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Life and Literature

The Public Use of Literature in the Oeuvre of József Desseffy

Theses

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Budapest, 2010

In the past decades, researchers of the Enlightenment have been highlighting the heterogeneity of the era. Ian Hunter wrote of rival Enlightenments, according to Robert Darnton, as far as history of ideas is concerned, the French Revolution's background may not be found in the Enlightenment's Rationalist philosophy but – to the contrary – in that of the opponents of Enlightenment, while J. G. A. Pocock drew attention to the presence of the political discourse of a conservative Enlightenment in the circle of British thinkers of the 18th century. Studies of intellectual history and social history regularly point out the diversity residing in the era. This is not for nothing. For the 18th century – and there is virtually unanimous consensus on this – brought along a new type of men. This dissertation couches this turn as the “anthropological turn”, the point of which is that men as moral being defines itself as the object of cognition. At the same time, enlightened sense was the object of anthropological perception, and, in this sense, sensible sense. And, while it was the thinkers of this era that juxtaposed sensation (*sensatio*) to rationality (*ratio*), sensibility and the power of imagination to the faculties of reason and sense, observations of sensitive impressions and bodily impacts – from the fledgling aesthetics to medicine – interrogated nonetheless the possibilities of mediation between body and soul. And while from the second half of the 18th century on anthropologists took pain to somehow subdue the substantialism of Cartesianism, we can witness the revaluation of epistemology that resulted in conspicuous change of perspectives at various fields – from ethics, through aesthetic thought even to criminal law or theory of the state.

As far as literary history is concerned, the impact of this turn may be grasped in the literary roles of the sensible type of man. The sensible man – and it is not merely the main characters of the epistolary novels that we should have in mind here – is animated, on the one hand, by finding the measure between sense and sensibility; and, on the other, the possibilities of extrapolation of the relationship between life and literature. What all of this means is that, at the time, the field of aesthetics is not separated yet from everyday life as it is lived, while, for the man of sensibility, refinement and cultivation (*Bildung*) become accessible precisely through aesthetical perception. As a consequence, even as advancing towards beauty, social action may be understood in aesthetic terms.

The hero of this dissertation, Count József Dessewffy (1771–1843), was born in the 18th century. During a long career, his public activities caught the eye at many fields: he is by all means one of the defining characters of the first decades of the 19th century. Browsing the indices of the monographies of the era, Dessewffy's name occurs frequently. At the same time, these references and quotations are usually not directly concerned with Dessewffy.

Instead, his intermittently surfacing figure and statements serve only as illustrations, supporting the assessment of someone else's viewpoint. Thus, the character of Dessewffy, alongside his role, serves as some sort of point of calibration: the greatness of others (such as Ferenc Kazinczy or Count István Széchenyi) may be manifested in reference to him. Yet as far as his own worth is concerned, he himself plays but a secondary role. That Kazinczy, marrying the countess, respected him in fact only for the sake of his rank as a count; that it was the intimacy of their friendly relationship that his illogical leaps were benignly ignored; that the sole reason for his *dilettante* poems being published was his divergent activities as patron of arts and his public esteem; that even though he was well regarded for his bold political stance, behind his back (boastful of unlimited knowledge) a whole range of peers smiled at each other sarcastically; that Széchenyi and Bajza "easily won" their disputes against him; that from the 1830s the elderly count gradually became the biggest political opponent of the young reformers – plenty of statements like these can be read about Dessewffy. All of this does not mean that by dint of his outmoded nature and impotence deriving from the power of his wealth Dessewffy would have become the demonic negative character of Hungarian historiography, as there is no overarching image of his public role or literary activities in the background of these views – the aspect of Dessewffy we encounter is the one that appears to be central to the argumentation-in-the-making. Hence, when the character's assessment is proposed (and it does not simply become the ingredient of a history of mentalities) it is sometimes a positive, sometimes a negative character that we see. Whereas, for example, being the first person to initiate the total elimination of preventive censorship he is an undoubtedly positive character in the history of press freedom, nonetheless – and at the very same historical moment – he is the leading character of narrow-minded conservatives who does not understand (as due to his societal limitations he could not understand) plans for reform by Széchenyi or romantic aspirations for style by Bajza.

This lack of understanding, I think, may be explained by the decline and fall of the sensible type of man in the 19th century. Dessewffy features sometimes in Hungarian history, sometimes in Hungarian literary history or, for that matter, in cultural history – while he himself never separated these fields from each other radically. For him, public sphere of the social action, public and private practices of the everyday life were more conceivable aesthetically.

The *introductory chapter* of the dissertation provides a sketch of the historiography of life and literature. Research into emotionalism of the 18th century was dealt with separately by history and literary history. Though the study of the discourse of books and that of life

progressed parallelly, it was done on pursuing separate paths. The discourse of life belonged to the discipline of history, the discourse of books to literary history, aesthetics and intellectual history. Even though, due to new methods in the discipline of history (microstoria, cultural anthropology, etc.), and historiographic attention to the everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*), in recent decades these two fields met each other at numerous points, and the legitimate existence of the other field is routinely acknowledged in the scientific practice, in the usual days of education and research the relationship of the two fields is nonetheless characterized by unconnected “parallelism”, side-by-side. Needless to say, such delineations are never without their own problems, neither are the boundaries static. Within the fields of both the history of reading and the history of mentalities and cultural history, transgressions of boundaries are very far from being unheard of. *Microstoria* and *Alltagsgeschichte* drew attention to areas that traditionally fall beyond the territory of historical interest, making thus primary interest for historical understanding sources that had previously been but corollary information to the appreciation of the stormy centuries of history. This redrawing of areas resulted in the revaluation of genres such as diaries, private correspondences, travelogues etc., which can be equally considered literarily formed artworks of aesthetic quality, sources for intellectual history dwelling on the ideological discourses of the era, and historical documents divulging important data.

The chapter demonstrates the interplay of life and literature on the example of suicide. The case study seeks to accentuate two issues: for one thing, separating the discourse of life and the discourse of books is by no means an unproblematical act of hermeneutics. To the contrary, not simply the experiences of human life become literary phenomena, but life and literature get into close – nay, inseparable – connection with each other. For another thing, discursive relations of the age are rather complex. Not only because texts (meant for literary consumption or other forms) written with considerable erudition mobilize a great deal of knowledge of civilization, but also because these pieces are inserted in to systems of references that are quite difficult for us to assess – if at all.

In the *first chapter* I describe the most important stages in Dessewffy’s career, the literary and political contexts of his work. Setting the biographies of Ferenc Toldy, Baron József Eötvös, Antal Csengery and József Ferenczy next to each other the two dilemmas of reception of the Dessewffy-phenomenon will become visible: the unity of the long career on the one hand; the evaluation of aristocratic acculturation on the other. Dessewffy lived a long life, at least as far as lives at the turn of the 18–19th century were concerned. His career intermeshes with literary historical ages characterized by concepts derived from

Enlightenment, Biedermeier and Romanticism; just as with historical eras described by concepts from feudal opposition and liberal reform-opposition. Toldy distinctly sensed rupture as regarded this career: Dessewffy, having been a pioneer for the issue of the Hungarian language as deputy of diet in his youth, became unable to follow changes in his elderly years. Eötvös, to the contrary, argued that Dessewffy – following the wise men of stoicism – remained consistent to his principles throughout his entire life and did not sacrifice them on the altar of party demands. Lastly, Ferenczy appreciated his career in terms of its diversity. He thought that Dessewffy created something lasting at every field yet these only connect to each other inasmuch as they all serve the cause of the country and that of the public.

Political history of the early 19th century states the strengthening of the political role of the nobles of lower rank of society (the so called *bene possessionati*). The dissertation argues that aristocrats retained their defining role in Hungarian cultural history until the middle of the 19th century. It was not all of a sudden that the cultural structure based on patrons of arts was transformed. Instead, it was precisely at the initiation and direction of aristocrats that those institutions (National Museum, Hungarian National Academy, first public libraries, etc.) came into being that would later become the stalwarts of “bourgeois public sphere”. Dessewffy is one of the pivotal characters of this slow transition, on whose career both the centuries long tradition of representative public sphere and the impact of civil publicity of more recent ages left their trace.

Four children were born to József Dessewffy. In the *second chapter* I examine what principles and practices of education helped him to nurture his three sons and one daughter. The 18th century has often been called the century of pedagogy, with Paul Ariès stating that this is precisely the age where the concept of the “child” appears in the cultural history of Europe. This can naturally be measured on the conspicuous boom of public education, but also on the increased attention paid to education by the aristocracy. The tendency can be observed in Dessewffy’s family as well: his sons were taught by a range of private educators, the Count himself took care of Greek and Latin, instructor for physical education was hired, and his daughter, Virginia, was entertained by French lady companions. The effects of the pedagogic principles of the novel ages can be reconstructed in the practice of the family: Locke’s, Rousseau’s, Kant’s and Pestalozzi’s effect can be equally observed. All of this was weaved together by Dessewffy by the demand for the appropriation of antic culture: even the names of his children bear the reference to what kind of examples are suggested worthy of imitation, they were taught in Greek, etc. The frequent appearance of Stoic virtues in the

education of the children does not simply derive from Dessewffy's neoclassicism but also from the aesthetic way of life pursuing measure by the man of sensibility. Furthermore, all this is supplemented by the aristocratical educational traditions of the Dessewffy family: from aristocratic private theatres, through peregrinatic pieces of advice, to aristocratic public exams we regularly encounter the representative public sphere's previous manifestations. In the last instance, it is not the cessation of traditional family practices of education that he aspires for, but their modernization.

Dessewffy and Kazinczy were very good friends. In the *third chapter* I analyze some differences of opinions occurring in this decades-long friendship. Those differences that pertained to aesthetical questions. Ulrich Im Hof's remarkable book designates the 18th century as the "century of sociability" (*das gesellige Jahrhundert*). The discourse of sensible friendship is not merely based on consensus, but on the receptivity to the emotion of others. One does not have to choose between the *privatum* and the *politicum*, but seek out the proper equilibrium. The road to the happy life, according to the Stoics, leads through social relationships and thus friendship. For Dessewffy (arguing so frequently against self-love) this culture of humanism is very much an organic tradition, applicable to issues of real life. Similar to a number of his contemporaries and role models (himself quoting Montesquieu, Shaftesbury and La Rochefoucauld) he thought that social contact's impact on refining taste and acculturation leads one to freedom (which in this case equally means freedom of political action and freedom for critique embodied in friendship). This sociable anthropological model very much appreciates friendship, while being rather burdensome at same time by transforming this friendship into a fragile state of equilibrium.

In the *first section of the chapter* I investigate the dispute over the poetry of Sándor Kisfaludy. As is well known, Kazinczy was not much of a fan of Kisfaludy's poetry, recognizing grammatical errors in the poems. Seemingly, Dessewffy agreed with his friend's assessment. Taking a closer look at the correspondence, however, differences become easier to spot. Kazinczy is a student of Winckelmann, and his aesthetic judgments are primarily influenced by considerations deriving from the theory of imitation: he quotes the received thesis often appearing at Schiller, Friedrich Schlegel or Herder that emphasizes the unbridgeable separation between ancient past and present, while being at one with Winckelmann in conceiving of art as more than the pure imitation of nature, since ideal beauty presents reality via the idea. Body is not in itself beautiful and the artist's work on conforming to the perceptions of the ideal is equally required for the body to become an aesthetic object. Dessewffy, to the contrary, is exercised by problems of aesthetic expression:

following Lessing (who critiques Winckelmann) he is of the opinion that an appropriate mode of representation must be found for the object of representation, so that ugly things can be expressed *as ugly*. Dessewffy criticizes Kisfaludy as, according to him, smoking a pipe belongs to metareflexive philosophical poetry – as such, the vision of pipe-smoke is ill-matched to the poetry of love.

In the *second section* of the chapter I examine the debate about Mihály Csokonai Vitéz. Dessewffy is disturbed by the fact that Kazinczy wishes to alter Csokonai's poems, even after his passing away. According to Dessewffy, the objective of the discourse of critics is not about the abstract ideal of beauty but one form of conversation. Criticism is possible, indeed necessary, as this is the way for judgments of taste to develop; at the same time he thinks that it is impolite to critique anyone not capable of response. This practice of conversation also makes its presence in Dessewffy's literary and political activities, public and private statements. Besides, Kazinczy's critical practice irritated Dessewffy's critical norm in the sense that according to the latter any conversation is tied to particular situations and the context where Csokonai's poems were born must therefore be taken into consideration. Rewriting Csokonai's poems *post festa*, Kazinczy removes them from their primary environment. The difference between Kazinczy and Dessewffy also becomes manifest in the sense that the former follows more the aesthetic principles of German Idealism (and is a huge enthusiast of Goethe), while the latter promulgates the greatness of French and English literature (and does not think much of Goethe's art).

No book of poems by József Dessewffy was published during his lifetime. A volume of manuscripts survived, however, and his plans for subsequent publication are known. In the *fourth chapter* I analyze one such volume's ("Pro Typo" of 1825) poems. The volume is characterized by the duality that could equally be observed hitherto: first, the presence of the tradition of the representative public sphere, and second, aspirations to modernize these traditions. According to the volume's existing subscription offer it was the diet's honourably members (Count István Széchenyi or Baron Miklós Wesselényi amongst others) that would have recruited future consumers of the volume. All of this shows that the intention of Dessewffy was not to publish his poems using his own means, but sought to find subscribers. Thus, it was an audience (*publicum*) in a modern sense that he wished to appeal to, while at the same time equally preserving their representative nature as the inclusion of aristocrat peers in the process of publishing would have guaranteed the volume's public rank and quality. Following the poetic traditions of the Baroque the poems of the volume narrate representative events from the everyday life's events of the aristocrats, as well as applying the sensible

clichés of the neoclassicist poetry. As a result, such a unique poetry came into being that adjusted the genres of occasional poetry to the representational world of the aristocratic walk of life, preserving thereby the unity of this trans-aesthetized life and its public-political environment.

The *fifth chapter* is concerned with Dessewffy's professed minority report against censorship. Dessewffy was a member of the regnicolar delegation's committee of public law delegated by the 1825/27 diet. As a principled opponent of the preventive censorship he suggests the introduction of the English example: everyone would be responsible for their communication and each complaint would then be dealt individually by a jury. The report comprises of a characteristically conservative argumentation: during the evolution of history institutions spontaneously adapt to changing circumstances and any use of force on or conscious interference into this natural process is harmful; according to Dessewffy, time's progress may be measure on the change of opinions; and freedom, custom, tradition and the wisdom of predecessors is also to be protected as well as a treasure to be handed over – such treasure that the cultivation of which is our duty but which can only be handed over via the freedom of conservation. This minority report caused rather considerable repercussions: it was attacked in defence of censorship by conservatives regarding Enlightenment as an ultimate threat, part of the counties also suggested the erasure of censorship but not based on a historical-anthropological arguments akin to Dessewffy's but simply wishing to adopt the civic right of supervision. The chapter analyzes the dispute between Dessewffy and his son, Aurél, about this issue, where the son argues from a third viewpoint: following Sonnenfels he thinks that human's capacity of judgment is not yet mature enough so that they should have an unlimited access every book and idea.

Chapter six analyzes the well-known debate between Dessewffy and Széchenyi. Dessewffy devoted an entire book to critique Széchenyi's *Hitel (Credit)*, to which the latter responded with the publication of *Világ (Light)*. To date, Dessewffy's reply has not been known. It was while researching the archives that I found the cycle of epigrams by the title *Hamvvévő (Snuffers)*, in which Dessewffy provides a riposte to *Világ*. First, I inquired into the public sphere and audience to which these poems were meant. I concluded that, in the case of Hungary, the presence of a manuscript-based public sphere was more extended than has previously been estimated on the basis of Habermasian description. It is quite likely that these poems were presented to Dessewffy's friends, yet he did not intend to distribute them publicly. In the Humanist and Baroque tradition, the genre of epigram is akin to satire and the

cycle of epigrams functioned as satire as well. This would suggest that Dessewffy read *Világ* as satire.

Dessewffy's response is built around three topics: 1) he countered the attacks on his person; 2) he made the relationship to temporality and historical past explicit; 3) to the larger extent, he dealt with the distinction between mind and heart. This shows that the difference of opinions between the two Counts, as far as Dessewffy's perspective is concerned, is not so much concerned with the philosophy of economics or political structure (as posterity intuited) but with anthropological-philosophical issues. In the chapter I argue that Dessewffy interprets Széchenyi's attitude to the past in the context of the classic debate between the ancients and the moderns (*Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*), and in the dispute of mind and heart he accuses Széchenyi's understanding with the radicalism of Cartesian substantialism.

In the *Appendix* of the dissertation, I publish the family trees of the Dessewffy, Teleki and Ráday families, Dessewffy's volume of poems analyzed in chapter four, the subscription report written for the volume and the cycle of epigrams (*Hamvvévő*).

Results of the dissertation:

- 1) Via the procession of considerable archival material I managed to delineate the position of significant figures of the Conservative Enlightenment in the history of ideas. Dessewffy was no enemy of the Enlightenment. At the same time, his anthropological ideas based on measure lead him to distinctively conservative forms of thought.
- 2) The change in structure of the Hungarian public sphere shows a somewhat different picture from Western models. The forms of representative public sphere – even adjacent to the civic public sphere – define the structure of cultivation. Dessewffy's career may be interpreted with regard to this duality.
- 3) Dessewffy's career expressed the typical patterns of aristocratic cultivation. The emerging historical model may not be present in the form of debauchery and decline, but exposes the complexity of interactions between different public figures. The dissertation would like to contribute to the studies of cultural history of the first decades of the 19th century.
- 4) It was the question of continuity that evolved as one of the most important historiographical dilemma about the turn of the 18–19th century. My aim in this dissertation was to exhibit the linguistic forms of discourses' survival and

transformation. I attempted to construct a dynamic model where emphasis is not on the sharp contrasts between different languages and discourses but on the investigation of their interplay.

Publications

- 1) Dohányozni szabad? Betegség és irodalom, in: *Amihez mindenki ért... Kultúratudományi tanulmányok* (szerk. MENYHÉRT Anna – VADERNA Gábor), Budapest: József Attila Kör – L'Harmattan (JAK Füzetek 145.), 2006, 89–105. [About Disease and Literature]
- 2) Ízetlenségek és nuditások, ábrázolás és imitáció, in: *Kolligátum. Tanulmányok a hetvenéves Bíró Ferenc tiszteletére* (szerk. DEVESCOVI Balázs – SZILÁGYI Márton – VADERNA Gábor), Budapest: Ráció, 2007, 449–464. [About Expression and Imitation in the first Decades of the 19th Century in Hungary]
- 3) Egy holttest gróf Dessewffy József kertjében. Bevezetés egy kutatáshoz, in: *Prima manus. Tanulmányok a felvilágosodás korának magyar irodalmából* (szerk. KESZEG Anna – VADERNA Gábor), Budapest: Ráció, 2008, 119–140. [About Anthropological Paradigm of the Hungarian Enlightenment]
- 4) Gróf Dessewffy József és az alkalmi költészet, in: *Margonauták. Írások Margócsy István 60. születésnapjára* (szerk. AMBRUS Judit – BÁRÁNY Tibor – CSÖRSZ Rumén István – HEGEDÜS Béla – VADERNA Gábor, munkatárs TESLÁR Ákos), Budapest: rec.iti, 2009, 228–240. [About József Dessewffy and the Occasional Poetry]
- 5) Egy érzékeny barátság természetrajza. Kazinczy Ferenc és gróf Dessewffy József barátságáról, in: *Leleplezett mellszobor. Nyomozások Kazinczy birtokán* (szerk. CZIFRA Mariann), Budapest: Gondolat, 2009, 108–145. [About Friendship and Literature]
- 6) A törvénytelen gyermek. A mindennapok filológiája – a filológia mindennapjai, in: *Filológia – interpretáció – médiatörténet* (szerk. KELEMEN Pál – KULCSÁR-SZABÓ Zoltán – SIMON Attila – TVERDOTA György), Budapest: Ráció (Filológia 1.), 2009, 419–433. [About Anthropology and Philology]
- 7) Nevelés és *Bildung*. A Dessewffy család és a gyermeknevelés a 19. század első felében, *Sic Itur ad Astra*, 21.59 (2009): 117–148. [About Anthropology and Nurture]
- 8) Jó igazgatás, közbátorság és boldogság. Gróf Dessewffy József nézetei a sajtószabadságról, *Századvég*, 31.1 (2009): 85–111. [About Preventive Censorship and the Freedom of the Press]

- 9) A *Hamvénő* filozófiája. A *Hitel*-vita eszmetörténeti helyéhez, *Századvég*, 32 (2010).
(under publishing) [About the Debate between Count Dessewffy and Count Széchenyi]