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Mihály Babits 1925-1927. Depiction of a Career.

– Abstract of the Doctoral Thesis –

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Presentation of the Problem

I have been a member of the Babits Research Group led by my consultant, dr. Lajos Sipos since 2001. In my MA thesis I explored the letters of Mihály Babits exchanged in November and December 1918. This correspondence was part of the source material that was edited in the eighth volume of the series titled *Babits Mihály műveinek kritikai kiadása – levelezés* (see *Babits Mihály levelezése 1918-1919*, published by Lajos SIPOS, Argumentum, Budapest, 2011). I received the task to analyse the correspondence of Babits between 3rd October 1925 and 18th January 1927 as my share from the planned continuation of the critical edition of his letters. The beginning and the final dates may seem arbitrary at first glance, but, in fact, they are important moments in the poet's life: the first one is the date of the publication of his fifth book of poetry, *Sziget és tenger*, while the second one denotes the death of the Hungarian-born critic, Ferenc Ferdinánd Baumgarten, whose testament ensured the financial ground of the Baumgarten-prize, which, named after the testator, was awarded yearly after 1929 with the curatorship of Babits. The designated period is mute and telling at the same time. It is mute because it offers less information on his workshop compared to the earlier letters of the correspondence, written mostly during his university years. And it is telling, because it still promises an insight into his daily routine. This, however, is only the surface as, at that time, the poet was absorbed into the last phase of the writing of his grand scale novel *Halálfiái*. As a consequence, I focused fundamentally on textual criticism and I followed the formal standards of the critical edition of Babits' correspondence. Therefore, the final structure of my thesis was complemented with elements related more closely to his career only after having thoroughly mapped the collected letters. This process made it particularly difficult to balance between the positivist, microphilological method and the analysing approach, which focuses on the work itself.

The gathered material and the standpoints implied by it, however, started to outline the subject formulated in this thesis. By the mid-1920s Babits, his generation (the first generation of the *Nyugat*) and Hungary itself found themselves in a situation which required a reformulation of their identity and mission. This inevitably resulted in taking into account much wider criteria than the above-mentioned microphilological considerations, which encouraged me to apply a method similar to that of the so-called "literary history", a more traditional approach of the Hungarian literary criticism. To reverse the above list: in the political framework determined by the Treaty of Trianon, Hungary found itself in a new situation in terms of domestic and foreign policy: the country had to reformulate its identity, while, in the same time, it had to cope with the meagre external possibilities influenced heavily by the Little Entente, and the internal demands of stability. The first generation of the *Nyugat* had reached "adulthood" by that time, but they were still considered as "outsiders" in the eyes of the representatives of the official literature. They were not unacknowledged entirely, but, to some extent, they were only tolerated. This generation occupied an internal position then, similarly to Babits himself, who personally intended to overcome the division of the Hungarian intellectual elite and attempted to take steps in order to promote the acknowledgment of his generation. It is enough to refer here to the case of the Vörösmarty Akadémia founded in the end of 1918, which he planned to restore in 1925. I think that the establishment of the Baumgarten Foundation in 1929 cannot be understood without this context. For Babits, the assessment of the first generation of the *Nyugat* in a creative form meant a personal challenge. He also included his own role and his own history not being silent about motifs of psychology and family history. Finished on 10th February 1927, his novel *Halálfiái* was the outcome of this evaluation.

Methodology

As a consequence of the latter considerations, my research primarily focused on the collection of Babits' letters written in the period in question. The correspondence produced between 3rd October 1925 and 18th January 1927 can be read in a letter-by-letter form in the appendix of my thesis. During the collection of these texts I faced the problem of the presumably written, but now missing Babits-letters. In order to be able to identify these, I also numbered the lost items. My objective was to write a biography of Babits in this period. I attempted to use as many of his letters as possible in order to justify the discussed points. I am fully aware how problematic such an attempt is, considering the conditions and expectations of contemporary literary criticism – that explains why I addressed my thesis as an essay in the introduction – but I am convinced that an endeavour like this can be successful. Let me refer to the present-day reception of Babits' contemporary, Zsigmond Móricz, and the reconstruction of his life. In his case, several volumes have been published as the author's "diary" containing texts of various genres arranged in chronological order. These texts enable us to obtain an insight not only into his workshop but into the secrets of his person as well. Although one can find recent examples (e. g. Judit RÓNA: *Nap nap után. Babits Mihály életének kronológiája 1883-1908*, Balassi Kiadó, Budapest, 2011), I have not chosen the chronological method. Rather, apart from the historical background, I concentrated on the problems of his life and his literary pursuits in the period in the context of his letters and his later reception. Beyond the previously mentioned factors, I also applied texts published earlier or later than the assigned period by Babits or his contemporaries. As a result, a heterogeneous material has been accumulated which doubtlessly posed some risks. In this case, however, it allowed me to outline more clearly those problems that Babits and his age had had to face. These questions are deeply rooted in the problems of the previous era and prepare those of the future. From a philological point of view, the thesis is well-founded, which explains why biographical elements were complemented with analyses of poems, closely linked to the emerged problems, and why my investigation included the study of motifs as well. Therefore, I suppose, the elements of the literary education so characteristic of Babits came into motion.

New results

As I have already mentioned I primarily aimed to chart the characteristic events of Babits' career in the examined period. It is a result in itself that the lost letters are now identifiable. Completed by the published calendar entries of Babits' wife, Sophie Török, we can get a relatively faithful image of his life. The accumulated microphilological data does not allow us to reconsider the image of Babits, but it permits to get a more accurate picture. The scattered pieces of information on the poet and his age are now seen together and put into context. Babits appears both as a creative artist (authorial self) and as a private individual (biographical self). Their relation is probably just the opposite what the traditional, biographically oriented literary criticism claims; it may be the first one which defines the latter one. Putting the elements of our knowledge together I sketched the circumstances of Babits' life and his living conditions until the mid-1920s. These certainly have a psychological aspect. It is enough to think here of his flat in Reviczky street, which recalls the "experience of persecution" lived through during World War I and which definitely influenced his choice of his living place. The "asylum", as characterised by Ilona Kelemen, the "Nenne", in a letter dated 20th May 1926, purchased in 1923 on the Előhegy in Esztergom, is such a place too. The Esztergom dwelling became an intimate nest from the mid-1920s when it started to house the first – and later rather frequent – banquets. It is enough to have a short glance at the chronological list of his works to claim that Babits' speed of work was

outstanding at that time, which clearly affected his private life, including his relation with his wife. The letters exchanged between his paternal family in Szekszárd and Budapest (and, of course, Esztergom) shed light some upon the relationship with his mother. These experiences had found their way into the novel *Halálfiái*.

On the basis of the philologically verifiable facts, it became palpable how Babits was really affected by the recurring problem of the unity of Hungarian literature. His answers to this question, which had already occurred by the emergence of the *Nyugat*, can be grasped in the establishment of the Vörösmarty Akadémia in late 1918, in his attempt of its reestablishment in 1925, and in his central role in the Baumgarten Foundation founded after the death of Ferenc Baumgarten in January 1927.

It also became evident that Babits was present not only in the literary life of Hungary, but he was also acknowledged abroad. Primarily, this can be thanked to Stefan I. Klein, who translated Babits' oeuvre into German. (In 1925, Klein published his novel *Kártyavár* under the title *Das Kartenhaus*, which was followed by a collection of short stories titled *Kentaurenschlacht* in 1926.) Babits, however, was well-known not only in Germany. He wrote an essay in a festschrift published in Zurich, Switzerland, for the 60-year-old pacifist, Romain Rolland (*Liber Amicorum*), titled *La Couronne d'un petit peuple. Hommage à Romain Rolland*. Babits, therefore, was rightly counted amongst the important authors of the European Left. The correspondence, however, offered tinier details as well. During the Spring of 1926 a famous movie star, Conrad Veidt paid a visit in Budapest and invited Babits to his banquet. The event was covered by the wife, Sophie Török.

The period between 1925 and 1927 was the time of the writing of *Halálfiái*. The critical edition of the novel signals that the creative process cannot be fully reconstructed as no unified manuscript of the work survived. In my thesis, however, I make some correcting notes on the arrangement of the chapters, which modifies our knowledge and the statements of the critical edition too.

These facts do not alter our image of Babits essentially, but, to some extent, still modify them at some points. Still, it is a significant result to me that I could have an insight into his workshop – as far as the texts at hand let me to do that.

Publications related to the topic

CSÁBI Domonkos, *Hajszálerek – kísérlet egy környezet megrajzolására* = Új Dunatáj 2004. márc., 80-89.

CSÁBI Domonkos, *A Babits-levelezés kritikai kiadásáról (Babits Mihály levelezése 1890-1912. I-IV.)* = Magyar Napló 2006. febr., 48-52.

CSÁBI Domonkos, *Irodalom a nyári lakban* (A 125 éve született Babits Mihályról és Esztergomról) = Heti Válasz 2008. ápr. 3

CSÁBI Domonkos, *Látószög kérdése* (a 125. éve született Babits Mihályról) = Magyar Napló 2008. nov., 6-9.

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Nézőpont kérdése (Vonások Babits arcképvázlatához) = Az év esszéi 2009 Antológia, vál. és szerk. EKLER Andrea és ROSONCZY Ildikó, Magyar Napló, Bp., 2009, 26-33.

CSÁBI Domonkos, *Termékeny kétely* (a *Közelítések* című, Babits Mihály életművéről tartott konferencia előadásait összegyűjtő kötetből) = *Kortárs*. 2009. júl.-aug., 181-184.

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CSÁBI Domonkos, *Összeálló mozaik. Beszélgetések, esszék, jegyzetek*, Bp., Magyar Napló Kiadó, 2014.

Conferences

Hajszálerek – kísérlet egy környezet megrajzolására (A szakdolgozatban feldolgozott levélanyag egy kisebb részét összefoglaló előadás) – elhangzott az ELTE BTK Modern Magyar Irodalomtörténeti Tanszékének Babits Kutatócsoportja által rendezett jubileumi Babits-émlékkonferencián az ELTE Központi Épületében 2003. december 8-án.

Egy est története – elhangzott a Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Bölcsész- és Társadalomtudományi Karának Irodalomtudományi Doktori Iskolájának szervezésében a *Babits és kortársai* címmel rendezett konferencián 2012. november 16-án Piliscsabán.