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“That could make up a volume...”

The Genesis of the Poetry of Mihály Babits between 1900–1903

Ph.D. Theses

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It is almost three decades since the preparatory research work concerning the critical edition of Mihály Babits' works started in the late 1980's within the Literary Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. As the necessary auxiliary material (an inventory of the known manuscripts, a bibliography, a chronological description of the poet's life and works) had not been produced yet, the manifold textological exploration and decisions concerning the genesis of the poems were somewhat hindered and could not happen but advancing very slowly. What is more, the philologists had to face extraordinary professional problems that are special features of juvenilia. The poems in question being of the poet's least explored or documented period of life, it is often not only the biographical details we miss, but have to realize that several letters we know of have disappeared, and the majority of the juvenilia are known only in the form of the poet's own handwritten fair copy made later. Consequently, it is impossible to track the process of their formation, and the revision of the dates put down by Babits is not easy either.

In the bequest of the poet there are more than a hundred poems that have never been published. Most of them are included in the first booklet, titled *Troubadour Age* as part of the manuscript volume usually called *Book with an Angel*. The scientific literature was most indifferent to the poems copied into this first booklet of the collection. Some of the poems or stanzas were published as selected passages, sometimes as illustrations. Not even György Rába's large

monography deals with them, though Babits as a student spent a lot of time with, paid meticulous attention to this compilation, made considerable effort to save his juvenilia written at 17–20 years of age. When exactly and for what purpose he made a fair copy of the poems of his youth, how much of which text he sorted out or transferred into a cycle, under a new title, perhaps changing some of the words as well, all these are unknown.

It was first at the end of 1902 that Babits, though full of angst, started contemplating the possibility of his stepping up publicly. This should be the time he started putting his things in proper order. So we suggest that the genesis of most of the collection titled *Troubadour Age* goes back to a somewhat earlier time than it is considered by other authors. At the end of the booklet we do find even poems dated April 1903, but this can be explained by the fact that the poet was a student at that time. He must have stopped copying his poems when the examination period started, and later he put down the poems written in the meantime. (All these assumptions can be justified by the identical layout, the same way and style of forming the letters, etc.) Even though there are unimportant corrections in the texts, they are usually consequences of mere slips of the pen. Our impression is that the poems often got their titles before being copied into the booklet. It cannot always be easily decided whether the parts of the cycles were written at the same time or not. We would rather suspect that it was on the basis of a topic, a motif, or experience that made Babits put poems in

one and the same cycle, and give them a common title referring to the content, or the place, or time of writing them.

This kind of summing up must have been necessary for the young poet at the turn of 1902/1903 because of several reasons. It could seem important from the point of view of finding his own appearance and role, and might also have resulted from some biographic facts. The poems in the booklet start with the date of July 1900, i.e., after his matriculation. The closing date is the Spring of 1903, in the year when he turns to be 20, and after passing his first comprehensive exam at university decides to rather deal with Philosophy. While, as the poems tell us, he is less and less content with himself and with his lyric production, this period is getting more and more fertile from the point of view of his poetry. Never again would he write so many poems in such a short period of time. By the end of 1902, he had got about 120 poems, so it is a well-based decision of his to celebrate himself as a poet by making a survey of his poetry, the document of which this booklet is.

We know that the tension between his desire to reveal himself and his intimidation of publicity had been present in the literary activity of Babits since his adolescence. He wrote his poetry in secret for himself: in the literary and debating society of high-school and in the first period at the seminar of Professor Négyesy he excelled only with his criticism and translations. He introduced himself to the public as a poet no sooner than at the age of 25, much later than his contemporaries. The almost forgotten juvenilia of the first booklet

of the *Book with an Angel*, most of which are unknown to the public, do not only give an insight into the genesis of a literary oeuvre of decisive importance, but – thanks to the revision of their chronological order – new interrelationships of the poems can be recognized, and new possibilities of interpretation can be offered even in the case of some later poems now considered classics of Hungarian poetry. The background of certain poems can be a compass for research work done in the future concerning the poet's education, models and changing aesthetic attitudes.

The above-mentioned first booklet of the *Book with an Angel* contains 137 poems, of which a mere 16 were published in the posthumous collected editions of Babits poetry. This way, the critical edition in the making can offer a lot of surprises, not only poems, but also concerning the spiritual and intellectual orientation of the young Babits. Several times the notes on the genesis of certain poems correct the point of time of the birth of a text, and can also give new points of reference to later ones. There are also cases like that of the *A lirikus epilógja* (The epilogue of the lyric poet), this well-known poem, which used to have been classified as one of June 1903, but was actually written in February 1904.

My paper aims at describing how Babits' poems were written from July 1900 to December 1903. In the given chapters, I deal with the poems one by one, collecting all possible information on the time of writing, biographical

background, literary sources, context in the oeuvre. Much of the material has been explored by my personal research work.

By his first attempts, Babits was still learning the technique of versification, posing as some 19th century poets would, though even these juvenilia suggest a relatively widely-read young author. These early poems bear the signs of obvious direct effects, unintentional loans as well as vague reminiscences, unravelling which proved to be the most challenging task of all. One can meet quotations of ancient authors and the Bible, pieces inspired by Goethe or Heine alike. Nevertheless, the most remarkable feature of Babits' poetry of this period is how well-versed a reader of Hungarian classics (Zrínyi, Berzsenyi, Kisfaludy, Vörösmarty, Petőfi, Arany, Madách, and Vajda, Komjáthy, Reviczky) Babits was. Numerous visions and images, attributive constructions, or even whole lines are borrowed from these authors. Babits' pieces of reading are significant determinants of his poetry, while the circumstances of his home and actual personal experiences of the day have only an indirect effect on the texts. Though most of the lyric pieces are still immature, it is also interesting to trace how the author more and more eagerly looks for taxonomic points. This is the desire that takes him to the field of philosophical studies, when the aim of the young Babits turns to be "philosophy substantialized as poetry".

Of course, I do not consider my work finished, but I believe that it is worth while a discussion. Besides the new results, there can be comments and notes that could still be useful even for the volume to be published next year.