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A STUDY IN HUNGARIAN LITERARY HISTORY: BABITS ON ADY

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By the turn of the century western Europe, now largely urbanized and undergoing changes as rapid and drastic as ever in its history, had all but abandoned its Victorian-era doctrine of progress. Positivism was giving ground to the vitalist philosophies of Nietzsche and Bergson; Descartes' soul or ego – pure reason which was also one and the same as the self – was, as scrutinized by Freud, beginning to look like a mere speck in the seething ocean of the unconscious. The scientific world-view was straying ever further from the rational Newtonian model, making such paradoxical discoveries as would lead to Einstein's theory of relativity and quantum mechanics.

In the heart of the Habsburg monarchy, however, these new paradigms of thought were, if apprehended at all, embraced with a great deal less urgency. After all, it was only in 1896 that Hungary had celebrated her millennium, certainly a proud moment but in a way also the grandest expression of those provincial and chauvinistic attitudes which would ultimately prove Hungary's undoing.

Yet even amidst all the patriotic sentiment, among the purveyors of which were the uninspired poets Lajos Pósa and Mihály Szabolcska, there began to emerge the signs of a literary renaissance. There were Vajda's magnificent last volumes, which in their peculiar use of symbols anticipated Ady; Komjány's idiosyncratic poetry expressive of a cosmos not accounted for in the folk-national world-view; and Reviczky, whose nearly militant cosmopolitanism foreshadowed Babits.

Ady and Babits were both members of that generation of Hungarians who, by their formidable accomplishments in the arts and sciences, are without peers in Hungarian history. In music there were Bartók and Kodály, in the visual arts Lajos Gulácsy and Ferenc Medgyessy; there were Freud's disciple Sándor Ferenczi, the linguist Zoltán Gombocz, the aesthetician Lukács, the poet and film theorist Béla Balázs. In literature the path towards Hungary's modern age was, in part, prepared by the proliferation of such forward-looking journals and periodicals as *Jövendő*, *Új Idők* and, most important of all, *A Hét*.

The literary periodical, in the modern sense of the world, had arrived. Perhaps the two greatest contributors of *A Hét*, Ignó and Ernő Osvát, joined forces with Miksa Fenyő and financier Lajos Hatvany in 1908 to found what may be the most important Hungarian literary journal ever: the *Nyugat*. Ady contributed to the journal from the

beginning, while Babits, whose death in 1941 essentially meant the end of the *Nyugat*, only joined its ranks towards the end of the year.

At first it was very much Ady around whom literary opinion, praise and opprobrium alike, was centered. His star shone much too bright than that the lesser suns in his vicinity could emerge with their own distinctive contours. But in time it became apparent that in Mihály Babits Hungarian literature had a talent who in many ways rivalled Ady, certainly one whose technical wizardry and stunning erudition owed little to the example of Ady.

Ady looked towards the West, it is true, but ultimately less for literary models than for models of the modern society. He was a newspaper writer first, many of whose poems would take up the same themes already treated in his articles. The revolution he wrought in Hungarian literature was, for all its purposefulness, almost instinctual and but a part—if in retrospect clearly the most significant part—of his career in public life whose main aim was nothing short of the social and political transformation of the country.

Babits, meanwhile, though accepting with reservations Taine's literary determinants of race, milieu and moment, was far from embracing anything so deterministic as the later Marxist-Leninist notion that literature, as a constituent of the super-structure, depended in its development on the socio-economic sphere in which it may be said to operate. So, whereas Babits often likened the development of literature to evolution, he also saw it by and large as a self-contained process, conforming to laws peculiar to itself.

Thus for Babits knowledge and absorption of literary traditions was a vital concern. It was the relative lack of this, he argued, to which Hungarian literature owed its precipitous decline towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Therefore, if Ady seemed to tap into an ancient, almost pre-historical impulse to create his vitally new poetry in the service of social change, Babits immersed himself in literary traditions spanning some three millenia, ultimately to arrive at a philosophy of literature best summed up in the expression *l'art pour l'art*.

The subject of Babits's Ady-criticism enjoys a burgeoning literature. Until the mid 60's or so, the views of Lajos Hatvany and Gyula Földessy held sway. According to them, Babits, who coveted Ady's preeminent position in Hungarian letters, played the part of objective critic only to insinuate a comparison between himself and Ady which was decidedly in his own favor.¹ Since then, thanks mainly to the work of Pál Kardos, Lóránt Basch, István Gál and György Rába, this biased but by no means unfounded view has been giving way to the other extreme. Namely, that Babits was not only fair and objective in his Ady-commentary, but indeed was Ady's most understanding and insightful critic.²

The truth of the matter is somewhere in between. It would be uncharitable, however, to suppose that such anti-Ady overtones as do exist in Babits are entirely, even primarily, to be attributed to Babits's alleged envy of Ady. We should not forget that Babits did recognize Ady's unique talent and his inestimable contribution to Hungarian literature. Ultimately, however, his appreciation of Ady was limited by

several factors, the most important being his own very well-defined literary-aesthetic views which were very much at odds with Ady's. These in turn were shaped and determined by Babits's Transdanubian-Catholic heritage, again at variance with the Partium and Calvinist milieu into which Ady was born.

When therefore Babits is accused, not only in connection with his Ady-writings but with his literary criticism in general, of being too subjective, it would be well to bear in mind the words of T. S. Eliot, who said: "I believe that the critical writings of poets ... owe a great deal of their interest to the fact that the poet, at the back of his mind, if not as his ostensible purpose, is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing, or to formulate the kind that he wants to write."³

(After these introductory remarks, we may now take up the subject of Babits's earliest thoughts and ruminations on Ady—his "private", unpublished Ady criticism.)

By early 1905 faint but ever louder rumblings began making themselves heard. Just as Babits and his friend Kosztolányi were peering into their crystal ball and seeing there a Hungarian literary renaissance which only awaited them to usher it in, in came bolting Ady from out of the blue. In practically a flash, the modern age of Hungarian literature had begun, without either Babits or Kosztolányi.

A journalist who had put in apprentice years in Debrecen and Nagyvárad before settling in Budapest, Ady burst upon the literary scene, in 1905–1906, like a meteor crashing upon a sleepy planet. Although he already had two volumes of poems to his credit, *Versek* (Poems, 1899) and *Még egyszer* (Once Again, 1903), their Biedermeier conventionalities hardly portended the arrival of a great poet. True, the poems that had begun to appear in the dailies *Budapesti Napló*—the paper for which Ady worked—and *Jövendő* might have alerted the especially perceptive to a great poet in the making. Nevertheless, until Ady had returned from his year-long sojourn in Paris, in early 1905, and had unfurled the new poetry which had been conceived or written there, a newspaper writer he essentially remained.

Of course, as Erzsébet Vezér has pointed out, there was always an intimate relationship between his poetry and his journalism, the former being in a way an extension of the latter. Themes, motifs, and issues of the day which had already won a forum in his prose, were taken up again in his poetry.⁴ This in itself would have been enough to raise not a few eyebrows. But Ady's clarion's or crusader's voice, unorthodox metrics, elaborate symbolism, eccentric diction, and peculiarly *Magyar* themes all combined to create a radically new kind of poetry.

Seen in a larger context, Ady was swept in with the second wave of symbolists and had affinities with the likes of Rilke, Verhaeren, Blok and Machado.⁵ An early biographer, József Révai, listed as his main influences the Parnassians, Nietzsche and Tolstoy.⁶ Babits himself argued that Ady could not be understood without appreciating the impact made on him by the iambic verse of Reviczky, the Heine-school, and the French symbolists.⁷ Ady meanwhile regarded János Vajda and Csokonai "as his true predecessors and spiritual relatives".⁸

Although hailed by some as a genius and as the future of Hungarian poetry, Ady

and his poetry exercised a much different effect on the majority of people. As Lajos Fülep remembered:

The sensation was the scandal that such poems were being published at all, such incomprehensible, meaningless, crazy, insane poems, and not just once or twice in some humor periodical, as a joke, but from week to week, with unerring consistency, in a serious political journal."⁹

It was impossible, moreover, to dismiss Ady out of hand, because his provocative style aroused among those genuinely critical of his poetry not apathetic yawns, but outrage and indignation. And Ady, donning the cloak of a prophet, announced in shrill and pompous tones his self-appointed mission.

Verecke híres útján jöttem én,
Fülembe még ósmagyar dal rivall,
Szabad-e Dévénynél betörnöm
Új időknek új dalaival?¹⁰

Babits, in 1905, was in the last of his four years at the University of Budapest, busy cultivating himself and his craft. Although he would remark years later that he had intended to pursue a career in philosophy,¹¹ his major subjects were all the same Latin and Hungarian. Originally he was to have written his thesis on János Arany, but, perhaps daunted by the difficulties in doing an exhaustive study on the poet he admired above all others, he changed his topic to, interestingly enough, a linguistic one: the objective conjugation in Hungarian.¹² Since 1904 he had been attending the writing seminar of László Négyesy, where he made the acquaintance of Gyula Juhász and Dezső Kosztolányi. These three young literary aspirants were all wellread and cultivated, and all shared the same dream: to make a great impact upon the world of *belles lettres*.

The three of them formed at this time a fairly close-knit society. As proof of this can be cited their steady letter correspondence which had its beginnings during, but continued well after their association at the university. The bond between them was in part formed by the worship of common idols: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, the English Romantics, the Parnassians, Ibsen and Tolstoy. Their tastes were by no means identical, however. Kosztolányi's high praise of Byron was countered by Babits's summarial dismissal of same.¹³ Babits's enthusiasm for the decadent in literature, meanwhile, was greeted by Kosztolányi with a mixture of scorn and surprise.¹⁴ And, as we shall see, Juhász's good opinion of Ady would not be shared by either Babits or Kosztolányi.

Now, these young men, but particularly Babits and Kosztolányi, envisaged themselves as the leaders of a great literary renaissance which they saw on the horizon. They groomed themselves for the task purposefully, and in accordance with a common assumption: that the new Hungarian literature would be only so strong as its practitioners were cultured. Knowledge of languages, and of literary traditions, and

the scrupulous attention to craftsmanship—these were the building blocks of great literature.

Babits himself learned German and French while still a youth, and would come to know, with varying levels of proficiency, Latin, Greek, English and Italian. His love of reading and books, fostered at home by his cultivated father, developed at the university into an irrepressible passion. He became on familiar terms with the literature of antiquity, and also grew to like medieval literature, thus combining classical tastes with romantic. But he followed more modern trends as well, and, apart from the idols he shared with Juhász and Kosztolányi, his favorites included Baudelaire, Poe, Whitman, Pushkin, Browning and Swinburne. In philosophy, too, to which he increasingly turned his attention during his university years, Babits displayed an omnivorous reading appetite. Besides Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who were on practically every cultivated person's reading list at the turn of the century, Babits read, or would in due time come to read, Augustine, Spinoza, Kant, and the English Empiricists Locke, Berkeley and Hume. He was also an ardent admirer of the American pragmatist William James, the social Darwinist Herber Spencer, and the vitalist Bergson.

It was all the same Hungarian that constituted one half of Babits's formal fields of study. His letters to Juhász and Kosztolányi, therefore, saturated though they are with references to foreign literatures, also betray their author's keen interest in his—their—national literature. In early 1905, for example, Babits wrote to Kosztolányi, "...I want to acquire for myself a Hungarian education, if there is such a thing. I am trying to read old Hungarian classics."¹⁵ Though not mentioned by name, one of "the classics" Babits no doubt had in mind here was Vörösmarty, about whom he would write two seminal essays. The figure he loved and admired most, however—the one most often mentioned in his letters to Kosztolányi and Juhász—was János Arany, on whom he had till about the time of the letter been engaged in research.¹⁶ It is interesting to note the way Kosztolányi would respond to this news. Writing from Vienna where he was then studying, he exclaimed:

I burst with pride when I read that you too have been transformed into a Hungarian, and that you are engrossing yourself in our literature. I had myself intended, just as soon as I can leave this drab people, to immerse myself in our classics. What a divine joy it must be for you to luxuriate in Arany!¹⁷

In addition, Babits was much taken with the novelist and short-story writer Zsigmond Kemény, who more than any other anticipated a realist style in Hungarian prose. He was, moreover, very fond of Jenő Péterfy whose hybrid world-view, made up in practically equal measure of both positivistic and humanistic traits, was not far from his own.

Nevertheless, it was foreign writers and poets who most captured the imagination of Babits and friends. This was due, in part, to their tacit conviction that the upgrading and modernization of Hungarian literature would be commensurate with how well it could rejoin the European mainstream. Either practically unknown in Hungary or

still lacking any impact were the Parnassians, the Symbolists, the Pre-Raphaelites, and even a great deal of naturalist prose. Certainly one reason for the backwardness of *fin de siècle* Hungarian literature was the fact that, with the exception of a noble few, it was being dominated by a fashion popular out of all proportion to its merits. This trend, which in one form or another persisted for two generations, is most commonly referred to as the "folk-national" style. Though this hybrid of folk culture and nationalist spirit was hardly unique to Hungary, its particularly strong but fossilized presence there only underscored the kinship between Hungarian literature and the other literatures of central and eastern Europe, a fact which can hardly have delighted the modernist Babits.¹⁸

It is ironic that the folk-national movement in Hungary, which on the whole left very little of worth, was inspired by the examples of Petőfi and Arany, two of the greatest poets Hungary has ever known. Babits was, as we know, an ardent admirer of Arany, but felt little empathy for Petőfi. He took pains, however, to deny or denigrate the folk element in Arany, even to the point of calling him essentially a decadent poet.¹⁹ Petőfi's folk character, on the other hand, Babits accentuated to that poet's distinct disadvantage. It is likely, in fact, that Babits's unfavourable opinion of Petőfi was, at least in part, formed in reaction to that romantic and sentimental picture of him painted by the folk-national poets and critics who saw him as a model of virtue. Not surprisingly, Ady and Babits were separated on this issue as well. Ady, for the most part, failed to see in Arany the great poet he was commonly held to be; Petőfi he loved and admired with a boundless zeal. Of course, at the heart of this difference, too, were two disparate life-experiences and world-views.

While Babits, Juhász and Kosztolányi, then, were acquiring in their sequestered academic setting the background in world literature they saw as requisite to the grand literary undertaking of their dreams, Ady was already making a name for himself in the world at large. And just as his name became an ever more common one in the press, so it began to be bandied about in the halls and classrooms of the university. By the spring of 1905, news of Ady had most decidedly penetrated the insular world of the Négyesy seminar.

The Négyesy student most attuned to the pulse of life outside academia was Jenő Mohácsi, and it was he who first championed the cause of Ady within the group. He was an ardent advocate of a radical and activist literature, and in debates within the group where Babits naturally sided with the aesthetics, Mohácsi was invariably the spokesman for the politically committed.²⁰ Kosztolányi, despite sharing the *l'art pour l'art* convictions of Babits, was at first favorably impressed by Mohácsi. In the spring of 1905 Kosztolányi wrote Juhász: "Immediately upon my arrival I received two letters from Jenő Mohácsi, the editor of *Tűz*. I am very sorry indeed that I was unable during my stay to become acquainted with this worthy man. Based on the poems he sent, a great, great deal can be expected of him."²¹ Kosztolányi, however, would soon be revising his high opinion of Mohácsi. In early August of that year he wrote Juhász that Mohácsi had, as it were, "subtly spat on him". The issue from which this insult sprang, says Ferenc Kiss, probably revolved around Ady.²²

What follows is a brief history of Kosztolányi's early views on Ady. This short detour seems unavoidable, since no records survive that might document Babits's earliest reactions to Ady. Moreover, it would be at the urging and behest of Kosztolányi, with whose unfavorable opinion of Ady he was by then well acquainted, that Babits first committed to paper his own opinion of Ady.

Kosztolányi became, judging from the evidence, quite obsessed with Ady. His letters, which before had for the most part been cheerful and playful, increasingly reflect their author's glum moodiness. It was to Juhász that he would first turn to vent his anti-Ady spleen. His hopes, however, of finding in Juhász a fellow Ady-hater would be quite disappointed. In July of 1905 Juhász would inform his friend, "I like Endre Ady. He is nearly as sick as I am, but unquestionably brighter."²³ A short time later, Juhász again responded to his badgering friend's anti-Ady exhortations. "Don't fear for me", he wrote, "because of the noble and dreamy Endre Ady, the Hungarian Verlaine. Unfortunately, I won't get so far as to necessitate that. There are many more philistinian elements in me and much less poesy."²⁴

As Kosztolányi saw that he could not count on Juhász as an ally, he began sending out probes to Babits. No doubt he was thinking of Ady's "Hungarian-fallow" poems when he wrote Babits that "I have become a Hungarian, a bitter, incorrigible, stupidly naïve Hungarian—notwithstanding all the Jenő Mohácsis and Endre Adys."²⁵ This patriotic exclamation, inconsonant though it may seem with Kosztolányi's literary cosmopolitanism, nevertheless calls to mind the letter in which Kosztolányi wrote, together with an ethnic slur aimed at the Austrians, that he had "burst with pride" over the news that Babits had "been transformed into a Hungarian". On November 2, 1905 Kosztolányi wrote Babits another plaintive letter. Referring again to Mohácsi and Juhász and others of "today's youth", he dismisses them and their modernist literature. "Very much the newspaper writers. Very ignorant..."²⁶ Although he is not mentioned by name, Ady the journalist cannot be far from Kosztolányi's thoughts.

Stir up controversy though he had, it was not until the publication of *Új versek* (New Poems) in 1906 that Ady became a national phenomenon. No volume of Hungarian poems, either before or since, has been so lauded and maligned. Kosztolányi wasted no time in communicating his thoughts on the volume. Already in mid February he wrote Babits a letter which, though intended as a "review" of *Új versek*, was in reality a more comprehensive criticism of its author. Employing a wide range of arguments, literary and extra-literary alike, Kosztolányi criticized as much the poet as the poems. Many of these arguments would later be echoed by Babits himself.

The letter reached Babits in Baja where he was now engaged as a teacher at a Cistercian *gymnasium*. A copy of Ady's book had already been sent in a separate package. "Do you still remember", reminisces Kosztolányi, "the days when we dreamt of the re-creation of our literature, when we demanded of every new poet a modern and fresh spirit, genuine inspiration and scholarly training?" He continues: "Today times have changed, and it seems as though our plans and, with them, our

success must wait a good long while."²⁷ This rhetorical opening can hardly have missed striking a responsive chord in Babits.

After this well-oiled preface Kosztolányi gets to the heart of his grievance. "An insufferable and empty *poseur* has been placed on the throne of modern literature: Endre Ady." He has been placed there, moreover, "by those youths whose modern spirit is no better than they must publish in the *B. N.*'s literature column their bad, mannered and affectedly chaotic poems".²⁸ To this group of modernist youths no doubt belong Juhász and Mohácsi, whom Kosztolányi has already sarcastically mentioned. His feelings toward Juhász would continue to cool. Nevertheless, in his correspondence at least, he scrupulously reserved his criticisms of his friend for Babits, revealing to Juhász himself relatively few hints of his changing attitude. Mohácsi, meanwhile, who had in fact little in common with Juhász, was routinely spoken of by Kosztolányi in the same breath as Ady. What made Juhász and Mohácsi birds of a feather, in Kosztolányi's eyes, and what eventually made even their art and their very intelligence suspect, was simply their high estimation of Ady.

All the evidence suggests that Kosztolányi's ill feelings toward Ady were closely tied to his poisoned relations with Mohácsi. But as to which can be called cause, and which effect—this is a matter impossible to resolve. In any event, Kosztolányi soon formed the habit of discrediting Ady by associating him with the group of "modernist youths" to which belonged Mohácsi, and of discrediting these modernist youths by virtue of their association with and high opinion of Ady. It was a perfectly circular argument, one which Kosztolányi used with impunity. It was also a tactic that Babits himself would utilize to good advantage. In Babits's hands, however, the tactic turned from the transparent to the opaque, becoming an argument with a veneer of respectability. After all, his version would be published and thus be scrutinized by more than just friends. The most important difference between the two uses of basically the same tactic lay in Babits's apparent efforts at distinguishing between Ady and, as he put it, the "Ady-hyenas". How sincere his efforts were here, however, is a matter of some debate.

Affectation is a word Kosztolányi often used in describing Ady's and his followers' poetry.

These unschooled and feeble little lads [Ady and Mohácsi] look for something extraordinary and special, they themselves don't know what. They affect a love for the world, and they affect eccentricity. This is something many cannot befriend even when it is natural. For there is such a thing as natural affectation—the affectation of Baudelaire is natural, for example. They never feel so good as when they manage to write a poem that even they themselves cannot understand.²⁹

Clearly Kosztolányi is thinking here of the obscurity – even incomprehensibility – commonly attributed to Ady's poetry. What Kosztolányi means by Ady's affected "love for the world", however, is rather hard to say. He may be alluding to Ady's penchant for political engagement, a trait which would not endear him to Babits any better.

Gyula Földessy would claim, decades later, that both Babits and Kosztolányi made the habit of suggesting that Ady lacked the high level of culture which it was their own privilege to possess.³⁰ It is interesting to note that Földessy made this claim on the basis of published criticism only; he was as yet unaware of the existence of this letter or of Babits's reply. Yet this is what "These unschooled and feeble lads..." obviously implies. In a follow-up letter, Kosztolányi, speaking mainly of Ady's Schopenhauer-quoting disciples but, by extension, quite clearly also of Ady himself, took into aim both the group's ignorance and their pretensions. "And then they stroll up and down the boulevard, feeling very proud to be poets, and nobody knows that their Schopenhauer has not even been cut open."³¹

But it was Ady's apparent condescension toward nation and country that seemed most to rankle Kosztolányi. "By all means", he implores Babits, "let me hear what you have to say about Ady's scolding of the Hungarians and such expressions as 'Sad Hungarian fallow'..." This begins a curious patriotic outburst.

The same blood is astir in me as that which poured from my grandfather's veins on the Isaszeg plain. Because I am, however much it may hurt, a Hungarian, an unrestrained Hungarian at that, and so I will remain despite all my sociological studies.³²

This sentiment of Kosztolányi would of course exercise a predictable effect on Babits, who also had a grandfather who fought in the war of 1848-1849 against the Habsburgs.

Babits's reply to Kosztolányi's letter contains exceedingly harsh criticisms of Ady. Of course, the extreme severity of the attack may in large part be attributed to the special circumstances in which it was written. There is no doubt that Kosztolányi was in effect pleading with his friend to deliver as harsh a judgment as possible. But what he got from Babits must have exceeded his every expectation. For there is hardly another writing on Ady that so viciously and summarily dismisses the great poet as precisely this letter. And though the judgments therein are rendered much harsher by the hyperbole which Babits clearly intended for the private amusement of his friend, they must all the same be regarded as sincere judgments.

Babits indicates at the outset that his assessment of Ady agrees with Kosztolányi's. "You are right. Endre Ady is a nauseating poet, that is the best word for it..." He elaborates: "When I reads his first couple of - truly beautiful - poems in *Jövendő*, I noted then that there was in the man an inner rhythmic rocking. This rocking has since become what one is accustomed to catch sea-sickness from."³³ Behind this barb may be Babits's disapproving attitude toward Ady's metrical liberties. But it is not mere pedantry that leads Babits to censure Ady. "That [Ady] is not a great talent his mannered style and imbecilic, impotent self-repetition proves. But it proves something else also: that he is idle and lazy. His formal sloppiness is all the more unforgivable because it is not sincere and is not based on a struggle with content. It lacks all *Knappheit*, connectedness, solidity, economy."³⁴

Thus Babits fails to see in Ady the requisite matching up of form and content, which to him is a form of insincerity. One trait of Ady singled out by Babits is his

penchant for self-repetition. Obviously he is not against repetition *per se*; his high opinion of the incantatory Poe is enough to put that notion to rest. But apparently he sees in the self-repetition of Ady a mere signature, an empty device, which is more often than not imposed on material that would seem to resist such treatment. This trait of Ady is so pronounced, in fact, that it might be said to court and invite parody. Take, for example, Frigyes Karinthy's "A Törpe-fejűek" (first and last stanzas).

Nem dolgozni jöttem ide,
Nem dolgozni jöttem ide,
Törpe-fejű, mit akarsz tőlem?

Hát maga megbolondult,
Hát maga megbolondult,
Hogy mindent kétszer mond, kétszer mond.³⁵

But self-repetition is, to Babits, only one of many symptoms of Ady's deficiency as a poet. The "common fault of the juvenile, 'modern' Hungarian literature", of which Ady is the acknowledged leader, "is this dilutedness, this slipshodness, looseness. They continually clamor for *studies* and for *content*, whereas in fact they are too lazy to be serious or to undertake any studies—that is the right word for it: lazy!"³⁶ Babits seems therefore to agree with Kosztolányi that Ady lacks the seriousness and cultivation which the truly good poet requires. Also similarly to Kosztolányi, Babits deems to see in Ady not an isolated example but in fact one of many—albeit the most celebrated one—of the gaping chasm in "modern" literature between serious intentions, on the one hand, and sloppy execution on the other.

Babits also takes exception to what he regards as Ady's lack of taste.

Ady has another unpleasant side—his tastelessness and antipathetical nature. I cannot imagine anything more tasteless than the book's dedication, "To the mistress Léda". ("The mistress Léda" itself as name and title is tasteless and mannered, as are the psalms of "the mistress Léda".) "In the growing fevers of my waning life, in deep storms, in fires of Hell"—what a half-baked intellect it is who could like something like this! And what immodesty! Such a thing may be said in verse, even in a prose poem, but to say the like in a foreword or in a dedication is against modesty. Look at the great poets' dedications and forewords. How modest even the least restrained of them are before getting into the saddle. Look at Baudelaire's pleasant dedications, or those of Byron.³⁷

What Babits here chooses to call immodest Kosztolányi dubbed affectatious. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that they are at bottom referring to very much the same thing.

Babits next proceeds to address the patriotic-tinged issue broached by Kosztolányi. "But of the many instances of poor taste the greatest is doubtless the cursing of the Hungarian fallow."³⁸ Here upon Babits launches into a bitter and suprisingly chauvinistic invective.

Does Ady, I wonder, come from an ancient Hungarian family. I'm Hungarian, I come from a Hungarian family of nobility (I'm very proud of this fact), on my father's side as well as my mother's. And in both branches, since time immemorial, my grandfathers, their fathers have been county office-holders. (Is there a more Hungarian occupation?) My father was the first to step into the service of the state, but even he was a prime example of the Hungarian lawyer and gentleman. And I—who with my career and to a great extent also my learning (though my father was... also cultured in the modern European sense) have broken with the family tradition, the centuries-old spirit—even I sense better with each passing day how natural and logical a continuation I am of my honorable forebears. My grandfather, who fought in the War of Independence, liked poetry, and collected a library.³⁹

There are in this outburst contradictory impulses. On the one hand, Babits would like to distinguish himself, by virtue of his vocation and education, from his noble forebears whose learnedness he seems to regard as questionable. Since, however, his main aim here is to deny Ady a place in the noble ranks, he has little choice but to stress his own place there. In the end, he resolves this paradox, not by attributing to himself a county clerk's mentality, but by ascribing to his forebears – to his father and grandfather at any rate – a cultivated mind not unlike his own. One effect of this convoluted argument is to impute to Ady, depicted after all as being outside the circle of nobility, the same lack of intellectual means and erudition already referred to by Kosztolányi.

Clearly Babits is, among other things, implying that the criticism of Hungarians is best regarded as the privilege of Hungarians of noble extraction only. Even so, casting aspersions on Ady's pedigree is hardly his main purpose here. Babits, referring to the "Hungarian fallow", concedes that "there is something of this theme in the air". But "for Ady", of noble extraction or not, "it is just an occasion for decadence".⁴⁰ Babits here obviously uses "decadence" in a pejorative sense of the word. As a rule, for example in the case of János Arany, decadence for Babits is a positive attribute. Just why he regards Ady's treatment of the theme as decadent is of course hard to determine, unless it is because "one is permitted to touch on this subject only with love and respect".⁴¹ Ultimately, Babits's objections may rest on a vague apprehension of the same problem as later formulated by Gyula Szekfű. "Guilt and the burden of the nation's sins weigh down upon Ady—but his moral grasp is inadequate to show him a way out of the sinful decline."⁴² Others, however, would find more than enough to praise in Ady's basic insight. Marcell Benedek, for example, observed: "I find strange a great many things in the verse of the new poet to have emerged of late, Endre Ady. But the painful truth of his remarks about the Hungarian fallow cannot be disputed."⁴³

The backwardness of Hungary as an emerging literary theme, argues István Király, was by the turn of the century increasingly evident. One found it, for example, in the poetry of Juhász, the prose of Zsigmond Móricz, Gyula Török's novel *Porban*, and for that matter in the poetry of the young Babits.⁴⁴ Babits, however, was only following unconscious impulses and had none of Ady's revolutionary propensities. For the only "revolution" that Babits believed in was the one in literature which he

was plotting together with Kosztolányi. Babits believed, in 1906, that a literary revival in Hungary depended most of all on whether a living bond could be reestablished between Hungarian literature and the literature of the West. Even some thirty years later he would see growth and change in literature as essentially a self-contained process.⁴⁵ Whether Babits saw no need for the transformation of Hungarian society in general, or simply did not think a literary resurgence, which was then still his primary concern, was dependent on one, his basic outlook was apolitical. He was not inclined, therefore, to find appealing a reformist literature like Ady's. Ferenc Kiss has put it more bluntly: "Babits and Kosztolányi were quite lacking the will, hence the sense of mission, to reform in its entirety national life. This is why, to them Ady's prophetic stance and pompous poetic speech were antipathetic..."⁴⁶

Babits finishes his letter to Kosztolányi with a remarkable flourish.

Let us remove this unpleasant figure who stands in the background of our thoughts. Endre Ady has the right to practice Hungarian poetry (even if the mastery of the language for which he is famous is not borne out by either resonance of meaning or stylistic invention), because *he has created a few nice rhythms and atmospheric words, and because he has written a few nice poems.* [Italics mine.] And so when he asks us (quite naïvely), "May I cry beneath the Carpathians?", let us tell him plainly (just before we turn our backs on him): "Go right ahead. Don't let us disturb you. Cry. Even whine". But he doesn't whine—he just mews. And his voice very much resembles that of a cat in love . . .⁴⁷

Thus comes to a close this remarkable letter which, for all its interesting observations, is saturated with the venom of sour grapes. For the time being, Babits and Kosztolányi indulge themselves in the thought that, though to Ady may go the laurels, the moral victory is theirs.

Oddly enough, in this, the most sarcastic passage of the letter Babits puts in a good word for individual poems of Ady—unfortunately unspecified—and, moreover, for certain general characteristics and features. These words of muted praise would, in fact, prove to be the seeds of a more mature and objective Ady-criticism. Indeed, much of what was here grist for the debunking mill would in time be recycled to serve other ends, including even the unambiguous praise of Ady. Therefore, however much it seemed to seal their alliance, this letter in fact marked a parting of the ways for Babits and Kosztolányi, at least as far as their opinions of Ady were concerned. Kosztolányi, though for more than two decades constrained to offer Ady occasional token praise, only became confirmed in his opinion of Ady as a much overrated poet. Babits, meanwhile, would amend his opinion of Ady, and amend it again, creating along the way a body of criticism that, marred by internal contradictions though it may be, would offer important and profound insights into the most discussed Hungarian poet of the century.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Lajos Hatvany, "Vázlatok Babits Mihályról" (1921–1922) and "Petőfi és Arany" (1922–1923), *Irodalmi tanulmányok*, Vol. 1, (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1960); also Gyula Földessy, *Ady értékelése – Az "Új versek"-megjelenésétől máig – Kosztolányi és Babits szerepe az Ady-problémában* (Budapest: A Kelet Népe, 1939). Hereafter cited by Földessy and page.
2. Pál Kardos, "Ady és Babits kapcsolatban 1919-ig" (1961) and "Babits viszonya Adyhoz 1919 után", *Irodalmi problémák*, Budapest: Gondolat, 1979; Lóránt Basch, "Adalékok az Ady–Babits kérdéshez". *Studia Litteraria* (1964), pp. 79–89; István Gál, Babits Adyról (Budapest: Magvető, 1975); György Rába, *Babits Mihály* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1963), in particular the chapter "Esszéi mint a gondolkodás és frás dialektikájának problémaelemzései", pp. 154–169.
3. T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Noonday Press, 1974), p. 17.
4. Erzsébet Vezér, *Ady Endre* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1968), pp. 81–82.
5. *A magyar irodalom története*, ed. Tibor Klaniczay, (Budapest: Kossuth 1982), pp. 277–278.
6. József Révai, *Ady* (Budapest: Szikra, 1952), pp. 24–31. Hereafter cited by Révai and page.
7. Mihály Babits, "Tanulmány Adyról" (1920), *Esszék, tanulmányok* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1978), p. 672.
8. Révai, p. 99.
9. Lajos Fülep, *Művészet és világnézet* (Budapest: Magvető, 1976), p. 45.
10. Second stanza from the famous prologue of Ady's *Új versek*. In English: "I came on the famous Verecke path, / An ancient Hungarian song was still blaring in my ears, / May I invade at Dévény / with new songs of new times?" All translations – which in the case of poems aim at literal and not poetic fidelity – are my own except where otherwise indicated. (Note: "Verecke" denotes the pass in the Carpathian mountains over which the Hungarians came, late in the ninth century, into their present-day homeland in the Carpathian basin; "Dévény" is the name of a small town on the western border of historic Hungary.)
11. In 1928 Babits had this to say on the subject: "I had to renounce my ambitions in philosophy when I wound up in the provinces, where it is impossible to stay in touch with the latest developments of a science." Cited in György Rába, *Babits Mihály költészete* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1981), p. 11. Originally in László Bende, "A jubiláns Babits Mihály elmondja hogyan lett költővé ő, aki valamikor undorodott a versírástól", *Esti Kurír* (June 2, 1928), p. 13.
12. Babits's unfinished thesis, "Arany mint arisztokrata", anticipates in many ways the author's celebrated essay "Petőfi és Arany" (1910).
13. After many artful attempts on his part to dodge the issue, Babits, on February 17, 1905, finally wrote Kosztolányi these few words on Byron: "Lately I have even been reading Byron (for Arany's sake) – boring it's not, but it, too, is stupid." Kosztolányi replied, "Byron, by the way, is not stupid, as you write. I have found in him everything I have been looking for..." *Babits, Juhász. Kosztolányi levelezése*, eds. Dezső Tóth and Kálmán Vargha (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1959), pp. 79, 82. Hereafter cited by *BJK* and page.
14. Kosztolányi, e.g., wrote that "The decadents... are among those people I hate from the depths of my soul." Babits, meanwhile, while echoing Kosztolányi's unfavorable opinion of the French *symbolistes*, including Verlaine, nevertheless wrote: "It is my secretly held conviction that every true poetic language is a decadent language." *BJK*, pp. 25, 41.
15. *BJK*, p. 79.
16. In fact, it was in this very letter that Babits, despite having "amassed an enormous collection of data for the János Arany biography", informed Kosztolányi that he would be abandoning his project. *BJK*, p. 79.
17. *BJK*, pp. 81–82.
18. In his *Az európai irodalom története* Babits may take up the great and immortal figures of Hungarian literature, but other Central or East European literatures (except, of course, for Russian) he almost entirely neglects.

19. In an early letter to Kosztolányi (September 15, 1904), e.g., Babits challenged: "And if it was precisely Arany that you mentioned in opposition to the decadents, I say it would be easy for me to prove that János Arany and mainly his language (and if the language is, then so must be the man) are decadent..." *BJK*, p. 41.
20. See Ferenc Kiss, *A beérkezés küszöbén* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1962), p. 125. Hereafter cited by Kiss and page.
21. *BJK*, p. 84.
22. Kiss, pp. 125-126.
23. *BJK*, p. 87.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110. (Note: *P. N* = *Budapesti Napló*)
29. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
30. Földessy once wrote, for example: "Babits insisted on his superior erudition *vis à vis* Ady, and made a case of Ady's deficient erudition not once in his writings." See Földessy, p. 34.
31. *BJK*, p. 121.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
34. *Idem.*
35. "I did not come here to work" / "I did not come here to work" / Dwarf-head, what do you want of me?" / ... / Have you gone quite mad, / That you say everything twice, everything twice?" First and last strophes of the Ady-parody "A Törpe-fejúék", Frigyes Karinthy, *Így írtok ti* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1986, p. 18.
36. *BJK*, p. 112.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 113. The quoted passage in the original Hungarian reads: "... fogyó életem növd lázában, mély viharzásokon és poklok tükrében." Translation by Anton N. Nyerges, *Poems of Endre Ady* (Buffalo, N. Y., Hungarian Cultural Foundation, 1969), p. 57.
38. *Idem.*
39. *Ibid.*, p. 113-114.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
41. *Idem.*
42. Gyula Szekfő, *A három nemzedék* (Budapest: Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, 1938), p. 370.
43. Cited in István Király, *Endre Ady*, Vol. 1. (Budapest: Magvető, 1972), p. 147.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
45. See *Az európai irodalom története*, pp. 113.
46. Kiss, p. 132.
47. *BJK*, p. 114.