It might seem that taking the attitude toward St. Augustine’s philosophy as a guide for setting out the history of Polish sociopolitical thought in the mid-19th century is hardly a good idea. Despite this, when the synthetic work Historia filozofii polskiej (History of Polish Philosophy) by Jan Skoczyński and Jan Woleński mentions Cyprian Norwid, it is precisely St. Augustine and his concept of the philosophy of history that is presented as the factor that distinguished Norwid from his great predecessors (Skoczyński & Woleński, 2010). In particular, of course, this meant Adam Mickiewicz and his messianic concepts of the Polish nation’s struggle for independence.

The question that the authors of Historia filozofii polskiej considered was that of the degree of agreement with Augustine’s concept from De civitate Dei that the earthly fate of the heavenly kingdom’s citizens was a “mixture and a kind of melding” of the ideal element of the soul of divine origin with earthly history. As Étienne Gilson put it, God’s country, elevated above all nations from which it equally chooses its citizens, is built slowly as the world continues, and the only reason for the world to last is so that this construction is completed. People are the stones of this heavenly – and thus invisible and mystical – city, and God is its builder (Gilson, 1958, p. 358).

Insofar as we could consider Norwid’s stance to be an expression of complete acceptance of the idea of human life as a pilgrimage to the Kingdom of Heaven, his major opponent Mickiewicz aimed to fulfill the purpose of the history of salva-
tion within a time horizon accessible to everyone and achievable in a process of predictable succession of events. Due to the two poets’ different historiosophical concepts, the output of Mickiewicz and Norwid, as Historia filozofii polskiej’s authors note, also contained different visions of people’s responsibility for the world’s development. That responsibility manifested itself as a collective struggle for a new political and spiritual form for European society (in Mickiewicz) or as an individual experience of holy history in every person’s life through physical and spiritual labor (in Norwid).

In Mickiewicz’s case we can justifiably say that the concept of salvation he proposed, accomplished through and thanks to history itself, was a variant of Christian messianic millenarianism which links its expectations directly to the temporal nature of human existence and to individual or collective agents of salvation functioning within history. This was how Mickiewicz’s rejection of the official and orthodox version of Christianity showed itself, directed against the political advantage the superpowers had over the rest of the continent and against the activity of the “official church” – the papacy. The zeal with which Mickiewicz tried to involve the Church on the side of the revolutionary struggle for the independence of nations contributed, among other things, to the last two courses of his Paris lectures being placed on the index of prohibited books.

In this respect Norwid never went as far as Mickiewicz, but it needs noting that he expected completely different results from Christian philosophy. One of Norwid’s historiosophical beliefs was the certainty that despite the 19 centuries which had passed since then, the arrival of Christianity had left many areas open to the influence of pagan thinking, reducing humans to the role of a passive puppet in the power of fate. Thus, Norwid in his output tries to recontextualize general history, showing its meaning from the viewpoint of the divine plan of salvation. The way he rewrites history from the point of view of Christian eschatology can be viewed in terms of a variation on St. Augustine’s theology of history. The poet set out to show the sense of history, but without reinterpreting it in the spirit of any specific historiosophical hypothesis. In the ultimate perspective of the history of salvation, lay history completely loses significance, and its role does not become visible unless history is considered as a struggle between belief and unbelief, on all levels, from the life of an individual human to conflicts between whole countries. As Karl Löwith noted, “Hence the whole scheme of Augustine’s work serves the purpose of vindicating God in history. Yet history remains definitely distinct from God, who is not a Hegelian god in history but the Lord of history. God’s dealing in history is beyond our disposal, and his providence … overrules the intentions of men” (Löwith, 1949, p. 170).

Thus, since the ultimate perspective of the world’s history reduces the significance of earlier events, can we seriously reflect on the influence of human beings
on what happens in reality? Considering Norwid’s views on the duties of humans due to the historical dimension of their existence, we need to ask how they should strive to transform the material forms of the world. Does history solely serve the purpose of individual self-fulfillment on the way to eternal life, or do people also have to fulfill some other, important obligations toward history itself? Or, should they rather seek knowledge about history, or co-create history?

For many reasons, the mid-19th century was a time of intensified interest within literature and philosophy in outstanding individuals who were ahead of their times and opened up new prospects for the world as it developed. In this respect, Norwid shared the views of his era. Studies on his oeuvre have spread the sound view – even in the inter-war period – that there is an amazing parallel which, thanks to some complicated self-creation, links the poet’s life with that of Athenian philosopher Socrates. As Zofia Szmydtowa wrote:

The attitude of the masked poet strongly resembles Plato’s account of Socrates. The Greek philosopher feels lonely in the face of his contemporary reality and the preferences that dominate it, but also elevated due to this distinctness and isolation. He appears as the only man of them all who cares nothing about negligible and transient things, but possesses an essential understanding of being. / Norwid, too, elevates his loneliness. He also, the only one among the crowd of his contemporaries, elevated above the disputes of the day, reaches to the source of the highest perfection. Like Socrates (Defense), he wanders among his compatriots, asks them and tests them in order to be confirmed in his belief that he is alone in a covenant with the truth, himself incomprehensible and ridiculous. (Szmydtowa, 1936, p. 379)

The image of the suffering Socrates stayed with Norwid his entire life. In the section “To the Reader” preceding the poem Niewola (Bondage), he describes a vision of the shackled wise man who, ignoring his physical limitations, grew up with a sense of freedom unattainable for his persecutors: “I cannot forget here the model of Socrates, who considered the wound from the shackles imprinted on his leg to be the content and the example supporting reflection on pain and the relationship between pain and life, thus clearly controlling the misfortune of his position, yes, even growing in freedom confident enough to be undefeatable.”¹ For Norwid, the thirty days Socrates spent in prison awaiting the return of the procession from Delos became a heroic model of following the path of the truth that seizes the whole person. Norwid rejects the possibility of Socrates remaining in

pagan devoutness, he also puts any thought of the dark, disturbing effect of irony out of his mind, never allowing any enthusiasm to come to the fore, neither for death nor, even less, for life.

In the first of his lectures on the poetry of Juliusz Słowacki delivered in late April and early May 1860 at the Polish Reading Room in Paris, Norwid paid Socrates open homage: “And Greece was also endowed more than all the other peoples, but it was unable to bear not only the Savior’s, but also Socrates’ great goodness, and having given him poison so that he would not surpass the nation, it disgraced itself” (Pwsz., vol. 6, p. 411). The juxtaposition of Socrates and Christ is symptomatic for Norwid’s thinking; his idea is that the sacrifice of the Athenian philosopher preceded the fate of the Son of God in the plan of the divine history of salvation.

Norwid judges Socrates from the viewpoint of the end of the pagan era; he was a martyr of a faith he was not given the opportunity to understand, as Norwid mentions in his sketch *Asocjacja, ilość i jakość* (*Association, Quantity and Quality*): “Socrates, being the last Greek wise man before Christianity, and thus as a wise man ahead of his time, sensing Christianity – was thus a martyr of this premonition” (Pwsz., vol. 7, p. 48). In *Zmartwychwstanie historyczne* (*Historical Resurrection*) Norwid explains that Socrates’ role was to accustom people to the idea of immortality of the soul; when arguments that could convince the Athenians ran out, the philosopher’s death became a natural supplementation of his reasoning and at the same time highlighted the sacrifice he made of his life: “In his as yet dark presentiment of Christianity, setting out to prove immortality throughout his life and presenting increasingly strong proof, Socrates had to use poison as his final proof, so he almost didn’t die... rather, he completed his philosophical argumentation...” (Pwsz., vol. 6, p. 609).

However, Socrates as the anticipation of Christ’s Passion is just one aspect, and I dare say not the most important one, in Norwid’s view of his person. *Imitatio Socratici* only partly corresponds to the message of *imitatio Christi*; in a paradox, Socrates not so much preceded as justified the need for the coming of Christ and indicated future problems related to the irrevocable linking of the history of salvation with the continuance of the political community and its immersion in history.

I think it is worth offering the hypothesis that in order to properly understand Norwid’s Socrates, we need to see him as the politician who thus describes his activity in *Gorgias*: “I think,” said Socrates, “I am one of the few Athenians engaged in the true political art, and that of the men of today I alone practice statesmanship” (English trans. from http://www.roangelo.net/logwitt/gorgias.html). Socrates is considering the potential possibility of having to face a court, because the special nature of his activity makes him one of the people who are especially dangerous for the peace of a city threatened by the ambiguous effects of an intellectual ferment that, developing in the minds of Socrates’ faithful listeners, could
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lead people to question the rules of Athens’ statehood. Therefore this statement, placing the philosopher next to or in a sense even outside Athenian politics and – as Aleksander Ochocki points out – “clearly combining ... service to the deity with civic service” (Ochocki, 2001, p. 105), attempts to delineate an alternative “space of public civic discourse” which, due to the nature of democracy, based on the voluntarist model of government of the people, no one had managed to enter besides Socrates himself.

Socrates releasing the spirit of the Athenians has a lot in common with the thinking of Hegel, who saw the philosopher’s sentencing as a watershed for the city and its inhabitants in their effort to oppose the weakening inseparability of thought and reality. The Socratic revolution triggered a state in which a subject using his reason and his own opinions could choose his homeland, which is what the world of thought was slowly becoming, replacing the previous, historical homeland. “In Athens,” wrote Hegel, “that higher principle which proved the ruin of the Athenian state, advanced in its development without intermission. Spirit had acquired the propensity to gain satisfaction for itself – to reflect” (Hegel, 2007, p. 270).

In his third lecture Norwid points to the opposition between what is private and what is public, and again makes reference to Socrates:

Socrates, who did not seek to make his followers gravitate to the sun of his bosom, losing the individual force of rotation around the mental axis of each one of them separately, who thus respected the free men in his followers, and who thus had wisdom – when he was thanked (I say) for imparting knowledge, he asked and begged that rather they should thank Him who causes them to take advantage of his words. (Pwsz., vol. 6, p. 423-424)

This key excerpt from his lectures may – I think – be understood in several ways that enable us to see the uniqueness of Norwid’s unusual civilization project. Socrates debating with his students appears as a political activist committed to what his times were becoming, not necessarily calling for specific action but defining the range of possible choices, potential alternatives contained in the current reality and also – no less importantly – in the sphere of his individual followers’ professed values and ways of thinking. The first interpretation leads through the concept of knowledge, which to become wisdom first has to dominate our lives, as Norwid remarked in his first lecture:

And thus, for example, the truth that Wisdom is not just knowledge but that it has to turn into life and permeate it, and also the other (truth) that the soul is immortal, was long known: the former among all wise men, the latter among the Egyptians; but these truths were not so strongly binding, not until the mo-
ment that in the life of Socrates the cup lent power to these truths. This Greek is the seal here: the cup brought the written law to completion and turned it into a living statue of duty. (Pwsz., vol. 6, p. 414)

Norwid remained within the trend of thinking in terms of the human origins of knowledge. The death of Socrates _de facto_ opposed the sacrifice made by Christ because it was brought about in the name of progress of the human race. The philosopher died proclaiming the immortality of the soul in order to reassure everyone else and show them the direction their spirituality should take. However, he took his knowledge from the dead – as Norwid mentioned slightly earlier – symbolism of Egypt, so the religious significance of his deed remained practically unnoticeable. The “non-binding fantasy,” as Stefan Witwicki described the story about the soul’s life after death in his commentary to _Phaedo_, was put in Socrates’ mouth solely to convince those who were already believers, to give hope to the weak who could not bear the vision of a life definitely closing at the moment of death.

Invoking the _daimonion_ without giving any details of what it really meant to Socrates brings Norwid closer, in this and the previous excerpt from his lectures, to understanding his activity in a very similar way to Oswald Spengler’s understanding in his concept of the method of euhemerism (Spengler, 1928). This was based on recognizing people like Socrates, Confucius and Rousseau as priests of reason ascribing all the achievements of civilization to nothing but the activity of humans who – fearing their own power – create religion to conceal their own omnipotence behind a façade of nonexistent deities. “That which once had been grandly molded myth and cult is called, in this ‘religion of educated people,’ Nature and Virtue – but this Nature is a reasonable mechanism, and this Virtue is knowledge” (Spengler, 1928, p. 307). The attack on the Athenians’ religiousness must have been interpreted as a revolutionary attack on the foundations of the democratic system. And it was exactly this argument that became part of the accusation that forced the philosopher to appear before the court. From discovering Socrates’ dislike of government of the masses, who are manipulated and absorbed with continual political battle, it is easy to go further and present him as a supporter of oligarchy and tyranny as well. Norwid puts aside the matter of Socrates’ political views because he ignores the correlation between religion and the historical background in which there emerge issues of faith and relations between acolytes of a given religion and decision-makers with political power who decide about the boundaries of freedom of worship.

For Norwid, the mysterious voice to which Socrates referred is proof that it is impossible to profess faith in the Christian God before the birth and Passion of Christ, while feeling his superhuman presence. In a paradox, invoking the in-
ner voice did not help acquit the philosopher, because even from his students’ perspective – as Norwid admits outright, saying they thanked only Socrates for knowledge – it was a clever trick emphasizing the modesty of the wise man who had reached all his conclusions by himself.

It must become the role of a true wise man, of whom Socrates is a model example, to limit himself to the only sphere over which he has any control – the language of his time. What Socrates achieved, and his successors – not philosophers but poets – after him, was creating a “language of social transfiguration” and a “language of phenomena,” key notions in a civilization which, abandoning paganism, suddenly found itself in a changed reality:

... no people can change the language overnight, the language, I say, of passionate feeling and the whole drama of life that changed after the coming of Christianity – especially when this people was composed of different strata; therefore the priests took the language of the people and elevated it. (Pwsz., vol. 6, p. 412)

In Norwid’s thinking, Socrates opens the list of people who, trapped between the space of power and the stratified people, made an effort to develop innovative formulas that would enable people to communicate and express emotions and beliefs impossible to verbalize in archaic languages that were pagan in spirit. As Arent van Nieukerken asks and then replies in his book *Perspektywiczność sacrum. Szkice o Norwidowskim romantyzmie* (*The Sacred in Perspective. Sketches on Norwid’s Romanticism*):

Why is it so difficult for “us” to approach the historical nature of our being? The problem lies in the fact that it is very hard in the *hic et nunc*, at this point of “my” life’s road, to reconcile “life” with reflection on life. When our thinking considers life, we set it aside – we think there is a distance separating us from it. It happened sometime, in very old times, when life was still expressed as energy. In those “heroic” eras when the sacred meaning of life decided about human behavior, people lacked historical awareness but thanks to this they were creative, because creativity precedes any reflection. It is a direct expression of the inner purpose of being, imitating (fulfilling) the creativity of the Word becoming incarnate. (van Nieukerken, 2007)

How, then, are issues of ongoing history and human responsibility for history correlated in Norwid’s output? In Nieukerken’s approach, history is temporary in Norwid, because it is the task of each and every individual to realize the fragmentary nature of all portrayals of reality, all the way to achieving the status of a
“transformed, deified subject.” In this concept, the figure of Socrates plays a special role in that it opens an era of people’s new, different attitude to the historicity of life.

Norwid accepted Vico’s concept of history created by humans and simultaneously contributing to the development of the human mind. On the other hand, however, he strongly emphasized the role Christianity played in this process. It not only brought different anthropological concepts than paganism and the prospect of salvation, but also a new language enabling people to aptly describe the alternative form of the world. This is the way that the model of responsibility for the Word is implemented in Norwid’s work, seemingly resembling the concepts of the Polish Romantics and the demiurgic power of the artist that they promoted, but radically different in its deepest essence.

Norwid made some reservations, however, as regards the transience of history and its ancillary character. Reflection, the best example in his output being the figure of Socrates, continual deliberation on the forms that reality assumes, and refraining from action are essential factors deciding about the ultimate nature of history. Complete empowerment of human beings will not be possible without discovering, as Nieukerken calls it, the perspective of being. Looking at the characters from Norwid’s works, especially the epic poems, we can easily notice different forms of reflection that does not attain the absolute dimension that Norwid suggested. The young philosopher from Epirus in *Quidam*, Cleopatra from the tragedy about her, and Greek poet Tyrtaeus from the tragedy *Tyrtej* fulfill a model of incomplete, fragmentary reflection limited to one of many perspectives, which means that instead of understanding unfolding events they become puppets on the stage of history.

It is no use looking for the term “responsibility” used directly in Norwid’s output, it is obviously a word from outside his vocabulary as an artist, letter-writer and essayist. However, when we trace its indirect presence in the writings of Norwid, we can easily conclude that it was never a useless notion to him.