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**CLASSICAL SCHOLARSHIP
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY HUNGARY***

A CASE STUDY IN *HISTOIRE CROISÉE*

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Summary: The present paper treats some factors which influenced the development of classical scholarship in Hungary in connection with both historical crossings: a) Leo Thun's reform of public instruction, a bourgeois liberal reform pushed through by a conservative aristocrat, which was aimed at the Germanisation of Hungarian culture, but which effected the development of Hungarian scholarly life and Hungarian classical scholarship as a specialized branch of learning; b) the crossing of German and French tradition in the development of classical scholarship in Hungary.

Prof. István Borzsák's wide scholarly interest covered among others also history of classical scholarship. Thus it does not seem inappropriate to render homage to his memory with a modest contribution dealing with some problems of the history of Hungarian classical scholarship in the 19th century.

The aim of the present paper is to outline the state and esteem of Classical studies in the crossing of trends effective in Hungary in the nineteenth century. In order to make the problems clearer, it is instructive to call to mind some well-known facts.

After the enthusiasm of the Renaissance period for Greek and Roman Antiquity, the Enlightenment, in both its English and its French form was more critical. „Antiquity is from our point of view old and ancient”, Francis Bacon pointed out, „but from the point of view of the world itself new and young. Why should we esteem those who knew much less than we know?” (Nov.Org. 83; cf. 77). Similar was B. Fontenelle's view,¹ and the idea of Greek Antiquity

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¹ *Fontenelle* 164; 172.

as a childhood returned later with Voltaire.² The same outlook was behind the *Querelle*: some rejected Antiquity because it was primitive as compared to their own age, while others appreciated it for the same reason – that is, both accepted the idea of evolution and progress from those times to their own age. This was the basis of the historical view and the approach to historical phenomena, and this determined the character of a great deal of scholarship up until the twentieth century.

At the end of the seventeenth century another important idea came into prominence, a no less effective and significant one, that of the genius.³ Genius was perceived as being the product of the humours and the ruling passion that determine the peculiar character of every individual; it was something rational and in accordance with science, and as such it tended to replace the somewhat mystical and irrational concept of inspiration. The concept of genius emphasised the accomplishment of the individual who is not bound by rules prescribed by others or by tradition, but goes his own way and acts freely, as befits a free citizen. Thus the leading ideal of civil society was developed: the concepts of evolution and of individual liberty, and, behind both, civilian common sense. These concepts were, however, not in all respects in full harmony with each other. Those who laid more stress upon evolution and the results of progress tended to dismiss the achievements of ancient times, and thus also those of Antiquity. Those who emphasised individual freedom and the originality of the genius could appreciate the achievements and institutions also of bygone ages, if freedom and originality were then dominant. The French bourgeoisie, after gaining power in a victorious revolution, justifiably felt that it had transcended the past, did not need to draw strength from it, and made use of it only in formalities.

Not so the German bourgeoisie. That was much feebler and also took fright at the bloody actions of the Jacobin dictatorship. Thus German intellectuals – although at the beginning they had hailed the French Revolution – turned towards Classical Antiquity, especially Classical Greek antiquity, and not only in formalities. They saw in it their own ideals and aims realised. For them Greek Antiquity was partly a support, partly a paragon, in their attempt to establish a world of civil liberties. Their relation to the Greeks was for them of fundamental significance, determining their whole existence. „They are for us the same,” Humboldt wrote of the Greeks, „as their gods were for them.”⁴ For German in-

² It is enough to quote the title of the eighth Dialogue: *Grandes découvertes des philosophes barbares; les Grecs ne sont auprès d’eux que des enfants: Voltaire* 1876, 761; a similar statement in Dialogue XII. 776.

³ *Kaufmann* 191-217; *Butt* 363-6.

⁴ *Humboldt* 1908, 609. Cf. *Humboldt* 1904, 188.

tellecuals the metaphor of childhood had a different meaning from the one that it had for the British and French *lumières*. It did not simply represent a point that had been surpassed and transcended in the course of history, of evolution, but was the happy childhood of mankind, lost forever.

This was not the only difference. German men of letters – just like Vico in Italy – were ready to appreciate at least some periods of the past, and so they treated the past in a more nuanced manner, and applied a historical perspective to particular fields of culture. Winckelmann recognised that art had a history, and Lessing that religions too had a history, and it became obvious that dealing with arts, dealing with religion and dealing with culture in general have their methods, that they are self-contained professions and not simply elements of some encyclopaedic knowledge.

Then came F. A. Wolf,⁵ who recognised that the transmission of texts also has a history. Manuscripts, he said, should not be considered only as old or recent, interpolated or not interpolated, reliable or unreliable; rather, the transmission of texts should be treated as an organic part of the whole cultural or intellectual history of the ages. Viewed in this manner, the heart of Classical scholarship, *philologia*, became more than a hobby of philosophers, politicians or literary gentlemen; it became a self-contained profession with its own method, a special application of the historical view. This method was elaborated – not without antecedents – by K. Lachmann.⁶ Lachmann's procedure was ingenious and in its one-sidedness fateful, the first step towards leaving the entirety of culture out of consideration. Wolf considered the transmission of texts in the context of a culture as a whole, while Lachmann focused only on the codices. The result was a mechanically produced family tree without any cultural context, indispensable but far from sufficient. For the great intellects of the first part of the century, however, Classical scholarship was much more than this; it meant the recognition of what had been once recognised (*Erkenntnis des Erkannten*), in A. Boeckh's phrase⁷ – that is, the recognition of Antiquity in all its aspects.

If Classical scholarship was a self-contained profession, it had to be taught as such, and therefore required a chair at a university. This was realised within the framework of Humboldt's university reform, at the newly established University of Berlin. The reform was, of course, more than this. University instruction was built upon the Classical model of the *gymnasium*, in which both Latin and Greek were taught extensively; the Faculty of Arts (*philosophische Fakultät*) – formerly a mere propaedeutic course – was transformed into a self-

⁵ Wolf 1795.

⁶ Timpanaro 1963.

⁷ Boeckh 1886, 11.

contained faculty, with the same rights as the other three. In this faculty Classical scholarship played an important role; above all, academic freedom was established: professors could be elected freely and could teach freely, without any consideration that was alien to scholarship or science.

Now at long last I come to Hungary. In 1777, the very year when Wolf matriculated as a *studiosus philologiae* at Göttingen, thereby causing a certain sensation, a general regulation of education was issued in Hungary.⁸ It regulated education and the school system in the spirit of the French Enlightenment: the educational ideal was encyclopaedic and practical. This was not some backwardness; both Voltaire and Rousseau were alive. Since Latin was the official language (and remained so, albeit in diminishing measure, until 1844), as such it had to be taught in secondary education. Latin was useful both as a means of communication and as a means of providing the knowledge and technique of rhetoric, as well as furnishing the mythological and historical examples with which to adorn a speech, and therefore it had to be taught in the university by a professor of eloquence or aesthetics in Pest and Vienna, as well as in other cities: for example, Chr. G. Heyne too was *eloquentiae professor* at Göttingen. Classical studies as such had no chair.

The case of Greek was different. It was useful for scholars of divinity, although less so for Catholics, who used the Latin translation of the Bible, and more so for Protestants, who preferred the Greek original of the New Testament. However, there was a small group of intellectuals for whom, irrespective of their religion, Greek was important not because it was useful, but because it was a vehicle for a great poetry or philosophy that could enrich Hungarian culture. This was something akin to the attitude of German intellectuals who saw in the Greek world a paragon or at least a culture that had a message for their own age. The German attitude was more politically coloured, the Hungarian less so, or, more precisely, it was indirectly political, insofar as Greek poetry in translation could improve or polish the Hungarian language.

This, in turn, was a cardinal question at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, since national language was considered as part and parcel of a modern bourgeois national state. (The struggle against Latin as the official language also started at this time.)⁹ However, Greek studies were not important because of their practical usefulness, but because of the pleasure that they provided; nevertheless, to make Greek studies into a profession was not the intention of these Hellenophile men of letters either. To be

⁸ *Ratio Educationis totiusque Rei Literariae per Regnum Hungariae et Provincias eiusdem annexas. Vindobonae 1777.*

⁹ *Kornis* 49-81; 165-183; 193-209.

sure, there were several scholars who studied Classical scholarship under Heyne at Göttingen,¹⁰ the most modern university before the University of Berlin was established. Thus they received a professional education; yet none of them founded Classical scholarship, in the modern sense of the word, in Hungary. There was no „social demand” for such a scholarship.

The model for those who strove to transform society into a modern bourgeois one was not the Athenian democracy, but France, revolutionary France. Properly speaking this followed from the great influence that the French Enlightenment had had on all kinds of Hungarian intellectuals, aristocratic ones as well as those from the gentry and those of no noble background. And considering the backward economic and social circumstances of the time, one has to admit that it is understandable that the least of their worries was the development of Classical scholarship. However, the Hungarian Jacobins were either decapitated or imprisoned; at best, they had to withdraw from public life. In the course of the Napoleonic wars the situation did not get any better; in the absolutist police state of King Francis, in the age of the Holy Alliance, there was repression and stagnation. Professors at the university were controlled, and were not permitted to lecture on any subject that had not been approved by „the competent authorities”. And this at a time when Humboldt introduced academic freedom in Berlin!

From 1825 to 1848, absolutism relaxed somewhat, and several reforms were carried out (although not without great difficulties); among them the most important was the emancipation of the serfs. In 1848, when the earthquake began in Vienna, F. Exner tried to realise a university reform, similar to that of Humboldt, and succeeded (although not without making compromises), unlike Baron Eötvös – the latter prepared a similar reform in Pest, but the outbreak of the War of Independence did not give him time to carry it out.

Academic freedom was a topic discussed even prior to the revolution in Vienna; some suggested its acceptance, but it was considered by many to be dangerous, and after the revolution even more so. It is to Exner’s merit that he could win over the minister of public instruction, Count Leo Thun, to the cause. The reform is named after Thun, although it was Exner and H. Bonitz who elaborated it, and it is rightly so named, because Thun was sufficiently conservative and anti-revolutionary that he could not be charged with entering into a pact with Satan – that is, the revolutionary forces.¹¹ Of course, it was not some liberal inclination that led Thun, but rather the well-understood interests of a

¹⁰ *Borzsák* 1955, *Balogh* 2007.

¹¹ *Frankfurter* 1893, he idealizes Thun almost as a liberal; more realistic *Lentze* 19-34. – As regards to the university in Budapest cf. *Szentpétery* 379-81 (concerning Eötvös’ plans); 384-403 (concerning Thun’s measures).

centralised monarchy that needed experts and civil servants, as well as the specialised teachers who were able to teach them. This would have been inconceivable under an outmoded system of instruction. The reform established the Classical *gymnasium* (with Latin and Greek and professional teachers), the Faculty of Arts as in Berlin with a chair for Classical scholarship and, above all, academic freedom. The reform was accomplished both in Vienna and in Pest.

The reforms were similar, but their meanings were different. For Humboldt in Berlin, the reform served the cause of freedom of scholarship and the exclusion of anything alien to it: in Vienna it served the interests of a well-functioning centralised state. In Berlin Classical scholarship was a consequence of an enthusiasm for Classical Greek culture; in Vienna, it was an appurtenance of modern education.

In Pest there were further difficulties. While in Vienna Classical scholars of the first rank could have been invited (J. Vahlen, H. Bonitz), in Pest it was the brave K. Halder who joined the university as the first professor of the just established chair for classical scholarship. He was well informed, familiar with comparative philology, but as a scholar not too active. Of course, in Vienna, the German mother tongue of an invited professor did not cause displeasure. In Pest, an Austrian professor, simply because he did not speak Hungarian, was seen as an exponent of the Germanising efforts of an anti-Hungarian government.

However, Halder very soon learned Hungarian, even quoting Hungarian poets in his lectures, and by teaching Hungarians and writing in Hungarian periodicals he contributed to the development of a Hungarian Classical scholarship that was both modern and professional.

The situation was curious. The bourgeois liberal reform of education had been pushed through by a conservative aristocrat, the minister of a really reactionary government; the Germanising efforts of that same minister, hostile to everything Hungarian, brought about the modernisation of the Hungarian school system and contributed to the development of a modern Hungarian Classical scholarship. An instance of *histoire croisée*.

Nevertheless, the position of classical studies was made difficult in the fifties by an unexpected, almost incredible attack. Some catholic quarters impugned antiquity for having been pagan. The attack was launched by the book of J. J. Gaume, vicar-general of Nevers: *Ver rongeur des sociétés modernes ou le paganisme dans l'éducation* (1851). The author did not only reject classical Greek and Roman culture root and branches, but also demanded their elimination from public education as being pagan and plunging society in revolution and communism. Furthermore the author wanted to exclude even the ecclesias-

tical fathers Jerome, Augustin or Chrysostome, because – having lived in a pagan surrounding themselves too – the form of their works is pagan as well. The book was translated into Hungarian and published the next year.¹² It did not remain unimpressive. Somebody wrote of Greek culture as „splendid in itself, but, like the whitened coffins of the gospel, concealing rottenness in itself”.¹³ The author did not fail to mention that the French revolution too referred to the classics.

There were several scholars, both catholics and protestants, who beat off the attack soundly and decidedly, but the reference to the revolution was dangerous. The book must have had a considerable effect, since the topic was discussed even in the early sixties.

Less rough, but more foul was the proceeding of chaplain Walder in Vienna who wrote a letter to Thun causing an uproar that the direction of seminars is entrusted to persons who are not good Christians and say that the task of classical studies is to infuse the spirit of classical antiquity in the modern world. This was an unmisunderstandable denunciation of Bonitz who, by the way, being a protestant, could not be elected to dean of the faculty.¹⁴ Let it be said in Thun's favour that he did not take notice of the letter.

However, let me mention another instance of historical crossing. As previously stated, the educational ideal of French Enlightenment was encyclopaedic and practical. Roman Antiquity, and even more so Greek Antiquity, did not play an important role, representing only transcended childhood. The French *lumières* recognised the evolution of society, indeed, that of literature too, and this was very important, but they principally emphasised the developed character of their own age. The eighteenth century was not the greatest period of French Classical scholarship.

The Enlightenment in Germany was more theoretically oriented. It subscribed to the theory of historical evolution, but saw it in a more nuanced manner: it did not see the past simply as something that had been surpassed, but applied the idea of evolution to several fields of intellectual life and helped to develop these fields into professions, among which was the field dealing with Classical Antiquity, especially with Greek Antiquity, this latter being a determining factor in their existence.

In Hungary, the French Enlightenment, and for some even the great French Revolution, was a paragon. Its educational ideal was, so to speak, codified as such, all the more so since circumstances in Hungary required practical im-

¹² A társadalom testén rágódó fêreg vagy a pogányság a nevelésben (1852).

¹³ *Fuchs* 385.

¹⁴ *Lentze* 93; 128-130.

provements and radical reforms, whether in the direction of Széchenyi's economic reforms or in that of Kossuth's political reforms. Roman Antiquity, with its practical morality and political teaching, however, was as important as Greek Antiquity was for German intellectuals. Comparative and historical methods were not unknown as regards the Hungarian language, either.¹⁵ There was a certain respectiveness towards German ideas too. However, after the revolution was ruthlessly and violently crushed, it is no wonder that Thun's reform, with its *klassisches Gymnasium* and Greek – which had weak roots in Hungarian culture in any case – and the new *philosophische Fakultät*, was rejected by public opinion. It is no wonder that the new Faculty of Arts had altogether only five students, and that Halder in his first year as a professor of Classical scholarship had only one. Thun's reform shaped the school system and the structure of the university for some hundred and fifty years, but the „French tradition” too remained alive not only in that the French Revolution was seen as an important and positive milestone in history by a considerable part of the public even after Taine's very influential *Les origines de la France contemporaine*,¹⁶ but also in that that tradition was seen as a practical counterbalance against the traditional form of education, German in inspiration and sometimes alien from ordinary or practical Hungarian life. Again an instance of *histoire croisée*.

In conclusion, let me say a few more words about Classical scholarship. Classical scholarship started at the beginning of the nineteenth century not only as a profession for its own sake but also as a social or moral programme, as it were, and as a scholarly activity that tried to grasp Antiquity in its totality. I have hinted at the way in which, in the case of textual criticism, this failed – and soon this was the case not only in textual criticism. A Russian student who attended the lectures of M. Haupt in Berlin in the 1860s complained that nothing but grammatical analysis was taught.¹⁷ Haupt was a good scholar, and some of his papers are valuable even today, so it was not knowledge that he lacked, but the spirit that could fascinate students by showing them why Antiquity was important for them. Classical scholarship functioned well as a scholarship, and realised great achievements, but in becoming a profession it did not avoid the danger inherent in all professions: detachment from non-professionals. Classical scholarship lost its ideals, which could have been ideals for others too. It has become a mere matter of knowledge, a part of a curriculum, and only for a few did it become more than this.

¹⁵ *Sajnovics* 1770; *Révai* 1803-1805.

¹⁶ Published 1875-1894; the first volumes were translated into Hungarian by *L. Toldy*: *A jelenkori Franciaország kialakulása I-III*. Budapest 1881-1882.

¹⁷ I owe this information to Prof. A. Gavrilov, many thanks for it.

Hungarian Classical scholars in the nineteenth century learned this esoteric kind of scholarship. Some scholars managed to avoid losing all contacts with the outside world, and outsiders felt the problem even more. At this point I will mention only the „literary tale” of the aesthete Á. Greguss, *The Locksmiths*. When people had forgotten what beauty was, a fairy came and said: Behold! You see a double hall. The treasures of two peoples’ intellects are there: those of the Greeks and the Romans. Go and open the doors. And the fairy gave two keys to the locksmiths: two languages, Greek and Latin. The locksmiths were, however, so fascinated by the beauty of the keys that they only admired their refinements, discussed those amongst themselves and even quarrelled, but did not open the lock. At long last they were compelled to do so, but they did not enter, and nor did they allow others to enter. Finally some people „although not worthy of the name of Classical scholar” cast a glance over their shoulders into the treasury and told others what they had seen.

This tale does not need much comment. Nevertheless, there were also those in the world of scholarship who perceived the problem, the need for modernisation. Around the turn of the century several attempts were made, both erroneous and fruitful, to find a way further. This time I do not want to discuss these. I will mention only one, which can be considered as a revival of encyclopaedism or as a way to multi-disciplinarity, the opening up of the channels to sociology and psychology, French sociology (Durkheim) and French psychology (Le Bon) and British comparative ethnology.

Can scholarship develop without historical crossings? It seems that Hungarian Classical scholarship could not. Nor can perhaps other ones either.

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