

PhD Thesis

ENTANGLED IN THE ARCADIA DEBATE.
CSOKONAI'S CULT IN DEBRECEN

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Thesis Statement

The Arcadia debate is generally looked upon as a literary debate. However, the history of the town between the early 19th and 20th centuries makes it clear that it was much more than that. The clash between Kazinczy and the people of Debrecen can in fact be interpreted as a historical caesura. Around the 1800s Debrecen lost for good the leading role it played in the history of Hungarian civilisation during the previous centuries. The century following the debate was in effect a struggle to regain that role.

Looking back from the viewpoints of later debates on the homage paid to Csokonai it seems that the people of Debrecen perpetuated themselves or were perpetuated by the debate itself in the role that had been given to them by Kazinczy during the conflict. All later controversies that broke out over Csokonai's person followed the same role pattern as the Arcadia debate. Again and again, the representatives of the town were forced to reiterate that the behaviour associated with "being from Debrecen" was not real, that they did respect their poet Csokonai, that they were wrongly thought to be insensitive to art and that Debrecen was not an uncivilised place. It seems that it was against Kazinczy and his accusations that the local intelligentsia restored Csokonai to its favour: they erected a sepulchral monument and a statue to him, and named a literary-cultural society after him.

Consequently, the Arcadia debate serves as a clue to the interpretation of the narratives that marked the different stages of Csokonai's cult and gave a picture of the intellectual state of the town.

The aim of my thesis is to link those narratives and other texts related to Csokonai's cult that are distant in time and seemingly lack any close connection. I hope to broaden and add details to the present knowledge on the Arcadia debate, Ferenczy's bust of Csokonai and its reception, the erection of the sepulchral monument, the unveiling ceremony of Izsó's statue and the Csokonai-circle, which gave an institutional form to the poet's cult. Partly by regarding the Arcadia debate as an interpretational clue, I intend to give a new meaning and interpretation to later stories related to the cult. Last but not least, I would like to alter and enrich researchers' view of cultural life in 19th-century Debrecen.

Previous research related to the topic of my thesis is covered in the References section.

Methodology

My treatment of the over a century-long history was based on the methodology and results of literary cult research, focusing on how works of literature and the names of authors are used by readers, critics, literary institutions and public figures of political and social life. It seemed all the more worth following the path of cult research because it was during the Arcadia debate that literary cult was born, or at least the intention to give special honour to poets and artists appeared. It later found a model, reinforcement and methods in England's Shakespeare-cult. As his plan was firmly opposed by the people of Debrecen, Kazinczy insisted more and more strongly that special homage should be paid to Csokonai. It was not a cult in the sense of devoted love and respect, but the gesture itself was cultic, because the special honour that was to be paid to Csokonai, unprecedented in Hungary and also uncommon in Europe at that time, would have raised him above other poets.

Cult research deals with literary texts from the perspectives of social history, sociology, ideology, psychology and anthropology. Therefore it is somewhat distanced from the distinctive viewpoints and research methods of literary studies and borrows results and methodology from other disciplines. All this is possible and approvable because literary cults are complex social phenomena. Researchers claim that literary history should not only focus on text-centred questions facilitated by aesthetic detachment, but viewpoints focusing on actions triggered by the texts - or even looking upon texts as cultural actions themselves - may also be valid and useful. They regard texts as symbolic representations that relate readers' mental constructions to experienceable common symbols.

Thus the focus of my interest is not Csokonai's works but actions related to and texts about him. In my analysis I regard them as commentaries that mediate between the poet's image and the world of those who speak about him. According to Aleida and Jan Assmann commentaries mediate between a piece of art and life: "the text gets closer to life, (...) and 'the sense of life' gets closer to the text". Similarly, my notion of commentary includes depictions, celebrations and all those actions and their outcomes (a sepulchral monument, an exhibition, etc.) that do not only create an image of Csokonai but also present him as someone belonging to a particular community.

I attempt to give a reconstructive description and an interpretation of the participants' inner spaces of experience simultaneously.

I have taken special care not to be constrained by the methodology of the discourse of any particular discipline. In order to become involved in an academic discourse one has to take "the right position" prescribed by those constraints; and from that position one can make either true or false statements. Instead, however, I preferred to search for narratives - either heuristically or through minute scrutiny - that aim at probability rather than the truth and help us get acquainted with the (literary) world of the period. The other reason why I have refrained from searching for the truth is that in studies examining the past even the strictly professional standpoint is constantly infused with attempts to understand oneself and one's own world.

The Outcome of the Research

(The birth of Csokonai's cult: the Arcadia debate) The Arcadia debate centred around the questions whether art constituted an independent and separate world or it was part of everyday life, whether Csokonai's person lay in his biographical self or in the self portrayed in his works and whether such debates should be judged by literary publicity or the local public. Kazinczy thought art opened up a world that was distinct from everyday life, whereas the people of Debrecen gave priority to the world of the community that determined their everyday lives, and therefore they could hardly make sense of art and literature as independent world-creating forces, nor did they have a concept of literary community. Mihály Fazekas, for example, was ready to adapt his life and literary activity to the needs and expectations of the community. Kazinczy, on the other hand, wanted to use the honour to be paid to Csokonai as a means of raising literature (and art) above other forms of consciousness.

During the debate the concept of "being from Debrecen" became a topos, a collective representation, against which there was no defence because its meaning always depended on the context in which Kazinczy used it. The debate concluded without any results for either party. It happened so because there was a (still virtual) literary community opposed to a community held together by a common lifestyle and religion rather than involvement in art and literature.

(The hero of the national pantheon: István Ferenczy's bust of Csokonai) The history of the reception of the bust makes the difference between the two views of the world and literature even subtler. Debrecen was left with the same role as in the Arcadia debate, because the town did no more than endure the arrival of the bust. Although professor Pál Sárvári wrote an enthusiastic appreciation of the bust and Ferenczy in the name of the Reformed College, he was embarrassed by the fact that Csokonai returned to Debrecen as a hero of the national pantheon and found it incomprehensible how a poet who had lived an immoral life received such honour while notable public figures of the town (preachers, professors, doctors) were far less respected. Kazinczy, in spite of his aesthetic reservations, was enthusiastic about Csokonai's bust because he saw the fulfilment of his hopes in Ferenczy, of whom he expected the creation of national sculpture and a national pantheon.

The history of the reception of Csokonai's bust was embedded in the debate about popularity. In his critique on Csokonai, Kölcsey maintained that immortality and popularity could not go hand in hand; what is more, the latter does harm to the artist. Domby, on the contrary, interpreted the fact that Csokonai was read by people from all walks of life as a sign that he was a poet of the nation. In his biography he set out to prove that Csokonai was a world-creating genius. As a critic, Kölcsey placed himself above the audience and evaluated Csokonai's poetry as a supporter of the detachment of literature, whereas Domby held the view that poets and their works could only fulfil their mission if they were integrated into the national community and, accordingly, considered himself to be one of the audience.

(Veneration and self-knowledge: Csokonai's sepulchral monument) The debate that broke out over the erection of the sepulchral monument raised the question of what relationship there was between veneration and self-knowledge. The sight of Csokonai's neglected grave made those who were to erect the monument realise that there was truth in Kazinczy's accusations. The missing tombstone was a sign that the intelligentsia of the town was unable to face the relationship between Csokonai and Debrecen. They made the issue a taboo, the price of which was that they could not alter the town's negative image that was formed during the Arcadia debate. As a result, the local community's identity weakened, because such a community was impossible to identify with. The uncertainty of the poet's position in the community's memory was well illustrated by the argument between the professors Pál Sárvári and József Péczeli. Although their clash was prompted by their different judgements of the students' fundraising, it was rather about their contradicting views

on academic and secular knowledge, the relationship between the individual and the community, the role literature played in education and culture; national literature and the role of publicity. Sárvári was aware that amidst the transitions of cultural life literary intelligentsia played an increasingly dominant role and he acknowledged with bitterness that it seized the former role of the clerical intelligentsia, namely the representation of the community.

The difference between the professors' and Péczely's way of thinking marks the border of two eras. Whereas the professors looked upon the past as a source of knowledge and examples, Péczely's way of thinking was shaped by the duality of experiences and expectations.

(The popular national poet: Miklós Izsó's statue of Csokonai) The significance of the erection of Izsó's statue lay in the fact that not only did it restore but it also heightened the town's reputation. In this case it was not an outsider but the local intelligentsia that proposed that homage should be paid to the poet. The erection of the statue became a symbol of the town's modernization efforts. One of the goals of the Memorial Garden Society, headed by József Csanak, was to make Debrecen a modern town with such a communal space where the people of Debrecen could have experienced their togetherness as a community, and people from elsewhere could have been shown the outstanding role the town had been playing in the history of Hungarian civilisation. The statue was the first one to be erected at a public place, and Izsó also succeeded in giving the art of sculpture a national character. Csokonai's statue therefore proclaimed that Debrecen was a home to the arts again.

The poet figure Izsó depicted had been taking shape since the mid-19th century. It included the national poet whose image was canonised by Ferenc Toldy and the wider public's popular poet whose image got its final shape in Petőfi's poem. Toldy's biography of Csokonai and Petőfi's poem about him determined later interpretations and the poet's image.

(Institutional cult of Csokonai: the Csokonai-circle in Debrecen) The choice of name for the circle, founded in 1890, signalled that Csokonai had grown to be an emblematic figure of the town. The founders hoped that Csokonai's cult would help them unite the people of Debrecen and their purpose of making the town a centre of regional importance would be generally accepted. In the end, however, their goals remained unfulfilled, because they failed to gain support from either the *civis* or the middle classes. No national ideals appealed any

more to the cívis society, which was living its last hours, and the middle classes kept away from the circle's events because they found no answers to their problems there. Given that, the activity of the Csokonai-circle became more and more self-absorbed. Their most remarkable and successful event was the 1905 Csokonai-celebration, a moment of glory for the circle and the town.

Paradoxically, the Csokonai-circle brought an end to Csokonai's cult. While it was dreaming of a regional role for the town, its activity brought back intellectual idleness and provincialism. "Being from Debrecen" started to haunt again. Circle members were preoccupied with how little appreciation they received and almost ignored the poet himself. Moreover, unlike the poets of Nyugat, they did not make the least effort to render Csokonai's poetry suitably for their present age and find a message for contemporary people in his life.

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