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Affectivity, Hypochondria, and Piles Biological Reasoning and Metaphors of Illness in the Hungarian History of Ideas*

ABSTRACT: “Illness as metaphor” has become a widespread expression used in writings of history of ideas, since its first appearance in the essay of Susan Sontag. The present paper offers an analysis of its use in the 19th-century Hungarian culture. At first, it is distinguished the use of diseases and bodily conditions as a cause of the author’s ideas in interpretations, from the illness-metaphors of S. Sontag, and from the body-metaphors of the early modernity. In the second part it is detailed the bodily self-reflection of the 19th-century Hungarian authors in context of the ideas incarnated in their works, and the images of their contemporaries, described by them, using bodily symptoms as causes of the ideas of their reviewed books. In the focus of the analysis are the memoirs of Gusztáv Szontagh, a distinguished critic of the second quarter of 19th century, edited by the author of this article for publication. Szontagh has used the patterns of the bodily determination of the ideas describing a large scale of authors, creating a New World made of words, only, in literature, philosophy, and politics. This complex system of ideas has lost its connections with the theory, and had become an element of the political rhetoric in the second half of the 19th century, and in the first half of the 20th century. An outlook for this afterlife is the topic of the epilogue of the present article.
KEY WORDS: illness as metaphor • 19th-century Hungarian history of ideas • literary criticism • “world created by words” • bodily symptoms as causes of ideas

* Several topics of my present writing were discussed in details in the following recent publications in Hungarian. “*Idegyengesség, hipochondria és aranyér*”. *Metaforikus beszéd a magyar reformkor szerzőiről* (“*Nervous Diathesis, Hypochondria, and Piles*” *Metaphoric Discourse about the Authors of the Hungarian Age of Reform*), “*Világosság*”, 2006, Vol. 47, No. 8–9–10, pp. 211–219; *A “költőiség” mint vád a XIX. század magyar filozófiai vitáiban* (“*Poeticalness*” as *Accusation in the Debates of the 19th-century Hungarian Philosophy*), “*Világosság*”, 2007, Vol. 48, No. 6, pp. 125–130; *Magyar philosophia. A szenvedelmes dinyenyésztől a lázadó Ikaroszig* (*Hungarian Philosophy. From the Enthusiastic Melon-Farmer to the Rebellious Icarus*), Kolozsvár–Szeged 2006. I have recently analysed the same era of the Hungarian history of ideas from another point of view in English. See: B. Mester, *Philosophers in the Public Sphere of the Cities – the birth of the National Philosophies from the Spirit of the Editorial Offices and Saloons in the 19th century*, “*Limes*”, 2011, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 7–20.

The three mental and bodily diseases in the title quoted from the memoirs of an important figure of the 19th-century Hungarian culture, Gusztáv Szontagh, describe a characteristic intellectual type. This affective behaviour, in its extreme form a (nervous) affectivity in culture, is a common element in reports on the 19th-century intellectual life. The “illness” of the behaviour of several authors of literature and philosophy, and that of several political figures has rapidly become patterns of political and cultural discourse. The aim of my article is to offer an analysis of the origins of these significant topics in the vocabulary of the Hungarian political public sphere, rooted in a crucial era of the genesis of the Hungarian nation as a modern political community, traditionally called “the age of Reforms”¹. In the following I will outline the transformation of a naïve scientific, biological reasoning of contemporary cultural and political phenomena of the first half of the 19th century. By my interpretation, it was reasoning embedded in the special societal and cultural circumstances of the “age of Reforms”. It has turned to the use of the metaphors of illness in the national characteristics and the political self-reflection; later, from the second half of the same century to the present days. During the turn, this pattern of thinking lost its original context, and transformed into an increasingly vacuous rhetorical tool, without demonstrative content. In order to understand the reasoning of the early 19th-century Hungarian thinkers, we should first distinguish their thought from two known topics. First of them is a modern interpretation of the “metaphor of illness” explained in Susan Sontag’s well-known essays on the one hand,² and the early modern metaphors of the illnesses of the body politic, on the other. After this conceptual distinction, in the main part of my article, I will describe the original context of the biological reasoning in the Hungarian “age of Reforms”, using some paradigmatic instances of the literary, political, and philosophical debates of this era. In the last part I will analyse the functioning of the same patterns without their original context, in the second half of the 19th century, with consequences to the present.

¹ By the old convention of Hungarian historiography, the period of the “age of Reforms” started with the foundation of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1825), and ended with the Revolution of 1848.

² S. Sontag: *Illness as metaphor*, New York, 1978; S. Sontag, *AIDS and its metaphors*, New York, 1989.

Metaphors of Illness in the Early Modernity and Nowadays, and in the 19th-century Discourse

Critics of the “age of Reforms” have often used utterances about the illness of the authors of the books referred to above, as an important circumstance of the birth of their ideas, and as a source of the “illness” of their thought. Nowadays we tend to read these topics as typical instances of the “illness as metaphor” of the discourse of romanticism. The analysis of these writings gradually convinced me that the use of these epithets is frequently remote from metaphorical, at least in Hungarian discourse. In significant cases critics actually thought that the observed or supposed biological conditions of the authors and political figures are the causes of the strange styles of writing, philosophical systems, behaviours in private life and in politics which they criticised. An important topic of historical research is the transition from a theory of biological causation to a metaphor. However, the initial theory is weakly founded and naïve, as its main purpose is to describe, understand, and not denunciate a cultural phenomenon. The metaphors rooted in this naïve theory were originally inspiring, interesting and fruitful elements of thinking; they later transformed empty *clichés* of the epigones, frequently used in political rhetoric, instead of philosophy, and theory of *belles-lettres*. It is a history of “illness as metaphor” from its non-metaphorical birth through a flourishing period to the misery of its empty, meaningless use, fulfilled by affections of the author and the target audience during its long life.

This composite phenomenon of cultural history must be distinguished in its details from the recent use of the term “illness as metaphor”. The sources of this term are Susan Sontag’s above-mentioned essays. However, the best known idea of her first essay is the close relationship between “illness as metaphor” and the spirit of romanticism, she emphasises that it is a more general phenomenon, known before and after the golden age of romanticism. According to Sontag, the contribution of romanticism to the development of the metaphor of illness is the connection of virtues and personality with the illness of the same person. This connection opens the gate for the derivation of psychical processes and habits from the physiological symptoms and *vice versa*, and for the interpretation of texts used by the metaphor of (the author’s) illness as a tool. It is a difficulty of Sontag’s intellectual heritage that she uses the word romanticism in a double meaning. First, it refers to a well-defined era of the history of *belles-lettres*, and second, it means a general, a-historical attitude, including the “today romanticism” (that of the 1960s and 1970s for her). Later, in her second essay on the metaphor of AIDS, she had separated

the analysis of the phenomenon of historical romanticism. Sontag's writings have become inspiring sources both for the researches of historical romanticism and for contemporary discourse. Scholars of these fields often combine the patterns rooted in the circumstances of the other era.

This double use of the Sontagian term "illness as metaphor" in two separate fields of research sometimes causes misunderstanding amongst the scholars. It is not a result of Sontag's reflection on the actualities and her preferred genre of essay, but it is rooted in the age of romanticism itself. In my Hungarian examples, the illness of an author offers a cause, a key and an interpretation of his work. It is clear that the instances will be the most numerous and characteristic in the age of romanticism, which is almost parallel with the "age of Reforms" in the Hungarian case. The use of these metaphors does not connect with the argumentation for, or against the groups, or institutions of the movement of romanticism in the *belles-lettres*. On the contrary, this discourse was mainly out of the context of the contesting literary movements and groups, appearing partly within the press of the romanticist movement, and using examples from a larger sphere of cultural phenomena than romanticism itself. (Examples of the late sentimentalism often appeared in this discourse, and the affectivity of the characters of the works of Friedrich Schiller is a standard German parallel. The Hungarian „trial of Hegel" of the 1830s abounds in the instances of the metaphor of illness.) At least in the Hungarian case, we can say that the argumentation of the illness of the author is a larger phenomenon than a characteristic of the romanticism.

Another difference from the discourse initiated by Sontag is hidden in the symbolic meaning and background of the concrete illnesses used by her and my Hungarian examples. According to Sontag, the most frequented illness in the metaphorical texts is tuberculosis. However, Hungarian literature, similarly to other European cultures, abounds in examples of symbolical figures of tuberculous poets, of other illnesses, such as the above mentioned (nervous) affectivity and hypochondria with a behavioural affectivity as their symptom, and the piles are more characteristic in the Hungarian discourse. These diseases are not infectious ones, by the contemporary public opinion their cause is mainly hidden in the habits and in the way of life of diseased people. From the other point of view, they are especially capable of demonstrating the relation between the symptoms visible in the physical behaviour and the mental content. According to contemporary descriptions a person suffering of these mental and physical diseases represents a special physiognomy and a characteristic habit, as a cause and effect of his way of life, and his *Weltanschauung*, at the same time. In this context, as opposed to tuberculosis, these illnesses do not appear as a destiny of a genie, but

as calculable consequences of a societal role fulfilled by these writers, and the way of life derived from this function. A characteristic system of ideas, sometimes crystallised in a perfect philosophical system, is a product of this social experience, coloured by the physiological effects of the physical condition of the representatives of this social role.

Sontag's essays have established a careless generalisation from the cultural image, or social representation of the actually diseased persons to physical objects, e.g. buildings, and to the body politic. In her first essay, Sontag did not distinguish between a metaphorical description of an ill person and that of an ill commonwealth. Discussing the illnesses of individuals, she refers suddenly to a French expression of the "leprous house" (a house shedding its plaster), then she analyses the metaphor of illness in the language of politics, without any palpable distinction between an ill person and an ill body politic. The transition from metaphors through individuals to the metaphors for communities is not so easy in reality. The widespread metaphor of the "cancerous tumours of a body of a nation" does not refer to the disease of people who form the ill, cancerous organ of this body politic. According to this metaphor, the trouble is hidden in the extreme vividness of the "sinful" group, regardless to the health of the entire body. The illness incarnated in the accused group cannot be ill in itself. To demonstrate the difference, I will quote a classical instance from a monumental body-metaphor, Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, based on the interpretation of Mária Ludassy³. Hobbes, discussing the dangers menacing the life of a commonwealth, follows the basic body-metaphor of his masterpiece, and describes the situations of crisis as diseases⁴. In these sophisticatedly detailed series of illnesses, all the significant medical symptoms have their political meaning, for instance, the epileptic behaviour of a body politic symptom of the appearance of the idea of the separation of the church and the state by an influential political group of the commonwealth. In spite of his highly developed system of *Leviathan*, Hobbes never transforms the illness of a part or of an organ of the body politic into the personal sickness of the people who form this organ within the body of *Leviathan*. Epilepsy is the illness of a commonwealth, in which the church and the earthly powers have separated, and not that of the people who have a political opinion of the separation.

Compared with the contemporary discourse on the metaphor of illness, and with that of the early modernity, 19th-century Hungarian examples

³ M. Ludassy, *Halandó istenség és mesterséges örökkévalóság. A "Leviatán" metaforái (Mortal Godhead, and Artificial Eternity. Metaphors of "Leviathan")*, "Holmi", 2007, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 45–53.

⁴ See Part II, Chapter 29 of his *Leviathan*.

refer to the psychical explanation of the ideas of the authors at least only in their theoretical writings. In the next part of my article I will show several examples of self-reflection, and those of the analysis of other persons, using the metaphor of illness, and I will put these examples into the context of the contemporary history of ideas and politics.

Illness and Health of the Authors as Roots of Their Ideas

My first example is a diary of a typical figure of the intellectual life of the Hungarian “age of Reforms”, Péter (Litkei) Tóth⁵. The author of this diary, a follower of the revolutionary wing of the new generation of Hegelianism, was a rare phenomenon in a culture, which was dominantly juridical in politics, and Kantian in philosophy. The significance of this diary is based on the connections of the author with more important figures of his era, and two events of its afterlife. The manuscript lay for years on the desk of Zsigmond Móricz, a classical novelist of the inter-war period, and its author became relatively well known in the circles of “men of letters”⁶. Later, as part of a history of mentality endeavour, a relatively new field of research, this time edited and interpreted by a well-known scholar of the Hungarian history of literature⁷. The analysis of the text the image of the idealist intellectual of the age of romanticism put into another context. Self-reflection of author is full of physiological reports based on introspection and dietetic ideas, in a close symbiosis with his highly idealistic ideas about the martyrdom of the figures of the Protestant ecclesiastical historiography, the national history, and history of philosophy. According to his diary, it was evident for the author that his ideas partly depended on the physical conditions of his body. A conscious self-orientation in the labyrinth of the contemporary philosophical, political, and theological ideas and the navigation between the ill and healthy, internal and external bodily impressions were parallel phenomena for him. This role of the psychical–physical parallelism in the highly personal self-reflection of a typical, average intellectual show for us that recognising the bodily determination was no shame in this era. To be determined in the ideas by health and illness was natural, the unaware-

⁵ The brothers Tóth, both of them Calvinist pastors of their dominantly Protestant native land, from the middle of their career started to use the family name Litkei after the village where they were born.

⁶ The textual use of the diary is an open question in the history of the Hungarian novel. The presence of several features of the *milieu* of the diary in Móricz's novels is generally recognised.

⁷ For the modern, edited Hungarian edition of the diary see: P. Tóth, *Napló [Diary] (1836–1842)*, Budapest 1984. Edited by, notes and postscript written by M. Szegedy-Maszák.

ness of this determinism and its consequences were viewed unfavourably in the contemporary discourse. We should not regard this spontaneity of this parallelism of bodily and spiritual things in personal self-evaluation as an intellectual background; we can easily misinterpret the 19th-century utterances about the determination of other minds in view of the health and illness of the connected bodies. Reading these texts we should remember that the author probably analysed his own mind using similar patterns in his diary, memoirs, or in his personal letters.

I will show the use of bodily conditions to explain literary works by the analysis of writings of Gusztáv Szontagh, a well-known critic of his age in the fields of philosophy and novel⁸. In his case we are in a special position. We can have a parallel reading of his public utterances as a critic and of public intellectual in the “age of Reforms” and his personal memoirs written after the fall of the revolution of 1848, in the years of strict censorship, when he could not make public speeches. In this article I will quote Szontagh’s memoirs, and I will briefly mention his earlier published works. The genre of memoirs as a “spiritual last will and testament” offered him an opportunity to formulate his opinions in generalised form, without regardless of personal sensitivities of his contemporaries. If we first read Szontagh’s summarised opinions about the whole milieu of Hungarian men of letters of the pre-revolutionary period as a prerequisite for the revolution we can deem it as a caricature of the 19th-century cultural life painted by an anti-intellectual, royalist ideologue. In the following quotation he offers a general outline of this intellectual scenery:

A part of the nation always works and cannot emerge from its vulgarity. At the same time, the bureaucracy, and the scientists are killing themselves in their study-rooms, sitting behind their desks. They always lament because of their ill soul, and this lamentation clearly appears in their life, in their science, and in their art, everywhere. Let us regard these men of study-rooms⁹. You can recognise them in everywhere, from their pale, long faces. Look at this scientist whose enire every science was not enough to conserve his body in health.

⁸ Szontagh’s lifetime is the first golden age of Hungarian periodicals. When the genre of review appeared in Hungarian culture after the model of *Edinburgh Review*, he was in the middle in his carrier, and quickly became the most frequently employed critic in his fields and a man of letters with great influence on the cultural public opinion.

⁹ However, in the Hungarian text it is not evident due to grammatical reasons, in my translation I have made it clear that Szontagh speaks about male intellectuals only. It is important because he often speaks about the one-sided (male) experiences of the analysed writers, and their alienation from the female world. On the other hand, he played a significant role in the first Hungarian debate on the rights of the female writers in 1826.

What figure is that? No life, or vividness is in him, his body is almost dwarfed by piles. He can see the world through the dark eyeglasses of hypochondria with his perished nerves, born from the blood of Scythian heroes,¹⁰ he is terrified of every noise¹¹.

This scathing overview of the contemporary intellectual life will be embedded in another context after the reading of the pages of the same memoirs, discussing his personal bodily condition, and its relationship with his oeuvre. In these pages it will be immediately clear that the people described above are members of his own social group, and many of them were his personal friends. His own characteristics were similar at the time as he remembered them, too. On these pages, at first, he makes a parallel between a public debate at the time of the writing of his memoirs, and his affectivity as an elderly gentleman. In other words, a nervous symptom of gerontology is a direct cause of a style of a theoretical debate by his interpretation¹². It could be regarded as a *bon bot* of a literary gentleman, if it was not followed by a complete medical inventory of his whole life, with a detailed list of supposed inherited illnesses, diseases caused by careless house-holding of their parents, self-therapies and dietetic practices. He always interprets his works

¹⁰ Szontagh in here ironically refers to a widespread topic of the origins of the Hungarian nobility, similar to the Polish *Sarmatism*.

¹¹ G. Szontagh, *Emlékezések életemből (Memoirs of my Life)*, 1849–1850, manuscript, archival code: Törtl. 20 255, pp. 315–316. Szontagh died without heir, his manuscripts have become the property of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences; now they are available in the Archive of Manuscripts of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. His memoirs have an autograph manuscript and two copies by the hand of the editors of never realised 19th-century publications. In this article, I use the results of a research of mine, finished in the spring of 2011, sponsored by the Hungarian Cultural Found, entitled *After the Trial on Hegel – the Turn of the Hungarian History of Philosophy in the Middle of the 19th century* (forthcoming). Within this program I have prepared a modern, selected edition of the diary. My quotations are based on my edited version, made after the comparison of the versions available in the Archive of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In the following I will refer to the page numbers of the better-edited copy-version in the archive. (Page numbers of the autograph version are made by other hand, and they are not consistent everywhere).

¹² This debate is known in the Hungarian history of ideas as “the debate on the Hungarian science”. Its central topic was the concept of “historical fact”. Because of the connection of this topic within the philosophy of history and epistemology, it has followed the patterns of the “trial of Hegel” of the 1830s and 1840s, and has prepared the intellectual climate for the Hungarian debates on Hegel in the late 1850s. Szontagh played a crucial role in all these periods as an anti-Hegelian protagonist. These notes about his affectivity were written in the last days of the drafting of the memoirs. After the new, however, very modest possibilities of the publication of several Hungarian periodicals, the function of writing his memoirs for posterity as mental therapy has ended, and he finished it soon.

and opinions in connection with his bodily condition, and the therapies used by him. The clearest *locus* of his memoirs in this regard is the part where he declares an equivalence of his entrance with the literary world and his new diseases.

There has emerged gigantically the love of science, and the literary life in my soul. Leaving the army¹³, I immediately departed from Vienna, and travelled to Pest in winter, in the worst weather, with a swollen face. My literary friends were waiting for me, and I moved into the third floor of a new building, which was not dried perfectly, yet. I could only see the roofs of the neighbouring houses from my window. I started to write my *Propylaea*¹⁴, and I felt happier than in the treasury of *Croesus*. In my happiness I could not moderate myself; my nerves suffered because of continuous work, and I had to travel [...] to rebuild my corrupted health in the air of the mountains, moving in nature, and with the therapy of cold-water baths¹⁵.

It is evident that Szontagh speaks about the same bodily symptoms as during a significant part of his intellectual carrier, as in the case of the above mentioned Hungarian colleagues. His use of bodily and nervous symptoms the causes of styles, opinions, and literary works does not distinguish a literary or political group as a special substratum with respect to these symptoms. A false, one-sided reception of reality, manifested in nervous and organic symptoms in extreme cases, is dangerous for everyone who is a member of the societal group of writers under conditions of modernity, including himself. In his opinion, the single difference between him and other intellectuals in his era from the point of view of the diseased *milieu* is Szontagh's reflection on this danger, and his endeavour is to escape from its consequences. At this point of the line of his ideas it is not only a question of a healthy way of life; he speaks about avoiding false models of reality suggested by illnesses which are rooted in the societal situation of modern authors.

Szontagh used this system of ideas about the causes of several intellectual opinions as early as 1827. His relatively brief criticisms are important in Hungarian historiography of literature because they concern a classic of the Hungarian culture, Ferenc Kölcsey, amongst others the author of the Hungarian national anthem. Szontagh criticised his essay on philosophy

¹³ Szontagh began his military career as a volunteer in the last years of the Napoleonic wars, after his studies at faculty of arts, and an academy of law.

¹⁴ Szontagh's best known books are his *Propylaea* ("Prefaces"), *A Propylaeum for the Hungarian Philosophy* (1839), and *A Propylaeum for the Social Philosophy* (1843).

¹⁵ G. Szontagh, *Emlékezések ...*, p. 54. The cold-water bath therapy was used in the case of nervous symptoms in the medicine of Szontagh's lifetime.

of religion, published under a pseudonym in *Élet és Literatura* (*Life and Literature*) in the most important periodical of Hungarian romanticism¹⁶. Later, he published a criticism of Kölcsey's poem *Vanitatum vanitas*, using similar patterns. At that time, i.e. at the beginning of his career, Szontagh had not yet established system of his philosophical ideas. As his first published text (1825)¹⁷, his thought was aesthetically founded on this time, regarded the works of art, especially those of the fine arts as manifestos of a complete *Weltanschauung*. According to him, ideal art, and an ideal worldview could be an imagined medium between the paintings of the Netherlands and Italy. In this esthetical period of his thought his important example for the misinterpretation of a work of art and a worldview was an antique statue in modern times called "The Dying Gladiator". In Szontagh's opinion as regarding to this masterpiece of the antique art as an image of an armed slave who fights and dies for the entertainment of his masters, is a sign of a perverted worldview of several modern intellectual movements. In the original context, the value of this statue is based on the martyrdom of its real model, a free man who dies for the liberty of his country. This esthetical interpretation refers both to the original intention behind a particular work of art, and its modern audience from a clear ethical, and hidden epistemological points of view. Our emotions about life and death, wasted on an unworthy object, are aesthetically ugly, ethically wrong, and lead to epistemologically false conclusions. He evaluated Kölcsey's essay within the same network of ideas. Later, in his memoirs he recalls his experiences as a young professional reader of Kölcsey (i.e. his critic):

¹⁶ Kölcsey was a close collaborator of the chief editor of this periodical, using in his publications a non-perfect anagram of his name: Cselkövi. However, the identity of the author was known in the Hungarian literary circles, the inter-textual combinations of the periodical, based on its romantic program of authorship confused the minds of the contemporary readers. In the case of this text an anonymously published poem of the chief editor, P á l S z e m e r e , printed above the untitled essay of Kölcsey, was regarded as a motto, or title of the text. The title of the poem, *Faith, Hope, and Love* modified the contemporary interpretations; a significant number of readers regarded the essay as the following of the enthusiastic religious feelings, and opinions of the poem, far from the intention of Kölcsey.

¹⁷ See: [G. Szontagh], *Sz ... gh Gusztáv Úrnak 1823ikban Olasz-országi útazása' alkalmával a' Szépműveket érdeklő tárgyakról tett és feljegyzett Észrevételei, közli Kiss Károly* (*Mr. Gusztáv Sz ... gh's Notes on Several Works of Fine Arts in Occasion of His Journey in Italy in 1823, published by Károly Kiss*), "Felső Magyar Országai Minerva", 1825, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 442–449. For its modern edition with a commentary see: I. Fried: *Szontagh Gusztáv képzőművészeti élményei Itáliában* (*Gusztáv Szontagh's Experiences of Fine Arts in Italy*), "Ars Hungarica", 1992, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 35–46. Szontagh's personal notes, written in German, were translated into Hungarian, and sent to the editors of an eminent Hungarian periodical of this age by his comrade, *Károly Kiss*, without the permission of the author.

By this anagram [Cselkövi], Kölcsey has expressed some mystical opinions, which were published at this time in Germany by several people from the circles of religion and art, provoking strong critiques, because they have no place in the 19th century any more. Cselkövi focussed his reasoning on the following, hackneyed topic: the human mind cannot comprehend with certainty of truth in transcendent issues, consequently humans in religious questions must rely on Revelation. I have seen these ideas as a proclamation of religious fanaticism. It was hardly expected from Kölcsey, from a Calvinist, and from one of our liberal speakers. Later, when I became more familiar with the Hungarian writers, I found the key to this secret¹⁸.

The “key to the secret” is detailed in the following pages of his manuscript by a new outline of the same bodily symptoms and unhealthy ways of life, which were described above in his memoirs several times, referring to concrete persons, the whole of community of writers, or himself. Later, the bodily metaphors will emerge in his memoirs as interpretative elements of his philosophical opinions, mainly in the context of the contemporary German philosophy and its reception in Hungary. Here he recalls the time of the Hungarian “trial on Hegel”, and the roots of his anti-Hegelian ideas and feelings:

German philosophy regards itself exclusively as the single philosophy of the world, and it has a great influence on our philosophical literature because of its neighbourhood. The excellent philosophical spirit of the Germans is unquestionable. The problem is, whether the youth of the present world is educated harmonically both in body and in mentality; and whether the German philosophers have a real connection with the life and world; whether we can expect a real perception, and standing point from their philosophy? Pupils and students are suffering in the benches of the schools; while they develop their spirits, they do not care for their bodies. After their education, scientists will move to the libraries, and study-rooms, separated from the real world. In this situation, nervous system must be in a diseased, affected condition. In the minds of these people, the ideas do not being limited and oriented by the experiences, and life, must be at first predominant; and later their own ideas will usurp the hegemony over their minds. German speculative philosophy has become science of study-rooms, instead

¹⁸ G. Szontagh, *Emlékezések ...*, pp. 169–170. Kölcsey was an important figure of the contemporary political life, as a member of the national liberal opposition. He was an active member of the national county assembly of his homeland, and a member of the Hungarian Parliament in several periods. His political speeches are significant parts of the history of Hungarian political rhetoric.

being of wisdom of life. It has constructed Human Being, God, and World by the dialectical process of the concept, only. This constructed world is contrary to the life and reality; and it is not better interpretation of the universe than the *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*. Have a short regard to the development of German philosophy. Kant, the greatest German philosopher definitely distinguishes between the object and idea; and marks the limits of the human experiences and thought. His philosophy begins with the experience, and by this reason he is not a philosopher in the eyes of the Hegelians. By their opinion, real philosophy has its origins in Fichte, who makes devoured the object by the idea, and falls in unlimited idealism. Schelling as a philosopher of nature did not want to annihilate the real world by an ideal one, and has invented the identity of the object and idea. In the end, Hegel has composed a whole thinking universe with the law of thinking, by the dialectical process, using a new language, and concepts, which are not applicable and imaginable in the life¹⁹.

This caricature of German philosophy, which was written for his personal use only, offers a key for the interpretation of Szontagh's activities, first as a critic of his contemporaries. (All of his ideas are rooted in his role of a critic, including the most abstract and general utterances. Based on philological evidence, it is clear that every general statement he made is rooted originally in a concrete criticism of a Hungarian author, or on an author who had an actual importance in the Hungarian discourse). He established a system of ideas about a kind of contemporary thinking, which is larger than the romanticism in the aesthetics of fictional literature, or the Hegelianism in contemporary philosophy. The most important common element of the ideas contested by him is a special relationship with the reality which emerges in a perverted use of language. In the above quoted paragraph he did not speak about Hegel's special, difficult novelties in German terminology of philosophy only. A more dangerous feature of Hegelian philosophy is, according to him, a creation of a new world, composed by the elements of the terminology only, created by the same philosopher, Hegel. (In this point his critique on Hegel is parallel with that of Feuerbach who accused Hegel – using a Hegelian term ironically – by the *a l i e n a t i o n* i n h i s o w n c o n c e p t s). This idea of the danger of the world of language without reference to the physical world is partly rooted in his definitive experience of the creation of a scientifically developed language, that of Hungarian. The first period of his career as a writer was at a culmination time of the Hungarian linguistic reform. (He played a part in this process as

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 323–325.

an agent of the conscious reflection of the philosophical terms introduced by the authors of the books, which were reviewed by him. His friend, and the most important intellectual partner of his youth, Károly Kiss was at that time a protagonist of the creation of the modern Hungarian military terminology). Based on the experiences of the successful designing of the language, at least of the scientific vocabulary; Szontagh established a consensual model of language. In this model the highest virtue of a vocabulary of a scholar work is its transparency, and the language in itself not emerges as a problem of philosophy, just a problem of lexicography. Other sources of his antipathy against the creation of special worlds made of words of new terminology are his philosophical sympathies, partly with the different variants of Kantianism, partly with the tradition of the Scottish common sense philosophy. (There is no distinguished role of the analysis of language in these philosophical traditions).

This image of a “wrong philosophy” was established at the latest at the time of the Hungarian “trial of Hegel”. The pattern used in it that is an emergence of a pseudo-world made of worlds, based on the perverted perception of the inventor of this New World, has been extended onto the other spheres of the intellectual life in the middle of the forties. In his pamphlet he told a metaphorical story of a dream²⁰. Winning the greatest prize of a lottery, his fictional imago started a journey to achieve his endeavour for having new seed-corns, and plants of new kinds of melon, and tobacco. His accidental fellow travellers are archetypes of the contemporary Hungarian intellectual life: a (probably Hegelian) philosopher, a romantic poet, and a political speaker. (However, the fourth type, a historian of the beginnings of Hungarian history, and the origins of the Hungarian nation is not on the board of the steam-ship, personally, his imaginations about the “lost Hungarians in the fairy land of Magna Hungaria” emerged during the adventures). The end of the adventures is the escape of the imago of the author from the troubles caused by the superfluous rhetoric of their fellow-travellers by awaking, since their fellows had been closed in the dream for ever. The message of the symbolic tale is clear: the value of these ideas is equivalent with that of the dreams, and they are dangerous for reality.

The new element in this tale is a parallelism between poets, philosophers, politicians, and historians. The parallelism between the worlds made of words in several philosophies and kinds of poetry seems to be

²⁰ G. Szontagh, *Adventures of an Enthusiastic Melon- and Tobacco-Farmer*, I–II. “Életképek”, 1845, Vol. 3. No. 7, pp. 205–213; No. 8, pp. 231–237. In order to understand the title we should know that Szontagh was known by his audience as an author of practical manuals of melon, and tobacco growing as well.

evident in this context. The role of the historian as a type of scientist will be important in the “debate on Hungarian science” in the early 1850s. In this context several Hungarian historians symbolise a perverted scientific method, which can calculate with the data manifested in written sources, only. In this context, these historians create a fictional world by a few written words of ancient charters, and codices, and historiographers, disregarding the “mute data” of ethnography, and archaeology. In this regard, they are close colleagues of other “world-makers” that of the (romantic) poets, and (Hegelian) philosophers.

With the parallelism of the politicians, the critique of the diseased perception of the real world and that of the creation of a pseudo-world has been completed. The line of Szontagh’s ideas has formed a final ring in an appendix of his memoirs, entitled *Success*²¹. This essay is an experiment for an interpretation, and evaluation of the revolution of 1848 with its antecedents, and with its role in the formation of the modern Hungarian political nation. In this text he uses the well-established patterns of criticism of several philosophers, for an evaluation of political opinions, and activities. Of course, he discusses the personalities of the revolution in details, especially the role of Lajos Kossuth. It is interesting that all the elements of the political discourse, which has become commonplace later, are dealt with in this short essay. The only distinction is rooted in the context. The interpretation of the criticised political opinions and practice are not based on personal features of the agents of the revolution only. By his description, the unsuccessful Hungarian revolution is a consequence of a characteristic way of thinking of a period of the history of the European civilisation, and not an accident, or ethnically determined element of the specifically Hungarian behaviour and a way of thinking. In the light of the evidence of his cultural and historical instances, a dangerous affectivity could emerge everywhere under similar circumstances. The significance of this feature of his thought will be clear when compared with seemingly similar, but in their essence different, opinions and rhetoric of the next generations. My instance will be a key-figure of the transfer of several 19th-century political ideas to the 20th century, who has become an often-quoted reference in the 1990s in the Hungarian history of political ideas, and in the political rhetoric, as well.

²¹ Szontagh’s memoirs contain several essays, out of the linear line of the narrative of his life. Probably he wanted to find their final place in the version prepared for the press, which was never completed.

Epilogue: Affectivity – without Theoretical Context

János Asbóth, an important novelist and political thinker of the second half of the 19th century, based his system of ideas on an interpretation of the revolution, its antecedents and consequences, similarly to almost all of his contemporaries. Asbóth has emerged at first in modern interpretations as a novelist and as an inventor of the structure of narrative of the genre of novel in Hungary²². However, his significance in the history of the Hungarian novel is inevitable, his importance, and influence as a political thinker is more relevant in the history of political ideas, compared with his single, partly biographical novel.

In the origins of Asbóth's political thought there was a definitive element of his ambivalent relationship with the ideas of the previous, liberal generation of the revolution. Amongst them was his father, who was an officer of the revolutionary army, and his model of theoretical writer of his youth, József Eötvös, the Minister of Education, Culture, and Religion of the first cabinet of the revolution, and the best known figure of the 19th-century Hungarian political thinking²³. This personal and emotional connection made the argumentation of his gradually developed critique of contemporary liberalism an example of the political and theoretical use of the metaphors of illness. (Another reason of this kind of argumentation was his role as a politician from the “reconstruction of the constitution of Hungary”)²⁴. In his critique of liberalism of great influence²⁵, Asbóth used all the above-mentioned elements of cultural discourse on the mental illnesses and their consequences, developed in the Hungarian “age of Reforms”. His main source was not the oeuvre of Szontagh, and, of course, he was not in-

²² For his single published novel, see: J. Asbóth, *Álmok álmodója (Dreamer of Dreams)*, Budapest, 1878. It is a frequently analysed work in the history of Hungarian literature in the 1990s, and it has soon become a part of the national canon. Its first edition after the WWII was published in 1990; its latest edition was published in 2009.

²³ His father offered some information to the Austrian secret police for the liberty of his son who had participated in a prohibited movement as a student in Buda. Eötvös' reaction for his first writings as a political theorist was an eloquent silence. Asbóth's intellectual program was to complete the system of ideas of J. St. Mill on liberty with a cultural history of liberty. (See: J. Asbóth, *A szabadság (Liberty)*, Pest, 1872.) It is detectable by philological tools that in the middle of the preparation of this book for the press he has suddenly changed his political ideas.

²⁴ This euphemistic expression was used in the contemporary Hungarian political language instead of the “Austrian–Hungarian Compromise” in 1867. (It was completed with the Hungarian–Croatian Compromise in 1868).

²⁵ For the first edition see: J. Asbóth, *Három nemzedék (Three Generations)*, Budapest, 1873. Its newest, modern edition with notes and commentary was published in 2008.

formed about Szontagh's above mentioned memoirs. I do not want to state a direct influence, just to show two characteristic figures of the subsequent generations, concerning the use of illness as metaphor, and the affectedness of the described political agent in the argumentation.


The novelty of Asbóth's thinking is the setting known elements into a new context. In brief, it can be described as a deprivation of the temporal and European elements, and a creation of an exclusively Hungarian context dominated by politics. I can illustrate it with a methodologically characteristic, but in its essence a *locus* of secondary importance. Waistcoats of Mihály Vörösmarty, a recognised national classic of Hungarian poetry, were famously abundant in embroidery. For Szontagh, it was a part of the contemporary European and Hungarian fashion; for Asbóth, it is a feature of the timeless personality of the poet, which is important in his relationship with the contemporary political life. (That is the wrong influence of the style and way of life of the poet on his friends, important members of the liberal opposition). Asbóth's essay links directly an emblematic figure of literature with that of the politics of the same age, and tells a story of the decline of the Hungarian culture and political thinking for three generations. In the image described by him, literature is put in an instrumental role; however, the poetical thinking in politics is the original sin of liberal politicians described by him. Finally, he has developed a purely Hungarian story of the dark destiny of the nation brought on by the perverted, poetical thinking of its liberal leaders only. His invention is to introduce a gender-metaphoric into the system of the well developed metaphoric of illness. The affected, emotional gestures and utterances of the 19th-century liberal politicians and romantic poets described by them are characterised both as perverted, ill and as female behaviour. (By this concern, the description of the public swoons of the politicians is interesting, especially during their parliamentary speeches in a crucial point of their political career. By Asbóth's description, liberals are swooning womanly, expressing their political irresponsibility and carelessness; and their conservative opponents are swooning manly, expressing their feeling of deep political responsibility concerning the future of nation).

Asbóth's essay was an episode of the 19th-century history of Hungarian political ideas, if its title was not borrowed by a determining historian, and one of the most important figures of the history of Hungarian political ideas of the inter-war period, Gyula Szekfű²⁶. The waves of the new

²⁶ See: Gy. Szekfű, *Három nemzedék. Egy hanyatló kor története* (*Three Generations. A History of a Declining Age*), Budapest, 1920; for its new, enlarged and developed edition see: Gy. Szekfű, *Három nemzedék, és ami utána következik* (*Three Generation, and What Follows after Them*), Budapest, 1934; its first reprint after the WWII was published in 1989; the latest edition was published in 2007.

and newer readings of Szekfű's book, and the ideas based on it have become living part of the contemporary discourse on political ideas, both from the point of view of history and of the present. However, Szekfű based the ideas of his book consciously, with correct references to the essay of Asbóth, for generations of Szekfű's readers, from his lifetime till now; Szekfű appeared as a unique author, the inventor of the historical critique of the liberalism. He had another source of authority as a representative of the history as academic discipline. At this point several elements of the 19th-century history of political ideas dissolved in the new paradigm of *Geistesgeschichte*, and in the use of this paradigm in the political discourse, both in the inter-war period and nowadays.



Finally, the narrative of the three generations of 19th-century Hungarian liberalism, its embedment in the culture of its age, and the affectivity of its most important figures became an emptied rhetoric element of political discourse, after losing its original context. In its 20th-century form it is a world made of words only, alienated from the world of real experiences. The critics of “affected liberalism”, who have followed Szontagh's patterns *via* the transmission of Asbóth, were ultimately similar to the caricature of the Hungarian intellectuals of the “age of Reforms” described by Szontagh. The decline-story of the three generations of 19th-century Hungarian liberalism has transformed into a decline-story of (more than) three generations of their critics. 

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