlike in Monnica’s case, here the daimon prevents Socrates from defending himself in the usual way (*Apol.*4), because this daimon believes Socrates is morally perfect. Also Apollo himself told Chaerephon that no-one is more free, just and wise than Socrates (*Apol.* 14), so Socrates can confess that “no-one has ever had a better life”, that “he lived his whole life in a just way” (*Apol.* 15), and that he considers himself to excel over the whole humankind (*Apol.* 15). Maybe he was not addressed in such a way as Lycurgus was, whom the god did not know what to call – a god or a man – but he is certainly not merely human. Despite his initial reluctance, Xenophon’s Socrates eventually gives some examples of his good deeds and his virtuous life (*Apol.* 16–19). In the end, he even refuses to name his penalty because it would mean that he actually is guilty of something (*Apol.* 23).

In Plato’s *Apology* Socrates is more subtle and ironic. He demonstrates that the accusations are groundless, but he is not so straightforward about his virtue as Xenophon’s Socrates. He mentions Apollo’s oracle (Pl. *Apol.* 21a – b), but turns it into an ironical attempt to prove that others are wiser than he is and to “prove the god’s wrong” (21c – 24b). Later Socrates, ironically or not, says that he is not defending himself at all, but he defends his audience and judges instead – he wants to save them from sacrilegious condemning an innocent man to death (30d).

His pride is also being ironic at times, for example, when he compares himself to a gadfly, thus placing his educative and formative service to his *polis* in a comic context (30e – 31a). Socrates also gives an autobiographical picture of himself (Monnica’s *vita* would correspond to that), which functions as another defense – not by arguments, but by means of sheer facts (32a – 34b). The irony can be heard also in Socrates’ naming his penalty – here Plato and Xenophon diverge – because he considers an honorable reward for himself the best penalty (36d – e). Plato’s Socrates seems to be keenly aware that he can be seen as presumptuous or hubristic (37a), but he asserts that, nonetheless, it is true that he has never intentionally wronged anyone. Plato’s Socrates also evokes an image of a different court, that of Minos, Radamanthus, Aeacus, Triptolemos and other heroes in Hades (41a). They are, unlike the Athenian ones, just judges. Socrates suggests that he expects nothing less than an acknowledgement of his virtue and innocence and a reward of a blessed life. The divine tribunal is much more just than the human one and Socrates is happy that his personal justice will be fairly judged by it (41a – c).

From a philosophical point of view, Socrates’ self-evaluation is based on his

ethical intellectualism: people sin because they are stupid, they do not examine their life and do not exercise their reason (cf. Pl. *Prot.* 345d – e and 352c). When some of them finally recognize what is right and what is wrong, they must act according to this knowledge. Socrates' proud declaration that he never did anything wrong declares the triumph of reason over ignorance. There is no doubt that, according to Socrates, human being can become morally perfect by using his own reason and will, even though most of people do not achieve this highest goal.

Nothing can be more contrary to that than Augustine's view of human condition and thus nothing can be more contrary than Monnica's and Socrates' attitudes before the court. Augustine argues that people are fundamentally sick due to Adam's sin and, consequently, whatever they do is permeated by pride (*superbia*) which is the root of all sin.¹⁹ The sickness of sin turns everything into itself; even the most noble intentions become sinful, because they are done not for God, but for the self. That is why no-one can do anything good by his own effort. It does not matter, whether we see what is good and what is wrong, because whatever we do and whatever we choose is always sinful, if we do not do it for the pure love of God – which can be given to us only by God himself. Socrates' life and his defense would be perfectly reasonable and just, *if only* his view of human condition was true.

But for Augustine it is built on false assumptions, so it becomes a self-accusation, instead of apology. Actually, Socrates trial, even though it was never mentioned in the *Confessions*, is an excellent example of the sinful *praesumptio* of philosophers, which Augustine tries to heal with his humble *confessio*. The bishop of Hippo is quite severe, judging all Pagan sages as sinners, despite of their apparent virtues. The tradition puts into Augustine's mouth a saying that Pagan virtues are actually *vitia splendida*, "splendid vices", even though he never used that exact phrase, as James Wetzel points out.²⁰ However, in the *City of God* we found a powerful chapter, when Augustine condemns the famous virtues of Pagan sages, such as Socrates.

For however praiseworthy may seem to be the rule of the soul over the body and of the reason over the vices, if the soul and the reason do not serve God as God has commanded that he should be served, then in no wise do they rightly rule the body and the vices. For what kind of mistress over the body and the vices can a mind be that knows not the true God, and that instead of being subject to his command is prostituted to the corrupting power of the most vicious demons? Accordingly, the very virtues that it thinks it possesses, and by means of which it rules the body and the vices in order to obtain or keep any object whatsoever, if it does not subordinate them to God, are themselves vices rather than virtues. For although some suppose that virtues are true and honourable when they are made subject to themselves and are sought for no further end, even then they are puffed up and proud, and so must be reckoned as vices

¹⁹ See Green 1949; Harvey 1951: 42–44; Torchia 1987; MacDonald 2006.

²⁰ Wetzel 2004: 271.

rather than as virtues. For as it is not something that comes from the flesh that makes the flesh live, but something above it, so it is not something that comes from man but something above man that makes him live a blessed life; and this is true not only of man but of every heavenly domination and power (*De civ.* 19.25).²¹

Years earlier, in the *Confessions*, Augustine demonstrates how Pagan philosophy, even though it gives access to the contemplation of God and reveals the truth about the nature of reality, is unable to make people truly virtuous, because of the pride that drives its whole spiritual project. In Book Five Augustine says that philosophers err, because they do not know the humility of Christ who is the Way and the only medicine to human pride:

This Way they have not known – the Way by which they might descend from themselves to him, and through him rise up to him. This Way they have not known; they think they are radiant and exalted as the stars of heaven, when all the while they have fallen headlong to earth, and their heart is darkened in its folly. They have indeed uttered many truths about your creation; but the Truth itself, the craftsman of certain, they do not seek with proper piety, and hence do not find; or if they do find him, then having known God they honour him not as God, nor do they give thanks to him, and their own conceits they have dwindled away to nought. They say that they are wise, ascribing to themselves the things that are yours... (*Conf.* 5.3.5).²²

As Raymond DiLorenzo shows, the essence of Augustine accusation is precisely the opposition *praesumptio/confessio*, based on the recognition of grace.²³

Also in Book Seven Augustine will portray himself as the one initiated into the mysteries of Neoplatonism and yet, utterly unable to live a virtuous life, until

²¹Quamlibet enim videatur animus corpori et ratio vitiis laudabiliter imperare, si Deo animus et ratio ipsa non servit, sicut sibi esse serviendum ipse Deus praecepit, nullo modo corpori vitiisque recte imperat. Nam qualis corporis atque vitiorum potest esse mens domina veri Dei nescia nec eius imperio subiugata, sed vitiosissimis daemonibus corrumpentibus prostituta? Proinde virtutes, quas habere sibi videtur, per quas imperat corpori et vitiis, ad quodlibet adipiscendum vel tenendum rettulerit nisi ad Deum, etiam ipsae vitia sunt potius quam virtutes. Nam licet a quibusdam tunc verae atque honestae putentur esse virtutes, cum referuntur ad se ipsas nec propter aliud expetuntur: etiam tunc inflatae ac superbae sunt, ideo non virtutes, sed vitia iudicanda sunt. Sicut enim non est a carne sed super carnem, quod carnem facit vivere: sic non est ab homine sed super hominem, quod hominem facit beate vivere; nec solum hominem, sed etiam quamlibet potestatem virtutemque caelestem. (Text and translation: Saint Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, transl. W.C. Greene, Cambridge – London 1969).

²²non noverunt hanc viam qua descendant ad illum a se et per eum ascendant ad eum. non noverunt hanc viam, et putant se excelsos esse cum sideribus et lucidos, et ecce ruerunt in terram, et obscurata est insipiens cor eorum. et multa vera de creatura dicunt et veritatem, creaturae artificem, non pie quaerunt, et ideo non inveniunt, aut si inveniunt, cognoscentes deum non sicut deum honorant aut gratias agunt, et evanescent in cogitationibus suis, et dicunt se esse sapientes sibi tribuendo quae tua sunt...

²³DiLorenzo 1983. See also Starnes 1990: 194–197.

he is given the grace of celibacy by God himself (described in the famous conversion scene in the Milanese garden, in Book Eight). Augustine writes about himself:

I apprehended and perceived your invisible nature through the things you have made [...] I was certain of all these things, but too weak to enjoy you. I could chatter away of all these matters as if quite learned in them, but if I had not sought your Way in Christ our Saviour, I would not have been learned but lurching towards destruction. I had now begun to wish to be thought wise, being full of my own punishment; nor did I weep, but rather was puffed up with my knowledge. [...] and, later, when I had been made docile towards your Scriptures, and my wounds were being treated by your healing fingers, I could discern and distinguish the difference between presumption and confession²⁴ (*Conf.* 7.20.26).

The Christian model of trial, which is a rejection of the Socratic model, has been shown in a nutshell in the discussed “trial of Monnica”, but, as Lyell Asher demonstrated in his excellent study, a similar strategy is used by Augustine, when he describes the scene of the theft of pears in Book Two. This scene is an allegory of the fall of human race, just as Monnica’s infantile habit of drinking wine. Asher suggests that Augustine fears that both his claim that he is leading an ascetic life now and his act of *confessio*, in which he emphasizes that he is still a sinner, can become a source of a sinful pleasure, when he speaks publicly before his readers. If we develop Asher’s comparison some more, we could say that the whole *Confessions* are a Christian trial, polemical to the Socratic one. The hidden danger of Augustine’s *confessio* would be his pleasure that he is humble: this shows how insidious human pride is, since even humility can be a disguised *superbia*. This secret pleasure of humility is, according to Asher, symbolized by the theft of pears and Augustine is trying to convince the readers that his confessions, unlike the theft, can become a private matter and avoid a trap of hidden pride.²⁵

But what Augustine is trying to do in his *Confessions* is briefly and simply pictured at the very end of the autobiographical account, in the last chapters of Book Nine. He, as Monnica, is rejecting the Socratic attempt to defend himself before the human and divine court, in terms of the virtues possessed by him and all the good actions performed in his life. He is doing more than Monnica, because he is accusing himself and not merely abandoning defense, but the spiritual attitude, that of *confessio* vs. *praesumptio* is the same in both cases.

²⁴ invisibilia tua per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspexi [...] certus quidem in istis eram, nimis tamen infirmus ad fruendum te. garriebam plane quasi peritus et, nisi in Christo, salvatore nostro, viam tuam quaererem, non peritus sed periturus essem. iam enim coeperam velle videri sapiens plenus poena mea et non flebam, insuper et inflabar scientia. [...] et, cum postea in libris tuis mansuefactus essem et curantibus digitis tuis contrectarentur vulnera mea, discernere atque distinguerem quid interesset inter praesumptionem et confessionem.

²⁵ Asher 1998: 240–244.

In Monnica it is more clear, since Augustine is able to use her in Book Nine as a model of perfect *confessio* (which is, of course, quite the opposite of the claim to moral perfection!), because she is approaching the end of her life and any serious fall is not very likely, while he is in his forties and still could destroy everything that God gave him.²⁶

The idea of Augustinian *confessio*, that is, a spiritual attitude based on confessing all our sinfulness to God, not trying to deny them or justify them in any way, and begging His grace as the only source of therapy and salvation, is brilliantly conveyed in his portrayal of Monnica before the court of God. What she should do is absurd in human terms, since she should let the Devil accuse her and she should plead guilty herself, placing her hope in the love of God, that she cultivated in her earthly life. This paradoxical line of defense does not intend to suggest that good deeds or virtues do not matter. Augustine gives many examples of Monnica's virtues and good deeds throughout the *Confessions* and in Book Nine he makes her an exemplary saint, but he also describes her moral weakness and failures.²⁷ Eventually, before the court of God, it is not Monnica's wisdom, not her good will, that can save her, but her personal, intimate bond with God. Good deeds come out of this loving bond, but they are received, not only accomplished, and cannot be claimed her own.

CONCLUSION

Scholars suggest that Augustine assessment of Monnica's relation to the philosophical ideals is not consistent. Sometimes he pictures her almost as a philosopher, sometimes her life is an alternative to the way of philosophers. The final scene of Book Nine, which I called here the "trial of Monnica", is one of those places in which Augustine depicts his mother's sainthood as contradicting the ethical ideals of the Pagan philosophers.

The rhetorical brilliance of Augustine can be seen in the fact that he needed only four short chapters to create a complex picture, in which he entwined philosophical questions, Biblical images and literary mastery. Augustine uses the fact of his mother's old age to refer to the *topos* of old age as the time in which human life is assessed and evaluated in terms of virtue and happiness. He also, probably, refers to the famous trial of Socrates, also an old man, to revert the basic philosophical ideas expressed in Socrates' apology, as related by Xenophon and Plato. He does this not by means of philosophical discourse, but by evoking judicial situation of accusation, defense and judgment. But the

²⁶That is Colin Starnes' suggestion (Starnes 1992: 52–53).

²⁷About this complex, ambivalent and human picture of Monnica see: Brown 2000: 157–158; O'Ferrall 1975: 30; Paffenroth 1997: 150–151; Djuth 2004: 230.

courtroom Augustine creates is as much Roman as it is biblical; the Christian “folly of the cross” (1 Cor 1:23) denies the rationality of Roman judicial rhetoric and practice. If the defendant tries to defend herself, she will be severely and justly punished; if she does not defend herself and pleas guilty instead, she will be freed of all charges.

What is probably least visible in those four chapters of Book Nine is that Augustine is focusing readers’ attention on his mother, while he is, at the same time, referring to himself and to all his readers. To himself, because it is no coincidence that the “trial of Monnica” is also the end of his “autobiography” in the *Confessions*. His mother’s death evokes his own inevitable death, her trial – his future trial before the divine court. He cries, begging God to forgive her, but does he not cry also for himself? And the readers can easily focus on Monnica and her son, on *their* sins and *their* confession, on *their* fall and healing – perhaps, too easily. Augustine’s “first autobiography” and “biography” of his mother hardly resemble what we would call (auto)biography today. Not because they are incomplete, but because they are allegorical and their intent is not to describe a life of Augustine or Monnica, but to describe human condition in a vivid, powerful way, which can move the readers emotionally, spiritually and intellectually.

Augustine’s biblical hermeneutics is based on the principle that he learnt from Ambrose of Milan in 386, before his dramatic (or rather consciously dramatized) conversion in the Milanese garden. The hermeneutic principle was Paulinian *littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat* (*Conf.* 6.4.6), which enabled Augustine to search a spiritual (philosophical/theological) meaning hidden behind Biblical stories. It has been pointed out by many scholars (recently in a detailed study by Irène Bochet), that Augustine tells the story of his life using Biblical phrases, trying to reconstruct his biography in order to find a deeper meaning in it, that is, the personal history of salvation.²⁸ In other words, Augustine’s life, and also Monnica’s life, for that matter, is like a Biblical story: the reader can focus on the “carnal”, literal meaning, on the “real” events and personalities that are described by Augustine with a literary mastery, but some readers are invited to go deeper, to the “spiritual” meaning of the story. By doing that, they have to focus their attention on themselves, too, since they share the same human condition and face the same problems as Augustine or Monnica.

Augustine’s, praying and crying, imagines his mother before the court of God; we, the readers, can also pray and cry, imagining both Augustine and his mother (but also Socrates!), saints and sinners, before this tribunal. But the rhetorical brilliance both hides and reveals the real challenge that Augustine poses to us as his readers: to imagine *ourselves* old and dying, standing before the court of God, accused by the Devil of all our wrongdoings. And Augustine seems to give his readers a choice – they can act like Socrates (or any “rational”

²⁸Bochet 2004: 104–115 and 157–177.

defendant), or they can act like Monnica (in her trust in the folly of the cross). In any case, the fact is that our whole life, as Socrates himself pointed out (Xen. *Apol.* 3), is in any case a preparation for a final trial, regardless whether we believe that our judge will be God or only our own conscience.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Arendt 1991: H. Arendt, *O rewolucji*, transl. M. Godyń, Kraków 1991.
- Asher 1998: L. Asher, *The Dangerous Fruit of Augustine's "Confessions"*, "Journal of the American Academy of Religion" 66, 2 (1998), 227–255.
- Bakan 1965: D. Bakan, *Some Thoughts on Reading Augustine's Confessions*, "Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion" 5, 1 (1965), 149–152.
- Berlin 2000: I. Berlin, *Cztery eseje o wolności*, transl. D. Lachowska, J. Łoziński, Poznań 2000.
- Bochet 2004: I. Bochet, *Le firmament de l'Écriture: l'herméneutique augustiniennne*, Paris 2004.
- Brown 2000: P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo. A Biography*, Berkeley – Los Angeles 2000.
- Camus 1994: A. Camus, *Notatniki 1935–1959*, trans. J. Guze, Warszawa 1994.
- Capps 1985: D. Capps, *Augustine as Narcissist: Comments on Paul Rigby's "Paul Ricoeur, Freudianism, and Augustine's Confessions"*, "Journal of the American Academy of Religion" 53, 1 (1985), 115–127.
- Clark 1965: W.H. Clark, *Depth and Rationality in Augustine's Confessions*, "Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion" 5, 1 (1965), 144–148.
- Colish 1985: M. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition From Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages, vol. II. Stoicism in Christian Latin Thought through the Sixth Century*, Leiden 1985.
- Coyle 1982: J.K. Coyle, *In Praise of Monica: a Note on the Ostia Experience of Confessions IX*, "Augustinian Studies" 13 (1982), 87–96.
- Daly 1978: L.J. Daly, *Psychohistory and St. Augustine's Conversion Process*, *Augustiniana* 28 (1978), 231–254.
- DiLorenzo 1983: R. DiLorenzo, *Non pie quaerunt: Rhetoric, Dialectic, and the Discovery of the True in Augustine's Confessions*, "Augustinian Studies" 14 (1983), 117–27.
- Dittes 1965: J.E. Dittes, *Continuities between the Life and Thought of Augustine*, "Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion" 5, 1 (1965), 130–140.
- 1986: *Augustine: Search for a Fail-Safe God to Trust*, "Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion" 25, 1 (1986), 57–63.
- Djuth 2009: M. Djuth, *Augustine, Monica, and the Love of Wisdom*, "Augustinian Studies" 40, 2 (2009), 217–232.
- Dobell 2009: B. Dobell, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion: the Journey from Platonism to Christianity*, Cambridge 2009.
- Dodds 1927–1928: E.R. Dodds, *Augustine's Confessions: A Study of Spiritual Maladjustment*, "Hibbert Journal" 26 (1927–1928), 459–473.
- Farrell 2008: J.M. Farrell, *The Rhetoric(s) of St. Augustine's Confessions*, "Augustinian Studies" 39, 2 (2008), 265–291.
- Fenn 1986: R. Fenn, *Magic in Language and Ritual: Notes on Augustine's Confessions*, "Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion" 25, 1 (1986), 77–91.
- Ferrari 1975: L.C. Ferrari, *Monica on the Wooden Ruler (Conf. 3.11.19)*, "Augustinian Studies" 6 (1975), 193–205.
- Fredriksen 1978: P. Fredriksen, *Augustine and His Analysts: The Possibility of a Psychohistory*, "Soundings" 61 (1978), 206–227.
- Gay 1986: V. Gay, *Augustine: The Reader as Selfobject*, "Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion" 25, 1 (1986), 64–76.

- Green 1949: W.M. Green, *Initium omnis peccati superbia: Augustine on Pride as the First Sin*, Berkeley – Los Angeles 1949.
- Harvey 1951: J.F. Harvey, *Moral Theology of the Confessions of Saint Augustine*, Washington 1951.
- Havens 1965: J. Havens, *Notes on Augustine's Confessions*, "Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion" 5, 1 (1965), 141–143.
- Holte 1962: R. Holte, *Beatitude et sagesse*, Paris 1962.
- Kligerman 1957: Ch. Kligerman, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Confessions of St. Augustine*, "Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association" 5 (1957), 469–484.
- MacDonald 2006: P. MacDonald, *Petit Larceny, the Beginning of All Sin: Augustine's Theft of Pears*, in: W.E. Mann, (ed.), *Augustine's Confessions. Critical Essays*, Oxford 2006, 45–74.
- Miles 1982: M.R. Miles, *Infancy, Parenting, and Nourishment in Augustine's Confessions*, "Journal of the American Academy of Religion" 50, 3 (1982), 349–364.
- O'Ferrall 1975: M.M. O'Ferrall, *Monica, the mother of Augustine: A Reconsideration*, "Recherches Augustiniennes" 10 (1975), 23–43.
- Oppel 2004: C. Oppel, "Why, my soul, are you sad?": *Augustine's Opinion on Sadness in the City of God and an Interpretation of his Tears in the Confessions*, "Augustinian Studies" 35, 2 (2004), 199–236.
- Paffenroth 1997: K. Paffenroth, *Tears of Grief and Joy. Confessions Book 9: Chronological Sequence and Structure*, "Augustinian Studies" 28, 1 (1997), 141–154.
- Pruyser 1966: P.W. Pruyser, *Psychological Examination: Augustine*, "Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion" 5, 2 (1966), 284–289.
- Rigby 1985: P. Rigby, *Paul Ricoeur, Freudianism, and Augustine's Confessions*, "Journal of the American Academy of Religion" 53, 1 (1985), 93–114.
- Solignac 1958: A. Solignac, *Doxographies et manuels dans la formation philosophique de saint Augustine*, "Revue des Études Augustiniennes" 1 (1958), 113–148.
- Starnes 1990: C. Starnes, *Augustine's Conversion: a Guide to the Argument of Confessions I-IX*, Waterloo 1990.
- Starnes 1992: *The Ninth Book of the Confessions*, in: J. McWilliam (ed.), *Augustine: from Rhetor to Theologian*, Waterloo 1992.
- TeSelle 1986: E. TeSelle, *Augustine as Client and as Theorist*, "Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion" 25, 1 (1986), 92–101.
- Torchia 1987: J. Torchia, *St. Augustine's Treatment of Superbia and Its Plotinian Affinities*, "Augustinian Studies" 18 (1987), 66–80.
- Woolcott 1966: P. Woolcott, *Some Considerations of Creativity and Religious Experience in St. Augustine of Hippo*, "Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion" 5, 2 (1966), 273–283.
- Wetzel 2004: J. Wetzel, *Splendid Vices and Secular Virtues. Variations on Milbank's Augustine*, "Journal of Religious Ethics" 32, 2 (2004), 271–300.

OLD AGE BEFORE THE COURT: MONNICA AND SOCRATES IN BOOK NINE
OF AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS*

Summary

Even though the character of Augustine's mother, Monnica, has been studied from different angles, the students of the *Confessions* have not paid much attention to a curious image of her standing before the tribunal of God, which appears in Augustine's prayer after her death. This short scene, which could be called the "trial of Monnica" is a carefully created passage, in which Augustine juxtaposes Pagan and Christian ethical ideas, probably alluding to Socrates' trial and

confronting the Christian attitude of his mother to that of the greatest of ancient sages. Augustine argues that Monnica should not respond to the Devil's accusations and should not try to defend herself, because that would make her salvation impossible. On the contrary, abandoning of defense and loving trust in God's mercy can save her soul from eternal damnation. This attitude is contrary to the proud self-defense of Socrates, who emphasized his innocence and moral perfection. Augustine's image of Monnica before the court of God is an expression of his idea of original sin and of human inability to achieve virtue without God's grace, which is a significant break with the Pagan ethical tradition. The end of Book Nine is also an intriguing combination of such elements as the traditional idea of old age as the time of assessing one's life, Roman rhetorical and judicial tradition, and integration of Biblical and philosophical truths into an original, influential Augustinian synthesis.