In the 1851 preface to his first literary history, Ferenc Toldy, traditionally considered the father of Hungarian literary historiography,1 insisted on the reliability of his work. “I nonetheless can assure my readers,” he writes, “that I drew directly on original sources, not only in questions of essential importance, but in things of lesser significance as well, avoiding second-hand work, and in general, whenever I was able—and I was often able—I never asserted any claims without self-sight [önlátomás] and self-scrutiny [önvizsgálat].” He furthermore offered explicit justification for his adherence to this methodological principle: “I have learned from long experience how very necessary doubt is, even when dealing with recognized authorities, lest, alongside truths, we spread errors.”2

In this context the word “önlátomás,” rendered here as self-sight, means seeing for oneself, with one’s own eyes, and the word “önvizsgálat,” rendered here as self-scrutiny, means examining or scrutinizing something oneself. In other words both bear a meaning which today we would express with the technical term *autopsia*, of Greek origin (a combination of αυτος ‘self‘+ οπ- ‘see‘, ‘look’, as in αυτοπτήζ, meaning ‘witness‘): the inspection of a text or work of art, the verification of its authenticity, and the ascertainment of its authorship and the date of its composition. Toldy emphasized his personal consultation of sources primarily in order to distinguish his work from earlier literary histories, which were essentially compilations.3 His insistence on this distinction is interesting from our perspective, however, because it unavoidably reveals a presumption

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of the accessibility of knowledge in a kind of original purity, without mediation or interposition. Toldy “assures” his readers an autopsy, as it were, a literary history based on his scrutiny of original sources, and while he doesn’t clearly elucidate what this actually guarantees, he does imply that his method in and of itself is substantiation for the assertions he makes in his book.

He does not clarify whether his methodology, i.e., the almost exclusive avoidance of secondary sources, is simply a necessary precondition of reliability, or necessary and sufficient, but the clear implication is that it is through direct consultation of original sources that one can hope to obtain pure, undistorted knowledge. In principle one could treat the manuscript much as a physician today would treat a corpse in the course of an autopsy, which in order to establish the identity and cause of death of the person who has passed away may well extend beyond mere observation. In Toldy’s case, however, “self-sight” (or first-hand scrutiny of the sources) plays a role of primary importance because it was important to him that in the course of the examination the object in question remains untouched. Since the notion of seeing for oneself replaces the reading of the sources with their mere observation, and since the metaphor of seeing implies all absence of transformative work or even any form of contact, the direct observation of the source presents itself as a process that will leave no trace. In other words it does not constitute interpretation, but merely a retrospective philological gesture based on the hope shared by Toldy’s contemporary, August Böckh, who believed in the possibility of preserving the past untouched. In Böckh’s view the goal of philology lay in the undistorted recognition (“wiederzuerkennen,” “das Erkennen des Erkannten”) of the artifacts of the human mind, their complete reconstruction (“die Nachconstruction der Constructionen des menschlichen Geistes in ihrer Gesammtheit”), and the accurate reproduction (“richtige Reproduction”) and reconstitution (“reine Wiederherstellung”) of the cultural heritage (“des Überlieferten”). At most he considered the work of recognition and reestablishment an active process, but he regarded it as necessary, in order to recover a genuine image of the past that did not tamper with the artifact under examination (to avoid falsehoods, falsifications, and misunderstandings and restore unity out of scattered fragments), to understand such an object according to its own nature (“in seiner eigenen Natur”), from itself and for its own sake (“aus sich selbst und um seiner selbst willen”).

Indeed, he even went so far as to define this as the goal of hermeneutics, one of the branches of philology. This classical philological approach remained blind to the necessarily interpretive and transforma-