

MIHÁLY BABITS: "ALL GREAT POETS ARE DECADENT"

GEORGE F. CUSHING

School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London

Mihály Babits was born in 1883 and died of cancer in 1941, by which time he had achieved recognition as one of the most outstanding and influential writers in Hungary—and this was a period rich in good writers there. He was a poet and translator, experimental novelist and short-story writer, fine essayist and literary historian, as well as editor for a number of years of the literary journal *Nyugat* (West). He rapidly won the title of *poeta doctus*, and deserved it, since his work is unashamedly intellectual and he makes no concessions to his readers. It was in 1908 and 1909 that his verse began to demand attention, first in a controversial anthology *A Holnap* (Tomorrow), published in Nagyvárad, then in an independent volume, *Levelek Írisz koszorújából* (Leaves from the Garland of Iris), which appeared in Budapest under the aegis of the then new journal *Nyugat*. In the same year he contributed thirteen poems to a second *Holnap* anthology, this time published in Budapest. Contemporary critics, still battered and bruised by the sudden appearance of Endre Ady's *Új versek* (New Poems) in 1906, were totally baffled: they did not know what to make of yet another, younger and quite different rebel and iconoclast. Intellectually, Babits was obviously superior to Ady, and he seemed to have sprung, like Athene, fully armed into the literary world. His technique was formidable and his themes wide-ranging and not particularly Hungarian. Here was a lyric poet who appeared to lack romantic inspiration, who did not parade his emotions in the expected fashion, and whose verse preserved an objectivity that was somehow disturbing, together with a philosophical content that was new and unexpected. In short, he wrote "difficult" verse, whose message was often hard to extract, though his language was crystal-clear. And where Babits's message was evident, it was uncomfortable. Quite clearly he could not be dismissed simply as a new young poet-under-instruction who in time would learn the good old traditions, so for the most part the critics of the period relegated him to a secondary role—he did not make such fierce demands for recognition as did their arch-enemy, Ady.¹ They were wrong, but Babits did remain a controversial figure all his life; after his death and the political changes in Hungary after World War II, he was given scant recognition until the centenary of his birth in 1983, when at last his extraordinary achievements in the whole realm of Hungarian literature were acknowledged.

What happened before he emerged as a major new poet is instructive, and helps to illustrate the peculiarities of the Hungarian cultural scene at the turn of the century. Babits was the son of the equivalent of a county-court judge, and was born in the small Transdanubian town of Szekszárd. His education was conventional, beginning in Pest and continuing in the southern town of Pécs, where he attended the Cistercian *gimnázium*. He was a studious boy, a voracious reader; shy and undersized, he was no sportsman and curiously enough for a budding poet whose sense of rhythm and of musicality of language was marked, he was tone-deaf and remained so to the end of his life. He also had problems with language-learning—again an oddity in one who produced some of the finest translations of poetry from many languages. His father's death when he was fifteen was a fearful blow, for he did not get on well with his mother, and this perhaps may have sown the seeds of the rebellion from family tradition that occurred when he went to Budapest University. He wrote poetry at school, mainly connected with his flirtations there, but it was of no particular merit.²

It was at the university that his ideas began to take shape. First, he determined not to study law (the family tradition), but to train as a teacher—though at first it was by no means clear to him what subjects he would teach, and only later did he train in Hungarian and classics. He thirsted, he writes, “to know about higher laws than those created by man.”³ He does not specify these “higher laws”, but it is worth noting here that he already possessed two traits which remained part of his nature throughout his life: his Catholicism and his inclination to philosophize, which became a deep love of philosophy. He went through a deeply religious phase at school, and though he rebelled in youth against conventional Catholicism, he retained a love of its artistic values, mysticism and universality and gradually progressed to a deep personal faith at the end of his life.⁴ His love of philosophy led while he was studying to a lasting interest in psychology.

Recalling this period of his life, Babits wrote:

“The passage of my days at this time resembled a rather boring, slow novel into which briefer and much more interesting episodes were inserted (. . .) My own life did not give me much excitement. It seemed far too smooth; it gave no promise of any surprises. My course was predetermined, as far as both family and career were concerned. Around me the world stagnated peacefully. Hungary sulked like a spoiled child, an oriental princess who had been forced into marriage with the Austrian tyrant. Long ago Vörösmarty had concluded that boredom is what usually makes Hungarians readers and so poets too.”⁵ Then he adds, referring to his own escape into the world of books:

You must not believe that someone who escapes to books necessarily wants to flee from life. Often his desire is rather to broaden his life: he thirsts for more life than his period and fate have allotted him. In this Hungarian globe, life sometimes contracts and grows impoverished in a peculiar way. This is what was happening then, though only intellectually, for in other things there was

abundance here. We played cards, drank, entertained and talked politics, but in the meantime nothing happened year after year.⁶

This is a good description of the state of Hungarian culture at the beginning of the century. The millennium was celebrated in 1896 with great pomp and ceremony. Budapest, with its new and splendid buildings, fine boulevards and the first underground railway on the continent of Europe was a brash, new, thriving metropolis, growing rapidly and with all the signs of new industry and commerce in its midst. On the surface, at least, there was prosperity and security. Economic progress since the *Ausgleich* of 1867 had been startling. Politically, however, a succession of weak governments did nothing to allay the eternal Hungarian suspicion that Vienna's word was really paramount. There were increasing signs of unrest among the national minorities, which had not been helped by the intensification of magyarization, and there was above all the ever-present problem of the social structure of the country, now aggravated by the increased mechanization of agriculture.

In literature the stagnation mentioned by Babits was only too apparent. It must be remembered that over the previous century it had become a *littérature engagée*; writers, and poets in particular, were seen as prophets, leaders of the people, and they felt themselves to be responsible for the well-being of the nation. So the determination to be a writer was an important decision, and his reception by critics and public was governed by criteria that were at least as political as literary. Now despite the challenge of the big city and a newly-rich urban population, the aging custodians of what they felt to be the genuine Hungarian literary tradition obviously still saw their readers as mainly country-bred petty gentry, schoolmasters and clerics basking in the sunshine of a well-ordered, comfortable, even gently-decaying existence. And these literary arbiters were firmly entrenched in the Academy, the university⁷, the theatre and publishing-houses. Younger writers who strove to meet the challenge of a new age and circumstances were frustrated when they were simply told to model themselves on the great figures of the earlier nineteenth century. Árpád Zempléni (1865–1919) expressed their discontent in a poem beginning:

We're uncertain poets, are we;
It's very easy to be bored with us.
We don't even know what we should like,
We plough the seas as the wind blows us.⁸

And he goes on to lament the passing of an age in which poets had a real aim; modern poets have none. What he does not say is that the *Ausgleich* of 1867 had neatly removed one of those aims, opposition to Austria, which had fed so much into Hungarian literary activity during the earlier nineteenth century.

But for the majority of the reading public, there was plenty of comfortable reading-matter. About this Babits writes:

This was the age of the Antal Váradis and Emil Ábrányis, and on the other hand that of the Szabolcskas and Pósas. We, critical youths, took a very dismissive view of the whole of contemporary verse. In our eyes it was nothing but empty rhetoric or vulgar sentimentality. Platitudes on the one hand and popular songs on the other. But the public in general had become used to finding nothing else in verse but platitudes and popular songs. Poetry-reading had gone more and more out of fashion. At most poetry could be declaimed or sung. And the average taste did not make distinctions: even Petőfi was simply popular song, and Vörösmarty too was for declamation.⁹

This was the mood in which Babits began his studies in Budapest.

I arrived at Pest University with many confused dreams, little education and even less knowledge of life. My soul was drenched in Catholicism, but shaken in its faith, and sought a new dogma to latch on to. For a time I was an enthusiastic socialist, then I threw myself into philosophy. At that time I thought I should become a philosopher... This was a time of feverish study. My eyes, suddenly opened, gazed around the whole world.¹⁰

And in an interview he gave in 1923 he declared that at that period he had scarcely any doubt that he would solve the secrets of the world.¹¹ He joined the Hungarian Philosophical Society and wrote reviews for its journal—his first original studies.¹² He read Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and Schopenhauer, like so many other would-be intellectuals in the Austro-Hungarian lands; he became interested in Spinoza and Hume, but then comes something of a surprise. He writes:

My positive inclination from childhood towards psychology and the conviction that my special subject, philology, could be developed further in future through a greater and more precise use of psychology, the basis of all scientific knowledge, gave me support. But I did not spend much time on the German trend of Wundt; instead I sought to become acquainted with French, and more particularly American modern psychology. I read James with great enthusiasm (...) As for modern philosophy, in the strict sense of the term, I read Spencer (the *Epitome*), Nietzsche and Mach—hardly anyone else.¹³

From Babits's frequent references to him later, it is clear that William James was a strong influence on him, and it was James's main work, *The Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890, that was his guide. In this James outlines five principles, which Babits absorbed and applied in his poetry as well as in his theoretical studies on literature:

1. Every thought tends to be part of a personal consciousness.
2. Within each personal consciousness thought is always changing.
3. Within each personal consciousness thought is sensibly continuous.
4. It always appears to deal with objects independent of itself.
5. It is interested in some parts of those objects to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects—chooses from them, in a word—all the while.¹⁴

This facility to select, reject and combine thoughts became an important idea in Babits's writing, as does James's emphasis upon the "stream of thought".¹⁵

Budapest University at this period was not a place of great stimulation, except for one remarkable seminar, or discussion-group, held weekly under the tutelage of the then 40-year old László Négyesy. Négyesy, who had written books on the vexed problem of Hungarian versification¹⁶, was by no means a radical thinker, but allowed the students free expression of opinion and talked with them in language they could understand, not wielding his professorial authority from a great height.¹⁷ His knowledge of literature, impartiality and approach drew huge crowds of students from all faculties to what became virtually a literary salon and one of the mainsprings of modern literary development in Hungary. Here Babits became friendly with Dezső Kosztolányi (1885–1936) and Gyula Juhász (1883–1937), who had also come up from the provinces to study. They encouraged and criticized each other—an important process in Babits's development, since he had a desire to write, but feared publicity; he was unsure of himself and found it hard to take criticism, as he wrote in an unpublished poem of 1902, describing how the Muse will not let him out of her clutches and refuses to leave him in peace.¹⁸ So it was here that he began to write in earnest, first for his friends' eyes, incorporating the results of his reading and study, in an attempt to break away from the dead Hungarian traditions.

He wrote of this time:

Anyone who longed for the decadence of real poetry looked abroad. They became fanatical about French and English poets, modern and hyper-modern poems, ostentatiously taking a wide berth around all the clichés of platitudinous verse and the suspicious simplicity of popular verse alike. Baudelaire and Verlaine, Poe and Swinburne, Mallarmé and Rilke—these were the names that hovered on the lips of the scruffy young "westerners". New worlds of poetry opened wide before their childish and adventuresome snobbery. Colours and flashes and lights and musics.¹⁹

This last phrase is important. Babits's poetry is shot through with references to colour, light and music, and it was these elements that attracted him particularly to foreign verse. The list of names may appear very ordinary for a young man of that age seeking inspiration outside his own tradition. But it is worth noting that this Catholic and classical scholar with an interest in philosophy and psychology, seeking for a new line in literature, the voracious reader of foreign works, did not for one moment consider going to Vienna to find out what was happening there, particularly in psychology, which as we have seen he then regarded as the basis of his other studies. The reason is significant for all Hungarian culture at that period: it is the suspicion of anything Austrian. The revolution of 1848 and its suppression left a deep scar on Hungary, and this did not apply only to the politics. The *Ausgleich* of 1867 was passed over in utter silence by a literature which reacted sharply to national feelings. And there was always a reluctance, if not a psychological stop, in the minds of Hungarians

to acknowledge that any good could possibly come from Vienna. It might be argued that one of the reasons for the deadness of Hungarian literature towards the end of the last century was precisely the fact that 1867 had driven Austria and Hungary (Babits's sulking oriental princess) into marriage and removed a popular theme from the writers' list of subjects. It was thus quite normal to overlook Vienna, and only when the journals *Huszadik Század* and *Nyugat* appeared was there a shift of balance. The only one of Babits's friends to go to Vienna to study was Kosztolányi, and he was extremely disappointed by the experience, as his letters to Babits indicate only too clearly.²⁰

Babits's correspondence with Juhász and Kosztolányi reflects his interest in decadence—a term which he does not define and appears to have been used in a very broad sense indeed. He tells them what he has been reading—and reading was the inspiration of much of his work, rather than real life. In 1904 he is trying to write classical odes, but has become “the man of *l'art pour l'art*”²¹. Then he translates Poe, notably *The Bells*²², which Kosztolányi declares is the first of his translations really to appeal to him.²³ Then in the summer of 1904 there appears to have been a letter from Babits mentioning his love of the decadent poets. Kosztolányi's reply is intriguing. He describes how he read through a batch of Babits's poems and was delighted with them at first, but then he “put aside those which smelt of decadence (. . .) Shakespeare and Arany will always be greater than Edgar Poe and Baudelaire, and in the expression of his thoughts Hume a thousand times more so than Nietzsche. So the decadents are among those I detest from the bottom of my heart (. . .) Even the great Baudelaire, who is a giant of a poet and unique, even Jean Richepin whom I have read recently and who in a certain respect stands high as an ideal—not to mention the empty Mallarmé and the sickly Verlaine—To Hell with them! They destroy one's sense of beauty, they blacken one's view of the world for the sake of a French rhyme—for apart from filth, they are chiefly fond of rhymes.” And Kosztolányi continues his lengthy and detailed denunciation, ending significantly, “The reason why I'm informing you of this change of view is that you have known me as someone who has a general inclination towards decadence, and I shouldn't like misunderstandings to come between us in the future.”²⁴

Babits does not reply to this immediately. He writes instead about rediscovering the classics (though at this stage he means Latin) as a source of inspiration. But on 15 September 1904 he returns to the subject of decadence:

My opinion about decadents does not differ from yours, but my opinion about decadence does. This week I happen to have read a great many of the decadents: almost the whole of Verlaine, then Mallarmé, Maeterlinck, Jean Moréas (he's perhaps the most reasonable), also Rimbaud and Paul Fort—who isn't so very decadent. These gentlemen have one fundamental fault in common: all of them are poets of very small calibre. Baudelaire is a giant spirit and a classic compared with them. The majority of them are deadly dull and produced a surprisingly stupefying effect on me; I couldn't get through all I had of a single one of them. But having said this I have not declared my

opinion of decadence. Indeed it is my secret conviction that all great poets are decadent and all really poetic language is decadent language. And if you happened to cite János Arany to oppose the decadents, I declare that I could easily prove that János Arany and his language in particular (...) are decadent. But now perhaps it's not worth my while chasing this up; you yourself will find without any trouble (and not as an exception) lines in the finest pages of our greatest writers far more daring and radically decadent than, for example, the "coloured vowels" of Rimbaud. You will discover what I mean, though I can't explain it, or rather I'm too lazy to do so now,—that the essence of poetry is the same as that of decadence. And it was not in vain that some decadents sought for really decadent expressions in the ancient classical word: classical and decadent are not far apart.²⁵

This is an important statement in Babits's development, for the mixture of classical and decadent in his early volumes of verse is striking, and when he wrote this letter he was working on some of the poems concerned. János Arany (1817–1882) was a poet after Babits's own heart, indeed he regarded him as his Hungarian model. Kosztolányi disagrees with this comparison, referring to Arany's language as "sacred and marble", which he could certainly not term decadent. "True, I said that all one could recognize as the success of decadence was a certain realism in language, which however they always carried to excess and never used with a healthy intellect."²⁶

Then he points out that this realism in language is shared by the real classics such as Arany, Dante and Shakespeare, "but in their case it is allied with thought. All I want to say is that there is no justification in calling the honourable and serious father by the name of the unruly and mischievous son; (...) it's stupid to learn language from the decadents when we have available the ancient source from which we can draw at will."²⁷ And he goes on to make comparisons, to the detriment of the French decadent writers.

Babits makes no detailed reply to this, and Kosztolányi returns to his theme in the following year, when he concludes that both of them have been too keen on mere novelty in verse, and that he has recovered from this in two stages—first by his rejection of the decadents, and now by a true love of philosophy. He then goes on to advise Babits to look back over the poems he most liked and he would see that they were all the result of inspiration. "For my part, under the influence of reading Nietzsche, I chased away such moments when they came. I regarded it as weakness to capture them, and most probably you did too."²⁸ He tells Babits to put "the delight of creativity" at the top of his priorities, to write a lot and grasp at moments of inspiration.

Babits does not reply directly. He then declares that he is "trying to write poetry objectively, like others taking themes from the Bible and from Boccaccio."²⁹ This reference to objectivity is taken up later in 1905 when he writes to his other friend Juhász commenting favourably on his "objective art", adding "Please don't continue with lyric verse, which you've had just as much cause to be bored with as I have. I'd like to deliver philippics, in public, against this accursed tendency of the spirit, that is, lyric, which has no right whatsoever to lay claim to the eternal life of the arts—for after all,

it's a completely new disease! Hardly two hundred years old. There weren't any lyric poets in ancient times (. . .) Before the nineteenth century, lyric was never included among the arts (. . .)

Don't misunderstand me: I must explain that what I'm fighting is not so much the genre called lyric as the accursed spirit of lyric. And here I don't mean the individual. The objective poets of every age saw the world in an individual way; the subjective poets, so-called lyricists, expressed their individual reactions—Pindar his enthusiasm, Catullus his wrath, Propertius his sensual impulses—but always for the world and against the world. Not even the timorous Tibullus ever thought of shutting his eyes."³⁰

Again, this is an important statement, since it shows Babits wrestling with what his first critics found so difficult to comprehend: the objectivity of lyric verse. And it was here that he received encouragement from an equally difficult poet whose works retained their fascination for him throughout his life—Robert Browning.³¹ He saw in Browning a poet of intellectual power, far removed from the 'lyric spirit' he despised, and objective in his approach. And, as his essay of 1912 celebrating the centenary of his birth demonstrates, he appreciated the disharmony and questioning of accepted norms that so often appear in Browning's work.³² He did not, however, call him a decadent in so many words, though he found in him many of the characteristics that would have fitted his earlier enthusiastic defence of decadence.

In 1905 Babits left the university and the intellectually stimulating company of his friends for six years of teaching in the provinces. He began in the Cistercian gimnázium at Baja in south Hungary where he "quarrelled with the boys and drank with the priests" as he put it.³³ And it was during this year that Ady's *Új versek* appeared, causing such a storm that Kosztolányi wrote that any plans they had made for the reformation of Hungarian literature were now totally upset by the appearance of "an unbearable and empty poseur, Endre Ady."³⁴ Babits replied in kind—incidentally his only real outburst against Ady, alongside whose verse his own was to appear in the anthology *A Holnap*,³⁵ and with whom he was to be compared whether he liked it or not. Unlike Kosztolányi, who never came to terms with Ady's writing or personality, Babits soon realized that their poetic methods were totally different, though they both wished to see the rejuvenation of Hungarian literature, and he did not see him as a deadly rival.

From Baja Babits was moved after a year to Szeged, and from there he went to what he regarded as virtual exile in Fogaras, Transylvania. It was during this period that he buried himself in books and reached out beyond France to Britain in earnest. Meredith, Swinburne, Tennyson and Oscar Wilde satisfied his tastes in literature, and in art he became a subscriber to *The Studio*. He grew weary of Wilde after a time, but both Tennyson and Swinburne captivated him with their use of language and their technical skill. But there was something else that he discovered in English Victorian poetry, and that was the inspiration of Greek, as opposed to Latin, classical verse.³⁶

Babits had wrestled with Greek at school and at university, but had found its grammar difficult³⁷; it was in his isolation in Fogaras that he took it up seriously once more, largely because of his English reading. He too came to a realization of its inspiring force and maintained his love for it throughout his life.

This is the complicated background that lies behind Babits's arrival on the Hungarian literary scene. It is the personal quest of a shy intellectual, a born poet with a strong sense of all that makes good poetry—language, form and rhythm, allied with themes that showed immense variety. His approach was European rather than specifically Hungarian; this meant in effect that he was something of a cultural aristocrat. He did not proclaim the expected national message (or, for that matter, attack his nation like Petöfi and Ady); he was certainly a radical, but this did not involve political commitment, and those who expected a clear social message were made to search for it.

Babits was by no means a prolific poet. He was a severe editor of his own works. At the time of his death in 1941 he had published some 320 poems in all (excluding translations and his play in verse, *Laodameia*), but had rejected well over 300 poems, which remain, for the most part, in manuscript. His first book of verse contained 39 poems, five of which had appeared in *A Holnap*. These verses had been written from 1904 onwards, and many of them had been discussed by his friends before appearing in various journals. It is worth recalling this volume, since it gives some clue to the bafflement of Babits's early critics.

The very first poem is a programme-verse with a Latin title, *In Horatium*, beginning with a Hungarian translation of 'Odi profanum vulgus et arceo'—not exactly the most appropriate way, one would have thought, to court popularity in 1909. And it goes on to attack Horace's comfortable philosophy of golden mediocrity: "Let me sing today verse never heard before... for strong young ears", writes Babits, and "Let me sing today the hymn of eternal dissatisfaction". The metre is impeccably alcaic—which harks back to the early nineteenth century and such poets as Berzsenyi, but the thought, the attack on Horace and all that he stands for, combined with the concept of eternal movement and the dependence of life on death, the long and often complicated sentences that weave their way through the stanzas, make for disturbing reading. When this is followed by an Ode to Sin (*Óda a Bűnhöz*)—perhaps Vice would be a better translation—in impeccable Sapphics, the reader is on good decadent ground. This and the succeeding Hymn to Iris (*Himnusz Íriszhez*) are full of the colour, light and music that Babits so much admired in his reading of foreign poets. The language is lush, unashamedly erotic, and once again attacks the stagnation of the world he sees about him, but there is no reference in so many words to conditions in Hungary.

It is no surprise that there are poems about Europe; there is a kaleidoscopic view of eight countries (Far, far away: *Messze... Messze*), and what Babits calls a fantasy entitled *Paris*, best described as a collage, held together by a galloping rhythm and

immensely long sentences, and quite clearly inspired by Ady's poetry concerning Paris, as indeed Babits admits,³⁸ though the style and tone are very different. *Fires (Tüzek)* is a good Baudelairean series of pictures of various types of fire, ending with the fire of hell; this leads to several poems which have night as their theme—Babits was a bad sleeper and had horrifying nightmares. *Sunt lacrimae rerum* evokes the spirit of material things. Only in the ninth poem in the book does a personally-inspired theme appear, "On my mother's name" (*Anyám nevére*), but any reader expecting a romantic poem by a devoted son will be disappointed: it is a bleak little verse which suggests the truth—that Babits did not get on with his mother—and reveals much more about his state of mind than anything concerning his family. That verse ends with a suggested epitaph for himself, and this leads naturally to the next poem with its title, *Epitaph (Sírvers)*, with its refrain of "There's no world better than the next world," because that is the non-world, and that is far better than the world of nerves and flesh, "which is so bitter and foolish."

There are some dramatic monologues, like *The Night-Haired Girl of Aliscum (Aliscum éjhajú lánya)*, in which a whore from his home town dreams of the glories of Rome—the theme is that of La Fontaine's 'Courtesan in Love'. Or there is the folk-style dramatic monologue of the soldier in the Inn at Golgotha (*Golgotai csárda*) who plays dice and wins Christ's cloak; here it appears that Babits knew Browning's "How it strikes a Contemporary". There are Christian and Buddhist contrasted hymns, Nietzschean stanzas based on Tannhäuser (and Babits was fond of Wagner, despite his tone-deafness), and a Turanian March (*Turáni induló*), which might appear to be a good contemporary Hungarian theme, but in fact is a straight translation of Jean Richepin's *Marches Touraniennes*, composed while waiting for a train,³⁹ and a weak verse compared with the others in the volume. It is ironic that this should be the first poem in the book to contain the word "magyar".

There is a surprise poem, showing how good Babits could be when it came to pastiche. It is an unashamedly cabaret verse (this was a time when literary cabaret was fashionable in Budapest), written for the then very young cabaret-singer Vilma Medgyaszay in a splendid mixture of eighteenth-century French, German and Hungarian. Several poems have an Italian flavour, though this may be misleading; though *Recanati* is subtitled "Leopardi's birthplace", the scene is Szekszárd and the poet Babits and the theme his own search for happiness. There are some magnificent sonnets—indeed, Babits was a master of this form. *Market (Vásár)* paints a vivid picture of the market in Fogaras, and this is followed by two *Still Lifes (Csendéletek)*, in one of which he conjures up a scene evoked by a cloud—14 lines containing six classical references! The other is a bleak catalogue of the debris at the bottom of a desk-drawer. Modernity is well represented by a poem called *Movie (Mozgófénykép)*, which gallops through an American melodrama, effectively evoking the hiccups in the projection of an early silent film. The philosophical concept of eternal return is present

at the double ending—the end of the film itself, and the longing of the poet to go to America, which in effect takes the reader back to the beginning. Babits, incidentally, was a great film fan, but at the time when he wrote it (1906–7) this was not a “poetic” theme.

There are some townscapes, but certainly not depicting the attractions of urban life. Old Hotel (*Régi szálloda*) is about a hotelier who murders a rich guest and hides his body under the floor: life goes on above, while “beneath the dark wood covering the corpse disintegrates without a sound”, as the refrain has it—until the final section, which points to the time when “beneath a white stone covering your corpse will disintegrate without a sound.” End of the Town (*Városvég*) is a precise series of scenes of desolation and neglect which evokes a sense of stifled terror. And Lichthof (*A világosság udvara*) is a deliberately “unpoetic” evocation of the dank hole at the back of a tenement-block: there is no attempt to preach a social message, the poem is almost prosaically objective, yet the reader cannot fail to react the poet’s final questions “What is there in it? What is it that upsets me so much in it?”

The only real love-poem in the collection is a meditation on the beauty of the female body, Ray (*Sugár*), as sensual as anything the French decadents wrote—and to be compared with Blood-sucking girls (*Vérivó lányok*), the poem which precedes it, which after an erotic beginning ends with part of the Litany of Loreto, thus suddenly turning it into something mystical and—in the eyes of Babits’s contemporaries—blasphemous.

There are visions in plenty, prefaced by a short introductory poem, With Closed Eyes (*Húnyt szemmel*); “Grasp the slippery pearls of dreams, you who are tired of reality: embroider out of them a pearly cover for your freezing soul.” These visions are disturbing: a black country where not only the visible signs are black, but whose inside, unseen elements are black too—an idea from Poe’s ‘The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym’; The Eternal Corridor (*Az örök folyosó*) depicts the fate of the individual as a journey down an unending labyrinthine corridor full of identical arches, with a nightmarish figure in pursuit—the idea can be traced to both Nietzsche and William James. The penultimate poem is the vision of a church that gradually turns into a bird and flies off, leaving nothing but a “silent square” on the ground (*A templom! Repül!*). The last poem, written as early as 1904, is revealing. It is entitled The Lyricist’s Epilogue (*A lírikus epilógja*), and is in Babits’s favourite sonnet form.

Only I can bear to be a hero of my verse,
First and last in every song of mine.
I long to put the universe in verse,
But so far I’ve not got beyond myself.

And I now believe there’s nothing outside of me,
but even if there is, God knows if there is.
To be locked like a blind nut within a nut
and to wait to break out—oh, how that nauseates me.

There's no way I can break out of my magic circle.
 Only my arrow can pierce it through: desire—
 but I well know, the suggestion of my desire is deceptive.

I remain: to myself a prison,
 for I am the subject and the object,
 alas! I am the omega and the alpha.

This poem would provide a splendid examination-piece for budding philosophers and psychologists, as indeed would much of this first volume. But remembering Babits's strictures on Hungarian poetic traditions, it is easy to see why critics were nonplussed. The Hungarian flavour was minimal, and the expected revelations of a lyric poet were suppressed: where the verse was not sensuous and erotic, instinct, emotion and experience were subjected to a very exacting process of reasoning and calm thought. It was a kind of objectivized lyric that nevertheless allowed glimpses of a poet wrestling with ideas rather than emotions, yet the poet himself was often a witness, a photographer or a man who could address himself in the second person, as from outside.

One of the best contemporary critics, János Horváth, wrote:

Here is a poet who goes about the world, not only that of the present, but the great age of antiquity of history and culture; he reviews and observes with sensitive body and spirit. He catches sounds and scenes, he hears the speech of men living and dead, of market folk and great artists; he hears the speech of stones, statues and paintings, the individual voices of towers, houses, towns, peoples and countries; to him the silent landscape and the passing seasons speak with meaning, for him everything that lives in a visible significance, an audible expression. Yet where is *he*? Where is *his* speech? He who has listened to everything—who hears *him*? Has he no significance? Has he no individual expression?⁴⁰

Horváth goes on to praise his brevity, his sense of form and style and his ability to evoke atmosphere, but notes that one of his serious weaknesses is his tendency to let words run away with him and to allow his train of thought to be debased into mere play upon words. Yet he clearly sees Babits as a force in the confusion that followed the arrival of Ady:

In an age of formless poetic creations, he idolizes form. Among those who stammer out their incomprehensible subjectivism, he is the precisely-spoken poet of objective views; among the muddled naturalists of the subconscious world, he is clear, responsive, trained artistic consciousness in person.⁴¹

Two years later, Babits produced yet another slim volume, *Prince, Suppose Winter Comes Too!* (*Herceg, hátha megjön a tél is!*). This contained a similar mixture of poems, yet in an extended range. Once more there were tantalizing glimpses of the poet's ideas about his craft:

These are cold sonnets. All cleverness
 And passionless, just virtuosity.
 Though nowadays there's no nobility in work,
 these are just work, just carving.

If he's a poet who displays his feverishness, here you are!
 here I stand wanton, undressed! Look at me!
 this is not poetry, but goldsmiths' work!
 and though it's not sincere, it's not comedy.

Every sonnet is a miniature altar,
 who loves words of blood, in disarray,
 let him not read my verse henceforth.

Who long ago were the key to so many hearts,
 sonnet, golden key, lock up my heart,
 firmly, so that only my relative may open it.⁴²

Again here are the classical references, including a wild Bacchic revel (*Bakháns lárma*) and a poem on the Danaids (*A Danaidák*) which by sheer monotony and repetition depicts their dismal fate. And again there are the philosophical poems and the precise nature-scenes. But much more to the fore is the poet himself, still wrestling with his doubts and fears, a lonely and apparently friendless figure. Sándor Sík, the Catholic priest, poet, later professor and mentor of many young poets and writers characterized him most aptly at this time:

These poems lead a double life. On the outside, there are musical rhymes, sparkling, booming, lulling music; on the inside, hidden deeply away is a storm-tossed hermit-soul, a strange and agitated intellect full of feverish struggles.⁴³

And after noting that Babits's classicism is unusually Greek, he declares that there are "few poets who can make us sense the struggles of modern man, see the depths of his problems and feel and make felt his emotions in their entirety with such tempestuousness as this artist of form who appears so cold."⁴⁴

Sík comes near to the truth, and as Babits developed, this slowly came to be recognized. The war of 1914–1919 caused him to regard himself—just as Ady did—as a preserver of ancient virtues; his anti-war poems, highly unpopular at the time, were directed not against the Hungarian war effort, but against war itself as the destroyer of culture. During the revolution of 1919 he accepted a university post and gave a series of remarkable lectures on the theory of literature, known today only through the notes of those who attended them.⁴⁵ For his purely literary activity during this period he was punished by being pensioned off as a teacher and henceforth he lived entirely by his writing and editorial duties. Like all other thinking people in Hungary, he was badly shaken by the effects of the Treaty of Trianon; but he was equally aware of the dangers

of fascism. It is quite wrong to see him at this time as an isolated observer of the Hungarian scene. Whether he liked or not, he was bound to accept the responsibility of being a Hungarian writer and editor, which meant that he had to play, however unwillingly, a public role. Zsigmond Móricz, the novelist who was six years his senior and his uneasy co-editor of *Nyugat* for a time, described him aptly as a very delicate wild beast from the woods, whose black eyes flamed with terror, yet who stood his ground valiantly.⁴⁶

Babits was much more than a poet breaking new ground. He was an experimental novelist—his first work in this genre was a study of a schizophrenic (*The Stork Caliph: A gólyakalifa*, 1916) and his last a horrifying vision of the future (*Elsa the Pilot, or the perfect society: Elza pilóta vagy a tökéletes társadalom*, 1933). He was a prolific translator, ranging from Dante and Shakespeare, Sophocles and medieval Latin hymns to an anthology of erotic verse (*Erato*) that was duly banned. Above all, he was a superb essayist in what one may rightly call the English tradition, and he encouraged younger writers in this art. The work of Antal Szerb, Gábor Halász and László Cs. Szabó shows the extent of his influence. And here his *History of European Literature (Az európai irodalom története)*, first published in 1934, but later revised, deserves special mention. He wrote it, he says, for his own delight, but it shows admirably the breadth of his knowledge of European culture and how he saw Hungarian literature in the European context. He planned a reader to accompany this history, but at the time of his death had written little more than the introduction to the classical Greek section.⁴⁷

Viewed as a Hungarian writer who began his literary career as the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was in its last days, Babits is intriguing as someone who tried to find an individual response to the challenge of the times not in the Hungarian tradition—with the notable exception of János Arany—but in classical and west European culture. It was fortunate for him that the journal *Nyugat* was started, for its editorial policy allowed freedom of theme and treatment provided that the writing was good in the eyes of the editor. His tragedy was that while he was finding his own voice, his world was wrecked by World War I, the revolution of 1919 and Trianon, and his ever-sensitive spirit became a mass of wounds. He was always a man of contradictions in an age that was equally contradictory—and his statement “Who’ll catch me? I’ll slither away like a fish” is entirely in keeping with his attitude. Yet he does inherit certain Hungarian literary traits, the most notable being his conviction that literature was destined to demonstrate opposition. (“For you are nothing, if you are not resistance”) And he believed in battling against “the blind forces of the world and the doubts and emotions of my own spirit,”—these latter as often as not connected with the fearful bouts of illness that he suffered from time to time, culminating in the agony of cancer of the throat that killed him.

Some idea of the esteem in which his fellow-writers held him can be gained from the

memorial volume, edited by Gyula Illyés, that appeared very shortly after his death. Over 70 contributors presented their views of him as poet, novelist, essayist, as educator and editor. All of them had come under his spell, some willingly, others reluctantly. He began his career as a teacher, and remained one all his life: one of the youngest writers to contribute to the Memorial volume, György Bálint, declared:

"He was a great educator. Today the influence he had on the generation of Hungarian writers after the first world war and on the youngest one today cannot be measured. In time it will grow like the ever-widening circles from a stone dropped into the water. I think there is no Hungarian writer of any worth of the last twenty years who has not learnt from him. This does not mean following his themes or style. Like every great master, he did not breed imitators; it was his example that had the greatest influence. His intellectual methods, his whole mentality and—in recent times—his life, too. At the end of the thirties, on the brink of the forties, during a time of whirlwind destruction of spiritual values many young Hungarian writers were strongly influenced by the very fact that Mihály Babits was alive. To be his contemporary was in itself something that compelled one to be conscientious and maintain standards. Gorki wrote that it was impossible to lie in the company of Tolstoy. We may declare that with Babits around it was impossible to write carelessly and unconscientiously. The pen in the hand of a young writer often stopped in the middle of a slipshod thought, a loose sentence: 'What would Babits say to that?'"⁴⁸

Today Babits can be seen as a writer who early in life broke with the literary values of his age and absorbed something much broader and deeper from the whole range of European culture. The result was intellectual poetry and prose of a kind rarely seen in the Hungarian tradition: it was never popular, nor was it intended to be. But, as the young György Bálint noted, it did set standards at a time when the European world was in turmoil and Hungary in particular was shaken by a series of disasters unthinkable at the turn of the century. And although it is customary to regard Ady as the poet with "new songs for new times", as he puts it⁴⁹, he was a lone voice with no followers and no school. Babits's influence was immeasurably greater; it is good to see proper recognition of his work beginning to emerge today after many years of neglect. As a postscript, it is intriguing to observe how well Babits the poet fits in with the English literary tradition—indeed, he is the most accessible twentieth-century Hungarian poet for English readers nurtured on, say, T. S. Eliot.

Notes

1. For an interesting comment on the critical reception of Babits, see Lengyel, Balázs, "A Babits élmény nyomában" in *Mint különös hírmondó* (Budapest, 1983), p. 229.
2. Belia, György, *Babits Mihály tanulóévei* (Budapest, 1983), pp.129–30.
3. Cited in Pók, Lajos, *Babits Mihály* (Budapest, 1967), p. 30.
4. Németh, G. Béla, "Világkép és irodalomfelfogás Az európai irodalom történetében", in *Mint különös hírmondó* (Budapest, 1983), pp. 21–36.
5. Babits, Mihály, *Keresztül-kasul az életemen* (Budapest, 1939), p. 12.

6. Babits, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
7. See Babits's comments on Pál Gyulai, whose lectures he attended in his first year at university, "Az igazság Gyulai Párról", *Esszék, tanulmányok* (Budapest, 1978), vol. I, p. 200.
8. Zempléni, Árpád, "Bizonytalan költők", in *Századvegi költők* (Budapest, 1959), vol. II, p. 127.
9. Babits, *op. cit.*, pp. 113–114. Of the four poets mentioned, Antal Váradi (1854–1923) was the author of countless now forgotten poems for recitation, Emil Ábrányi (1850–1920) wrote much patriotic verse, but was a superb translator, Mihály Szabolcska (1862–1930) wrote village idylls, though some of his more serious poetry deserves recognition, and Lajos Pósa (1850–1914) composed songs and is chiefly known as editor of a children's paper and writer of verse for children.
10. Pók, Lajos, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
11. Belia, György, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
12. Reviews of *The Monist*, *The American Journal of Psychology*, *Magyar Philosophiai Társaság Közleményei* XVI, 1905, pp. 32–39.
13. Babits's draft on an autobiographical sketch, cited in Pók, Lajos, *op. cit.*, pp. 37–38.
14. James, William, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York, 1950), vol. I, p. 271.
15. Rába, György, *Babits Mihály költészete* (Budapest, 1981), p. 55.
16. *Magyar verstan* (Budapest, 1886); *A mértékes magyar verselés*, 1892.
17. See Kosztolányi, Dezső, "Négyesy László" in *Egy ég alatt*, ed. Réz, Pál (Budapest, 1977), pp. 38–40.
18. 'Lévé', cited in Belia, György, *op. cit.*, pp. 185–186.
19. Babits, *Keresztül-kasul az életemen*, Budapest, 1939, p. 114.
20. *Babits–Juhász–Kosztolányi levelezése*, ed. Belia, György (Budapest, 1959), p. 51 and p. 59.
21. *ibid.*, p. 10.
22. *ibid.*, p. 11–12.
23. *ibid.*, p. 20.
24. *ibid.*, p. 25–26.
25. *ibid.*, p. 41.
26. *ibid.*, p. 44.
27. *ibid.*, p. 45.
28. *ibid.*, p. 81.
29. *ibid.*, p. 89.
30. *ibid.*, p. 92.
31. *ibid.*, p. 96.
32. 'Browning', *Nyugat*, 1912, Vol. I, p. 892.
33. *Babits–Juhász–Kosztolányi levelezése*, ed. Belia, György (Budapest, 1959), p. 103.
34. *ibid.*, p. 109.
35. *ibid.*, p. 112.
36. For a fuller account of this connection, see G. F. Cushing, "Babits and the English Classical Tradition", *Acta Litteraria Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 27 (1985), pp. 440–446.
37. *Babits–Juhász–Kosztolányi levelezése*, p. 54.
38. Rába, György, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
39. *ibid.*, p. 208.
40. Horváth, János, "Babits Mihály", *Babits Mihály száz esztendeje*, ed. Pók, Lajos (Budapest, 1983), pp. 61–62.
41. *ibid.*, p. 72.
42. "Szonettek", 1909.
43. Sík, Sándor, "Herceg, hátha megjön a tél is", in *Babits Mihály száz esztendeje*, ed. Pók, Lajos (Budapest, 1983), p. 49.
44. *ibid.*, p. 50.

45. "Az irodalom elmélete", in Babits, Mihály, *Esszék, tanulmányok* (Budapest, 1978), vol. I, pp. 553–645. Another version of the same lectures: Kelevéz, Ágnes and Sárdy, Jánosné, "Babits irodalomelméletének öt egyetemi előadása Szabó Lőrinc lejegyzésében", in *Mint különös hirmondó* (Budapest, 1983), pp. 241–271.
46. Móricz, Zsigmond, "Babits Mihály", in *Babits Emlékkönyv*, ed. Illyés, Gyula (Budapest, 1941), pp. 139–141, based on a shorter version published in *Nyugat*, 1924.
47. Babits, Mihály, *Az európai irodalom olvasókönyve*, ed. Gál, István, (Budapest, 1978).
48. Bálint, György, "A nevelő", *Babits Emlékkönyv*, ed. Illyés, Gyula (Budapest, 1941), p. 103.
49. Ady, Endre, "Góg és Magóg fia vagyok én", introducing *Új versek* (Budapest, 1906).