

Insight Essay on Hasdeu

Dr. Olga Bălănescu

Department of Communication and Public Relations

Faculty of Letters

University of Bucharest

Dr. Olga Bălănescu is a lecturer at the Department of Communication and Public Relations of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Bucharest. Her main interests are in linguistics, political and advertising discourse. She runs courses of Writing Texts, Advertising Discourse, Journalistic Discourse, Political Communication Strategies, Pragmatics.

Abstract

This study is concerned with bringing out into strong relief some unknown aspects of the personality of the great scientist B.P.Hasdeu, aspects which are to be found only in his correspondence. We were interested in his correspondence with his little daughter while she was living in Paris together with her mother. What we found out in these letters is the roots of a warm and gentle soul which is to be discovered only in the presence of his family, whom he deeply loved and cared of.

Keywords: *Subjective writing, Authenticity, Correspondence, Special aspects of personality, Academic spirit, Loving father, Committed husband*

Preliminaries

Human nature has always been preoccupied by real communication. The Emitter has been always interested in getting the communicational intention of his interlocutor alongside with the message. The fact is due to the dual aspect of communication. A message may transmit:

- a. information about the fact under consideration;
- b. extra-information which is hidden behind the proper one, and which could be detected only by means of gestures, voice, intonation, tone, attitude.

It depends on the receiver to `see` behind words and to give a proper interpretation to every single gesture of his interlocutor during a conversation they have together.

Once we got the message, there is still an issue: have we been persuaded by our interlocutor? Could he be sure that we should act exactly the way he had in his mind, or that we should be by his side from now on after having heard his message? Specialists in communication (1) have figured out two major ways of getting your way:

1. emotional persuasion;
2. rational persuasion.

Life experience has proved that the former is always stronger than the latter. Otherwise, why do people still smoke while there is so much evidence against smoking?

Emotional persuasion is the key to *subjective writing*: autobiographies, diaries, personal letters, memories. People is generally attracted by such pieces of writing because they are eager to find out real facts of life. Professor Eugen Simion has nicely overemphasized (2) that emotion pales in time, and a fact which took place some years ago will be more objectively viewed if we put it down on paper after a couple of years, than if we wrote it on the spot.

Time acts as the healing and reconciling force against an estrangement, a distance that seems to be caused by the arbitrary intervention of a transcendental force. A slightly tighter exegetic pressure on the text reveals that this transcendental agent is itself temporal and that what is being offered as a remedy is in fact the disease itself. A negative statement about the essential problematical and self-destructive nature of the personal letter is disguised as a positive theory about its ability to rejoin, at the end of this dialectical development, a state of origin that is purely fictional, though fallaciously presented as having historical existence.

A certain concept, *time*, is made to function on two irreconcilable levels:

- a. on the organic level, where we have origin, continuity, growth, and totalization, the statement is explicit and assertive;
- b. on the level of ironic awareness, where all is discontinuous, alienated, and fragmentary, it remains so implicit, so deeply hidden behind error and deception, that it is unable to rise to thematic assertion.

This kind of pragmatic common sense is admirable, up to the point where it lures the mind into self-satisfied complacency and puts it irrevocably to sleep. It can always be shown, on all levels of experience, that what other people experience as a crisis is perhaps not even a change. Such observations depend to a very large extent on the standpoint of the observer (who might be the Emitter).

Why subjective writing?

We know pretty well that a diary may be faked. Its author may pretend to tell the truth hiding, in fact, aspects which could jeopardize his own image. It is a matter of handling writing skills if the diary does really make us believe what is written in it.

Things are totally different in correspondence. A letter cannot be faked. One cannot simply write a letter to his friend and pretend to be anything else than he really is, for the simple reason that he writes the letter because he has something to say, to confess, to clarify. Life has also proven this fact. Titu Maiorescu, for instance, in his huge diary (11 volumes, begun at fifteen years old, and ended a few days before he died) does not mention a single word about his unhappy marriage to Clara Kremnitz, or about his deep and secret love for Anna Rosetti (his second wife), or about his divorce from Clara Kremnitz. Why? Because he was fully aware of his value and importance for the Romanian culture and knew that his diary would be, thus, read after his death. He wanted to build an impressive and magnificent image of himself in front of the generations to come by means of his diary.

While in his letters, he could not help confessing his true feelings. He was writing to his friends to whom he was asking for pieces of advice, so all the personal details missing from the diary are to be found in his letters.

We could thus conclude that letters bring us the real image of their author more than a diary can.

That is why we have chosen the correspondence of Hasdeu to look into because we wanted to figure out details about his moral profile, about his personality, details which could not have been found out unless Hasdeu himself had confessed them. And we were lucky to discover new aspects and unknown sides of this great personality of the Romanian culture: Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu.

Historical changes` are not like changes in nature, and the vocabulary of change and movement as it applies to historical process is a mere metaphor, not devoid of meaning, but without an objective correlative that can unambiguously be pointed to in empirical reality, as when we speak of a change in the weather around us, or a change in a biological organism. No set of arguments, no enumeration of symptoms will ever prove that the present effervescence surrounding subjective writing is in fact a crisis that, for better or worse, is reshaping the critical consciousness of a generation.

It remains relevant, however, these people are experiencing it as a crisis in referring to what is taking place. We must take this into account when reflecting on the predicament of others as a preliminary before returning to ourselves.

Confession is involved in subjective writing, and it a fashion to read and write diaries at the beginning of the last century. This is why, perhaps, people were more and more interested in reading subjective pieces of writing in order to find out the unknown, the obscure. Sometimes, these pieces of writing gave a new light on the face of somebody we already knew. And if that `somebody` happened to be a grea person, so much the better.

New perspectives

We all know that Hasdeu kept a continuous correspondence with his beloved daughter, Lilicuta, from whom he had been punished to stay away; the punishment had been gived by the severe Mrs. Hasdeu who had believed those denigrating words about her husband. The letters mentioned above bring out into strong relief a new perspective on the life and personality of Hasdeu: in these pages he appeared more as a father and husband than as a scientist and writer as we have been accustomed with. This new side of his personality enlarges the perspective we used to have on him , and helped us understand more of him.

What are the letters about?

They are about many things, about too many things, fact which proves that they were absolutely authentical. Hasdeu himself had been preoccupied by all the issues mentioned in the letters sent to his daughter (and to his wife, as well, although she rarely answered him back. While the little Lilicuta was writing him back almost daily...) So, the issues of the letters are:

- a. living expences of the scientist for him to prove his severe wife that he could not practically waste money around;
- b. information about the French school curriculum where his daughter was studying;
- c. information about every single headache his daughter was haing, her diseases, the way she was spending her spare time;
- d. pieces of advice for his little daughter

The correspondence of Hasdeu is worth being mentioned and looked into not only because the huge volume of information it offers, but also because it gives us the great and unique chance of entering the soul of the scientist.

What do we actually find out of his letters to his little daughter?

Several aspects which come to whole up his portrait of a scientist.

At first, we find out that he considered these letters a way of surviving after the cruel blow life gave him: his wife left for Paris as a revenge that he had not been faithful in marriage (at least, this is the explanation we are

vaguely given). Anyway, although his soul was devastated, he never let his daughter feel this inner tension. He did not want to upset a pure and noble soul of a child. He was always advising her to be an optimistic nature, to laugh and be happy with her life, her mother, and the background over there. *‘Have fun, my dearest, amuse yourself and laugh as much as you wish because only the stupid natures are dull and mean’* he was writing in November 1887. (3)

It is obvious that his correspondence is different from what we knew about him. The academic, severe spirit makes room for a human, common nature, in total agreement with himself and with the world around him. As we said, this attitude is due to the fact that he wanted little Iulia to grow up in peace and harmony

Throughout the letters he manifests himself as a loving father, always worried for his far away daughter.

Another aspect we find out in his letters is connected with his hard working on his scientific project. He was regularly informing his wife and his daughter about his academic work. He was doing all his best to finish as much as he could of the Great Etymological Dictionary which he had started. As curious as it could seem, his project was not overwhelming him, as much as he worked, because he was feeling alone and considered his studies a blessing on his soul. His work was keeping his mind busy day and night and thus he did not have time to think about the cruel separation imposed by his wife.

In December 1887 he confesses to the two women in Paris: *‘In your absence, it is only the daily contact with the spirit of an entire nation which keeps me alive, safe and sound, while being surrounded by such a cruel loneliness. The huge encyclopedia of the Romanian people saves me out of the solitude I am condemned to. If I am to follow a saying of a Roman emperor, I feel like a God, and while feeling it, I can do nothing but laugh’*.

We also find out that he is confident in his work, and that he strongly believes that his hard work will be finally appreciated by his contemporaries. Although he has to face a lot of difficulties in his time (connected with financing his project work), he does not let these aspects come to surface in his letters. For sure, he wanted to educate his little daughter in the spirit of work, and of being confident in her efforts.

Above all, he is The Father. And this the pervading aspect in his letters. The scientist is always worried about what might happen to his family in Paris. He is worried because the letters come late, or because he does not know enough details about the curriculum of the school which little Julia attends. On the 11th of September 1881, he writes:

`I was like crazy when I saw I did not get any letter from you for such a long time. Moreover, I did not know your address in Paris, because you forgot to tell me that you established on the same Rue de Tournon.`

His main and special interest is in Lilicutza. He lovingly watches her growing up, although the little one is thousands of miles away. He is glad to see his daughter studying well: *`I am sure you have already heard the French saying noblesse oblige`* (the 4th of October, 1881)

Hasdeu did all his best (and succeeded in it) to make his daughter proud of being a Romanian, and thus, to make her show her French colleagues the Romanian nation (whose representative she was in Paris) is as good as they are: *`Show the French girls that a Romanian can be even better than them if she wants to`*.(the 18th of October, 1881)

He watches and directs her lectures and little by little, although being away, he becomes the most important person around the little girl.

We already know that any parent is ready to close his eyes to the shortcuts of his child, and to cover them up, as well as to give more importance to the good sides of his or her character. Hasdeu highly appreciated his daughter, he considered her to be a genius (as well as those who knew her and met the little one). Here is what he wrote on the 4th of November 1881 to his wife, immediately after her arrival in Paris: *`She is extremely brilliant and absolutely innocent and sincere in all she does.`* When comparing the letters written by his daughter with those written by himself, he admits with no hesitation the superior spirit of little Julia: *`They (the letters) are much more expressive and artistically written than mine. I have to admit that Lilicutza is a better writer than me.`*(the 28th of October 1883)

Here is another letter in which he overemphasizes the qualities of his daughter as a gifted writer. It is a letter sent to his wife on the 25th of January 1886: *`She writes me so nicely and asks me to answer her back in the same way. But one should not forget that, when you are half a century old, not only your forehead gets wrinkled, but also your thinking and life style. Under such circumstances, he is only good to be sent to the Archives and put inside a dictionary. One should also not forget that the child is like his parent`s second edition and when the latter is better, the former (the parent) may nicely and quietly stay on the shelf of the bookcase, letting the better one talk`*.

He was simply adoring his daughter. And Julia, in her turn, was highly praising her father. We could have rarely noticed a stronger relationship between father and daughter than this case. The situation is even more striking as the two of them were hundreds of miles away. The girl finds it normal for the scientist to be accepted as a member of the Academy in St. Petersburg or of the Society of Linguistics in Paris.

There is a strong relationship of mutual consideration and respect between the two of them. It seems to have been purified by the long distance which was separating them. The relationship established between the two of them was even more serious as it was reflecting their affinity on mental structure. No one has ever been that close to Hasdeu than the little Julia, as well as nobody did ever worship the scientist more than this cute child. They think the same, have the same attitude towards life, share the same type of humor and conceptions, manifest the same generosity towards people.

We are surprised and impressed by the respect Hasdeu shows to his little daughter. For him, Julia is not only that clever child towards whom her parents manifest a condescendence – sometimes – too striking, fact which makes the child build a barrier around her and refuse any type of communication. Hasdeu treats Julia as if she were his equal. He avoids giving the so-called `authority reasons` (just because he is `the father`), he is always joyful and understanding. He always accepts to be contradicted and makes fun when it happens.

All these facts do not mean that he does not advise his daughter when she needs. He surely does it, but not from the position of a severe, all-mighty grown-up, ready and eager to overwhelm the poor child, to suffocate the little soul by his authority. He advises his Julia as an older friend who understandingly smiles when hearing of some funny things the little one did, and does not explain more than it should. This attitude of his makes Julia confident in her own powers, and places the two of them inside an atmosphere of informal and open-hearted friendship, with no embarrassment of any side.

Although he was accused that he had asked the little Julia to surpass her colleagues in learning and to work harder and harder, his letters offer us proves on the contrary. He was regularly advising his wife to take care of Julia's schedule so as the little one to have time enough for playing and entertainment.

The letters, all in all, reveal the warm and generous soul of Hasdeu, feature which was not known by the great majority, but by his family and close friends.

Bibliographical Notes

- (1) MASLOW, A.H. *Motivation and Personality*, New York> Harper & Row, 1970
- (2) SIMION, Eugen. *Timpul traiirii, timpul marturisirii*. Bucuresti: Editura Cartea romaneasca, 1979.
- (3) Corespondenta B.P.Hasdeu –Iulia Hasdeu. In: *Documente și manuscrise literare*, vol. III, editie publicata, adnotata și comentata de Paul Cornea, Elena Piru, Roxana Sorescu., Bucuresti: Editura Academiei RSR1976.