

Summary

"Is this the right theory of theory?" – The genre of epistle in Hungary in the age of the Enlightenment, its poetics and role in media history

by Gergely Labádi

The epistle in the Hungarian literature of the age of the Enlightenment assumed special significance. The period of the Enlightenment as defined in literary sociology and cultural history (roughly 1770–1820) coincides with the popularity of the genre. Authors from this period (e.g. Ányos, Barcsay) often left behind an oeuvre that consist mainly of epistles.

The genre itself is mostly considered uniform in literary histories but if we read contemporary texts it does not at all seem so. While a large number of reflections on the characteristic features of the genre were handed down to us from the post-1800 years, we barely have anything from the period preceding the turn of the century. But this is not the only difference: even contemporaries thought that the type that is best represented by the works of Ferenc Kazinczy has features different from those of the epistles of the previous Enlightenment generations (especially Ányos, Bacsay, Bessenyei, Orczy). This split is reflected even in the early works of literary history. Since no comprehensive papers on the history of Enlightenment epistle have been written yet, and as the genre itself proved to be more complex than thought before, I will provide a historical-poetical analysis in the second chapter of my thesis.

This chapter is divided into three major parts. In the first, I attempt to describe and analyze the guidelines on writing prose epistles. I show that there is a duality in the reception of the shift that took place in European epistolary theory around the middle of the century – the most significant results of which are the growing significance of the personality and naturalness, as well as the appearance of the “without rules” idea.

Various sources (textbooks, exam questions, reviews, abstracts, guides to letter writing) unanimously recognize – and usually even stress – the importance of this shift, yet the norms of the genre, especially those concerning the personality of the writer, are not discussed. The letter is still considered as a genre of practical literature, and as a result meeting the social code is the primary focus. We can also mention a so far neglected peculiarity of the sources: they overemphasize the materiality of real (that is sent) letters and the way it is regulated (paper size, margin, folding). All these were to keep social hierarchy alive. Despite all this, we cannot deny that the letter in the Hungary of this period became such a practical medium (the place for the exchange of thoughts and opinion) that went beyond the accepted framework of publicity, and was a precursor of a new one.

The next section of chapter two is an analysis of the guidelines major contemporary works on poetics and literary history set for writing poetic letters. We can point to two noticeable changes in the period discussed: the Batteuxian shift in genre theory, which split the genre formerly considered to be unified into two distinct genres: the didactic and lyric epistle. The epistle “proper” is the former only. The other change is attributed to Pölitz, who created the theory of the already existing genres of prose and poetic letters: he reinterpreted the “presence” topos of antiquity, and separated the poetic letter from the genuine features of the genre, from the writing that imitates the audience of verballity.

Hungarian works on poetics and literary history follow these changes, which still live together with those theories that see the genre as undivided. I use various extracts from letters and reviews to interpret the non-systematic poetics of the era, focusing on four regularly arising problems: poetry, structure, verse and the relationship between the tone and the subject. Among these, the first is the most exciting. It is by this that the unique interpretation of the epistles is born, which explains the inner development of literature and provides a historic-

philosophic explanation (Schiller). According to this, the genre is an authentic means of expression for a reflective and sentimental manhood as opposed to naive (Greek) childhood.

The split in the Enlightenment history of the epistle is not exclusively a problem of poetics: of course, this approach is partly suitable for describing the epistle types before and after the split, while the changes in genre history and theory can explain the characteristic features of various types, still these are unsatisfactory in themselves. Comprehensive attempts to discover the poetical-rhetorical tradition necessarily run into a dead end: the typical features of the epistle, as defined in antiquity, (friendship, presence and conversation) as well as the general descriptions of its style (clarity, simplicity and laconism) are constant, but the content and the practice itself were continuously changing. And even though there were shifts in focus as a result of the changes in genre history, these cannot explain the split that took place in Enlightenment epistle writing and interpretation in Hungary.

However, a process that is parallel with the changes in genre theory provide an opportunity for the re-thinking of the problem. On the basis of a consensus among various disciplines, it is obvious that printing in the period came to the forefront, and the “second revolution of the book” brought about a qualitative change in culture. The typically manuscript form of the genre of the epistle found a new medium and became a printed genre. The question inevitably arises: cannot this change in the medium explain the changes in the rhetorical and poetical guidelines and the split that is obvious from the first decades of the 19th century? The third chapter focuses on this.

Various discourses had various reactions to this phenomenon: while it was not regarded as important in the legal and political discourse, the change in the medium was seen as extremely important in the literary-scientific one. The difference between manuscript and print culture was often described as a change in the availability of knowledge. Moreover, drawing on the tradition of *litteraria historiae* the shift from verblativity to writing was also seen as significant, and the structural transformation of knowledge was also emphasized.

Later on I focus on sent letters (*missiles*) and the epistles that were written as such. As a starting point, I interpret *A Besenyei György Társasága* (The Society of Gy. B.) because there is an agreement in the literature that this work represents the beginning of Enlightenment epistle writing. Comparing it with possible contemporary reference texts we arrived at various descriptions of this beginning: it is the diversity of interpretations and their deviation from the literary historical tradition that makes the effect of the structure (in this case, printing) visible, which overwrites contemporary interpretations. This analysis is followed by a study of letters and epistles that were handed down to us as *missiles*, and an attempt to typologize the appearance of poems (looked upon as epistles in literary history) in sent letters. I defined three groups: quotations in verse, literary appendices and “letters in verse”. While epistles before 1800 typically belong to the third group, after 1800, we rather regard those from the second group as epistles.

I also dealt with the transformation of sent letters brought about by printing. They are most obviously different from previous letters in their arrangement. In most cases, the printed form – with the exception of some early letters of recommendation – never corresponds to the manuscript. It is not the social rank or the degree of personal relations but economy, and the style of the print and the series (if there is such) that define the spaces in print. Nevertheless, the type of the given media (newspaper, periodical, book) and the goal of the text (conveying information, cultic interest, setting a literary example etc.) also has some influence on which features of the letter survive or disappear.

Before 1800, the “original” medium of the epistle was the private sphere. That is, letters were written as real messages destined to be sent (in entirety or in part), but works on literary history – with a few exceptions – know and use the majority of them as edited into printed volumes. Because of that I chose uniform aspects for the study of the collection of poems: volume space (the author and the title) and volume order (dialogic and monologic).

The importance of a media-historical approach is that it can provide a possible interpretation for that shift in the history of the genre which, by setting the Horatian epistle as an exclusive example, excluded the majority of Enlightenment epistles written before 1800 from the genre. The most obvious consequences of this can be seen in the different ways collection of poems treat the name of the author and the title of the works (cycles and volumes), while the dialogic way of early letter collecting is substituted by monologic order.