


# Pure love in the *Confessions* of Ferenc Rákóczi II

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### ABSTRACT

Ferenc Rákóczi II is known primarily as the leader of the anti-Habsburg Hungarian War of Independence between 1703 and 1711, but in recent years there has been a growing interest in his literary work, too. Research has shed light on several aspects of moral problems represented in his *Confessions*, written in the early 18th century in Latin. The defining element of the self-understanding in the *Confessions* is the anthropological concept that classifies human actions according to whether they are motivated by self-love or the love of God. The condemnation of sins of self-love is therefore a recurring theme in Rákóczi's spiritual autobiography. However, the fact that the opposite of self-love, the concept of pure love also appears in the *Confessions* has not been noticed so far. The analysis of the description of earthly loves and the sometimes ambivalent reflections on them can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the moral discourse of the *Confessions*.

### KEYWORDS

Ferenc Rákóczi II, spiritual autobiography, early modern moral philosophy, Jansenism, self-love

## 1.

In Hungarian cultural memory, Ferenc Rákóczi II is known primarily as the leader of the anti-Habsburg War that broke out in 1703. His literary activities became known only to a narrower circle, and for a long time their reception in literary history was not very lively. The main

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reason for this may be that his most important works, the *Confessions* (*Confessio peccatoris*) and the *Memoirs*, were written in Latin and French.<sup>1</sup> Recently, however, there has been a renewed interest in these texts, as evidenced by the publication of English translations, a new monograph, and the fact that an international conference has also addressed the philosophical and theological dimensions of these autobiographical narratives.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the recent revival of research on Rákóczi, we have a much more nuanced view of the patterns and models on which Rákóczi might have drawn, and of the complexity of the moral discourses of the *Confessions*.<sup>3</sup> However, the reflections on earthly love in the *Confessions* have so far received little attention, even though they touch on important anthropological issues. In his monograph on the exiled Rákóczi, Béla Köpeczi rightly notes that the description of these love affairs in the *Confessions* “would have their place in the novels of Madame de La Fayette or Mademoiselle de Scudéry.”<sup>4</sup> But the passages describing the love stories are of interest not only because they demonstrate the author’s quality as a writer, but also because Rákóczi, in analysing his love for two French aristocratic ladies, also reflects on the possibility of pure or disinterested love. In the reflections on pure love, the central problems of early modern moral philosophy are revealed, and from a particular perspective, in the context of the individual’s attempt at self-understanding.

## 2.

Rákóczi began to write his *Confessions* after the fall of the War of Independence he led between 1703 and 1711, during his stay in France, when he broke with his previous way of life and reinterpreted his life according to strict religious principles. The writing of this autobiographical narrative, which takes as its model the conversion story of Augustine, can be seen as an attempt to release the psychological tension caused by political failure and the overwhelming burden of responsibility, and to forge a new identity.<sup>5</sup> The conversion narrative, building on the figure of the sinner who repents to God after his erring ways, allows for a positive evaluation of the life journey and the creation of a new self-image. This goal of distancing oneself from the old identity and searching for a new one, a religious-mythical re-tuning of the life path, is served by the two decisive elements of the self-understanding in the *Confessions*, self-reproach and apology.<sup>6</sup>

The defining element of the self-understanding in the *Confessions* is the anthropological concept that classifies human actions in a moral sense according to whether they are motivated by self-love or the love of God. With its strong thematic emphasis on self-love, Rákóczi’s spiritual

<sup>1</sup>The French-language *Memoirs* were published in 1739, the manuscript of the *Confessions* was first published in 1876; Hungarian translations followed in 1903 and 1979. An eighteenth-century French manuscript translation of the *Confessions* was also published: Rákóczi (2020). For an overview of sources and reception see: Tüskés (2021).

<sup>2</sup>The translations: Rákóczi (2019a, 2019b). Key new findings of the research are: Tüskés (2016, 2023), Tüskés and Knapp (2023), and papers in Tüskés et al. (2023).

<sup>3</sup>See especially Mahlmann-Bauer (2023), Simon (2023), Tüskés (2023).

<sup>4</sup>Köpeczi (1991), 220.

<sup>5</sup>Tüskés–Knapp (2023), 36.

<sup>6</sup>Tüskés–Knapp (2023), 87, 94.



autobiography is linked to a central issue in seventeenth century philosophy. As Niklas Luhmann, among others, has pointed out, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the interpretation of human nature increasingly emphasises restlessness and individual activity, and the main novelty of early modern anthropology is the description of man as a self-referential system, most often through the notion of self-love or self-interest. Although theories of self-love as a positive factor had already emerged in the mid-sixteenth century, a characteristic feature of seventeenth-century French moralism is the theologically motivated condemnation of self-interest and self-love as selfishness and thus as sin.<sup>7</sup> In the *Confessions*, too, self-love is presented as a force that distances the individual from God, and thus as the source of sin.

Following the pattern of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, there is a turning point in Rákóczi's narrative that allows the life story to be interpreted as a conversion story. The new identity of the prince, who retires to the Camaldulian monastery in Grosbois and is reborn, is shaped by his conversion to God, and the dominant feature of the retrospective account of past events is accordingly the confession of sins. Like Augustine, he confesses the sins committed in his youth, including forgetting God and country, excessive drinking, gambling, debts, onanism, and love affairs. Later, he condemns his sins as a rebel leader, the greatest of which is that his actions were motivated by a quest for worldly glory, by self-pleasing. It follows from the condemnation of self-love that he describes his former self, a rebel against Habsburg rule, as "a whitened sepulchre and a slave of the devil, seated on a throne in the guise of a prince."<sup>8</sup>

However, as has been pointed out, not all elements of the *Confessions* fit perfectly into the conversion story. First of all, it is the acceptance of the role of the leader that formulates a different role model from that of the penitent, and thus Rákóczi's narrative contains two significant twists: the first is the political awakening of a young man immersed in the pleasures of life, at the end of which he becomes the leader of the uprising; the second is the retreat of the exiled prince from the Sun King's glittering court into the ascetic solitude of hermitage. In view of this, Lajos Hopp rightly stressed that the diversity of Rákóczi's roles was difficult to fit into the framework of the pattern of the conversion narrative, which limited the possibilities for depicting inner, spiritual development.<sup>9</sup> The story of earthly loves is a thematic element of the *Confessions* that raises similar problems as the interpretation of the War of Independence: it is questionable whether they fit perfectly into the story of conversion. Rákóczi often sharply condemns his former worldly loves, but at the same time, in his reflections on these loves, elements can be found that imply a positive evaluation of them.

### 3.

In his *Confessions*, Rákóczi uses the notions of *cupiditas* and *concupiscentia* (desire), which often overlap in meaning, to identify the source of sinful human actions, ultimately finding their cause

<sup>7</sup>Luhmann (1980), 178–188. See also: Vollhardt (2001).

<sup>8</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 155. "Quid fui, Domine praeterquam sepulchrum dealbatum et sub principis vestitu et in ejus throno sedens larvatum daemonis mancipium?" Rákóczi (1876), 247. In the main text I quote the translation by Bernard Adams, but in the footnote I also give the Latin text and page number. Exceptions are made for passages that are missing in Adams' translation. These are quoted in my own translation, and only the Latin text is referred to in the note.

<sup>9</sup>Hopp (1964), 381; Hopp (1979), 943. A similar view is expressed by Tüskés: Tüskés-Knapp (2023), 67–68.



in self-love. The only antidote to the depravity of human nature in the *Confessions* is the total annihilation of the self and the identification with God's will, which – as is emphasised in several passages – can ultimately be achieved only by the help of divine grace.<sup>10</sup> The ideal that the penitent formulates and seeks to achieve is thus ultimately the joyful identification with the will of God.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Confessions*, there are several reflections relevant to moral philosophy, anthropology and theology, which testify to a knowledge of contemporary philosophical concepts. On the whole, Rákóczi's critique of self-love, imagination and the passions is akin to the strict positions of the Jansenist authors.<sup>12</sup> The consequence of the anthropological, moral philosophical and moral theological principles that underlie the ideological background of the *Confessions* is that, when writing about the events of the past, Rákóczi is constantly and sharply critical of his sins of self-love. However, the struggle with self-love and the sins that result from it also defines the present of the confessing I. In several cases there are even doubts whether or not it is possible to uncover the hidden manifestations of self-love, to determine whether an action or desire arises from self-love, and to identify with God's will.<sup>13</sup> Rákóczi's statement that man is unknown to himself points in this direction.<sup>14</sup> But we also find more concrete examples. Thus, for example, suspicion is aroused in the confessing I against himself, registering that when he talks to God about worldly matters, time passes more quickly than when he is in pure contemplation of God: "O Lord, have mercy upon me, if there is anything of self-love in this, because I cannot judge."<sup>15</sup> A little later, he expresses similar doubts, reflecting on the political situation and his own deeds: "I think I have done and am doing in this situation what I could and can do, but I do not even know whether what I say is true or whether I am merely deluded by self-love."<sup>16</sup> He is also uncertain about his desire to return to solitude, to a contemplative life: "however, in desiring that I am perhaps seeking myself and not you."<sup>17</sup> In this doubt, a problem arises which is also predominant in the whole of the *Third Book*: Rákóczi calls solitude and peace of mind sweeter than any worldly rank, yet he is preoccupied with worldly, political plans: and ultimately he cannot be sure which choice would embody freedom from self-love and the pursuit of God's will. The confessing I is even suspicious whether it is not an act of self-love to complain to God about the obstacles to union with God.<sup>18</sup> The effort to expose and uncover the various, often hidden manifestations of self-love, as evidenced by Rákóczi's remarks, stems from the

<sup>10</sup>See about this: Tüskés (2023), and Tüskés–Knapp (2023), 155–211.

<sup>11</sup>"Fac ut lubens eam quo volueris, gaudens sequar quo duxeris, hilaris agem et perficiam quae jubes et jusseris [...]" Rákóczi (1876), 352.

<sup>12</sup>See about this: Matzat (1985), especially 236–237.

<sup>13</sup>This question was articulated very sharply in the late seventeenth century in the controversy between Fénelon and Bossuet. See about this: Force (2003), 183–194; Moriarty (2006), 206–216; Schmal (2007), 113–124.

<sup>14</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 343. Rákóczi (1876), 320.

<sup>15</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 349. "O Domine parce mihi, si his inest quid amoris proprii, quod ego discernere nequeo [...]" Rákóczi (1876), 327.

<sup>16</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 351. "Credo me fecisse et facere in his, quae potui et possum, sed hoc quoque ignoro, num quod dico verum, an illusio amoris mei proprii sit." Rákóczi (1876), 345.

<sup>17</sup>"Sed quia fors hoc desiderans me quaererem, non te [...]" Rákóczi (1876), 329.

<sup>18</sup>See in particular Rákóczi (1876), 364–365.



anthropological concept of man's inherent depravity. There are many examples of this kind of suspicion and criticism of self-love in seventeenth-century French moral philosophy.<sup>19</sup> However, unlike the French moralists and theologians, Rákóczi's aim was not the philosophical study and systematic discussion of the question of self-love. The *Confessions* show how the problem of self-love manifests itself in the penitent I's attempt at self-understanding and religious introspection.

There are also several passages that show that the confessing I is dissatisfied with his present situation and feels a strong sense of guilt. Already in *Book One* he complains that, although he comes before God with pure intentions, his thoughts are scattered because he delights in many things and is distracted by his desires.<sup>20</sup> A similar self-criticism is found in *Book Three*, where the penitent admits that he is more preoccupied with worldly matters than with prayer, and that he cannot forget his worldly plans even while praying. Rákóczi also confesses that although, unlike his former self, he loves God more than creatures, he is not as passionately attracted to him as he once was to creatures.<sup>21</sup> He whips himself even harder, when he condemns himself for becoming absorbed in his activity and distancing himself from God while painting and sculpting: "O Lord, how long will my filth and dirt cling to me? How much longer shall I languish in the mire and mess of my situation?"<sup>22</sup> These signs of remorse show that the conversion depicted in the *Confessions* is not a one-off, definitive change (although the turnaround that conversion represents is undoubtedly a key element of the narrative), but a constant inner struggle.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4.

According to the narrative of the *Confessions*, it was during his stay in Vienna that Rákóczi first fell in love, and it was then that he learned that the strange feeling he felt for a lady – not named in the text – was what people called love.<sup>24</sup> It is not mentioned whether the beloved returned the love, but it is revealed that the affection continued after Rákóczi's marriage and lasted for five years.

The representation and evaluation of this love is ambivalent. The narrator's reflection identifies worldly love as sin, as a manifestation of his innate weakness, but emphasises that the sinful emotion could only have entered his heart because divine grace had not yet enabled him to recognise sin.<sup>25</sup> At the same time Rákóczi stresses that his attraction to the unnamed woman was not a forbidden desire, and that their contact never crossed the boundaries of propriety.

<sup>19</sup>On seventeenth-century French moralism, see Force (2003), 185–186; Moriarty (2006), 206–216; Schmal (2007).

<sup>20</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 91. Rákóczi (1876), 68.

<sup>21</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 350. Rákóczi (1876), 328.

<sup>22</sup>"O Domine, usquequo haerebo in quisquiliis et sordibus meis, usquequo volutabor in hoc coeno et luto meae?" Rákóczi (1876), 375.

<sup>23</sup>This is also stressed by Pierre Nicole. See: James (1972), 114.

<sup>24</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 50. Rákóczi (1876), 32.

<sup>25</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 65. Rákóczi (1876), 46. Rákóczi draws on Augustine's view that sin is a privation. See: Lindén (2022), 136.



The brief yet plausible description of the lover's emotions shows this love – following the pattern of courtly love – as an idealising love, that also includes elements of suffering and service:

She was present in my every action, and in her absence too my vivid imagination made me with her; it was my delight to speak of her, or to listen when others spoke of her if I had no opportunity of seeing her; in a word, nothing was so pleasing to me as to think of her and to imagine her qualities, to desire to suffer on her account, or to do something to please her; that was the extent of all my desire, and the fear of offending her was inseparable from all that I did.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, the author of the *Confessions* claims that he feels no guilt about this love, since it was in accordance with God's command to love his neighbour. In addition to this, he makes the interesting observation that through this love, precisely because of its intensity, he understood how he should love God. It is not entirely clear, however, whether this insight occurred in the youth or only in the present of the confessing I. The first reflection on the meaning of the youthful love suggests that the insight took place at the time of the love relationship: "the exceedingly great strength of my love ensured such great respect for her that from the circumstances of that my suffering I truly conceive best of that love with which, oh greatest goodness, you desire to be loved and honoured by your elect."<sup>27</sup> Another statement, however, suggests that the interpretation of the earthly love as reminding one of the love of God is a matter of hindsight: "Now I know, Lord, for it is you that have taught me, that you too desire this from me and from my heart that truly loves you."<sup>28</sup> In any case, earthly love is subject to a double perception: it has a positive value because it is analogous to God's love, but it is also a source of sin and shame because its object is a creature, and not God. In the passages describing the youthful love, the value system of the confessing I is reflected not only in the moral or theological judgement of the former feelings, but also in the present tense statement that the memory of the former passionate love marks in fact a lack: "I did rather for a creature what I cannot now perform in such measure even for the Creator."<sup>29</sup> Rákóczi evokes the former love precisely in order to confess his sinfulness and shame, so that he can draw closer to God.

On the one hand, therefore, Rákóczi makes arguments that mitigate his guilt. He emphasises that his love remained within the bounds of decency, by which he means that he did not seek physical contact. By referring to love for one's neighbour, he associates love with the

<sup>26</sup>"Praesens illa mihi fuit in omnibus actionibus meis, et absente quoque ea me in praesentia ejus esse viva imaginatione putabam; pars deliciarum mearum fuit loqui de ea, vel loquente audire, ubi eam videndi defuit occasio; in summo nulla mihi tam grata fuit occupatio, quam de ea cogitare et imaginarius ajus qualitates considerare, desiderare pati pro ea vel ei quid grati praestare posse; et his limitabantur omnia desideria mea, et eam offendendi timor inseparabilis fuit a cunctis actionibus meis." Rákóczi (1876), 46.

<sup>27</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 64. "ipsa enim amoris violentia tantam mihi ejus conciliaverat reverentiam, ut vere ex hujus passionis meae circumstantiis vel optime concipiam amorem, quo tu ipsemet, o summa bonitas, amori et timori desideras ab electis tuis." Rákóczi (1876), 46.

<sup>28</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 65. "Nunc scio Domine, tu es enim, qui me docuisti te quoque haec desiderare a me et a corde te vere amante." Rákóczi (1876), 46.

<sup>29</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 65. "illa me pro creatura fuisse, quae per creatore nunc quoque tam adequate, prout oportet, exequi non valeo." Rákóczi (1876), 46.



Augustinian concept of *caritas*, and recalls the idea of Augustine that love for creatures and love for God are the same love.<sup>30</sup> In addition to applying this idea to heterosexual love, part of the apology is to emphasise that through this love, thanks to God's help, he was able to avoid greater, carnal sins. On the other hand Rákóczi, in line with the position of contemporary Jansenist authors such as Nicole, condemns love for creatures in general as sin.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the interpretation of love as sin is underlined by another anthropological dichotomy, that of body and soul, linked to the idea of the duality of love for creatures and love for God: "it is the property of the flesh to love the flesh, and that love you worthily despise; it is the property of the spirit to love the spirit, which you require, for you desire to be loved in spirit."<sup>32</sup> In formulating his ideas about the role of flesh and spirit, Rákóczi drew primarily on Augustine's interpretation of sin.<sup>33</sup> In the light of these reflections, the youthful love described in the *Confessions* can be interpreted as a form of *cupiditas*, since there is a clear reference to its sensual, physical character: "It was my innate weakness to love my fellow man, and every feeling in me loved something like itself."<sup>34</sup> Drawing on Augustine's philosophy of love, we can say that in the text Rákóczi interprets his worldly love sometimes as an example of *caritas*, sometimes of *cupiditas*.<sup>35</sup> Put another way, the problem with Rákóczi's line of thought can be summarised as follows. In his interpretation of love, Rákóczi mobilises, on the one hand, dual schemas, contrasting the love of creatures and the love of God, flesh and soul. At the same time, three categories of love are outlined: dishonest, lustful love; honest love for the creature (this kind of love is also called pure love in other parts of the *Confessions*, which will be discussed later); and the love of God.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, it is not entirely clear how pure love of creatures can be described within the framework of dual evaluative schemas, i.e. whether pure love of creatures

<sup>30</sup>See for example *De trinitate* 8. 9. 12: "ex una igitur eademque caritate deum proximumque diligimus, sed deum propter deum, nos autem et proximum propter deum [...]." Augustinus (2001), 40.

<sup>31</sup>Nicole, for example, writes in his *Essais*: "Il est clair premierement que si l'on doit aimer Dieu de toute l'étendue de son coeur, on ne peut donner aucune partie de son amour au monde & aux créatures [...]." Nicole, however, does not call worldly love a mortal sin, but stresses the need to fight against it, to strive to get rid of it: "Je dis que tout amour de la créature est mauvais; mais je ne dis pas qu'il fait toujours mortel & criminel." Nicole (1755), 247–248. For more details see: James (1972), 112–115. The condemnation of the love of creatures is based on Augustine's opposition between two kinds of loves in *De civitate dei* XIV: 28. On Augustine's views on neighbourly love see: Chambers (2024), 240–268.

<sup>32</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 65. "carnis est amare carnem, et hunc amorem merito condemnas; spiritui convenit amare spiritum, et hoc est quod desideras, vis enim amari in spiritu." Rákóczi (1876), 46–47.

<sup>33</sup>For Augustine's views on flesh, body and sin see: Biernoff (2002), 26–31.

<sup>34</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 65. "Innata mihi fragilitas fuit amare visibilem creaturam similem mihi, et omnes sensus mei amabant in me sibi quid simile." Rákóczi (1876), 46. It may be more correct to use "sense" instead of "feeling."

<sup>35</sup>The problem can be illuminated by a passage from Petrarch's *Secretum*, where Francesco tries to defend his love, among other things, by saying that there was never anything impure about it ("in amore meo nichil unquam turpe, nichil obscenum fuerit, nichil denique, preter magnitudinem, culpabile"), but his interlocutor, Augustine, does not accept this excuse. Petrarca (1992), 212.

<sup>36</sup>The ideal of a pure earthly love, i.e. love between a man and a woman, different both from carnal, sensual attraction and the love of God, but open to transcendence, has been a living tradition in European literature in various forms at least since Dante's *Vita nuova* and Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. This tradition, incorporating Platonic elements, found followers until the end of the seventeenth century (of the Neoplatonic tradition, Ficino's theory of the three varieties of love – contemplative, moral and lustful – as set out in Part VIII of his *Symposion* commentary, was of particular relevance). See about the impact of these diverse traditions in the seventeenth century: Penzkofer (1998), 160–167.



falls within the range of emotions originating from self-love and carnality. It is perhaps more correct to say that these two anthropological schemas, whose relationship is not without tension, appear in the *Confessions* as overlapping, sometimes even questioning each other's validity.

It is worth mentioning in this context that in the *Third book*, Rákóczi deals with the question of the origin of sin in even greater detail, focusing – in a somewhat different way from the reasoning in the *First book* – on the role of imagination in it.<sup>37</sup> Here Rákóczi emphasises that the imagination presents as good and desirable for the individual worldly things that are not really good, and ultimately nothing. The imagination is therefore a constant source of anxiety and trouble, since “these ends are no sooner attained than they make a man sick or dissatisfied with them, and he desires either more or something else.”<sup>38</sup> That is why he calls desire “the real Proteus,” stressing that it drives man incessantly towards new, sensual and sinful goals, but inevitably always leads to disappointment.<sup>39</sup> The relationship between the flesh and the imagination, their role in the sinful impulses, is not entirely clear in the *Confessions*. The reason for the uncertainty is that imagination can vividly reveal phenomena to man that he has not previously experienced in a physical, sensual way. This is also the reason why Rákóczi cannot place imagination among the faculties of the soul in a reassuring way, saying only that perhaps it is part of memory, or memory is part of it.<sup>40</sup> He states that reason and will cannot subdue the imagination, but ultimately leaves open the question of whether the imagination is subordinate to the body, the world, or the devil. But he clearly holds the imagination responsible for the fact that man, although his will is always directed to the good, commits a sin: for the imagination, by making bad things appear good, deceives the will.<sup>41</sup>

Writing about the events of the War of Independence period, Rákóczi makes several references to a new love affair, an adulterous relationship which, unlike the first, transgressed the rules of decency. However, he does not relate this relationship in any detail, citing the need for discretion,<sup>42</sup> nor does he mention the beloved woman's name, Elżbieta Sieniawska.<sup>43</sup> But he goes on to recount in detail the extramarital loves he fell in during his stay in France: according to his account, while staying at the court of Louis XIV, he fell in love with two unnamed French aristocratic ladies.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>37</sup>The critique of imagination is one of Nicole's central themes. See: James (1972), 116–131. On the similarities between Nicole's critique and Rákóczi's views, see: Tüskés–Knapp (2023), 346.

<sup>38</sup>Rákóczi (1876), 353.

<sup>39</sup>Rákóczi (1876), 196, 335.

<sup>40</sup>Rákóczi (1876), 375.

<sup>41</sup>See also: Tüskés–Knapp (2023), 173.

<sup>42</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 141. Rákóczi (1876), 139.

<sup>43</sup>See about this relationship: Gebei (2017).

<sup>44</sup>Béla Köpeczi made an attempt to identify Rákóczi's lovers among the Bourbon princesses. He identified one of them with Mademoiselle Charolais, Louise-Anne de Bourbon; the other with Marie-Anne de Bourbon, Princess of Conti. The latter identification is incorrect because Marie-Anne, who married Louis Henri in 1713, never had a child, while Rákóczi states emphatically that his beloved returned to court after giving birth. For sources to help identify the princesses see: Köpeczi (1991) 221–222. According to the English translator, Bernard Adams, Rákóczi's beloved was rather the sister of Louise-Anne, Louise-Élisabeth Bourbon-Condé (Adams mistakenly writes Louise-Isabelle Bourbon). Rákóczi (2019a), 245, n. 25. Louise-Élisabeth was born 1693, and gave birth to her first child in 1715. The facts given in the *Confessions* really fit this princess.





Reporting the events and circumstances of his life at the court of Louis XIV, the author of the *Confessions* describes in great detail the pleasures and distractions that occupied his days. Although he speaks highly of the virtues of the monarch, his description of court life is a powerful moral critique at the same time. Rákóczi, distancing himself from his former self and values, points out that the courtly man lives an inauthentic life, since he always assumes the roles required by society, tries to win the favour of others, and does not shy away from lying. In his own words, he was “leading the life of a theatrical actor.”<sup>45</sup> In retrospect, Rákóczi debunks the social life of the court, which once seemed for him pleasant, as a weakness that distances the individual from his own essence and from God’s love. The critique of courtly life and of the former self of the penitent fits well into the conversion narrative of the *Confessions*, since, according to Rákóczi, it testifies of God’s goodness that he had the opportunity to know all forms of worldly life and all kinds of human weakness, while at the same time God has mitigated the evils of his depravity and prevented him from exceeding the possibilities of his mercy.<sup>46</sup>

The author of the *Confessions* mentions as a natural part of court life that he also came into contact with women, and even became friends with them, because (in his own words) he fell in love too easily. In the description of his relationship with two Bourbon princesses he sometimes conflates the concepts of friendship and love, ultimately, however, the relations are identified clearly as love, a version of love that does not stem from sensual attraction and from carnal desire:

I yearned for the secret, true and genuine friendship of which very few women are capable. You know, Lord, that it was never bodily desire that urged me to this, but I received with a certain natural sympathy that sudden impression that rendered me indifferent to all the other women in the world. I sought intimate but honest conversations [...]. I therefore truly felt that my heart, which was not yearning after anything forbidden, was moved at the sight of a certain woman, who rendered me astonished, nervous and feigned. [...] It was my greatest wish to gain her liking, my greatest desire to give her something pleasing, and my greatest fear that I should offend her, so pure and altogether free of lust was the love that I felt, and which day by day enslaved me more and more.<sup>47</sup>

According to Béla Köpeczi’s observation, Rákóczi’s conception of love may have been shaped by seventeenth century French novels.<sup>48</sup> Keeping in mind the contemporary concepts of love, we can clarify this and conclude that the love narrative of the *Confessions* is linked to the idea of tenderness that appeared in the second half of the seventeenth century, and was popularised by the novelist Madeleine de Scudéry. In contrast to love as the conquest of women and the patriarchal model of marriage, Scudéry advocated an ideal of love that was more accommodating to women’s expectations, disinterested, mutual, based on sincerity and similar to friendship.

<sup>45</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 232. “Vere theatralium histrionum vita fuit mea [...]” 224.

<sup>46</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 235. Rákóczi (1876), 227.

<sup>47</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 235–236. “Secretam desiderabam et veram illam realemque amicitiam, cujus paucissimae capaces sunt. Tu scis Domine, me ad haec concupiscentia carnis numquam inductum fuisse, sed quandam sympathia naturali suscepisse subitam illam impressionem, quae me pro toto caetero mundo muliebri reddebat indifferentem, secretam anhelabam conversationes easque honestas [...]. hinc sentiebam vere cordis nihil illiciti cupientis motum ad aspectum cujusdam personae qui me reddebat attonitum verecundum et compositum [...]. Summum meum fuit ei complacendi studium et grati quid praestandi desiderium et offendendi metus, tam puri et nullo modo carnalis amoris igne sentiebam me dietim magis irretiri.” Rákóczi (1876), 226.

<sup>48</sup>Köpeczi (1991), 219.



The central concepts of her novels, pure love (amour pure) and tender friendship (amitié tendre) refer to this ideal.<sup>49</sup>

Rákóczi only tells us about the appearance of the two women that they were both beautiful; but he goes into more detail about their characters, explaining that they were of very different natures: one was lively, easy-going, and eager to please, the other modest, reliable, strict, serious. According to the narrative, the two-way attraction forces Rákóczi to make a choice, but he cannot decide and therefore lives in constant anxiety. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, afterwards he thanks God for not having allowed him to have only one object of love;<sup>50</sup> this is obviously to be understood as meaning that the double object prevented the feeling of either love from becoming exclusive and filling his soul completely.

The desire for reciprocated love leads to disappointment, moreover, the love that oscillates between two objects ultimately leads to disillusionment with love. After a long struggle, Rákóczi confesses his feelings to the reserved, serious woman, but it turns out that she has another love; he then decides to break with earthly love; the agony of love makes him lonely, makes him hate worldly life.<sup>51</sup> He cannot yet give up the other woman completely; she is still dear to him, but he no longer wants to reveal his feelings to her.<sup>52</sup> At this point, at the point of disillusionment with love, the story of love is intertwined with the key element in the narrative of the *Confessions*, the conversion of the sinner. The first significant moment of this is a visit to the Carmelite monks, which Rákóczi attends at the request of the Princes and Princesses of Bourbon (among whom is his adored one), and which has an unexpectedly great impact on him (245). There is no clear reason in the *Confessions* to explain the fact of the conversion. However, the experience of love failure, in addition to the change in the political situation, to the death of the king, and to getting tired of court life, must be taken into account as having prepared the ground for this turn of events.<sup>53</sup> It may not be far from the truth to say that the pleasures of a stay in France may have temporarily masked the psychological tensions of political failure, but as illusions dissipated, a confrontation with the past became inevitable; the love failure may have contributed to the turning point in his life in this indirect way.

The presentation of the love story of the Bourbon Princesses contains strong evaluative elements: Rákóczi emphasises the purity of his former feelings, but also expresses his remorse for having wasted this pure affection of the heart, which he considers a gift from God, on creatures, thus abusing the goodness of God.<sup>54</sup> The interpretation of love is ambivalent, as is

<sup>49</sup>Thus, for example, in the last book of Scudéry's *Grand Cyrus*, which deals with the love of Sapho and Phaon, love is repeatedly emphasised as pure and innocent: "Phaon et elle jouissoient de toutes les douceurs, d'une amour pure & innocente"; "se dirent toutes les tendresses que l'amour pour & innocente peut permettre" Scudéry (1654), 452, 517. Their love is not for marriage, and is akin to friendship; in Sapho's words: "ie comprends bien qu'il y a mille douceurs toutes pures, & toutes innocentes, dans vne affection mutuelle. En effet, cet agreable échange de pensées, & de pensées secretes, qui se font entre deux Personnes, qui s'aiment, est vne plaisir inconceuable: et pour iuger de l'amour par l'amitié [...] que j'ay presentement plus de joy à vous dire sans déguisement ce que ie pense, que ie n'en ay lors que nous sommes ensembles aux Festes les plus magnifiques." Scudéry (1654), 370. See: Penzkofer (1998), 160–167, Meyer-Sickendiek (2016), 61–111; Barthel (2016), 51–52.

<sup>50</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 236. Rákóczi (1876), 227.

<sup>51</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 236. Rákóczi (1876), 227.

<sup>52</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 250. Rákóczi (1876), 239.

<sup>53</sup>Tüskés–Knapp (2023), 25.

<sup>54</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 236 Rákóczi (1876), 227.



the case of the youthful love. These love relations are, on the one hand, in opposition to the love of God, but, on the other hand, as gifts of God, they are also similar to it.<sup>55</sup> (The women he loved would, of course, have been outraged to learn that Rákóczi had described his affection for them as a waste of emotion on an unworthy object: however, their perspective is not included in the text, and the man who remembers them shows no sign of being aware of the offensive nature of his remarks.) A further contradiction is that although Rákóczi emphasises the purity of his love, there are several elements in his description of his feelings for the Bourbon princesses that cast doubt on the disinterested nature of his love. That his love was not unconditional is suggested, among other things, by the statement that the lover was driven by a desire for requited love and wanted to be the sole object of it (244 / L 234).<sup>56</sup> Here, of course, the reader may wonder not only whether the desire for exclusivity and possession is not a manifestation of self-love, but also that Rákóczi does not seem to notice the asymmetry of his desire: while he is equally in love with two women, he would expect the women he loves to love only him. Likewise, the statement that the jealousy of the two women towards each other was due to their own “selfishness and false pride in their beauty”, and not to the man’s erratic behaviour, does not seem entirely fair.<sup>57</sup> The self-love latent in love is also hinted at in the remark about competition with rivals: “Something was spurring me on to love, agony tormented me if I were not loved more than others, and yet I was not angry with them but sought their friendship and to please them.”<sup>58</sup> However, the narrator does not seem to realise that his former love was not entirely disinterested, nor is he aware that his expectations of what he called pure love were rather one-sided.

Somewhat contradictory statements about pure love can also be found in the passages of the *Confessions* that contain reflections on the potential readers and the function of the text. There are passages in which Rákóczi stresses that his life story can provide a moral lesson for his readers, as it testifies to God’s mercy and shows how God led him to himself according to a secret plan:

It would be worth my while to describe in greater detail the splendour and magnificence of all these events [...], so that the future reader may see clearly on the one hand the pleasantness, and on the other hand the roughness of those ways by which you led me imperceptibly, so as to teach me by the experience of all these things that it is possible neither in the love of women, be it pure or sordid, nor in the graciousness of kings and princes, nor in the company of chosen friends [...] to find that sweet peace and calm of spirit that your goodness bestows upon those who love you even in the midst of the tribulations, torments and afflictions of the world.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup>The reference to love as a gift of God is frequent in Augustine’s *de trinitate dei*, we find it for example in XV. 18. 32: “nullum est isto dei dono excellentius.” *Augustinus* (2001), 330.

<sup>56</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 244. Rákóczi (1876), 234.

<sup>57</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 238. Rákóczi (1876), 227.

<sup>58</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 244. “impellebar ad amandum sine ullo proposito fine malo affligebar, quod prae caeteris non amer sed propterea non irascebar aliis, sed amicitiam illorum quaerebam, ut complacerem [...]” Rákóczi (1876), 234.

<sup>59</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 239. “Dignum foret, ut prolixo sermone horum ego describerem delicias [...], ut cunctis haec aliquando legentibus pateat et suavitas apparens viarum et asperitas, per quas me ad te duxisti modo incomprehensibili, ut omnium horum reali experientia me doceres nec in puro nec in foedo mulierum amore, nec in Regum Principum favore, selectorum amicorum consortio [...] reperiri posse suavem illam requiem et animi aequalitatem, quam dare solet bonitas tua diligentibus te etiam inter tribulationibus, angustiis et afflictionibus mundanis constitutis.” Rákóczi (1876), 227.



At other times, however, the author expresses his distrust as to whether readers will understand what pure love is; Rákóczi assumes that his readers will be mostly sensual people who do not know pure love (thus also testifying that he considers himself an extraordinary man):

I know, Lord, that what I write is incredible to carnal men, most of whom cannot imagine purity of love, but I am confessing to you, not to them.<sup>60</sup>

In contrast to the previous quotation, here it seems as if it is not at all important for the writer that his readers understand and learn from his story. This may be explained by the fact that the confessing I wants, while trying to interpret pure love, first of all to reveal his soul to God, to give an account of his deeds to Him. The author repeatedly states that he wishes to express his love and gratitude to God in his *Confessions*, although, as he himself emphasises, he cannot do so properly because of the inadequacy of the language:

But what have I to offer by my writing? Nothing whatever, for neither tongue nor pen can express the feeling of the heart that loves you and in which you dwell. Those who read them in a worldly spirit will take my words for a fairytale, while those who consider them with your illumination will feel what I can say better than I can describe it.<sup>61</sup>

At the same time, Rákóczi repeatedly emphasises that he could not completely get rid of carnality, of desire, the root of which is inseparable from him: the ambivalent attitude towards pure love may also be related to this observation.<sup>62</sup>

Evaluating love from the point of view of the author's present establishes a clear hierarchy: pure love is better than lustful love, but both are distancing from God's love and therefore ultimately despicable. Yet Rákóczi does not reject pure love outright as a manifestation of self-love. In fact, his claim that only spiritual people can understand pure love seems to be a defence of it. The reflections on love reveal tensions, that have not been fully reconciled by the author.

<sup>60</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 236. "Scio Domine, incredibili quid me scribere carnalibus, quorum plurimi puritatem amoris sibi imaginari nequeunt, sed tibi confiteor ego non illis [...]" Rákóczi (1876), 227.

<sup>61</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 266–267. "Sed numquid eo hoc praestare potero? non profecto, nequit enim calamus nequit lingua exprimere sensum cordis te amantis et a te inhabitati. Fabulae videbuntur, quae dico. Haec aliquando cum spiritu mundi legentibus, qui vero te illuminante haec perpenderent melius, quae dicere possem, sentient, quam ego describere valerem." Rákóczi (1876), 254.

<sup>62</sup>Related to this is the fact that there are somewhat contradictory statements about getting rid of self-love. We can find statements that show that it is possible, by divine grace, to be freed from self-love. For example: "I shall refer only by the general name of sin to these things, the result of which was the arrogance of my life, the love of myself and my worth, full of which our corrupt nature comes into being and on which it feeds and grows unless enlightened by your grace, and they are the food of sin, the source of every woe and the spring from which all sins flow." Rákóczi (2019a), 174. "Non memorabo ego ea nisi sub nomine generico peccati, cujus origo fuerat superbia vitae, amor ille proprius et excellentiae suae, quo natura nostra corrupta repleta nascitur, crescit et alitur, nisi illuminata fuerit per gratiam tuam; hic est fomes ille peccati, fons et origo omnis mali, ex quo omnia peccata emanant." Rákóczi (1876), 167. At other times, Rákóczi stresses that self-love cannot be got rid of: "I know that it was not possible to eradicate desire in me, and even now it lives with me." Rákóczi (2019a), 266. "novi quippe radicem illam concupiscentiae inseparabilem fuisse a me et adhuc subsistere in me." Rákóczi (1876), 254.



## 5.

Although Rákóczi sometimes – as we have already mentioned – refers to his emotional relationship with women as friendship, the concept of friendship is usually quite distinct from that of love in the *Confessions*. We read of several important male friendships in which very intense emotions are expressed. When Rákóczi meets Count Bercsényi in Poland, they embrace each other and weep; in addition to this, he calls the meeting as one of the happiest moments of his life:

So brief, so swiftly fading are human pleasures in this world that one cannot express what one feels in them while enjoying them; so it was for me on this occasion, although I believe that I have not had many more pleasurable experiences. Heart and fortune bound me to him; smiles and jests of friendship replaced my tears of profound emotion, and were themselves quickly replaced by the sympathy truly deserved by his condition [...].<sup>63</sup>

Likewise, when saying goodbye to the Duke of Orléans, tears stream from Rákóczi's eyes as they express their tender feelings.<sup>64</sup> The friendship with Marshal Tessé, who moved into the Camaldulian monastery with Rákóczi, also shows a very intense emotional attachment: Rákóczi calls the Marshal his dearest friend.<sup>65</sup> In a reflection on friendship, Rákóczi distinguishes between true friendship, supported by Christian love, and friendship based on self-love and the principle of profit.<sup>66</sup> The above examples clearly show a desire for selfless, tender friendship. At the same time, however, we find a statement about friendship that reflects the stricter Jansenist view, according to which friendship is also a factor that distances us from God's love. Such is the passage quoted earlier concerning the moral lesson to be drawn from the *Confessions*. The problem of interpreting male friendships is therefore similar to that of pure love, although friendships are not subject to the same sharp critique of love for creatures as is the case with love for women.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 133. “Tam brevia et tam cito transeuntia sunt hominis gaudia in mundo, ut quid in illis, dum fruitor, sentiat, cum semel transierint, eloqui nequeat; sic accidit mihi in illo casu, quamvis pauca hoc eventu suaviora mihi accidisse credam. Junctus eram illi corde et fortuna; fletum ex animi teneritudine natum amicus risus et joci exceperunt, qui tamen subito in compassionem mutati sunt, qua profecto nimioquam dignus fuerat status ejus [...].” Rákóczi (1876), 229. This episode not only shows that at the beginning of the eighteenth century it was possible to express tender feelings between male friends, but the hug also shows that it was more natural for men to express physically their tender emotions for each other: the hug in male–female relationships can always be misunderstood as erotic.

<sup>64</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 292. Rákóczi (1876), 276.

<sup>65</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 262. Rákóczi (1876), 250.

<sup>66</sup>“Demonstratus mihi quanta mutationi subjecta sit mundana amicitia aliorum, qui tantas quondam mihi fecere protestationes et dedere assecurationes; quam inanis est illa, quae Christiana charitate non fulcitur, cujus objectum non tu, sed proprius unius cujusque amor est [...].” Rákóczi (1876), 342.

<sup>67</sup>Rákóczi does not justify his statements on friendship. There is no trace of an attempt to expose the self-love inherent in friendship, as in La Rochefoucauld or Fénelon. See about this: Force (2003), 185–186; Moriarty (2006), 243–244.



Concerning tender feelings, it should be mentioned that such feelings are sometimes expressed towards some family members: Rákóczi several times mentions his love for his sister,<sup>68</sup> the thought of the possible loss of his son fills him with deep pain.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, he describes marriage as agonising (mainly because of his wife's jealousy), and does not mention any feelings towards his wife.<sup>70</sup> However, unlike love of women, tender feelings toward family members do not play a significant role in the autobiographical narrative.

How can we evaluate the partially contradictory claims of the *Confessions* about love? Keeping anthropological premises in mind, we can conclude that the claim of pure love for women contradicts the dual anthropology of the *Confessions*. For, from the point of view of this anthropological conception, love manifests the fundamental human characteristic of restlessness, the desire to seek new and new objects. The ideal of pure, tender love, on the other hand, posits love as a positive emotion capable of forming stable relationships. From this point of view, the renunciation of love may also be motivated by the disturbing realisation that love – due to the Protean nature of desire – can never be happy, and that in the field of male–female relationships, selfless emotional contact with the other, conceived as a soul mate, remains only a delusive desire.<sup>71</sup> In the *Confessions*, however, the author does not seek to uncover love as an illusion, although it would be a consistent step to identify the idea of pure love as a hidden form of self-love. In announcing his desire to get rid of love, he invokes the shame caused by his failure as the reason for his decision, not a recognition of the nature of love.<sup>72</sup>

From a psychological point of view, keeping the author's person in mind, we can conclude that Rákóczi did not want to or could not completely renounce his former affections, which were still dear to him, although the theme of conversion and the role of the penitent sinner forced him to develop such an interpretation: that is, that his earlier experiences and deeds were difficult to fit into the subsequent self-interpretation following the Augustinian pattern. Moreover, in the reflections on love, we can discover a double perspective of self-reproach and apology, which is also characteristic of the *Confessions* as a whole. In the reflections on love, apology and self-criticism support each other and help the reader to develop sympathy for the person of the penitent: the apologetic and self-critical reflections form a self who is guilty of excessive love for creatures, but whose sins – which he repents – are not mortal sins. Yet in many cases there is a tension between the anthropological and theological implications of the

<sup>68</sup>“That evening my sister visited me in my lodging, and after fraternal embraces and weeping tears of mutual affection she revealed to me the state of my affairs [...]” Rákóczi (2019a), 45. “Aduit sub vesperam in hospitio meo soror mea et fraternis amplexibus, inter teneritudinis mutuae lacrymas peractis, statum rerum mearum profecto longe aliter detegebat mihi [...]” Rákóczi (1876), 28.

<sup>69</sup>“most of all, however, it pained me to have had to leave my son – as we thought – a prey to the menacing enemy, to the Turks and Tartars [...]” Rákóczi (2019a), 77. “Sed summa doloris fuit, unicum filium imminenti, prout credebamus, hosti, Turcis et Tartaris deserere obligari [...]” Rákóczi (1876), 55.

<sup>70</sup>“I will omit, Lord, the account of my domestic conflicts which, as you know, my wife's jealousy caused [...]” Rákóczi (2019a), 63. “Praetereo, Domine, recensere domesticas afflictiones meas, quas uxoris meae zelotypia per vere, prout tu ipse nosti, falsas anus cujusdam, quam mater illi pro aulae praefecta dederat, relationes et instigationes causata [...]” Rákóczi (1876), 44

<sup>71</sup>A similar insight is behind the heroine's retreat to a convent in Madame de Lafayette's novel *The Princess de Clèves*. See about this: Matzat (1985).

<sup>72</sup>Rákóczi (2019a), 241. Rákóczi (1876), 231.



reflections. However, the nature of apology, i.e. the emphasis on the purity of love, also testifies to the fact that Rákóczi was familiar with a concept of emotions that differed from the Jansenist conception that underpinned the discourse of self-reproach. Looking at the reflections of the *Confessions* on love from a larger historical perspective, we can also argue that in the desire for pure love, there is a demand for a new concept of love that will later be expressed in eighteenth-century sentimental literature based on a new interpretation of emotions.<sup>73</sup> The ambivalences in the thematisation of love for creatures can thus be interpreted as signs of a claim to selfless love, that cannot be plausibly explained in the anthropological model of the *Confessions*.<sup>74</sup>

In conclusion, the basic moral philosophical schema used in the *Confessions* for self-interpretation is the duality of self-love and the love of God, through which the contours of a conversion narrative are drawn. However, there are also factors that make this narrative and the self-interpretation implied in it ambiguous. This can be seen in the ambivalence in the description of love for creatures, as well as in the evaluation of leadership during the War of Independence, and in the fact that conversion is not a one-off turn of events, but an endeavour accompanied by doubts and inner struggles. The perfect realisation of the ascetic ideal is thus itself in question, and the basic feature of the penitent is therefore constant doubt. The source of the tension between ideal and its realisation is not only that God's will cannot be known, but also that the penitent is also a prince who has not completely renounced his political ambitions.

Finally, regarding earthly loves and tender feelings towards women, it is worth noting that in other works of Rákóczi, such as his *Réflexions sur les principes de la vie civile et de politesse d'un chrétien*, written in French in his exile in Turkey, intended as a moral instruction to his sons, there is no trace of any positive evaluation of intimate relations with women. The work, which portrays the figure of the ideal prince, is a sharp critique of court life, and is particularly critical of the conversation with women.<sup>75</sup> Among other things, Rákóczi proposes that men should spend their time in scientific meetings and physical exercise instead of chatting with women and playing dangerous games; and that women, on the other hand, should keep animals and do handicrafts, which would divert them from the idle and soft lifestyle "which feminises and thus corrupts men."<sup>76</sup> In this work Rákóczi is also very negative about women in relation to marriage: as Béla Köpeczi noted, the prince's bitterness over his own unhappy marriage may have been behind this anti-woman sentiment.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, the absence of the ambivalences analysed above can be seen as a consequence of the fact that the main purpose of the *Réflexions* is to teach, to give moral advice (although it also shapes the self-image of the author). Looking at

<sup>73</sup>Meyer-Sickendiek (2016).

<sup>74</sup>In this regard, W. Matzat's study is illuminating, showing the difficulties Rousseau encountered in trying to formulate the concept of tender emotions within the discursive framework of the classical age. See: Matzat (1990), 17–83.

<sup>75</sup>Rákóczi (1984), 349.

<sup>76</sup>Rákóczi (1984), 365.

<sup>77</sup>Speaking of marriage, Rákóczi explains that although it would be desirable for a man to find in a woman a soul mate who understands him and is his second self, this is hardly possible in reality because of the morals of aristocratic women: women "want to look like a doll and want their husbands to think of them as such." Rákóczi (1984), 350–351. According to Béla Köpeczi passages like this are "more haunted by misogyny than by the exposition of Christian moral teaching as interpreted by Jansenism." Köpeczi (1984), 501–502.



these works from the perspective of genre, we can say that spiritual autobiography has greater potential for reflecting worldly attractions, doubts and ambivalent evaluations.

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