

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

The problem of aesthetic self-redemption in the essays and essayistic prose of Jenő Péterfy, János Asbóth, Zsigmond Justh and Elek Gozsdu

(with a view on how to interpret the discrepancy between the 'aesthetic' and the 'ethical')

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1. Scope and objectives of the thesis

The aim of the thesis is to present through the essays and prose of four 19th century (and early 20th century) Hungarian authors – Jenő Péterfy, János Asbóth, Zsigmond Justh, and Elek Gozsdu – how the problem of aesthetic self-redemption appears in Hungarian intellectual history. This issue also closely correlates with individuality as a problem of an anthropological nature. I will investigate how the modern, disharmonious individual with a desire for autonomy, as described in the works of the above mentioned authors tries to find a specifically ‘aesthetic’ solution for his own most fundamental, existential problems.

The individuals discussed in the dissertation constitute a fairly heterogeneous group in terms of literary metaphysics and narratology. They include: 1. real historical persons: essay and prose writers (Jenő Péterfy, János Asbóth, Zsigmond Justh, Elek Gozsdu, as well as their spiritual predecessors, allies or adversaries, namely: Zsigmond Kemény, Ferenc Salamon, Ignotus, Dezső Malonyay); 2. historical figures who are transformed into “pseudo-real” heroes of essayistic portraits and character studies, and are often also the alter egos of the essayists depicting them (István Széchenyi as depicted by Zsigmond Kemény; Zsigmond Kemény as depicted by Jenő Péterfy; Károly Aggházy as depicted by Zsigmond Justh; and László Mednyánszky as depicted by Zsigmond Justh); 3. alter egos of the authors in essayistic prose, bearing a fictitious name (such as protagonist Zoltán Darvady in János Asbóth’s novel).

From a perspective of intellectual history, however, these figures can be investigated together without such problem, even though they belong to disparate levels of existence. They have a number of shared character traits. All

of them strive for a high level of self-reflection and (intellectual) self-knowledge, but they are also sensitive personalities with a rich spectrum of emotions, barely able or outright unable – as a result of their character – to exist within the limits of the order society imposes upon them. They are all characterized by an attempt to escape the ‘paltriness’ of reality and the prison of their own existence, and they all find shelter in the aesthetic: the alternative world of artistic creation or artistic reception. This is an area of existence deemed too sterile by more rational minds, but they – as believers in the importance of art – find that this sphere is far from being estranged from life, as it carries authentic values that never lose their validity, values that the suffering, anguished ‘fugitives’ that they are can always cling to.

Whether this endeavor, looked upon by many as a preposterous venture, is successful or not, whether it is lasting or provisional, and whether its aesthetic motif is interlinked with ethical or political issues or not, will be presented separately for each ‘actor’ in the thesis. I will also investigate whether these protagonists start out as lonely individuals on the road to aesthetic self-redemption or whether the opposite is true: that their ‘endeavor’ inherently carries inter-subjective context.

This dilemma appears in early modernity, in the context of Hungarian literary and intellectual history between 1849 (or 1867) and 1914. The starting point of the era was a social trauma difficult to process, the failure of the 1848–49 revolution and war of independence. Following this tragic turn of fate, a repressive state was created, triggering a widespread intellectual retreat, followed by a less oppressive era from 1867, which however—according to a number of critical intellectuals—was built on corruption and petty power struggles. In addition, the second half of the 19th century saw a certain degree of economic modernization which, asymmetric as it was, subverted the traditional religious, moral and cultural values.

These contradictory historical events smothered the virulent idealism in historical philosophy and politics characteristic of the era before 1848-49, and contributed to the temporary upturn of ontological pessimism – very influential in Europe at the time – in Hungarian intellectual life. What is more, in the long term they provided the foundation for the expansion of a more constructive pessimism, namely positivism, originally based on a neo-Baconian, dispassionate respect for facts, but soon rising to the rank of a ‘science-religion’, a substitute for metaphysics and transcendence. This led to a strange situation where a large number of humanities intellectuals, disillusioned by the ‘beautiful ideals’ of politics, became supporters of scientism, a now strengthened set of ideas which offered a more and more uniform worldview.

In a more radical and elaborate version of intellectual and emotional turn towards aesthetics on an existential basis: aestheticism found a ‘new transcendence’ in the world of Beauty – in a historic sense and as an intellectual trend. It became the rival of political idealism, ontological pessimism and scientism in the last third of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. Thus, while it served as a counterweight against all three sets of ideas, it primarily manifested itself as an adjustment of the positivist – scientific world view (not always acting as a destructive force, but also as a supplement thereto in certain cases). Above all, it was predestined for such a role because it showed clear commitment to the preservation of values called into question by the ‘scientific’ ideology, such as the integrity of the personality and the self-determination of culture.

The thesis attempts to present this philosophical trend (little known in Hungarian circles) mostly, but not exclusively, through the literary essays and essayistic prose of the authors mentioned above. In this context, the aim is to indicate through its modest means that the rich – and in several respects less known – tradition of Hungarian essay literature, rooted in ‘philosophy’, is much

more than just an unusual enclosure of Hungarian culture deemed as philosophical.

2. Theoretical and methodological reflections

Thematically, the paper uses an interdisciplinary approach, blending aspects from literary and intellectual history, aesthetics, anthropology and (not in the hard science sense) psychology. It is an intellectual, idea-oriented study rather than one based on factual science. It deals with interpretations from the past and (re-)interpretations of those from the same era, therefore it is characterized by a certain degree of empirical rootlessness. Actual historical and socio-historical facts and relationships are only hinted at.

It is important to emphasize that the thesis is not intended to be a monograph: it is no more than a commentary or an attempt at reconstruction, with an apologetic or rehabilitative intent, rather than a critical or polemical one. Accordingly, the purpose is to reveal, not to expose; it conveys an attitude of respect and trust, not suspicion. It relates to the authors and works presented – by varying textually relevant and larger-scale approaches –, as well as to the ideas that define these with an *understanding*, emphatic method, not devoid of narrative characteristics. There is no doubt that this ‘methodology’ is difficult to reconcile with the analytical approach which distances itself from even the most conservative forms of emotional and intellectual involvement. However – if we accept the premise that the purpose of the study establishes the methodology to a certain degree –, taking into account the specific themes, when presenting the essayistic (self-)interpretation attempts of the non-identical individual, this approach, inspired by elements in intellectual history and the study of

worldview/psychology seems justified (exactly because today this would be classified as a non-typical, alternative ‘method’). Naturally, this reconstitution based on empathy cannot be unbounded: rational (self-)reflection, as a means to shed light on the more or less spontaneous understanding is also an important factor of the investigation.

The paper does not follow the footsteps of monographic treatises in terms of formal requirements either. Regarding its structure, it is more a loosely linked chain of case studies than a single, whole text. (On the other hand, it is true that the fragmentation of the text structure, the organization of the text that is based on restarting and repeating is linked in many respects to the fact that three out of the four main sections of the paper essentially deal with *failure* – in so far as the attempts at aesthetic self-redemption by Péterfy, Asbóth and Justh prove to be ineffective and unsuccessful in the long run.) In terms of the language used, one striking characteristic of the paper is that it does not necessarily use a ‘strictly scientific’ conceptual apparatus, utilizing a more relaxed literary, essayistic and rhetorical style instead.

3. Thesis structure; line of reasoning

The paper consists of four main sections, and can be divided into two major units. The first, relatively closed unit consists of the first and second main sections, while the third and fourth main sections constitute the second unit.

1. At the center of the first main section is the (second) essay of Jenő Péterfy on Zsigmond Kemény – the first nonfiction, treatise-like Hungarian prose, where the problems of disharmonic individuality and aesthetic self-redemption are thematized *together*. However, the essay cannot be interpreted by itself, without its background. In analyzing it, a number of precursors will be

mentioned and investigated, including: *Érintések* (Touches) by Zsigmond Kemény and the major essay on *Széchenyi* by the same author; an obituary-like piece entitled *B. Kemény Zsigmond emlékezete* (The Memory of Zsigmond Kemény) by Ferenc Salamon; as well as the first essay on Zsigmond Kemény by Jenő Péterfy. Of the texts listed above, special attention will be paid to analyse the major essay on *Széchenyi* by Zsigmond Kemény, given that this is where the problem of the disharmonious individual appears first in Hungarian intellectual history. This thesis will give ample philological evidence that Péterfy – as well as János Asbóth, a few years his senior – interprets the question of individuality under the intellectual influence of Kemény.

In the second main section of the thesis, an essayistic novel by János Asbóth, entitled *Álmok álmodója* (Dreamer of Dreams) will be at the center of our investigation, the first work of fiction (to some degree) where the problem of the disharmonious individual and that of the aesthetic mode of existence are closely interlinked. This work of prose – burdened with essayistic elements to such a degree, and lacking a meaningful plot to such extent that it legitimately lends itself to interpretation as a ‘philosophical’ work as appearing in fictional form – will be discussed along with other similar treatises and meditations by Asbóth (including the travelogue *Egy bolyongó tárcájából* [From the Wallet of a Wanderer], the pamphlet entitled *Három nemzedék* [Three Generations], the voluminous political discussion paper *Magyar konzervatív politika* [Hungarian Conservative Politics], the essay entitled *A fiatal irodalomból* [From the Young Literature], as well as Asbóth’s political characterizations of Pál Sennyey and Albert Apponyi). When presenting the context of the novel, I will also emphasize that one of the most important precursors to *Álmok álmodója* (Dreamer of Dreams) is also the major essay on *Széchenyi* by Kemény.

Turning now to the substantive issues: the first two main sections constitute an attempt to reconstruct an intellectual strand along the lines of (Széchenyi)–Zsigmond Kemény–Péterfy–Asbóth. My goal is to show that the

dichotomy of ‘reason’ and the ‘heart’, the issue of sensitivity, and the concept of ‘impressionability’ is decisive in the interpretation of the individual for Kemény, Péterfy and Asbóth alike.

Kemény derives the disharmony that forms the basis of existence for the autonomous individual (Széchenyi) from the antagonism of two ‘forces of personality’, the ‘heart’ and the ‘reason’, and clearly states that the dominance of the latter above the former proves to be fragile in the long term. At the same time, the author discusses the problem of the disharmonious individual within the framework of an antithetical relationship, sharply contrasting the historical figures defined by disharmony (ultimately the emotional richness they want to stifle), and those defined by impressionability (a kind of superficially experienced sensitivity).

The issues raised by Kemény live on in Péterfy’s and Asbóth’s works, but they also shed new light on the problems of the thinker–writer. First of all: they both interpret the mode of existence of the disharmonious individual in an ‘existential–aesthetic’ context (unlike Kemény, whose works lack this context). Secondly: for both of them, the disharmonious individual is peculiarly also impressionable. This suggests that both Kemény-disciples, in contrast to their master, consider the dichotomy of disharmonious individuality and impressionability interpretable not only in an interpersonal context, but also within the world of a single person. Thirdly: in addition to the dichotomy of heart and reason, both of them –more implicitly in Péterfy’s works, and explicitly in Asbóth’s writings – discuss the opposition between the aesthetic and the ethical. There is no ‘one-to-one’ correspondence between the two pairs of opposites here, but the latter can clearly be interpreted on the basis of the former. The ‘aesthetic’ also includes the realization of the order of the heart (which does not mean that rationality is not present in this area), while the ‘ethical’ is only realized if the mind dominates the heart (limiting, suppressing particular desires).

There is a difference in the presentation of the boundary problem of the aesthetic and the ethical between Jenő Péterfy and János Asbóth.

In this interpretive framework, Zsigmond Kemény presented by Péterfy is an overly sensitive personality, who suppresses his own desires and emotions in the sphere of the ‘ethical’, as a thinker and public figure with a striving for true self-knowledge. However, the author emphasizes that Kemény does not exist in the world of politics alone, but also as an artist. This way, he does not have to completely give up the illusions of the ‘heart’: in the world of aesthetics, he can legitimately internalize the values that were denied to him by his ‘mind’ in the domain of the ‘ethical’. However, the figure called Zsigmond Kemény depicted by Péterfy cannot live with this opportunity in the long term; the disharmony that permanently defines his personality condemns his attempt at self-redemption to failure.

The aesthetic–ethical duality, present in Péterfy’s essay in a concealed manner, becomes a central motif in Asbóth’s novel. However, the two opposing sides can hardly be considered of equal value. It can be reasonably assumed – based on the ending of the novel, as well as other works of the author – that the paradigm of the ‘ethical’, realized in the world of politics in Asbóth’s works, is superior to the paradigm of the ‘aesthetic’. The ambitious experiment of aesthetic self-redemption offers only a temporary existential solution for the protagonist Zoltán Darvady. – Darvady’s psyche is very complex: he is a man of the heart and of the mind at the same time, and not only a man of the abstract intellect, but also that of practical reason; he is an artistic personality who also seeks to play a public role. In addition, his character combines the personality traits of the susceptible, impressionable, disharmonious individual, disenchanted with the world and himself. In the end, however, he must exercise self-restraint, and reduce the heterogeneity of his personality to make his existence more harmonious. The ending of the novel reveals that the ethical mode of existence, the action for others out of a sense of duty rather than self-interest becomes the

positive, working alternative of the passive, aesthetic mode of existence for the protagonist.

2. The next (last) two main sections of my thesis is clearly distinct from the first two. This is because there is no precisely detectable relationship in terms of philology or reception history between the authors and their works in these two main units of the paper. In the third and fourth main section, sections that are less closely connected to each other as well, I set out to investigate how the issue of aesthetic self-redemption appears – irrespective of the Kemény–Péterfy–Asbóth strand – in the writings of Zsigmond Justh and his spiritual ally, Elek Gozsdu.

The third main section focuses on the essays of Justh on Károly Aggházy and László Mednyánszky, presenting with deep empathy the personality of the modern artist who seeks self-redemption, which – despite their brevity – are among the most significant works in the tradition of Hungarian aestheticism. Within the same section, the writing of Ignotus strongly criticizing Justh’s aestheticism in terms of a philosophy of life or rather an ‘ideology’ of life is discussed, as well as the parts of the works on Mednyánszky by Dezső Malonyay (an author with similar views to those held by Justh), which can be interpreted in an ‘existential–aesthetic’ context.

In the fourth main section, ‘the collection of Anna-letters’ by Elek Gozsdu – difficult to categorize in terms of genre – takes center stage. In the course of the analysis, I will pay special attention to presenting the philologically demonstrable relationships between the thinking of Justh and Gozsdu; emphasizing that Gozsdu’s extremely complex interpretation of World War I cannot be understood without Justh’s work entitled *Páris elemei* (Elements of Paris) and the concept of historical decline described therein.

Turning now again to the substantive issues: in the writings from Justh’s first era with an artistic subject, the aesthetic and the ethical are no longer as

sharply separated from each other as in the works of Péterfy and Asbóth, in fact, just the opposite is true. This is not unrelated to the fact that Justh also emphasizes the intersubjective aspect of the attempt at aesthetic self-redemption – in close union with the teachings of the ethics of compassion (based on this, we can conclude that the ethics of duty is replaced by the ethics of compassion in Justh's works). According to Justh, for the overly sophisticated, introspective, suffering artist who empathizes with others and offers comfort to his fellow men, the effective solution for existential problems is creation interpreted as action, as well as the receptive understanding unifying the motifs of the 'aesthetic' and the 'ethical'.

(However, in his second era Justh goes beyond this aesthetic thought experiment, and – as an ideologue idealizing the 'healthy', 'unspoiled' people – gives a completely different answer to the problem of sensitivity. This answer points in the direction of collectivistic schools of thought not devoid of irrationalistic components.)

Of the authors included in my thesis, the concept of aesthetic self-redemption and aestheticism is represented most consistently by Elek Gozsdu, whose works could be viewed as an effort to form these elements into a system. According to the old Gozsdu: the sensitive personality who finds the order of existence of immanent reality banal or unseemly, may find their true home in the world of aesthetics, a world with its own ontological status.

However, this does not mean that the author – under the spell of radical aestheticism – becomes independent of any ethical line of questioning. What is more: Gozsdu has his own unique, pronounced ethical concept – as suggested by the importance he attributes to the problem of intersubjectivity, as well as the concepts of compassion and understanding – just like Justh. However, in the works of the former author, ethics and aesthetics are mutually based on one another, while Gozsdu utilizes a more complex approach: 'aesthetics' does not need ethical foundations (according to the author's principle, which might seem

somewhat preposterous: things that possess true beauty may also be good by necessity), but in his system ethics is impossible without an aesthetic foundation. Accordingly, the author of the Anna-letters believes that understanding in terms of ethics – the recognition of ‘otherness’ –can only be achieved through an aesthetic approach, one that can rise above the analytical perspective.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian books (1)

1. **Mórocz, G.:** Túl a diszharmoníán: Az esztétikai létmód problémája Péterfy, Asbóth, Justh és Gozsdu esszéisztikus írásaiban. Magyar Művészeti Akadémia Művészetelméleti és Módszertani Kutatóintézet : L'Harmattan, Budapest, 138 p., 2016.

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2. **Mórocz, G.:** "Egzisztenciál-esztétikai" alapkérdések Justh Zsigmond és Malonyay Dezső Mednyánszkyról szóló írásaiban.
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Szerk.: Ekert Mária és Molnár Attila Károly, Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egetem Molnár Tamás Kutató Központ, Budapest, 323-337, 2015. ISBN: 9786155527739
3. **Mórocz, G.:** Túl a diszharmoníán: Összefüggések Kemény Zsigmond és Asbóth János "érzékenységfelfogása" között.
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4. **Mórocz, G.:** Közéltések az esztétizmushoz.
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Hungarian book chapters (1)

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18. **Mórocz, G.:** Egy vagabund vallomásai avagy az antiparanooid fanatizmus esztétikája.
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