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Dilettantism as a Literary Moral Panic. Recovering a Forgotten Discourse of Hungarian Literary Modernization

Abstract: The paper considers the nineteenth-century shift of dilettantism from a descriptive to a highly evaluative term in Hungarian literature along literary professionalization and modernization. Dilettantism, a fundamental term of the new, modern literary and artistic vocabulary in nineteenth century, is recovered here as a powerful response to a complex frame of anxieties and frustrations in face of several challenges ranges from transnational nationalisms to the decline of mimetic poetics.

Keywords: Dilettantism; Dilettante; Literary and Artistic Modernism; Literary Moral Panic.

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DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2017.33.13

Dilettantism was the new buzzword and fever from the 1840s to the late 1860s in Hungarian literature. Various artists apostrophised one another as dilettante and soon the term entered the vocabulary of the literary field; more and more people, texts and phenomena were addressed as dilettante, and the term was turned into one of the most powerful evaluative interpretive frames of modern Hungarian literary history from then up till today.

Hungarian literary history usually characterizes these debates around the diverse forms of dilettantism as the literary turmoil of classical Hungarian literature around and after the death of the national poet, Sándor Petőfi, and along the lifetime and career of János Arany, another Hungarian classic. According to the general narrative, the popularity of the poets and writers of the emerging canon of Hungarian classics was so enthralling that it lured many would-be writers and people from outside the literary establishment to imitate them. The received literary accounts of these events talk about young poets, professionally and financially unsecure literati, women and large masses acquiring literacy that often were tempted also by the



developing capitalism of the literary field. The dilettanti defined in this manner threatened the values and canon of the emerging Hungarian national literature; they seemed to downplay the standards of contemporary literature of the time, allegedly ruining every chance to a valuable and forceful ethnic Hungarian literature. It is clearly visible why has the category of the dilettante been such a huge burden of the Hungarian literary tradition, and there have been only few attempts to challenge or re-open the discussion regarding the way this powerful category came to be constructed in the decades between 1840 and 1870. It has seemed too self-evident and obvious who the dilettanti were, what they used to do and how they should be regarded, including the attitude towards them, which was, of course, contempt and ridicule. Thus the authors, the texts and the phenomena linked to mid-19th century dilettantism became relic forms of bygone times and debates, without putting questions regarding the terms, the framework and the function of these fierce debates of the nineteenth century that produced this new category. My attempt is to recuperate and reconfigure these literary historical narratives by perceiving them as discourses, gestures and acts of modernization, and by viewing the historical frustrations and repugnance against dilettantism both as a byproduct of and a powerful drive behind literary modernization.

A Literary Apocalypse, the Discourse of Waste and the Dilettante as a Literary Scapegoat

The image of a never-ending literary and cultural crisis that endangers Hungarian nationhood and literature was not a novel perception among the Hungarian

writers of the middle of the nineteenth century. From the end of the 18th century, especially due to the reception of Herder and Schläözer, there had been an intensive and wide vindicative discourse that refuted allegations that Hungarian literature and culture would disappear on the long run. This sense of crisis was recycled in the 1840s when several types of literary groups and practices were labelled as dilettante that engineer or fuel literary catastrophes. The dilettante became the potentially dangerous and economically less useful author that would shake “the health“ of literature, it was thought of as a perilous virus that threatens to break out a crisis or enforces literary crises. A recurring cognitive metaphor of this discourse was waste. The texts often speak of being afraid of cultural and professional waste; being afraid of wasted (useful) time, wasted professional character and career, wasted talent. But almost all the whole range of meanings of this cognitive metaphor linked the imminence of a literary apocalypse to wasted work. Work was a central and recurring component of this discourse, it was portrayed as the normal form of literary life, and the alleged dilettanti always seemed to disrupt this imagined normality.

“I am beginning to turn into a man. I am going to take up my abode in the countryside and work myself to death”– wrote the young and ambitious critic and literary historian Pál Gyulai in August 1852 to one of his friends.¹ This language and vocabulary of modern *workaholic attitude* seemed to bring about a new, revolutionary and fresh feel into literary life, and was widely used in the literary nationalistic discourse of the 1850s. The well-done literary and artistic work was often viewed as the



basis of a professionalizing literature that was thought to be founded on regular, calculable, economical usage of time and talent. The dilettant writers were accused of wasting time and talent by disrupting the regularity of literature, misusing the time dedicated to the profession and casting doubts on the usefulness of literature. For instance, the invention of the deadline as a completely new form and articulation of literary and artistic time was made along this fear from wasted professional career and personal lifetime. The same Gyulai we have quoted above spoke of literary deadlines with an utmost ascetic ethos and linked them to personal and professional self-discipline: "During this vacation I will learn how to control myself and I will work six hours daily without any interruption."² With Gyulai this self-regulation was part of a learning process of endurance that would allegedly socialize him not to miss a deadline. "It happens sometimes that I miss a deadline with one or two days, but I will work hard so that no such a thing could happen" – wrote the same Gyulai to his fellow-writer and editor, Sándor Szilágyi.³

János Arany, the emblematic poet of the late 1840s-1870s was also terrified that he was unable to write even a single "proper" poem on the occasion of the 1859-1860 Kazinczy commemorations. He was horrified at the idea that the readers and his fellow-writers could think of him as a lazybones, slack writer unfit to carry out his duties, and he translated his lack of inspiration into a problem of work ethic: "When all the world echoed his name (i.e. the name of the late Ferenc Kazinczy), how could I remain the only silent person? This was not indolence, laziness or indifference. I lived through the most poignant grief

[for not being able to write]."⁴ According to Arany and a whole new generation of writers proper time management of literary creation became a new feature of the writers and editors to be taken seriously by their readers and their fellow writers, and the misuse of creative time could easily be interpreted (or misinterpreted) as a sign of literary misconduct leading to dilettantism.

This is why for him the newly invented deadlines of the literary establishment became ethical markers that separated those who wrote for a living and those who were outside of the profession, and consequently could allow themselves to miss or ignore the deadlines. Many remarks of the 1850s-1860s conclude that these writers positioned themselves automatically outside the profession since they abused of the potential of concentrated working time and dissolved the border between work and play, work and non-work, concentrated work and lax discipline. This desperate attempt to turn literature and the arts into a "serious" profession with a clear line of demarcation between professionals and non-professionals, forms of literary work and non-work, working time and leisure time was also a response to the paradigmatic shift that created the contours of the modern professions. Thus the demarcation drawn between professionals who used their time properly and dilettanti who abused of the time of literary creation was a vigorous and emancipatory answer to the emergence and classification of the occupations, trades and professions. Therefore the failure to accomplish this work ethic equaled the ruining of the ideals of the literary establishment that aimed at becoming the perfect and most representative national profession.



At the same time, it was exactly the modern and recently invented category of the literary deadline that brought to the forefront the huge dilemma whether modern forms of professional time and space management could be shared and accepted without reservation by literature and the arts. The same Arany and his generation not only identified themselves with the standards of the emerging modern professions, but also asked themselves whether literature and the arts should have similar quality criteria than the other professions, especially those based on manual labour. In 1857 when confronted with his own disability to write as swiftly as many of the emerging outsider writers, Arany commented on the (*modern*) *speed* of the new writing and publication style of many of his contemporaries. Writing and publishing in leaps and bounds was for him also a frightening effect that made him reflect on the limits of the literary establishment to become a profession perfectly similar to the trades based on manual labour: “It hurts my feelings to divulge my incapacity for creation to people who hardly know anything about quality, and who believe that writing a poem is just dabbling in verse-making, assigning a task in poetry. Such people would never understand how could a poet be renowned and not have a pile of verses every time he is expected to write one.”⁵ The silent protest and grumbling of Arany to his good friend and fellow writer shows the inner dilemma of one of the most canonic and popular Hungarian writers of the time when facing all the consequences of modern temporality also within the literary establishment. His reflections show us a writer at the advent of modern literary temporality who attempts to differentiate

between deadlines that fit creative literary works and those which are characteristic to professions governed by routine. For him a dilettante writer is unable both to write on schedule and abides by each and every type of deadline, even if these deadlines interrupt the flow of creation. By shaping the ideal professional writer along the idea of creative work, literary and artistic creativity, Arany draws a clear-cut line among those professions that show due regard to innovative and original work and those that are based on routine and manual labour. Arany was only one of the many canonic Hungarian writers who differentiated between creative and non-creative work, linked literary dilettantism to the noncreative use of creative work, and thus both revealed and contributed to the emergence of the distinction between vocations and crafts governed by routine, respectively between intellectual and non-intellectual professions. The late Romantic redefinition of literature as both modern work and creative pursuit at the same time reveals the way the literary establishment repositioned itself critically along the emergence of the modern professions.

When writers like Arany used the concept of the dilettante to foreground the nature of literature as a modern form of work, but also attempted to refine and distinguish this type of work from other professions, they actually inscribed literature into one of the most distressing and fierce intellectual and social debates of mid-nineteenth century Hungarian and European intellectual scene of ideas, and touched at the heart of the emerging new professions. The stigmatization of the so-called literary dilettante was so strong because the struggle both inside and outside



the literary establishment was actually a gamble for high stakes; was literature a profession, a calling, or just an ordinary, everyday occupation? Were there some professions more important than others? Was or were there any “national profession(s)”, and could (writing) literature become one? What made a profession more beneficial for the nation than others? All of these dilemmas were novel questions that framed the politics of inclusion and exclusion of the literary profession both inside, but also towards other professions and occupations. In this framework the dilettanti became the scapegoats not only for not rising up to requirements, but also undermining the alleged stability, the standards and thus the utopian ideals of a whole profession to become the leading endeavour and intellectual community of modern Hungarian nation-building.

But it was not just some lofty ideals fuelled by nation-building that the dilettanti were thought to ruin. The apocalyptic discourse, the resentment and the moral panic around them were also nourished by another type of fear linked to the *use and usefulness of the intellectual work*. Modern work was a wholly new emancipatory concept in the literary and artistic world of 19th century Hungary. It seemed to emancipate both individuals, like the humbly born new literary stars Sándor Petőfi, János Arany, Mór Jókai, Pál Gyulai, Ferenc Salamon or János Vajda, and the whole emerging class of modern intellectuals since it offered a social advance and a previously unthinkable career for the literati. That is why the cult of the *work* as a new form of social value was so fostered among this new generation of Hungarian writers of the 1840s-1870s. From this angle it is a

not a surprise that one of the most powerful and promising literary association of the middle of the nineteenth century, The Benevolent Society of the Hungarian Writers put forth a definition of literary creation and scholarship that laid stress on the education, prolonged preparation, hard and painstaking work of the writer. But it was also the Benevolent Society of the Hungarian Writers that expressed the autonomy and the sovereignty of the literary endeavour as a special and well circumscribed type of work that was especially useful for the representation and vindication of Hungarian nationhood. That is why the idea of the institutionalization of a permanent financial help of the Hungarian writers was a recurrent wish and plan of the literary establishment in the 1850s. Dozens of journalists and writers urged the founding of an association specialized on forging a social net around the writers, and were constantly referring to such “best practices of foreign nations” that made Hungarians green with envy: “While in other countries the literary career is a path to financial well-being and wealth, and leads to influence and public rewards, the fate of the Hungarian writer is alike to a miner. While he brings up the treasures to the light from the chute, he remains a poor person forever,”⁶ wrote one of them in an early call issued by the Benevolent Society of the Hungarian writers.

But who will be the one to finance ailing and aging Hungarian writers? Should it be one or more mecene(s), the local communities, the state or the emperor himself? None of these was the answer for those who proposed the new form of financial reward that would help the writers temporarily or permanently *out of work*. The mecene, the



emperor, the local communities seemed too personal or too local for such a grandiose plan, while the state impersonated by the Habsburg Empire was seen in rather ambivalent and enigmatic terms. Of course, it was the imagined community of the ethnic and cultural nation that embodied the perfect solution for them; a permanent nationwide prescription was proposed, but the endowers would hold no rights on the final decisions of the committee that was elected to distribute the funds. Thus the association reinforced the difference between professionals and those outside the professional literary establishment; had they supported the writers with however large sum, the “outsiders” could have no decisive word at all with regards to their charity. It was only the “insiders of the insiders” elected from high-profile representatives of the writers who could decide who and on what basis deserved the money. This mechanism of making the endowers outsiders and turning the writers into insiders made the ethical imperative of not disclosing the names of the beneficiaries one of the first *professional secret* of the modern Hungarian literary establishment. This secret translated the shame of being poor or (periodically/permanently) unemployed into a cohesive power of the emerging literary profession alike to the professional secrecy/ etiquette of the modern medical or lawyer’s profession. The invention of the modern literary work went hand in hand with *the invention of the literary unemployment and literary sick-leave with pay*.⁷ This emerging whole system centered around the intriguing idea of work was built upon a powerful line of demarcation that separated literary insiders from those of the outsiders, professionals from those outside of the literary

profession. That is why the idea of the dilettante was so fiercely debated in these types of discourses, and was constructed and used as the dreadful *other* of the emerging literary modernity, even though the dilettante himself or herself was both an outcome and an organic drive behind Hungaria literary modernity. The extremely large groups, media, artistic strategies and techniques that were labelled dilettante suggested that being a dilettante or doing something characteristic to artistic or literary dilettantism was a day-to-day hazard. Each and every writer could become a dilettante and would jeopardize both the new literary system and, consequently, the national ambitions of becoming a leading transnational literary force.

The fearful *other* of the literary dilettante became a haunting presence of the everyday Hungarian literary discourse of the 1840s-1870s, and it was anchored in the most powerful, topical and enthralling social and literary debates, desires, projections, anxieties on the possible roles of literature and literary intellectuals in society, the status of literature in national representation, and the transnational position of Hungarian cultural production. For instance, one of the strongest societal fears projected onto the dilettante was the fear from the alleged uselessness of the humanities that was an emerging phobia in the early Hungarian literary capitalism of the 1850s.⁸

All things considered, it is visible the way and general framework within which the figure of the literary dilettante and the phenomenon of literary and artistic dilettantism became one of the central new concepts of Hungarian literary life of the middle of the nineteenth century. The



dilettante and dilettantism was not just an incidental characteristics of the literary life, but it was expanded and (even) inflated by being positioned into the midst of several touchy literary and social problems. For instance, in his groundbreaking 1854 paper, the first finely elaborated literary historical paper on Sándor Petőfi's oeuvre and his poetic legacy, the leading literary critic and historian Pál Gyulai described dilettantism as a sickness threatening the "health" of the whole literary system. For Gyulai, a telltale sign of the viral spread of dilettantism was the widespread imitation of Petőfi. He saw it grow to a frightening dimension; literary clones seemed to think of themselves as geniuses, they imitated the disappeared Petőfi in behaviour and poetic style, in matters of life and poetic genre. For Gyulai the great disappointment and anxiety was that these imitators would make the originality and the quality of the national literature disappear, they would erode both the literary values of the national character and the national character of the literary life: "the epigons could never improve literature and literary style, they would just exaggerate style, genre and other poetic devices, using and eroding them, and eroding national literature, too."⁹ Gyulai attributed a series of poetic and societal failures to these dilettanti and envisioned a complex literary and social crisis narrative when commenting the disastrous afterlife of the texts and memory of the disappeared national poet. The frenzy and depth of this crisis narrative echoed various texts that ranged from essays similar to Gyulai's text to regular literary criticism and belles-lettres. The much disputed polemical article of Pál Gyulai on the incapacity of the woman writers to create literary

masterpieces ("Írónőink"/ *Our Women Writers*, 1858) and the furious and ironic response novella of his sister-in-law and former wife of Petőfi, Júlia Szendrey (*A Pesti Napló* 61., 62. és 65-iki száma / *The 61th, 62nd and 65th Issue of the Pesti Napló*, 1858) signed ironically by "an embittered dilettante woman writer," and followed from a distance by the similarly ironical novella of Pál Gyulai on the disastrous and unhappy fate of dilettante bluestockings ("Nők a tükör előtt"/ *Women in Front of the Mirror*, 1863) is just one of the telltale signs of the ways this complex debate spanned over genres, media, artistic and social groups, interpretive communities and decades in the midst of the nineteenth century. That is why we could consider these turbulent debates as one of the first literary moral panics of Hungarian literary modernity, an important peak of several such episodes in the Hungarian literary life of the long nineteenth century. By why should we label them as literary moral panic? What made them similar to what social sciences and humanities usually describe as moral panics? And what is the lesson we could learn from the first modern Hungarian literary panics?

The well-known term of the moral panic was originally introduced into the social sciences and humanities by Stanley Cohen's famous *Folk Devils and Moral Panics. The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, first published in 1972, introduced the term and label of *moral panic* as "concern over the social or cultural role or work of moral entrepreneurs," and highlighted the role modern mass media has been playing in starting and sustaining moral panics. In the last decades the term was successfully detached from the young, white, working-class males, i.e. the mods and rockers



Cohen envisioned as so-called moral entrepreneurs of late modernity. The term has rarely been used to describe phenomena of nation-building, even though moral panics often fuelled nineteenth-century nation-building processes, too. In nineteenth century Hungarian nation-builders often acted as moral entrepreneurs who created fear from losing national character ethnic lifestyle, national history, folklore and language, and celebrated emblematic past and present cultural figures for their almost “divine” presence and interventions that seemed to stop this decay and national decadence. Anti-dilettantism proved to be a powerful motif of moral panic that envisioned national decay brought about by certain sociocultural groups, certain forms of literary behavior, poetics and media.

**But Who Were the Literary
Dilettantes in the 1840s-1870s?
Stigmatized Hungarian Sociocultural
Groups and Banned Literary
Practices in the Middle of the Nineteenth
Century**

Women writers were one of the most targeted group when the critical and informal discussions turned to dilettantism in mid-nineteenth century Hungarian literature. Even one of the first protofeminists and fighters for the educational rights of women and against the inequalities of the Hungarian educational and public income system, Teréz Karacs presented a series of such biases against women writers in one of her first short stories published in the press of the early 1840s. Her hero returns home after a travel round the world and he is desperately refusing to

marry a young woman his loved and belated uncle had recommended to him. At first sight this is the refusal of a freedom-lover youngster who idolizes radical American thinkers for their thoughts on freedom, but soon becomes evident that it is the literary ambitions and reputation of the young woman he finds extremely repugnant: “Oh, dear friend, this is what fills me with disgust; God forbid all good men from women writers. Just like a poet who descends to play with the reality he despises, a husband is a mere toy in the hands of his woman writer wife. I don’t want my wife to sell the most beautiful sparkles of her soul in a cold paper to complete foreigners admiring her. I do not want to confine myself to her ideas and brain fatigued by the pen, and to the leftovers of her emotions. (...) A woman writer always lives for her readers and never for her husband; all her thoughts belong to her readers, all her happiness arises from their applauses, only their satisfaction gives her new flowers in her soul,” says Doorn to his close friend, Beringer in a crucial moment of the narrative.¹⁰

Of course, the larger the literary market grew, the more the presence of the women readers and writers was wished and felt already in the second half of the 1840s. And the more articulated and conscious the presence and attraction of the women writers grew, the more fierce and articulated the gendered debate on the role and value of women writers and writing became. For instance, in 1847 the newlywed Petőfi, assured his continuous presence in the daily and weekly press by turning the events of his private life into public one. He published the ongoing events of his wooing, marriage, honeymoon and return from the countryside to Budapest in a ceaseless



“breaking news”-type manner and in various genres ranging from excerpts of diaries and travelogues to lyrical poems.

The huge success and controversy of this type of literary and public representation of privacy made Petőfi and Júlia Szendrey probably the first Hungarian literary celebrity couple of his time, so it was not a surprise the poet tried to make the most out of this novel and paradigmatic situation. That is why he turned his wife into a writer by encouraging her to publish a selection of her private diary and taking the revision and editing of the text in his own hands. Even though Szendrey had felt repugnance to the immense publicity generated by Petőfi's interest in her, she consented to be published in the cultural press of the time. Constructed by the editor and close friend of the couple, the famous writer, Mór Jókai and Petőfi as *the* ultimate sensitive and romantic woman writer foregrounding her inner self, Júlia Szendrey's diary was not only a sensation of the literary and social life, but it also generated impressive frustration, grumbling and anxiety on women writers and what they could bring about. For instance, the young Pál Gyulai wrote to his friend and fellow writer, Károly Szász, in deep indignation, both of them emphasizing that Júlia Szendrey was first and foremost Petőfi's wife, i.e. a private ad not a public person: “[Your poem entitled] ‘On Reading the Diaries of Petőfi's Wife’ is a beautiful poem, but I don't like it because both Jókai and you play fast and loose with the little woman. Her diary is extremely beautiful (...), but was it ethical to publish it, was it worthy of Petőfi to disclose it? Petőfi says that it is a shabby thing to kiss somebody in front of other people and he would not cry his love

for his wife from the housetops. But he lets her wife disclose for the whole world how he kisses her gloves. He even publishes her portrait! Wouldn't it have been better to relate all this to the public in years or after his/ their death? (...) She begins her writing career where *her biographer* should have ended it.”¹¹ For Gyulai and many of his contemporaries the reality itself of the women writers was a provocation, but their growing and constant presence after the 1848-1849 revolution when many of the new female intellectuals and writers entered the literary field involuntarily, forced by the death or the disappearance of their spouses or male family members alarmed them (Júlia Szendrey's later fate being an eloquent proof of this situation).

The rising concern about the force of women readers, writers and even editors led to permanent irony, but also a biased position that connected the rise of women writers to low-quality literature and diletantism. In 1854 the daily paper *Budapesti Hírlap* commented maliciously on a fresh statistics according to which at that moment there were almost two million single women in England out of which 88 professional women writers, 18 professional women editors and journalists, 643 actresses and 135 ballerina.¹² The nasty remark not only linked professional female intellectuals to maidenhood and the implicit rejection of marriage and family life, but also suggested that professional women writers, editors and journalist were able to produce only second-rate literature and media: “just imagine how many news are trumped up by them and how many polemics are consumed around them,” wrote the biased journalist of the popular daily newspaper.



This was the framework of the first large Hungarian literary polemic (1858-1864) about women writers as new professionals, a structural debate that reframed the literary field and started off by employing the stigma of the dilettante to women writers in general. Even though most of the participants of the surprisingly long polemic recycled the stereotypes of the former decade on women writers and gendered writing, but throughout the whole debate these patterns were framed by the idea of the professionalization of literature. “The career of the woman writers is extremely dangerous even if they pursue a type of literature that is suitable for them. (...) Women writers should be kept at a distance from the fierce struggles and deep worries of the professional writer.”¹³ This gendered approach of the emerging literary professions made visible the deep fears that surrounded the notion of public space itself in the middle of nineteenth century in Hungarian culture, and constructed professional writing as a perilous, hard type of *male* work that was far above any other type of work, including manual labour since it included high risk that made it superior to mechanical and allegedly perfunctory labour. From this perspective female identity, labour and writing was downplayed by being positioned on the edge or outside the public sphere. It is telltale that most of the texts of this early polemic did not prohibit women writing, but would retort any crossing of the public space. For instance, Gyulai himself introduced a whole series of categories of public shaming against all women who “confused” their calling and embarked on a literary career, especially on writing in genres that expose their personalities to the public. One of these scolding

remarks suggested that such border-crossing turned respectable women into prostitutes, and this frailness of women made gender gap in the emerging modern literary profession a “natural” and not an abnormal social condition of writing. For many of the debaters women writing was a non-place, the position of social outsiders that created monsters and social deviance in literature: “(Such women writes will belong) to neither men, nor women, on the one hand they are demanding for the rights of women, on the other hand, for the rights of the men. They are at ease neither in public life, nor at home. The former will be too large, noisy and dangerous, the latter will be felt too narrow, peaceful and prosy. They have become objects of the public, and now anyone has a right to them,”¹⁴ was arguing Gyulai in a strong gesture to regulate the larger and larger groups of women writers who came to dominate and thematize the literary world of the 1850s.

According to this type of argument, women writers and female writing was something to be protected especially from being published and reaching the larger public – their natural frame was the household. When these arguments were associated with a politics of the genres, they ruled off women writers from prestigious genres of mid-nineteenth century Hungarian literature, like the historical novel, the Bildungsroman, literary history, literary criticism, the essay, and associated them to lyrical poetry and children’s literature that came to be seen as inferior genres or forms of literary production. The trick of these arguments was that it did not exclude directly and completely the emerging large body of women writers from the community of writers, but regulated, repositioned,



reframed them in a way that has never been seen and experienced before; it singled out and positioned them as a community to the edge of the emerging literary system. It is of paramount importance that the idea of “male writers” and “women writers” as distinct literary and social groups, and the idea of modern gender gap in the professionalizing Hungarian literary system was introduced and intertwined with the idea of dilettantism in the midst of the nineteenth century. Creating the idea of the woman writer and associating its public presence to dilettantism and professional inferiority had a long-term consequence in Hungarian literature where certain genres, especially literary criticism and literary history, turned to be unapproachable for women writers up till the second half of the twentieth century due to this nineteenth-century configuration and archaeology of the modern professional literary field.

But it was not only a large emerging group of would-be writers that was labelled dilettante, the concept was used and abused also when speaking about a certain type of media inside and outside the literary field. The Hungarian writers of the mid-nineteenth century felt both hope and mistrust when they discussed the daily press and emerging modern journalism in general. Their expectations were high in matters of literature, and some of them clearly hoped that the press could popularize the belles-lettres in an extent that had never been before. The outreach for the “whole” nation, the access of the largest audience possible soon led to fierce debates on the nature of the larger literary audiences and the price writers were willing to pay for such a paradigmatic turn. The literary criticism of

the 1840s and 1850s was already full of fears and traumas of the expanding literary and artistic market, and the way this shift turned literature into a maid of either of the audience, or of the daily and popular press. This anti-journalistic attitude held the daily press and certain formats of the popular and political press responsible for the fiasco of the literary plans that set as a target the transformation and creative use of the press for the aims of the literary field. Many writers seemed to be irritated that literature had become part of the daily press, and not vice versa, the daily press elevated through literary norms, standards and genres. The early Hungarian reception of the serialized novel is a telltale example of this situation; the huge success of this form of the novel was counterpointed by a harsh critical reception that denounced the way this literary form seemed to follow the rules and logic of the daily press.

This basic argument of literary modernization that both attached high hopes to the press and fiercely criticized the press for failing these hopes demonized several types of journalism. The women's magazines and the so-called fashion press, that was actually a combination of literary pieces and enthralling images on the latest fashion, were just two of the most badmouthed type of media in the 1850s. These were made directly responsible for the alleged decline of the literary field and were often described through the term dilettantism: “Almost no woman writer can be found in early Hungarian literature, and even lately it was only in the last decade that woman writers made their appearance. In considerable degree it was the foreign example and the encouragement of our fashion magazines that makes this



branch of our literature flourish, but it has hardly proved to be more than mere dilettantism,”¹⁵ wrote Gyulai in the essay that touched off the debate on women writers and the character of female writing. It was not only Gyulai who saw the recent flourishing of women’s magazines and the press in general a serious and sometimes unethical challenge for the belles-lettres. Those who blamed the press for an alleged decay of the literary life attributed this literary decadence to the extraordinary vigour with which the emerging modern press was depriving literature both from its best writers and from its readers. Most of them were doing this from inside the press, after failed or successful enterprises in this new communication framework that was imagined by many of them as an extension of the literary life that would bring new talents and readers to the belles-lettres. Their disappointment rose from the experience of having seen the press becoming an autonomous media and journalism turning into a profession more or less separate from literature that nevertheless used literature according to its own rules and inner logic. Therefore the term dilettantism in these debates seems to describe diverging and struggling modern professional narratives, ideals and realities of the midst of the nineteenth century; on the one hand, the ideal of the interdependence of literature and journalism, and on the other hand, the divergent construction of these professions.

The enormous success of the daily and regular press, the sudden emergence of the many specialized forms of journalism destroyed the literary agenda of the 1830s and early 1840s according to which journalism was and could remain only a branch of literature. That is why journalism often

became labelled as dilettantism or the cause of literary decline in crisis narratives/literary moral panics of mid-nineteenth century Hungarian culture. “I would have (never) asked you to waste your precious time to cover the products of ephemeral journalism,”¹⁶ commented Gábor Kazinczy to Ferenc Toldy, his friend, the well-known literary historian and editor of the *Új Magyar Múzeum* (*The New Hungarian Museum*), the highbrow scholarly and literary journal of the silenced Hungarian Academy of Sciences in the 1850s. This was the journal that often contrasted literary journalism and so-called scholarly and literary press with the alleged ephemeral forms of journalism, and linked their transitory character and susceptibility to dilettantism exactly to their distance and abnegation of the literary origins of the press. For instance, in 1854 when presenting the philosopher Cyrill Horváth to the larger highbrow public, it came natural to the *Új Magyar Múzeum* to present the man of letters as “a reserved, but profound man who never swears on names and authorities, but on arguments. He always steps forward as it should be, and not through the boisterous noise of journalism, but in the regular sessions of an academy of sciences.”¹⁷ Here the “ephemeral” and the “literary” journalism were two sides of the same coin where the distance from and to dilettantism was measured through literature, especially through literary genres and discourses. In this framework the concept of the dilettante and dilettantism thus became not only a response to an emerging literary and artistic group, or a structural answer to the emerging new media of the press, but also a fierce and visceral response to the specialization of journalism. Here the idea of



dilettantism both described and constructed the hierarchic vision of highbrow vs. lowbrow in literature fuelled by a powerful literary fear from the uncontrollable and more and more autonomous, “non-literary” daily and popular press.

But literary value was constructed through the idea of dilettantism/ professionalism not only through contrasting media and types of press, but also through underrating certain poetics, techniques of writing and discourses that used to be canonical up till then. One of the most powerful poetic turns that began to be described by the concept of modern evaluative dilettantism was mimetic poetics. The end of late literary and artistic Neoclassicism, and the decline of the norms of mimetic literature and art can be deduced from the vehemence mid-nineteenth century Hungarian literature began to link them to unreflective and rudimentary creation. For instance, the main argument of the cultural-literary-social group around the charismatic politician Ferenc Deák against Kálmán Lisznyay, the literary daredevil of the 1850s, was that he made an unsophisticated fashion from popular folkish literature instead of using it in a creative way, and therefore he just repeated himself: “(Lisznyai) was the same also in the folkish literature he made (...) he only changed his themes, because our poets are not devoted to their ideals anymore. They do not brave the audiences and criticism when these make an assault on the fundamental principles of their poetry, and just imitate the daily fashion in a slavish way instead of following their experiences,”¹⁸ said one of the most fierce piece of criticism on Lisznyai that labelled him a dilettante.

Dilettantism and Hungarian Cultural Modernization. Moral Panics of Dilettantism and the Birth of Modern Professional Literary Trust in Hungarian Literature

There are many types of crisis stories with different configurations, with different scapegoats, various narrative fine tunings. Even if the secondary literature on the modern uses and recyclings of the idea of the dilettante is not so ample as that on other aspects of modernity and modernization, it is clear that there are enthrallingly various European narratives linked to the modern dilettante.¹⁹ Some of the nineteenth-century European literary traditions are far from blaming the dilettante for any literary vices and view his/ her position along the long tradition of “lover/ patron of the arts.” The nineteenth century shift that turned the concept of the dilettante from a descriptive idea into an highly evaluative, regulating and normative one is not peculiarly Hungarian, but the way this transformation is transformed into a major literary and artistic framework of crisis narratives and moral panics is a telltale sign of the enormous modernizations process and its trauma that is taking place in the midst of the nineteenth century in Hungarian literature. Not recuperating or not reflecting on the mid-nineteenth century discourses on dilettantism, the authors, the literary and artistic works and poetics labelled as dilettante leaves the nature of the literary modernization and especially literary professionalization invisible.

The forgotten and often blamed figures and texts of the dilettante, and especially the malicious discourse upon them and their failures could prove an excellent



source to understand the nature and historical construction of Hungarian literary and artistic modernity, the huge frustrations, the fierce struggles and the construction of the canon of the so-called “modern classics” of Hungarian literature. Surely important aspects of literary modernity and modernization were at stake in the many questions behind mid-nineteenth century Hungarian moral panics invoking the dilettante again and again. Who controls literary modernity and how will it look like? Who will be the winners and the losers of emerging literary and social modernization? Will it be a world controlled by crowds or by select and highbrow intellectuals? Will it be a world dominated solely by male writers or should there be a place also for emerging groups of women writers? Who will write the masterpieces, the former of the latter? How do valuable literary works emerge? Who is able produce them? Are some literary groups and techniques better in producing them or not? For instance, are women writers less inclined to produce masterpieces or not? How was the value of the literary works to be established? These were just a few of the constant socio-literary frustrations translated into the evaluative and more and more demonized image of the dilettante.

Recuperating the discourse about dilettantism actually recuperates issues about social and literary control, literary and artistic autonomy as part of an emerging process and fears of literary modernization. Forgetting them would hide the archeology of Hungarian literary modernity. But let us recap those important trends and problems the invention of *dilettantism as an umbrella term and phenomenon* was an answer to in the midst of nineteenth-century

Hungarian literature. Firstly, the moral panic on the emergence of the alleged dilettante and dilettantism seems a powerful answer to the nationalization of the professions and the dilemmas of the status and forms of the literary labour. The insecurity and fears regarding both the status of intellectual labour and the modern labour market and the status of Hungarian literature in a European context produced a ceaseless transnational comparison that set forth a vindicative angle and discourse for the early Hungarian literary professionals; these tendencies practically multiplied the fear from the fall of the (Hungarian) literary professional and projected all the insecurity of this literary nationalism and capitalism onto the figure of the dilettante.

Secondly, dilettantism seems a powerful answer to the emergence of socio-professional groups that challenged the literary order. Among these, women writers were one of the cohorts who entered the literary field in a surprisingly large number, and some of them became even professional leaders in their narrower fields. Cases like the one of Emília Kánya, one of the first modern European female literary editors-in-chief, challenged and even traumatized the literary system dominated by men. Therefore the immediate labelling of the women as dilettante was a strong and gendered answer to this challenge, and also a sharp effort to reframe the whole literary field and construct women writing as a separate, inferior and unstable category. Thirdly, the mid-nineteenth century evaluative shift of the term dilettante mirrored a rising repugnance against Neoclassicist poetics, and an anxiety over the many faces of the modernizing media system, especially the fast change of the regular press.



This complex interplay of fears, frustrations, anxieties resulting in strong ethical labels were the result of a fragile and thus defensive literary professionalism and artistic modernity. The early phase of the emergence of modern literary professions led naturally to a series of moral panics that saw peril and risk everywhere, and dilettantism became the powerful common label and umbrella term for these very diverse groups, literary communities, media and auctorial strategies for both the real and imagined dangers. But paradoxically professional trust and the discourse on who, what, where, when and how can be trusted in the new and rapidly changing modernization of literature were born out of this moral panic and one of its central terms. The complex discourse on who, when, where and how should be mistrusted produced strong and long-term ideas

also on who, when and how should be trusted in matters of literature, who are the “real” professionals, what they do, how they create and behave. The many literary dangers deployed by literary modernization that became focused in the scapegoat phantom figure of the dilettante actually constructed both professional distrust and trust along values and categories that have influenced and governed Hungarian literary life up till the late decades. That is why a thorough analysis of nineteenth-century dilettantism as one of the major “leftovers” of early Hungarian literary and artistic modernity is not just an autotelic philological gesture, but reveals the essence of the politics of the early phase of Hungarian literary modernization. The moral panics of literary dilettantism are also the moral panics of Hungarian literary modernization and modernity.

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Volume 33

Sujets dépourvus d’importance.

Pour une politique du résiduel en littérature

Cluj-Napoca, România, 2017



Caietele Echinox is a biannual academic journal
in comparative literature, dedicated to the study of the social,
historical, cultural, religious, literary and arts imaginaries

Editor: Phantasma. The Center for Imagination Studies, Cluj

Publisher: Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

Print: Megaprint, Cluj, Romania

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ISSN 1582-960X (România)

ISBN 978-2-36424-046-9 (France)

DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2017.33

Journal accredited by CNCSIS (B),
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Volume 33, 2017

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