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A Lost Chance – Some Remarks on Ancient Autobiographies

Confessiones by St. Augustine is usually regarded as the first example of an autobiography in European literature. Nevertheless, unlike numerous other ‘model texts’ coming into existence during Antiquity, *Confessions* was for a long time little known among the general public as a prototype of the literary genre, i. e. in this instance a prototype of every kind of autobiographical literature. Suffice it to say that as late as the fourteenth century, Petrarch, admitting his wish to write an autobiographical treatise entitled *Secretum meum*, could proudly announce in his letter to Boccaccio that ‘de ratione vitae meae integro volumine disputem, quod ante me, ut arbitor, fecit nemo.’¹

By the above admission Petrarch not only ignored the autobiographical nature of the *Confessions*, but also dismissed the existence of a certain (relatively small) number of earlier medieval *quasi*-autobiographies, such as Otloh’s *Dialogus de suis tentationibus, varia fortuna et scriptis*, Guibert of Nogent’s *De vita sua sive monodiarum libri tres*, Gerald of Wales’ *De rebus a se gestis* — not to mention the best known epistolographic work of Peter Abelard, *Historia calamitatum mearum*.² While the omission of the autobiography of the saint from Hippo may seem puzzling in this case (the more so that Petrarch well knew and had a favourable opinion of *Confessions*; besides, *Secretum meum* took the form of a dialogue between Petrarch and St. Augustine), lack of interest in medieval autobiographies comes as no surprise. Petrarch did not aim at recounting events, however interesting they might be, but at a deeper reflection (i.e. ‘disputatio’) on the decisive factors in the internal logic of his own life (‘de ratione vitae meae’). Most probably the main reason for the proud assertions on the part of the Italian humanist was the dialogic form of *My Secret*; still, we can treat the aforementioned sentence also as a more universal declaration of originality.

We know from other sources that while writing his autobiographic work Petrarch

1 *Epistulae de rebus familiaribus et variae*, a cura di G. Fracassetti. Firenze 1869, vol. III, p. 367.

2 About the uniqueness of medieval autobiographies see W. Ullmann, *Medieval Foundations of Renaissance Humanism*. London 1977, pp. 69-70 and 178 — J. Le Goff, *La civilisation de l’Occident médiéval*. Paris 1965, pp. 348-349. Cf. also E. B. Vitz, ‘Type et individu dans l’„autobiographie” médiévale. Étude d’*Historia calamitatum*’, *Poétique* 24 (1975), p. 445 — C. D. Ferguson, ‘Autobiography as therapy: Guibert de Nogent, Peter Abelard and the making of medieval autobiography’, *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 13 (1983), pp. 187-212.

patterned himself on Seneca's letters and dialogues.³ Nevertheless, he had every right to believe that he was creating a new kind of writing, since ancient literature did not know spiritual autobiography in the true sense of the word. This was so in spite of the fact that the autobiographical element was noticeable in ancient literature ever since Hesiod's times, self-cognition was often the focus of philosophical interest, and Platonists' achievements in this area were used by none other than Augustine himself. The famous Augustine's sentence from the treatise entitled *De vera religione* (39.72) — 'Noli foras ire, in te ipsum redi, in interiore homine habitat veritas' — closely tied with the introspective character of texts such as *Soliloquium* and *Confessions*, may in fact owe its contents to a certain excerpt of Plotinus' *Enneads* (4.8.1).⁴

In order to explain the paradox of the meagre presence of more refined forms of confessional texts in ancient literature, it is worthwhile to follow one of the autobiographical motives of ancient works, making its appearance in the novel by Apuleius of Madaura entitled *Metamorphoses, or the Golden Ass*. In the first chapter of the text the narrator, who is at the same time the protagonist of the story, sharing the name 'Lucius' with the empirical author, goes into much detail about his background. The facts he discloses, however, are totally divergent with what we know about Apuleius' life and ancestry. While both he himself and his ancestors no doubt come from Africa, at the very beginning of the novel we read, among others, the following florid confessions:

Hymettos Attica et Isthmos Ephyres et Taenaros Spartiatica, glebae felices aeternum libris felicioribus conditae, mea vetus prosapia est; ibi linguam Atthidem primis pueritiae stipendiis merui.

After a long series of burlesque adventures there comes a finale, which has attracted much attention among historians of religion; it is the only detailed account of the rite of initiation into the mystery cult of Isis. The hero is transformed again from an ass into a man, at which time we learn that he is a resident of Madaura (cf. 11.27), just like the real Apuleius. In this way the authorial *ethos* strengthens the message conveyed in the concluding parts of the novel, which are of a conspicuously serious character. This small autobiographical element

3 Cf. G. Misch, *Geschichte der Autobiographie*. Frankfurt am Main 1959, vol. IV (2), p. 579.

4 Augustine himself frequently drew attention to the connection between his introspective interest and Platonic tradition. In the oft-quoted excerpt of the *Confessions* which gives a description of a 'Christianised' interpretation of Neoplatonic texts, a significant remark is made about the spiritual effects of this reading: 'Et inde admonitus redire [potui] ad memet ipsum, intravi in intima mea [...]' (7.10). Cf. also R. J. O'Connell, 'The Riddle of Augustine's *Confessions*: A Plotinian Key', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1964), pp. 327-372.

merits special attention since it is in effect the only trace of a possibility underused by ancient literature, namely of the lost chance of developing an autobiography describing spiritual transformations.

The autobiographical texts of ancient Greece and Rome, focused almost solely on the ‘external’ facts, were predominantly self-apologies descended from the rhetorical *genus iudiciale* and were concentrated on official and commendable versions of events. The most obvious examples are Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, Caesar’s *Commentarii...* (and his inheritor’s *Commentarii de vita sua*), or even the tenth elegy from the fourth book of Ovid’s *Tristia*. The panegyric fragments of *de vita sua*, inserted into speeches in order to highlight the *ethos* of the orator, were the first examples of such autobiographies.⁵ Textbooks of rhetoric recommended the use of one’s own biography as one of the possible ways of earning the listeners’ kind attention when commencing a speech.⁶ Thanks to their oratorical profession, such eminent rhetoricians as Isocrates, Demosthenes, and Aelius Aristides were able to present to the audiences numerous events taken from their lives. It was Cicero, however, who was extremely adept at composing mini-panegyrics about himself. Arpinate, the author of a megalomaniac poems ‘on his own consulship’ (*De consulatu suo*) and ‘on his own times’ (*De temporibus suis*), often worked with the following motto in mind: ‘You know me so well that now you can listen to what I say about myself...’ Libanius’ speeches constitute a later and an extreme example of this low-brow tendency. The once-greatly-admired rhetorician based as many as five of his speeches on events from his own life, highlighting personal successes as he did so. The first, and at the same time the longest, of those speeches bore a much-telling title *Βίος ἡ περὶ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ τύχης*. Ironically enough, Libanius composed his rhetorically charged autobiography at roughly the same time as Augustine wrote his *Confessions*. It comes as no surprise that the vision of man connected with the rhetorical and judgmental outlook, itself anchored in the belief in the static character of each of the limited number of well-structured spheres of human experience, had nothing to do with the introspective virtuosity permeating the work of Augustine.

Marcus Aurelius’ ‘inner diary’, which comes closest to a spiritual autobiography, presents in its abstract form an ideal model of a stoic rather than of a man in all his complexity and capability of constant transformations. The introvert focus (the work was titled, after all, τὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν) allows Marcus Aurelius’ diary to close itself off from both the turmoil of the external

5 Autobiographical digressions functioned in a similar manner in heavily ‘rhetoricised’ historiography, serving the primary purpose of strengthening the authority of the sender.

6 Such an introduction was referred to as *prooemium ab nostra persona* (cf. Cic. *Inv.* 1.22 — *Rhet. ad Herenn.* 1.8, 1-12).

world and the processes that indeed take place in the *psyche* of the author, retreated to his inner ‘fortress’ — *nous*. The possibility of a more profound presentation of one’s own self, distant from both rhetorical schemata and the reserve of the Stoics, was tied with the requirements placed by religious associations upon new members. This was precisely the situation which inspired the ‘confessional’ autobiography of St. Augustine and which, as we know, was experienced by the protagonist of *The Golden Ass*.

The theme of religiously motivated introspection was topical in Greece since time immemorial, as witnessed by the archaic Delphic maxim about self-cognition, ascribed subsequently to some of the seven sages, and later on propagated by Socrates and Plato.⁷ The maxim was presumably of particular importance also in teachings of Pythagoras, regarded as a son of Delphic god himself. Permeated with a mystical elation, the Pseudo-Pythagorean *Sacred Poem* recommended a daily inspection of conscience before a night’s rest, and the testimony of Porphyry (*The Life of Pythagoras* 40) confirms the popularity of such practices among the members of the Pythagorean society, which, after all, was associated with the mystery Orphic religion. In Neoplatonic texts it was mirrors, considered by Plotinus (cf. *Enn.* 4.3.12) as attributes of an Orphic god, Dionysus, that are often shown as tools of cognition. The authority of the Delphic sentence was so powerful that it could not be countered even by the more sceptical approach to cognition. In one of his aphorisms (B 45) Heraclitus mentions the inscrutable profundity of the *logos* hidden in the human soul; on another occasion, however, he confesses as follows: ‘ἔδιζησάμην ἑμευτὸν’ (B 101). Pyrrhon of Elis, the patron of the Sceptics’ ‘school,’ was presumably adept at ‘Delphic’ self-reflexivity and tested his own *psyche* ‘talking to himself’ (cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 9.64) — as well as his follower, Philo of Athens (cf. *ibid.* 9.69).

In the Roman times reflections connected with self-cognition appeared in the works of numerous more practically minded philosophers. The idea of making a ‘confession’ to oneself was especially close to the Stoics, as witnessed by the solipsistic form of Marcus Aurelius’ diary and remarks made by Seneca, among others in his *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, with which Petrarch was familiar. Epictetus often recommended an introspective spiritual training, i.e. some kind of confession, to his disciples (cf. *Diatr.* 3.7, 4.6, 10.10), while a comprehensive description of what a nightly inspection of one’s conscience should look like, shown by the

⁷ Cf. for example Xenophon, *Mem.* 4.2.24 — Plato, *Alcibiades I* 124b and 129a-133e; *Charmides* 164d-e; *Protagoras* 343b; *Laws* 923a. The history of the sentence γνῶθι σεαυτὸν is recounted in great detail by P. Courcelle, himself an author of a monograph on the *Confessions*, in: *Connais-toi toi-même. De Socrate à saint Bernard*. Paris 1974 – 1975, vol. I-III.

Stoic (or maybe Neopythagorean) philosopher Quintus Sextius, can be found in Seneca's dialogue *On the Anger* (3.36).⁸ Interestingly enough, in the very same chapter of the previous book of the dialogue (i. e. in the place that, so to say, brings the mirror-like symmetry to mind), Seneca mentions a psychological experiment (conducted by Sextius), thanks to which, by means of a mirror, one could get an insight into one's soul and appease the stormy emotions with a view to regaining a perfect internal equilibrium. The religious origin of these spiritual exercises is obvious; namely, none other than Zeus is supposed to set an example of self-sufficiency and self-awareness. According to Epictetus (*Diatr.* 3.36),

ἐπεὶ εἰ τὸ μόνον εἶναι ἀρκεῖ πρὸς τὸ ἔρημον εἶναι, λέγε ὅτι καὶ ὁ Ζεὺς ἐν τῇ ἐκπυρώσει ἔρημός ἐστι καὶ κατακλαίει αὐτὸς ἑαυτοῦ.

One of Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius* (1.9.16) contains very much the same observations on Jupiter. In keeping with the suggestions from another letter, the fact that god is within him should encourage Lucilius to the pursuit of self-cognition ('prope est a te deus, tecum est, intus est' — 4.41.1).

The fact that such experiments and reflections did not produce any major documents in the form of a spiritual diary may be attributed to the more or less conscious compliance with a strict ban on the disclosure of any details of the religious rite of initiation; the second rule, apart from the rule of γνῶθι σεαυτόν, that a pilgrim entering the Delphic temple of Apollo had to abide by was the rule of εὐφήμει, symbolised by the enigmatic, one-letter inscription 'E' on the facade of the temple; it was to this inscription that Plutarch devoted one of his dialogues.⁹ Pythagoras' biographer Iamblichus mentions a five-year period of silence to which are sworn

⁸ This description was analysed by M. Foucault in the 'La Culture de Soi', chapter of his famous *Histoire de la sexualité*. Paris 1984, vol. III: *Le Souci de Soi*.

⁹ *On the E at Delphi*. Plutarch, however, gives here other possible meanings of the inscription. It was J. Gwyn-Griffiths, 'The Delphic E: a New Approach', *Hermes* 83 (1955), pp. 243-245, who suggested yet another interpretation of the letter, focusing on the imperative of keeping silence. In a Homeric hymn to Demeter for the first time mention is made of the discretion to which are sworn the participants of mysteries in Eleusis. Obviously, similar testimonies can be found elsewhere: Sophocles (*O. C.* 1051-1053) speaks about a 'golden key', which seals the mouths of the Eumolpids, the guardians of the Eleusis sanctuary; Horace warns against disclosing the *secretum arcanae Cereris* (*Odes* 3.2.26-27). The fact that the ban was binding also for writers can be learned from sources that speak about a legal suit against Aeschylus, who is charged with blasphemy; the blasphemy in question means here the disclosure in tragedies of religious mysteries (cf. Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* 3.1, 1111a and Aelianus, *Various History* 5.19).

the new members of the Pythagorean community, much in the manner of those who want to become initiated into the mystery cults. Plato, in turn, presenting an outline of his own biography in *Seventh Letter*, basically gathers facts pertaining to his political activity and refutes accusations levelled against himself, at the same time anathematising writing as a means of transmitting knowledge about the essential. Self-cognition was one of the basic duties of a true sage; as follows from the above letter (332d), a major piece of advice given by Plato to the tyrant of Syracuse Dionysius was to reach peace with himself. The following excerpt from *Timaios* (72a) places even more stress on this truth: '[...] εὖ καὶ πάλαι λέγεται τὸ πράττειν καὶ γινῶναι τὰ τε αὐτοῦ καὶ ἑαυτὸν σώφρονι μόνῳ προσήκειν.' People who do not comply with the ban on revealing in writing 'esoteric' sciences were contemptuously referred to by Plato in the following manner: 'whomever they are, they do not know themselves' (cf. *Letter VII*, 341b). According to Plato true wisdom is, after all, the result of soul's dialogue with herself (cf. *Theaetetus* 189e; *Sophist* 263e).

Most probably the precious knowledge about one's own soul was not supposed to be spread and shared with others. It was only the Christian culture, with its reverence to writing connected with the reverence for the Holy Writ, and the idea of public confession that markedly changed this perception. The only extant example of breaking the ritual taboo is the above-mentioned novel by Apuleius. It presents the — partial — results of the introspection connected with mysteries; the 'curiositas inprospera' (cf. 11.15) to which Lucius succumbed was redirected from the observation of the external world of appearances to the inner regions of the soul. In this manner the above curiosity lost the negative prefix 'in-' and human nature eventually won over animal nature. The successive stages of the initiation rite described in the last book of *The Golden Ass* constitute in effect successive steps of the journey into one's own self, which ends in a victory over one's weakness. This can be testified by the allegorical summary of Lucius' life contained in a tale within *Metamorphoses* about Psyche and Amor, or 'soul' and 'love,' at work in each and every human being.

Texts by Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius provide extensive documentation of the results of introspective exercises conducted by the Stoics; the ritual ban was apparently not complied with here. Moreover, the diatribe, a favoured literary genre of the latter phase of stoicism, served among others to express the idea that the author's *ethos* is in fact the main subject of the text (which is why similarities between the diatribe and the essay have been frequently pointed out). Hermogenes of Tarsus defined this genre in rhetorical terms as follows:

Διατριβή ἐστὶ βραχέος διανοήματος ἠθικοῦ ἔκτασις, ἵνα ἐμμείνη τὸ ἦθος τοῦ λέγοντος ἐν τῇ γνώμῃ τοῦ

ἀκούοντος [...].¹⁰

Texts of the Stoic philosophers do not shed much light on the complexities of their authors, though. While the essence of autobiographic writing lies in recording the transformations occurring in the writer's mentality as well as in presenting his lifetime's turning points,¹¹ according to the Stoic doctrine human life has a meaning only on condition it remains perfectly still and static, shut off from the external influences that shatter the spiritual equilibrium. It was Marcus Aurelius who by means of his aphoristic style compared the soul to an invincible fortress (8.48).

Some of the above examples perfectly illustrate the difference between, to use C. G. Jung's typology, the 'introvertism' of the culture of pagan antiquity — a culture that with time loses its energy on the recycling of old ideas and gives birth in its final stages to such syncretic phenomena as hermetism, Neoplatonism, or gnosis — and the 'extrovertism' of the early, expansive stage of Christianity. It is at the same time the difference between the esoteric cults of the empire, such as the cult of Isis, familiar to Apuleius, and the more and more conspicuous 'exoterism' of the universal Christian creed. Augustine also notes the difference when he remembers his own disappointment while reading texts of Platonists (*Conf.* 7.21):

Hoc illae litterae non habent. Non habent illae paginae vultum pietatis illius, lacrimas confessionis, sacrificium Tuum, spiritum contribulatum, cor contritum et humiliatum, populi salutem, sponsam civitatem, arram spiritus sancti, poculum pretii nostri.

It appears, then, that what attracted Augustine to the Christian religion was precisely its extrovert and emotional component which made the above-quoted *lacrimas confessionis* possible. A similar meaning is contained in the definition of the very term *confessio*, understood by Augustine as 'self-accusation and the spread of God's glory' (cf. *Serm.* 67.2), in accordance with the Greek term ἐξομολόγησις.

10 *Rhetores Graeci*, rec. L. Spengel. Lipsiae 1854, vol. II, p. 429. It is worthwhile to mention that, as Horace himself testifies (cf. *Sat.* 2.1.28-34), both Lucilius and Horace employ satire, a genre closely tied with Stoic diatribe, as a kind of literary *tabella votiva* in order to describe some facts of their lives. Cf. T. Zieliński, *Horace et la société romaine du temps d'Auguste*. Paris 1938, p. 206.

11 As one theoretician of the autobiographical discourse noted, 'il n'y aurait pas eu de motif suffisant pour une autobiographie, s'il n'était intervenu, dans l'existence antérieure, une modification, une transformation radicale: conversion, entrée dans une nouvelle vie, opération de la Grâce.' (J. Starobinski, 'Le Style de l'autobiographie', *Poétique* 3 (1970), 312).

A question automatically arises about what actually happened to the idea of ‘confessing’, so vital to the whole tradition of autobiographic writing. It is hard to pinpoint many other writers fascinated with it aside from Augustine. For instance, Gregory of Nasians’ rhymed autobiography in two versions, composed under the influence of Neoplatonism, provides an earlier example of ‘confessional’ literature, while Ennodius’ brief *Eucharisticum de vita sua* of the C. E. sixth century is a rather unsuccessful attempt at imitating Augustine. It can be conjectured that a whole set of factors contributed to the composition of the *Confessions* and that identical factors under different circumstances would not have produced this work. Let us recall some of the most crucial of these factors, germane to our current discussion.

First and foremost, the very form of ‘confessions’ as directed to God provides an allusion to the uniquely Augustinian concept of grace. According to this idea, we are unable to make but one step in the right direction without the support of the Supreme Being, and our lives are basically a headlong, erratic rush (cf. *Conf.* 4.1: ‘quid enim sum ego mihi sine Te nisi dux in praeceps?’). In keeping with Plotinus’ beliefs, some form of supernatural grace is indispensable for us to be able to solve any epistemological problems, also to overcome obstacles on the way of discovering our own soul (cf. *Enn.* 5.1.6). In spite of the fact that Augustine took over some Neoplatonic ideas, the interest in *vita mentalis* included, in his writings we deal with a more emotional perception of reality inspired by the Gospel rather than with highly abstract and complex speculations. Augustine was inspired by introspective fascinations which originated, as has been mentioned above, in Neoplatonic sources and were besides connected with the awareness of the existence of an ‘enemy’, hidden not so much among the pagans, but lurking inside the Christian soul. Augustine’s times was a period when the Christian creed had already taken root; the martyrdom of the first centuries was over and the stage of triumphant expansion and the defence of orthodoxy began. Consequently, changes of personal outlook and the doctrinal fight with the errors of various heresies were becoming the focus of interest.

On the other hand we can observe in St. Augustine’s writings a desire — still very strong at that time among the entire Christian community — to set edifying examples and give witness to the truth. In this particular case the above desire was caused by the conversion of the author of the *Confessions*. We can observe on the basis of Marcus Aurelius’ diary (11.3) or Pliny the Younger’s letter (10.96.3) that it was this pertinacious inclination to lay bare one’s personal beliefs that was especially irritating to the restrained pagans, in most cases brought up on the ideology of the Stoics. Someone who basically addressed ‘himself’ could not grasp the profound need for a demonstrative expression of one’s own spiritual state, and it was precisely this need that became the cornerstone of the Christian understanding of autobiography and biography. The

latter genre, in the form of hagiography, soon gained the upper hand over the former. As early as in the fifth century we see two lengthy collections of hermits' lives, entitled *Historia Lausiaca* and *Vitae Patrum*, respectively. In contrast to the above two, *Acta martyrum* — one of the earliest Christian sources of inspiration for subsequent lives of saints — retained the unique, first-person account of events preceding the martyr's death of a group of Christians. This account, dating from the third century and known as *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, was the only instance of combining a witness of martyrdom with the autobiographical convention.

The very institution of 'confessing' in a less spectacular, non-literary form, continued to live a 'sacramental' life among Christians. However, both the Christian Platonism and the very idea of introspection lost their momentum with the passage of time. As early as one hundred years before St. Augustine, Lactantius in his *Divine Precepts* (3.3.2) questioned the idea of self-cognition on religious grounds. The author claimed that self-knowledge is an exclusive attribute of God, not of man. The notion, highlighting the *imbecilitas humana* favoured by Lactantius and in effect equating autobiographical writing with the sin of pride, hampered the development of autobiographies in the Middle Ages. The *Historia calamitatum Abelardi*, conceived as a self-justification, is an example of a work whose author was frequently accused of audacity and self-admiration. For a long time, then, the analysis of, let alone the writing down about, one's experiences and feelings was considered of little significance. The most interesting documents of spiritual life, belonging to the special genre of visionary intimate monastic writing, were written down — both in the Middle Ages and subsequently — not out of an inner need, which might have been seen as sinful, but as a result of supernatural pressure or a decisive encouragement of confessors. This was precisely how such works as the mystical texts of Hildegard of Bingen (autobiographical *Vita* among others) or the famous *Vida* of Teresa of Ávila came into existence.

Thus, autobiography motivated by an individual pursuit of introspection may have been construed, with certain reservations, as a joint invention of St. Augustine and Petrarch. There is no way of ascertaining how much the latter was conversant with the tradition of autobiographical writing; undoubtedly, however, he could not be aware of the great possibilities shortly to open up before posterity thanks to the advent of a cultural climate that in all respects would prove conducive to a thorough self-analysis.