

# Image of the World and Conception of Literature in Babits' European Literary History

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The subject of my paper is the borderland between the history of literature and the history of thinking; more exactly one of the most significant and profound personalities of 20th century Hungarian literature: Mihály Babits. From the plentiful harvest his activities have yielded his ideological and interpretative presentation by the so-called exclusive perusal in his famous literary history seemed the most suitable for my research.

## I

Reading and re-reading his non-literary prose the impression that it would be more fruitful to concentrate upon the lectures on literary theory held in 1919 at the university — the lectures that established his principles on the subject — waxed stronger. By that time the essays that elaborated his ideology had for the most part been written; he had done the reading that influenced his interpretation of life and literature. Works of art, events, processes could modify and naturally did modify that which was thus created; above all the trauma of Trianon, the narrow-mindedness of the restoration, and the brutality of fascism: but fundamentally they changed or altered little, and even these modifications were carried into effect in a manner that suited him.

Yet when my analysis was complete I had to admit that I would impoverish perhaps the richest but surely the most mature 20th century Hungarian spheres of thought by choosing a genre that was *not* truly suited to his character, a work that was *not* truly characteristic of his talent. His genre is the classical essay which he steered back from the torpid lowlands, the insipid marshes, the tangled web of cajolery of the Nyugat-generations to the objective individualism, the assertive intellectuality, the logical coherence of the great Hungarian liberal thinkers. But what can above all be brought up in favour of his literary history is the fact that this work comprises all the essential elements of all the pieces that constitute his didactic prose oeuvre, the suggestions and results of the experience of European cultural, literary,

psychological and dialectic history. Which naturally does not mean that the image of the world and conception of literature manifest in earlier works exactly corresponds to that of this one; that would be a particularly absurd supposition in relation to the mentality of this restless percipient of the dynamically changing and creative time.

## 2

The books that deal with Babits are numerous but primarily of a communicative, philological nature. I am indebted to these books but especially to those that courageously and expeditiously elaborate as well as disclose facts: to the works of János Barta, Pál Kardos, Dezső Keresztury, István Király, János Reisinger, György Rónay, István Sótér, Tamás Ungvári and others, but above all to the superb book of György Rába. If I do not refer to these books again and again it is only for the sake of saving time — as is my reluctance to quote the author himself, all the more as Babits's texts, like those of all true speculative writers, form for the most part logical links or sequences, and are detachable from these sequences only with great difficulty; are rarely aphoristic, thesis- or maxim-like, and even more rarely, if ever, proclamative.

Compulsory thrift and respect for the composition of texts are my reasons for confining myself strictly to my author's didactic prose. The *direct* introduction of poetry and fiction — without the mediation of poetics and study of genres and the *analysis* of the intention of creation — seems to me inadmissible, even if it is an accepted custom of our literary histories — though most of the Babits studies, especially the afore-mentioned book, does not fall into this error.

## 3

In relation to this work it is, we feel, especially important to elaborate and emphasize three of those elements proper to Babits' conservative liberal image of the world — and to his conception of literature which originates in and is constructed upon it.

## 3/a

The first of these is his *Catholicism*, originating in his heritage, schooling, and environment. In his first periods this ran deep beneath the surface and was rarely, if ever, directly externalized, only to burst forth and come into prominence in later years. This late Catholicism — especially the Catholicism manifest in this work — is naturally not identical with the Catholicism that was his heritage. It had become richer and had been altered by all the cultural and artistic experience and contemplation that a constant reader could collect into this volume as a result of a meditative way of life.

At first sight this Catholicism may seem primarily artistic and historio-cultural, liturgic and moral, tradition-bound and tradition-regulating. Yet it is above all philosophical; cognitive and ontological, metaphysical and transcendence-principled. And to the philosophical elements are coupled two theological elements in the strictest sense of the word: that of beatitude and salvation, which we may, of course, conceive as *historiophilosophical*. But none of the elements form part of the dogmatic tenets of the established church. The passionate declaration concerning the Church open at all times and to all peoples which he makes in the introduction of this book may seem to contradict this. But while one of the most glowing chapters is consecrated to Saint Augustine there is nothing but the cursory nod of a sentence to commemorate the great Saint of Aquinas, great master of hymnody that he may be. And if we take into consideration all that he has said about the church from the point of view of the whole book it is clear that his Ecclesia is the Old Christian church in which every soul seeking, desiring salvation and enlightenment, purification and improvement, irrespective of rank and station, language or nationality shall find realization of that desire and of his humanity in that desire. Therefore we should not be speaking of Catholicism but of catholicity, of oecumenity, of the greatest and truest universality of those desiring more than a biological, nay, we may even say more than a *merely rational* existence.

But here we must stop to consider a contradiction that may justly be raised. Catholicism and liberalism were irreconcilable adversaries in the 18th and 19th centuries. This contradiction is not only resolved with Babits: at a decisive point of his conception the two ideologies blend into one. Catholicism — or let us in this case say Christianity — besides and in spite of its doctrine of fraternal love, charity and responsibility for one another — is an *individual ideology*. It is not due to one's nationality, race, class, language or turn of mind but in consequence of one's personal life, beliefs, deserts and actions that one is integrated into the church to find salvation within and through religion. One of the greatest historical feats of Christianity is the realization, in European history and thought, of the concept of the potential equality of every individual — at least before the tribunal of God — a concept that acted upon the consciousness of the largest masses. Babits was fond of — and varied with pleasure — the obsolete expression from the Hungarian Credo "the accord of the Saints": that is, the union and universality of the blessed and those in search of salvation. There is no pursuit or tenet more grotesque or repulsive to him, to the man brought up on *European Christian culture and liberal ideology* than that of a racial, national, class religion, culture, truth. Like one of the last past-masters of the theory of liberalism, J. S. Mill, he too saw in the collectivity of individuals striving to attain truth, salvation, prosperity and perfection the greatest and truest realisation of fellowship

and universality, though unlike Mill he was more wont to cite Goethe as the most eminent representative, archetype and dominant example of this collectivity and universality.

And here we must add a parenthetical observation to our temporary digression. No onslaught as brutal as that of Bangha-Nyistor's *Magyar Kultúra* had ever been launched against Babits. The trusted followers of the authoritarian Church recognized in him the true jeopardizer of religion hierarchized to secure acceptance of their power. They were justly concerned for their own privileged master's dominion. For like the famous Prussian king who thought suspect and dangerous any person able and daring enough to think without the licence and guide-marks of power, so they felt menaced by the *homo liber* and the *anthropos catholicos*, the man who was free and strived for perfection, who dared to invade the territory they considered their patented métier with his individual thinking.

After this parenthetical but necessary comment let us continue our discussion. The content of Babits' Catholicism was decisively influenced by two ancient philosophers, the Greek Plato and the Old Christian Saint Augustine.

The first impressed him with his ideology and his teachings of the Eros. The idea of things is more complete and more real than the things themselves. The divination and desire of these ideas lives in our hearts. We are forever approaching them but can never attain them. Babits never propounds but suggests that it is the idea of ideas representing value and energy that operates in all things, holds everything together, makes everything worth-while. It is after this that individual and universal man strives. And it is this aspiration that prompts, urges, operates deep within the Eros, it is this that lies at the depth of its thirst. Babits interprets the Eros in the widest platonic sense. Ideas are concealed everywhere, therefore the idea of ideas is present in everything. The longing for this and these penetrates all things and prepares them for the irruption of the Eros. Babits himself acknowledged how deeply this conception of ideas and the Eros was permeated with the ideology of Spinoza.

But this and later concepts gained their world image-forming and organizing character through the author's experience, revelation and interpretation of the works of Saint Augustine. If we took into account every reference to the Bishop of Hippo, and not only those in which he appears by name, he would head the index, commanding Dante, Shakespeare, even the most revered master of Weimar. Speaking of him Babits's voice becomes fervent and if he wishes to enhance a favourite speculative author a comparative reference to Saint Augustine appears on every occasion — even Kant, treated at first with unvarnished antipathy, gains admittance to his heart and mind because of his fundamental ideas and concepts.

Which are then those main elements of Augustine's work that he considers important and uses or recognizes as structural elements of his world image?

When we *constrain* these into four main points it is only for the sake of an *analytical approach* that we may dissociate the elements pertaining to his image of the world and those pertaining to his conception of literature. For time and again it is in the self-same sentence that he declares that this is the first modern intellect and the first modern style; that this is the first new concept of the world and the first new presentation of the inner life; that this is the first real portrayal of inner experience and the first real self-analysis, in comparison to which even Rousseau adds but exhibitionism and affectedness and nothing essentially new.

The first element may be said to be ontological and epistemological. Augustine, according to Babits, sees life in its entirety, but knows that the true essence as regards the individual and mankind is *inner life, interior development*. And this inner life and development is more than the intellect can grasp — but it can be divined intuitively, can be grasped through inner observation, and a lot of it — an ever-increasing amount of it — may be recorded through the resolution to confess. This is not only and not primarily a flash-like, heuristic intuition but is experiential, sensorial, or to use our author's favourite word, sensual. This apprehension is subjective and personal, but its reality is objective as regards the spiritual world and the environment of man alike.

The second augustinian feature of Babits' image of the world may be defined as being metaphysical and moral. The individual senses, is familiar with the reality and attraction of ideas, especially with the reality and attraction of the idea of ideas, the essence, the truth, the divinity. In the awareness of this reality and in the field of this attraction every manifestation of the Eros *may* be transformed into the worship of God; *may* be projected upon all living things as piety, and *may* embrace all living things with devotion. But not necessarily, not obviously. Because the Eros may impel towards evil, since human nature, impregnated by the Eros, is dual from the outset, and therefore the issues of the Eros it encompasses, the Eros that fills it, may also be of a dual character. The specific recognition, acceptance and admittance of this duality and the nature of the struggle to combat it represents the third and fourth characteristically augustinian features of Babits' composition.

Citing Charles Lamb, according to whom Augustine is the saint that mothers may hate more than most but whom Schopenhauer may extol with elation gives Babits great pleasure — an almost sensual delight. It is the presupposition of the evil inherent in the spirit of man, of the fact of the original sin that makes, in his opinion, the one and the other talk *thus*. Yet Augustine, thinks Babits, achieves escape through and at the cost of a great

emotional shock. Through and at the cost of an enormous shock because this sceptical mind cannot be satisfied with cheap utopistic monism and teleology — for what kind of Idea, what kind of Truth, what kind of God is that in whose emanation, in whose essential effusion *evil*, and in its wake *damnation*, is contained? But the thirst for truth, for the essence, for the Idea that is present in every soul, and the attraction that emanates from the Idea — or, as Babits makes Augustine say in a Spinoza-like fashion — from the Universal Spirit upon every soul, the *illuminatio veritatis* renders capable every soul of combatting evil. The love, advice and experience of one's companions may be of service in this struggle but the final decision must be a personal one. No one can be redeemed in spite of themselves but each may work out his own salvation.

The doctors of religion and faith may with good and just reason accuse Babits' Augustine of upholding an anthropomorphically teleological, humanistically principled image of God and of dialectics that resolve the discrepancy between good and evil and thus verge on psychology — as Augustine himself was charged with these and not without reason, though the accusation coming from others, especially from those approaching the Hegelian view, became credit and praise.

All this however lies far from our province. Let us be content with the inference that human nature, the inherent duality of the Eros it contains and the resolution of that duality in the aforementioned manner — or, to comply with many philosophical authors, let us say, his *augustinian dialectics* — may have been one of the most decisive points or *the* most decisive point that bound Babits to this conception. At all events it is a *statistically* demonstrable fact that one of the main concepts, one of the key-words of his image of man and his conception of literature is that *thirst*, that *craving* which exists in the spirit and which illuminates the spirit, in the strength of which it becomes capable of overcoming the evil that exists within man. In the case of almost every great poet he admires the notion of *thirst*, of *craving* forms the focal point of his discussion.

### 3/b

To this deliberation on the faculties and possibilities of human nature can be coupled the *second element* of his world image, dating back to his early years — the philosophically understood *positivistic character* of his scholastic erudition and self-education. But while around this former, the individually conceived Christian heritage were assembled the contemplative and attitudinal values he esteemed, this positivistic heritage brought out and made crystalline the qualities that he contemplated with growing doubt and aversion, despite

the fact that he kept many fractional elements from the components of this trend as well.

In his early years, as we know, he wanted to take up philosophy, and as an older student, later as an undergraduate, accepted as a matter of course this governing trend of the age: the positivism which *by then* and *until then* harmonized in the consciousness of the majority with the tendencies that later became its apparent or veritable opponents and which in part overthrew it. The more so since it was elsewhere but primarily in this country present not so much as a philosophical trend or system as a scientific approach and method, from which it was easy to select certain elements, adapt and implant these into other trends; as did the young Babits, with naive eclecticism, in his earliest compositions.

Let us emphasize two striking and very important elements here. The *doctrine* and *tenet* of the struggle for existence and the doctrine of biological and environmental determinism which professes, acknowledges, approves with true social-darwinist faith and impatience the inevitable destruction of the weak and unfit for life. And concurs with the concept of biological and environmental determinism. Babits quotes Spencer as his authority in this early period and proudly professes himself a sensualist (in the positivistic sense of the word). Later, as his historical reading became more extensive, his ideological meditation more profound all this was reverted and the concept came to characterize his world image as the primary source of aversion.

But — as we have already mentioned — he retained two principles of this conception, that of the influence of the environment and that of sensual perception — principles that were of decisive influence on him from the start. True, he enthusiastically spiritualized both, making the one the effect of the intellectual atmosphere, the other the inductive energy of psychological perception and process, and subordinating both to the said augustinian dialectics, to the merging of our spiritual thirst or craving for the Idea and the attraction emanating from the Idea upon our souls. These and other remaining positivistic traits belong primarily to the realm of *psychology*, describing and determining the perceptive and recollective mechanism and role of the consciousness. They are for the most part coupled with the name of those psychologists who have broken away from the wundtian psychological statistical experimental school; had turned against it or had formed an opposing front mostly in favour of introspection and the meditative (slightly praehusserl-type) elaboration of the results of introspection, as for example Jean Philip, Carl Stumpf, Otto Weininger or, the most influential as far as Babits is concerned, William James.

At all events during the period his literary history was being written, from the point of view of his image of the world and his conception of literature it was the *awareness of danger*, originating in the intimate knowledge of the

positivistic trend — which he often identified with materialism — that proved the most decisive in his consciousness. No study of Babits — no study of the age — may leave incited his words concerning Spencer, whom he greatly respected: “In the meanwhile the greatest intellects of the West (i.e. the Western world) were combatting Nothingness, the demon of infidelity; seeking temporary solace for the heart or at least a task for the mind in the struggle itself, in the fortitude of facing danger. Albeit a philosopher, Herbert Spencer by name, had by then resolved the problem of faith and infidelity by pronouncing it “*unfathomable*”. It is easy for the philosopher, but what is there left for the poet who must necessarily deal with life, with life as it is perceived and endured, and to which death unquestionably appertains?”

And if some of his illustrious contemporaries were marxists at the time, it was on the basis of his irrational myth of reason of the period that he evolved the so-called Brown Death philosophy. In the authentication of these philosophies Babits attached at least as much importance to these positivistic national- and social-darwinist concepts, affecting to be scientifically rational and prattling about the laws of natural selection — and not unjustifiably. He believed that these conceptions deprived man the individual of his moral, psychological, ontological autochthoneity, of his emotional-intellectual rights and dignity, as did certain hegelian or socialistic doctrines. They accomplished this, according to Babits, through the divinization by the individual of a people, a nation, a race, a class — *therefore*, in his opinion, through the degradation of tasks and aims determined by a fraction into component, service parts; and added to this they wished the thus debased individual to jubilate his inclusion and not to question its exclusive redeeming character. “Ours is the mechanical world of organized powers”, he says bitterly.

### 3/c

Closely connected to this are the formative and perpetually changing *third group of components* that make up his world image and date back to his early years — the *vitalistic philosophies* and the influence of their precedent representatives, primarily that of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Bergson.

Popular belief in part holds Bergson's influence the most decisive in Babits' case; another fraction condemns him for the supposed overestimation of the French philosopher. Naturally it would be useless to object that his name appears in this great work on two pages all told, not even a tenth as frequently as that of the author of Zarathustra. Albeit this latter, like Augustine, appears in almost every chapter, if not by name, then by reference, symbolically or through a variation of the text — in spite of the fact that he classed Bergson among the gifted, “artistic philosophers”, just like Nietzsche

and Augustine. But the second, late study of Bergson clearly states the depth of his disappointment, at the same time acknowledging the importance of his *liberating* role in his career.

The essence of this may be concentrated into two points: the demand for metaphysics did not die out at the time of the positivistic-materialistic scientific attitude to life, and will not die out until the human intellect needs art and philosophy. This is one point. The other is that this demand and the results of science are easily harmonized, may even strengthen and cannot exist singly after a certain intellectual level. In point of fact the reading of Bergson did not change the train of Babits's thoughts, but strengthened him in their direction and gave their realization full scope. And at the core of his disappointment lies the fact that his philosopher *simply pronounced* the right to, the demand for and the possibility of metaphysics without realizing them in comparison with the great predecessors and according to the claims of the age as perceived by Babits. From his essay and from this volume it is apparent that the questions of philosophy, and within these the questions of metaphysics, have been relegated to and transposed into psychology — a fact that in many respects may be pronounced of Babits himself. The touch of irony in the repeated mention of "Professor Freud" and his "psychologists" shows that the determined, excessive enforcement of this tendency did not give him much pleasure.

And yet it is possible that the overwhelming impact of Nietzsche, whom he plainly considered one of the greatest and most influential thinkers, was due to the growing awareness of the inevitable approach of philosophy and psychology or rather of anthropology. We know that his youthful enthusiasm for his philosopher became quite early and to a great extent subdued and that he meticulously graded the supposed values of Nietzsche's works in the famous essays entitled *The dangerous ideology* and *The betrayal of the literates*; but at the same time he elucidated and acknowledged the inspiring and thought-provoking elements that had become integral, necessary and valuable components of his own world image.

From the almost uncountable quantity of references, variations and interpretations let us choose four elements — again somewhat under duress. The first of these is the idea of *eternal return*. It is well known that philosophical literature has given many interpretations to this idea of Nietzsche's — not exactly contrary to Nietzsche's intentions and not really against the grain as far as Babits is concerned. For he was always a partisan of precise formulation, but also believed in the possibilities of multifarious interpretations. By this Babits apparently meant for one the Heraclitusian motion of the eternally similar, but never identical universal human stream of consciousness and existence, for the other and primarily the reappearance, always in a different form, of the great existential questions, the questions of the apprehension

and selection of the essence in the course of every true life, true process of reasoning and work of art.

The second trait is Nietzsche's definition of one of the principal human and objective values, which, just like the former element, can be linked with the platonic and augustinian thirst or craving in Babits' conception. What is man? asks Nietzsche and Babits. He is that which must be surpassed, they both reply, each meaning something different by those words; the one following the course of the *Wille zur Macht* and remaining within man, the other following the direction of the transcendency of the urging of the Eros and the attraction of the Idea. The third is the emphasis and defense of the self-forming will of the individual against the doctrine of determinism and organicism. The fourth and last but not least is Nietzsche's opposition to the average, the fashionable, the multitudinous. There is perhaps no other famous Nietzsche title that Babits varies as often as that of the *Anachronistic Meditations*. And if at one time he did this self-complacently, in this work he does it with bitterness. In relation to this we must make mention of Babits' much-talked aristocraticism but also of the two famous essays in question, *The dangerous ideology* and *The betrayal of the literates*, and of his attitude to the enlightenment manifest in these.

Almost from the beginning this author-philosopher was on an oppositional-defensive footing with the educated people, with the so-called intellectual public life and public spirit of his day. Especially at the time this work was being written. In his opinion the *particular* had overcome the *universal*, everyday interests ruled over interests of universal validity, commonly devised theory over the vivid reality of life and worst of all, in the spirit of the latter, instinct and corporeality ruled over the intellectual and the spiritual. Only by a superficial reading of his works can one arrive at the conclusion that Babits was not in favour of the gradual humanization of the structure of society or its facilitating civilization. But he did profess that the perfection of the structure and the development of civilization were not the aims but the means of the self-assertion of individual man in his *individuality* and thus in his human *universality*. All partiality, whether it ousts *reason* through the mythicization and totalization of irrational qualities or whether the reverse happens, leads to the denial of the humanity of man and to his oppression — to the invalidation of the delicate balance between good and evil according to Augustinian dialectics, and thus to the annihilation of human self-realization in the spirit of good. He considered that most representatives of the enlightenment reduced man to a purely mechanical cerebral function, degrading him into an expendable component of an implicitly held, simply conceived process of development, disregarding the always *non-recurrent* intellectual-spiritual personality. And did this with a self-complacent, naive self-assurance inadmissible in the intellectual world. His attachment to

Schopenhauer — to whose "instruction" he bid farewell with the title of the famous essay on Nietzsche — can be first and foremost explained by the automatic and necessary requisite of scepticism and the defense of individual man he recognized in his work.

During the period of the genesis of this work however he believed it was *reason* that was being degraded, that was being robbed of its comparative, controlling, universalizing, judicial function in favour of the more unscrupulous enforcement of obtuse, selfish, impulse-governed fractional interests, sentiments and ideas. And seeing this he repeatedly and unfailingly stood up for rational enlightenment even if he was thus opposed to his favourite, most cherished authors. And in point of fact the reversal of his feelings towards Kant, the substitution of admiration for the original antipathy may be linked with this. In the beginning he believed to recognize in Kant's ruthlessly executed criticism the manifestation of the self-assured, self-complacent intellect which denies everything it cannot grasp. During the time of the atrocities of the war a thorough study of his works had to convince him that this great intellect was not self-complacent but knew and assigned its own limits and what it could encompass, and it is due to this ability, according to Babits, that Kant recognizes that it is the *aesthetic power of judgement* originating in the Eros and beyond reason but not opposing it, as well as the *ethic comprehension* arising from the thirst of the spirit and impelled by the attraction of the idea that can conduct man to *hope*, to overcome the factors that are as yet or will always be beyond the sphere of reason; to turn these to his best advantage using reason to combat biological, animal instincts. But it is surely not accidental, and not simply according to the custom of the age that he favours the more all-encompassing notion of *intellect* to that of *reason*, as if believing to avoid thus the confrontation of that which, in his opinion, exists *within* and *without* the sphere of reason, *permeating*, but *not opposing* each other.

— 3/d —

Our time, however, flies: we must proceed to our second sphere of questions, though it will hardly be necessary to enlarge upon these in detail as we have taken into account many circumstances relating to them, and not particularly indirectly or covertly at that. Yet surely the question arises and needs be answered — and such incidental questions are wont to acquire major importance in this country — which Hungarian authors did Babits consider the progenitors of his world image and conception of literature?

Four names must undoubtedly be mentioned: those of Arany and Péterfy above all, but also those of Kemény and Kölcsey.

Some paragraphs of his Greek passages but especially his approach practically coincides with that of Péterfy, the opposer of positivism and

Nietzsche and partisan of the rights and prerogatives of the individual. There is *one* element of his conception that must be brought to notice: if the historical development of human consciousness, of human intellect, has raised a question, that question can never again be avoided. Since the essence of history — as that of the development of literature, declares Babits, like Péterfy, without contesting the advantages and necessity of the continual perfection of social structure and the perpetual progress of civilisation — is the evolution of ideological thinking, of its variety and perfection. “Every human life and work is a world image in itself, a possible standpoint in the face of the world, of the universe . . . Robinson’s taking stock of his island again and again. This standpoint, this attitude becomes conscious and deliberate through expression.”

He disputes with Dilthey though in many respects there is some affinity between them — and even more perhaps (as can be said of Péterfy) with the *conservative-liberal* Ranke whose famous thesis may in his interpretation read: the great intellects of every age *could* and should be equally close to God. Like Carlyle — whom Babits greatly admired — he believed that the great intellects of an age characterize that age, and concurred with the opinion he attributed to him, namely that the fortunate periods of history were those that could boast of such intellects and paid heed to those intellects; yet Carlyle’s autocratic principle of coercion which propounded that the masses must forcibly be made to take heed of these was alien to him, did not agree with his liberalism, with his respect of the individual. In this respect he followed Macaulay’s democratic principle of persuasion by intellectual radiance.

And this is the point where we may grasp the ostensible or genuine contrast between the *collective development* of culture and literature and the restriction of his works to the *individual spirit*, the *particular thirst for truth*. And we may grasp his conception of the eternal continuity and renaissance of culture. This idea was never as forcibly prominent as in the case of the meeting and changing points of the ancient and Christian cultures. It seemed then — he says — that all that the spirit, the intellect had created in culture would fall prey to the new and elementary desire for truth. But this did not come to happen. With a tremendous effort the new thirst for truth engulfed the true values of the old culture. Not only its devices, but also its revelations. And it could do so because, as it became differentiated in its individuals, so it was revealed that it was the urging of the Eros and the attraction of the Idea towards truth that lay behind those too. It is in this that his bitter and decisive dispute with Osváth about the possibility of the *objectivity of truth* or its necessary *subjectivity and relativity* originates. Osváth took the latter to the point of absurdity, limiting the thirst of literature entirely to the *search* itself. Conversely Babits considered it bound to defend, enlarge and transmit the results of the quest, the thirst, the endeavours of man.

And here the oft-repeated question of the handling of the Old Testament may be discussed. According to Babits the Old Testament became part of European literature when it joined in the attempt to answer the universal questions concerning man through Christianity, when the Eros impelling towards universal truth and the energy of the Idea attracting towards universal truth was projected into its objects, histories and symbols. Until then it had been the affair of a race, a people, of their proper fate. It is unnecessary to say that the soundness of this view has been extensively and justly disputed by literary historians. Just as it is unnecessary to say that the *students of religion* who do not consider the Old Testament a racial affair, but a revelation, would do the same. But the discussion of this would lead us far astray and it is after all not our task.

What is more pertinent to our discussion is that Babits' historical pessimism regarding the culture of his age seems to be resolved at this point. Not through a definite, confident, regulative theory prescribing a system of norms. Time and again in this book and elsewhere he has wondered whether socialist doctrines, marxism among them, may not one day play the role that Christianity once played in the life and culture of man. But — understandably — he soon dismissed this possibility. *Understandably* because he considered marxism in essence here, as in other phases of his thinking, a *variety* of materialistic positivism.

Yet there exists a deeply confessional passage in his writing about Nietzsche, in an emphatically stressed place: in the summary of the historical part. "Man, — he says — the man of today has not attained his last phase of development . . . Nietzsche . . . the philologist and philosopher has proved to be one of the greatest poets. His book is full of treasures, but also full of dangers for the future. But that future for the most part is *my* future — mine who is writing this . . . He deserves to have this history end with his name."

What is this supposed to mean?

A few pages back he paid his favourite poet and philosopher a double-edged compliment for recognizing that metaphysical thinking was necessary and making a great effort to attain it — but through the *Wille zur Macht*. And this, as we have emphatically stated earlier, did not comply with Babits' desire of transcendency. Nietzsche remained within man while Babits strived for a more universal force, a more pure Idea, a more eternal existent. But because this struggle had not come to an end and would never reach an end, he concurred with his author in his efforts and his attitude of desiring the future.

This belongs to the realm of his conception of literature. Naturally we cannot speak of his poetics, rhetorics and stylistics — only of his approach, his attitude in the widest sense of the word.

In the summary of his literary theory he disclaimed the method of classification according to genres. He adopted it here and adopted it prolifically

but made it clear that it was in reality a delicate, undependable device. He speaks of *light* literature, *elevated* literature, and criticism according to function, meaning light and elevated literature metaphorically rather than determinatively. It would not be advantageous to accept the relative categories of this theoretical study, which are the least successful and convincing even here. He uses the metaphor — new become famous (and existing in Nietzsche's work) — of the chain of peaks. Every work that can be classed as elevated literature — as we have mentioned in the case of the idea of *eternal return* — is a new confrontation of the eternal problems of mankind within the scope of a new age, within the compass of a new individual. These works of art are rare and their readers are not numerous. But no age is identical with another in either respect.

Babits does not regard stylistic trends irreversible categories. Or at least in this book he considers them more important than those of the genres, but by no means in the fundamental fashion of Dilthey. The history of literature is the history of changes in ideology, and the style of every age, of every artist is a method and means of expressing, of objectivizing the ideology of that age and that artist. In his literary theory he uses the words *expression* according to the custom of the French literary theory of the age and believes that it loses its capacity of conveying individual ideologies, its power of expressing attitudes only if individual expression becomes a common, collective *formula*.

Ideology, of course, in relation to literature, is meant in a wider sense in the case of Babits than in the scientifically considered rational systems of thought. And naturally individual, particular ideologies are not of equal worth or depth just as individual styles are not equal in worth. He can accept that an image of the world, an ideology may be expressed through the objective facts of the registered exterior world. He therefore appreciates not only Balzac but also the best of the naturalists. Naturally by no means to the extent that he appreciates, say, Proust. And when he speaks of Augustine's style his quiet, gentle pathos becomes heated ("like my mother used to do, because that is what her heart had taught her. 'In schola pectoris': there was no one to say it before Augustine", he states). He is mostly attracted to the English-German romantic-type style and not to that of the romantic *period*, especially not to that of the French romantic period. He considers the English-German romantic-type style the result of the formation and development of the most complete, courageous and individual ideologies.

From this it becomes clear that the territory — or let us say the genre — closest to his heart is lyrical poetry. Not only and not primarily the lyricism manifest in poems, not only and not primarily the poetry of direct subjectivity and emotionalism, not only and not primarily directly self-expressive and autobiographical poetry. It is perhaps the descriptive-evocative-expressive

*subjectively inspired and individualistic-type* presentation of the exteriorly and interiorly induced objective stream of consciousness that is most to his liking. The true objects of attraction from the representatives of lyrical poetry are Goethe and Shelley, Baudelaire and Browning, the late works of Vörösmarty and Arany. And the Augustine-type, Zarathustra-like, Proust-like strongly confessional but deeply reflective speculative-emotional lyrical prose. The kind that strives for a world image and creates in effect a world image — for every great work — as we repeatedly make him say — is a stand-point, an attitude towards the world, towards existence. He did not exclude politics and public life as the means and possibility of objectivizing this struggle but he deemed politics and public life casual, passing subjects of literature — the domain of another sphere of life which is related to literature, to the sphere of the struggle for a world image only indirectly.

## 4/a

Many theoretical and practical questions could be, and probably should be raised. But our time is running short. There remain two problems which must nevertheless be discussed. The first is the question of the restriction of his field to Europe.

Babits considered European culture and literature the most highly developed of his age, its distaff side included. He did not believe in European superiority — far from it. Potentially he was prepared to recognize and accept that any other culture and literature in another period of history may reach this level of development. But in his day no other literature or culture, mentality or world-image formation could compete with the state of development, the mobile structure, the dynamics of European culture and literature. Some Eastern cultures may have compared with it once but have a long time since become static, tradition-bound, their hierarchy restricted. He believed that the dynamic historical structure of European culture was due to its capacity of making the universal problems of human existence, the questions of its basic aims the continual centre of interest for every man, instilling into them the compulsion and the pain, the majesty and the dignity of dealing with them. This culture does not recognize the categories of a *caste* chosen and entitled to think and that of the *masses* bound to *follow* these. He considered that it was in this culture that the compulsion of self-creation, the consciousness of the necessity of the creation of a world image was realised to the utmost.

The second problem is that of the relation between national culture and universal culture, national literature and universal literature. He considered these *inseparable*. But he placed the common essence over the dividing differences. The two are not opposed but it is not possible to disregard the order

of importance. Disregarding it would mean that neither category would lead anywhere. We may only speak of the nature of *Hungarian, English, German, French* man if we have simultaneously and previously spoken of the nature of *Man*. Babits felt that his century had forcefully separated the two and had placed the dividing, secondary element not only opposite, but above the primary element, the common essence, the unifying force — and did this almost exclusively. This is what he experienced in the case of the French nationalists of the beginning of the century, the Hungarian and non-Hungarian chauvinists of the Danube basin, and especially in the case of the propagators of Nazism and their conscious or unwitting Hungarian followers. "Global Empire", he often wrote longingly, meaning by the symbolic expression the unimpeded fraternal unity and voluntary collectivity of nations that so many had yearned for before, during and after the two great wars, especially the best of the much-suffered and often deceived Central European peoples.

To this sphere belongs the question to which the listener certainly expects an answer: in what manner did Babits fit our national literature into the history of European literature? Strictly speaking this is a question of proportion rather than of method or conception, since he considered Hungarian literature and culture from the beginning, continually and completely a literature and culture nurtured on the soil of Western Christianity and liberalism — one that did not lose contact with that soil even under the influence of the secularizing ideological tendencies, but the desire to belong to the soil was henceforth amalgamated with the consciousness and desire of disparity as happened in the case of many others. In this book (and during this period) there is hardly any mention of the mystical position and quality between East and West indicative of a fateful, tragic, mythicized eternal solitariness, of which it was so very much in fashion to hold forth on by his foregoers and contemporaries (and of which he himself speaks at length in the first of his aforementioned unsuccessful essays, by no means uninfluenced by Beöthy).

What are these proportions like? The answer is clear-cut: they are precise and just. Longer passages are given up to those who may truly be ranked with the representatives, as he would say, of European elevated literature: Balassi, Pázmány, Zrínyi, Mikes, Csokonai, Berzsenyi, Kölcsey, Vörösmarty, Eötvös, Petőfi, Arany, Kemény, Péterfy, Ady runs the list. And a few more names merited a mention. From those listed the names of Zrínyi and Berzsenyi, Vörösmarty and Petőfi, Arany and Ady are strongly emphasized. The fact that the extent of their treatment generally does not equal that of their foreign companions of the same rank is no contradiction. Babits wished to present the evolution of a characteristic intellectual-spiritual sphere, the historical evolution of European literature. In this evolution

Hungarian works of art had as small parts to play as *inducers* as many works of other minor nationalities of European stature. Therefore his task was that of insertion, the indication of position and proportion. And he accomplished this objectively, with a validity and relevance that holds good even today. He knew that the European character or stature of the authors of minor nationalities did not depend on whether their names were often repeated but upon whether their works could truly be measured against the European intellectual-spiritual-artistic standards of an age.

Historio-philosophical and ontological interest played a great role in Babits' philosophical disposition. He believed that the human essence, which is always most apparent in a dynamic great culture, is always structure-like and structurally variable. In each of these structure-like elements the variation of the characteristics of the parts is always much faster than the variation of the more general, more constant and more quintessential common essence. The changing of the parts always has an effect on the whole of the structure, but the truly essential changes in the parts are always accompanied by essential changes in the whole of the structure. The detachment of parts for the purpose of separation entails the mutilation of the whole and implies an emptying of the parts that threatens their existence. The tragedy — the tragicomedy — of nationalisms is that they believe to recognize the essence of their represented culture in ephemeral, incidental, secondary manifestations, losing or discarding in the meanwhile the consciousness of the common, truly human essence that is the true basis of every peculiarity. Because he did not believe that it was possible to say anything definitive of the characteristics of any part without drawing a parallel between it and the common essence, just as it is impossible to confront it with the other parts without taking into account the common essence.

From all the products of his mature didactic activities it is certainly not by chance that the least congruent, the least argued, the most artificial as far as a starting-point, logics and conclusion is concerned are those two essays in which, as if doing violence to his own conception, he attempts to examine the part independently, detached, in itself, as did many of his contemporaries. The first is the essay upon the character of Hungarian literature, the second is a didactic prose piece upon the Hungarian character in a volume entitled *What is Hungarian?* The first is undeniably haunted by the Beöthy-type pretentious national characterology — in certain statements it is manifestly felt. In the second he was so far conscious of the absurdity of the undertaking that it is full of revocations, faltering apologies and excuses. "When a question like this arises, — he says, — the writer can only send out exploratory feelers in the direction of a *faculté maîtresse*, of a basic trait" — in which he does not believe himself. Understandably. For perhaps it is not hopeless to determine the Hungarianness of the Hungarian nobility in the 18th and

19th centuries or that of the Hungarian peasantry in either half of the 19th century. But, by making a particular element an eternal essence, the question becomes absurd and can only be answered by those able to tell you not only what is Hungarian but also what is more Hungarian and even what is most Hungarian — and immediately lay down the duties of the individual in contradistinction against the individual in the name of the essence *under penalty of letting the nation perish*. Or one can answer with trifles like the high dignitary of the *What is Hungarian?* volume, according to whom being Hungarian means being a good Hungarian and the foremost aim for all Hungarians is to be the best possible Hungarians.

But Babits did more than write, speak and harangue — he thought.

## 5

We have said that Babits's liberalism was conservative. We would not think to speak of sophistically revolutionary conservatism, of conservative revolutionarism in the name of Chateaubriand, La Garde, Gobineau, Ernst Jünger or even Mannheim. This liberalism was conservative because it adhered to that nineteenth century variety of classical liberalism which saw the right and liberty (in the widest sense of the word) of every individual as the most important means of helping every individual to assert himself within and through his own image of the world. At the same time this conservatively liberal attitude was defensively oppositional because it made use of the elements contained by the ideal and those resulting from the ideal for the purpose of defending the ideal — but not only of these — almost exclusively of these. That interfusion of liberalism and social democraticism which characterized the left-wing intellectuals of the second third of the century remained alien to him, and he believed he could best defend the rights of man, the rights of the individual with the moral resistance of primarily cultural and intellectual means. This on the continent of the collective-national or national-social dictatorships of Hitler and Mussolini, Laval and Franco, Metaxas and Horthy, Salazar and Gömbös — not to mention other tyrants and other dictatorships — was certainly not enough, but it was certainly not unimportant. And from an artistic point of view this conservative liberalism was more open than any radicalisms of other tendencies whether opposing the part or opposing other trends that differed from their own. Babits did not accept works of art according to the *trend or schools* to which they belonged but according to the *direction of their meaning*. The works which were capable of directing attention in a convincing manner to a world image worthy of attention by force of the direction of their meaning he estimated and accepted — regardless of the trend or school to which they belonged. Babits's book is a historical continuation of that peculiar Hungarian liberal train of thought which may be marked

with the names of Kölcsey, Széchenyi, Eötvös, Arany, Péterfy and Jászi. This work is at once a narrowing down and a broadening out of that train of thought: the declining of a direct social-public role being the former, the prevention of limiting thinking to a purely political-philosophical level being the later. And this book of Babits's fits into the line of the European literature and the intellectual culture of the age which runs from Rilke to Eliot, Plank to Einstein, Bohr to Heisenberg. This latter in his superb essay on Plato expresses ideas that are almost identical with Babits' views: every life and every work of art is an attempt to create a world image. An attempt which is the right and duty of every man. And like Babits — the experiments of those listed all pointed towards transcendency.

It would not commend marxist thinking, it would not be worthy of marxist thought to attempt to explain the reasons behind those common and characteristic features with lexical stereotypes, with solely sociological explanations or even pathopsychological formulas instead of a true philosophical interpretation that embraces sociology, psychology and politics, even if this means submitting our own opinion to revision — since ontology of historical dialectics, historical dialectics of ontological aspirations are at the centre of marxism — as György Lukács clearly saw in his final maturity and courage.