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Csokonai and Education

The Harmony of Science, Art
and Life-Sustaining Human Relationships

Abstract

Mihály Csokonai Vitéz was one of the most significant poets of the Hungarian Enlightenment. In this essay, his views on education and his activities as a teacher are briefly presented. He had the opportunity to teach twice for a brief period in secondary schools: in Debrecen in 1794/95 and in Csurgó in 1799. As an educator, Csokonai – following one of his great role models, Jean-Jacques Rousseau – placed great importance on a nature-based approach, a curriculum tailored to the needs of the pupils, community organisation based on group dynamics and the transmission of values. During both of his teaching periods, he wrote and performed plays with his students. The conclusion of the essay is that, in the light of the facts it contains, we can state that Csokonai's pedagogy was characterised by the trinity of science, art and life-sustaining human relationships.

Keywords: Csokonai, poetry, cultural history, school performances

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Learning, knowledge, education, and erudition were traditionally present in the family of the poet, playwright and editor Mihály Csokonai Vitéz. His great-grandfather, Ferenc Csokonai, studied Reformed theology and worked as a pastor in the Transdanubian region, first in Győr and later in Alcsút. His son, the poet's grandfather László Csokonai, died young, but during his short ministry, he worked as a preacher in Győr. His son József, the poet's father, who remained in Orván, was no longer attracted to a church career, so he studied to become a barber at the medical school in Nagyszombat, and, in 1772, he opened a barber shop, first in Sümeg and then in Debrecen. At that time, barbers, also known as surgeons, performed not only haircutting, and shaving but also minor surgical operations requiring qualifications, as well as tooth extraction and bloodletting (Madarászné 2021, 325–366).

The mother of Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, Sára Diószegi, always supported her son in becoming an intellectual and educated man. After her husband's early death, she helped her child's education even under difficult financial circumstances. Since she could not afford the tuition fees, she provided a single lunch a day for seven or eight students, in exchange for which Csokonai was exempt from tuition fees at the prestigious Debrecen dormitory.

Debrecen was the largest city in Hungary with about 30,000 inhabitants at the end of the 1770s. It was a commercial, cultural, educational, and religious centre, the "Calvinist Rome". Two of Csokonai's ancestors were directly connected to the public life of Debrecen and the bourgeoisie: his father, József Csokonai, was at one time the guild master of the barbers, while his maternal grandfather, Mihály Diószegi, was the head of the tailor's guild and a member of the twelve-member internal town council (in modern parlance, the town assembly), a member of the jury (Szilágyi 2014).

The fact that personal family examples were deeply embedded in Csokonai's identity is demonstrated by a letter written on 22 January 1798 to Count György Festetics, the founder of the Georgicon in Keszthely, the country's first agricultural school. Herein, he wrote: "I was born in Debrecen, in Bihar county, of a noble and learned father from Győr, of whom I was deprived when I was still uneducated" (Csokonai 1987, 395).

Csokonai began his studies at the Reformed College in Debrecen at the age of seven. At that time, as Márton Domby, lawyer, poet and friend of Csokonai, worded, "he passed from his mother's lap into the lap of much sweeter muses" (Bertók 1973, 29). At that time, there were three levels of education in the col-



Source: Wikipedia

Picture 1. The Debrecen Reformed College in the 18. century

lege: in the lower school, students were taught to read and write, to add and subtract; in the upper school, they were called gymnasium students, or Latinists; after that, they were called college students.

Csokonai was an excellent pupil, with above-average talent in many areas, which contributed to his teachers' individual treatment of him according to his temperament. His favourite teacher was József Kovács, who taught him the poetry class in the fifth grade, and by his own admission discovered his pupil's poetic talent. He later said of Csokonai: "He could never be forced to study, much less to write poetry, having learned which, I left him free to write or not to write when his fellow students were writing. He would even have liked complete freedom to do his homework. If he didn't sleep enough, he was moody all day: so, I ordered him not to come up for his six-o'clock lesson" (Bertók 1973, 24–25).

These personal "favours" from his teachers, given the strict timetable of the college, gave the budding creative person a great deal of freedom. According to the timetable, the students got up at three o'clock in the morning to ring the bell, cleaned up, had breakfast, and studied. At six o'clock the lessons began and lasted until ten o'clock. Lunch was at noon, then the lessons continued until

seven o'clock in the evening, followed by evening devotions until bedtime at nine o'clock.

Csokonai, a student from Debrecen, reached college level and wore the uniform compulsory for college students: a black robe down to the ankles, a dark-green toga with yellow trim, boots and a tall hat called a *sinkó*. This attire alone showed a sense of belonging to the college community and gave the wearer a certain social prestige.

In the year of the French Revolution (1789), Csokonai was ranked sixth among the best students. During this period, Csokonai was introduced to the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He read everything he could get his hands on. It was not difficult for him, of course, since he had mastered German, French and Italian in addition to Greek and Latin during his college years, and he and his peers formed a self-education group and contributed to German, French and Italian journals.

Csokonai quickly adopted Rousseau's views on education and adapted the principle of "natural education" to his work as an educator, i.e. the basic pedagogical principle that children should not be hurried in the development of their abilities, but that their independent thinking should always be developed according to their needs, starting from their talents and personality, bearing in mind that one of the most important missions of man is to be happy and free (Rousseau 1957). He also followed Rousseau in his appreciation and respect for nature. In a letter to Ferenc Széchenyi, he wrote: "I am a son, a friend and an admirer of nature. A fountain, a shady tree, an obscure garden or a forest I still esteem above men not only in my poetry but also in my heart" (Bertók 1973, 45).

Already during his college years, he had the opportunity to put the educational principles of Rousseau into practice, since "on 11 January 1794, after an extremely strict examination, the outstanding Mihály Csokonai, who was well versed in Greek, Latin, Italian and Hungarian poetry, and was especially well versed in aesthetics, a light and excellent poet, was put in charge of the poetry class" (Bertók 1973, 63).

In April 1794, he began teaching, his *preceptorship*. Although he arrived late on the first day to a class of forty-seven, he quickly became popular with the students, as he worked hard at community organisation as well as teaching. His teaching method was personal, and he considered his students, only four or five years younger than himself, his friends.

Following in the footsteps of the pedagogical ideas of Rousseau, whom he admired so much, he sought to capture and hold the attention of young people,

building on their natural curiosity. To this end, he held his lessons outdoors as soon as the spring weather arrived. He taught by walking in the Great Forest of Debrecen. By observing plants and animals, he introduced natural history, which had not been taught at the college until then. He also used the possibilities of experiential education – as we understand it today. Consciously experiencing the moment and placing oneself in the situation, moreover, acquiring and mastering the information and knowledge that emerged from the questions and experiences that arose from these experiences, were part of his pedagogical methodology.

According to the afore-mentioned Márton Dombó, the poet taught literature with such fervour that he almost acted in his classes, where his students attended as if they were going to the theatre. As he wrote in his book on Csokonai: “With such fire, with such vivacity, now dignified, now ridiculous, now indignant, now calm, he spoke, he taught: the character and the whole history and nature of the persons he followed were at once caught in the minds of his pupils, and his pupils, as opposed to being repulsed by the customary cold lessons, went to his school as to a theatre, with great excitement. His treatment of his pupils was also quite different from the traditional approach. A young man of 21 thought of young people who were almost his own age as his friends rather than as his pupils. He walked, amused himself, played games and, concealing nothing, often smoked pipes with them in a feeling of friendship that knew no abstinence, and, most of all, as he was accused, drank with them, too” (Dombó 1955, 21–22).

Csokonai also constantly integrated the results of his creative work into the teaching and learning process. In November 1794, in preparation for a Christmas performance, he began rehearsing one of his plays with his students. The rehearsals were held in the Poetry classroom, where Csokonai once arrived with a pint of wine and then drank, smoked a pipe and sang with the students. The incident went viral and caused consternation among the college administration. Partly because of his popularity among the students, and partly because of his poetic success (he was already enjoying the friendship and confidence of Ferenc Kazinczy, who had hailed him as a distinguished lyric poet a year earlier), the professors, who had ridiculed him, brought him before the college tribunal in December 1794. They reprimanded him, admonished him, and lowered his rank in the student ranks, threatening that if he did not bring them a medical certificate of his illness (because of which he regularly missed evening devotions and morning services) he would have to leave the college.

Source: Wikipedia



Picture 2. Students of the Debrecen Reformed College in their uniforms in 1775.

Insulted and disappointed, Csokonai was later subjected to further disciplinary action after a dispute with the college principal and his failure to give him due respect, after which he resigned from his teaching post and took off his college uniform. Although still on legation, he was sent on a fund-raising trip to Kiskunhalas and Szabadszállás, from where he did not return, but went to Pest and witnessed the execution of Ignác Martynovics and his fellow Jacobins.

On 15 June 1795, in front of about four hundred and fifty students, he said farewell in Hungarian, for the first time in the history of the college, with

the following words: "Noble Learners, in whom is the hope of science and of the fatherland is developing, whose joy is budding, whose cheerful dawn of future glory is radiant! You have known me well, my behaviour, the whole of my erudition; you have looked most closely on me in all my actions, I call you witnesses when a witness is no longer needed; but in the tribunal of hearts, before the judges of thought, where news is the torturing or liberating pestle, morality is the law, tongue is the sharp sabre to cut chains or necks, before this tribunal I call you as witnesses, whether I have ever been a school scoundrel with a bad conscience, even if I found it hard to learn a lot of things that that I had to learn here, whether I have been a debauchee, a waste of time, a testicle? Bear witness of this in your hearts, and before others, you whom I can neither harm nor be useful to. May the benevolent deity bless your present labours, may he give you a great spirit, so that you may be of more and more help to your fellow men for the greater perfection of yourselves, for the greater glory of our sweet country and our unhappy nation" (Csokonai 1987, 370).

In response to this, on 20 June 1795, the college tribunal decided to terminate his student status in its entirety, forbid him to enter the college, forbid him to associate with the students, and decided not to give him any certificate or recommendation for his studies and work up to that time. A few days later, Csokonai left the city and continued his studies at the college in Sárospatak, but after six months, he interrupted them.

A few years later, Csokonai was able to work as a teacher once more, but again, for a very short time. In April 1799, he was appointed deputy teacher of the newly established Csurgó Secondary School, for a few months while the appointed teacher, Pál Császári Lósi, was studying at the University of Jena. In May, he started teaching in the most beautiful – and only multi-storey – building in the municipality.

A week after starting his work, he wrote the following to István Sárközy, the Reformed diocesan administrator in charge of the area: “I take the Christian rule as the maximum (principle) of my position and I work as if I were always living by it, and I beg to the Lord this way, and I live as if I had to pass away from here any minute. *Vitae csurgóiensis summa brevis spem nos vetat inctorae longam!* (The short duration of a stay in Csurgó does not allow for the development of long-term hope!) But in the meantime, I shall endeavour to familiarise my students with the old mechanics, the modern teaching that thinks and reflects, the pedantry devoted to school and happy oblivion, the knowledge that shapes real men, what is Orbilius (the cruelly caning teacher), and what is the human-loving instructor, whom he wishes to pay off to young mankind with his usury (the treasure he has taken from his teachers, living or dead, and the debt he owes for it)” (Csokonai 1987, 404–405).

In the Csurgó secondary school, however, neither textbooks nor teaching materials were available, and there were only a good dozen pupils. His teaching method focused on developing the ability to think for oneself and aimed at imparting real and human-forming knowledge. László Gaál, a former pupil of his, and later collector of his writings and biographical data, recalled: “If his disciple was weak in perception, he would begin to enlighten him or her where he noticed his/her perception was stalled. And the disciple rejoiced at his guidance, and had no reason to be discouraged” (Bertók, 1973, 145).

He taught the otherwise traditionally boring Latin oratory in a humorous and entertaining way, as well as the other subjects, because he also taught botany, history, geography and natural history. He also introduced the latter subject in

Csurgó. For the July examination period, he taught his students one of his plays, a comedy entitled *Cultura* (Csokonai 1987, 191–219). In this way, he wanted to show that he was not only a teacher, but also a poet and playwright. He took his task so seriously that he appeared at the final examination on 12 July 1799 – bought with a thirty-forint advance – in a new coat, braided trousers and spurred boots. The examination went well, and the play was a success. During the performance, they also sang a Rákóczi song, which later became a problem for Csokonai, who left Csurgó in September when his substitute period ended – and with it, his teaching career, too.

As an educator, Mihály Csokonai Vitéz – in the literal sense of the word – attached great importance to nature-oriented education, a curriculum tailored to the needs of the pupils, and community organisation based on group dynamics and the transmission of values – in addition, of course, to the transmission of compulsory and prescribed knowledge. During both of his teaching periods, he wrote and performed plays with his students.

Therefore, I believe, perhaps not without reason, that the trinity of science, art and vitalizing human relationships characterised Csokonai's pedagogy.

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