

Variations of intertextuality: the poetry of Mihály Babits*

Ágnes Kelevéz

Petőfi Literary Museum, Budapest (<keleveza@pim.hu>)

Abstract

Poet, writer, translator (e.g., Dante's *Comedy*) and author of a *History of European Literature* (1936, It. 2000), Mihály Babits (1883-1941) is among the most influential figures of the 20th-century Hungarian literature. With an intense commitment to the study of multiple literary traditions in their original languages, he landed on two manifestly modern poetic experiments: intertextuality and intermediality. The present study explores how, with his exceptional scholarship, Babits adopted a type of intertextuality that simultaneously alludes to literary texts from different eras and different poetic styles, and how the resulting *tapestry* (made up of sometimes anachronistically ironic entanglements and juxtapositions) anticipates postmodern works. In a forthcoming article, «Experiments with Intermediality in the Early Poetry of Mihály Babits», I will analyze the even broader references by which Babits's poetry constructs allusions to nonverbal media i.e., paintings, sculptures, and buildings.

Keywords

Hungarian literature; intertextuality; Mihály Babits; modernity

Introduction

The work of Mihály Babits in the early stages of his career occupies something of an exceptional place in the history of modern Hungarian poetry in part because Babits's preparation for the role he would come to

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play as a poet was coupled with a constant self-reflexiveness, which was also characterized by a constantly experimental, innovative poetic attitude. From the outset, Babits shaped the world of his poems in the spirit of this duality. For Babits as a university student and budding poet, the desired goal was to create a modern artistic workshop steeped in European culture and to master his craft at a high level that would enable him to accomplish the task he had envisioned, which he and his friends poets Dezső Kosztolányi (1885-1936) and Gyula Juhász (1883-1937), whom he met at university, had joined forces to achieve. We know from his correspondence with Kosztolányi and Juhász that Babits not only expanded, with indefatigable fervor, the repertoire of Hungarian and European literary works to be read, but also continuously set new poetic tasks for himself. He very deliberately explored the limits of his talents, assessing his own strengths and seeking new ways to cultivate modern poetry at the highest level while also preserving and promoting the literary traditions he held precious. This marked a distinct rupture with the traditionalist and conservative advocates of a folkish-nationalist understanding of culture. The openness and dynamism of Babits's conception of tradition also defined the tools he used in his poetry. His distinctive poetic experiments included an innovatively polyphonic intertextuality and an experimental intermediality¹. One of the most important features of which is that the interpretive reception of a given composition rests on active associate work.

Babits's intertextual tools draw, on the one hand, on traditional solutions. In other words, he integrates familiar passages from foreign works into the text of his poems in a clearly distinguishable manner (see also Rába 1969, J. Soltész 1965). One obvious example is his use of almost cultic lines from *Szózat* (Appeal), one of the most famous poems by his great idol Mihály Vörösmarty (1800-1855), in *Zrínyi Velencében* (Zrínyi in Venice), *Új mythológia* (New Mythology), and *Ezerkilencszáznegyven* (1940). In his early period, Babits also made frequent use of allusions that were conspicuous because they were in latin or in other foreign languages. In the book of poems titled *Szimbólumok* (1910d; Symbols), one finds «Nunquam revertar»,

¹ I write on this in more detail in my forthcoming essay, «Experiments with Intermediality in the Early Poetry of Mihály Babits».

a reference to an extract from a letter by Dante written in 1313², and in the poem *Illusztrációk mindenféle könyvekhez* (Illustrations for Books of All Kinds) one finds «Procul este profani»³, an allusion to Book VI, line 258 of Virgil's *The Aeneid*. Babits also gave many foreign language titles (latin or others) to his poems as references to texts by other authors. One might think of *In Horatium* (the first four verses are a translation of the first poem of the *Liber Tertius* of Horace's odes, *Ad chorum virginum et puerorum*, Carmen I⁴), *Sunt lacrimae rerum* («lacrimae rerum» is the Latin phrase for «tears of things», found in Book I, line 462 of *The Aeneid*)⁵, *O lyric Love* (from Book I of Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, the opening line of the last stanza)⁶, and *Vile potabis* (which is both the beginning of one of Horace's odes, *Liber primus*, Carmen XX⁷, and the title of a poem by Leconte de Lisle alluding to Horace⁸, which Babits had translated earlier).

Not just conventional allusions: multidimensional intertextuality

Alongside these more conventional uses of allusion, however, one also finds a more subtle form of intertextuality, especially in Babits's earlier poems, which depends very much on the interpretive work of the reader, and which often becomes one of the dominant elements of the given poem. Babits's approach to composition often resembles a kind of literary rewriting, repetition, or transposition. Contemporary critics often saw this as little more than imitation, and they cited the interconnections they had discovered as evidence of the allegedly second-rate nature of his poetry. Yet what one is witnessing in Babits's poetry should be understood as an

² Babits quotes the letter from Thomas Carlyle's *On heroes* (1841): «If I cannot return without calling myself guilty, I will never return, *nunquam revertar*» (Carlyle 2010, 75-76, 286).

³ In Virgil: «Procul o procul este, profani, / conclamat vates».

⁴ «Odi profanum vulgus et arceo. / Favete linguis: carmina non prius / audita Musarum sacerdos / virginibus puerisque canto» (Horace 2009, 180). In Babits (1909): «Gyülöllek: távol légy, alacsony tömeg! / ne rezzents nyelvet: hadd dalolok soha / nem hallott verseket ma, műzsák / papja, erős fiatal fiúknak».

⁵ See Virgil 2013.

⁶ See Browning 1868, 72.

⁷ See Orazio 2009, 84.

⁸ See Leconte de Lisle 1852, 155.

engaging poetic experiment that opens new horizons in world literature. As if seeing beyond the historical moment of his own time, he used in his poetry almost all the forms of what Gérard Genette (1982) refers to as transtextuality, or all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts, from intertextuality to paratextuality and hypertextuality. One merely needs to consider some of the poems that are most characteristic in this respect, and Babits's very deliberate strategy becomes clear. In an essay titled *Mese a nagyvilágról* (Tale of the Big World), Babits explains his ideas in a programmatic way. «All true art», he writes, «from the naive folk tale to the greatest artists» likes to bring its subjects from far away, «the artist encumbers the souls of distant ages and peoples with his own soul, because the further the things mixed fall from each other, the more novel and unfamiliar the result»⁹. Particularly in his early poetry, Babits weaves together passages from works which are sometimes strikingly distant from one another in time and style into a single poem. He creates a level of intertextual richness in his poems that is one of the important poetic innovations of his early career.

One of the most revealing illustrations of Babits's use of a multidimensional intertextual structure is the poem *Turáni induló*, which could be translated as *Turanian March*¹⁰. The Hungarian poet, translator, and literary historian György Rába (1924-2011) called attention to the model on which it was based. He regarded the poem as a mediocre work at best, in part because, in his assessment, «the poem is really just a transposition of a poem by [Jean] Richepin (*Marches Touraniennes*)»¹¹. Rába convincingly points out the poetic, content-related, and sometimes unambiguous textual connections, and allusions that, despite Richepin's popularity at the time, were not noted by his contemporaries, even though Babits faithfully and

⁹ Orig.: «[...] szereti minden igazi művészet a naív népmesétől kezdve a legnagyobb művészekig messziről hozni tárgyait, messze, korok és népek lelkét komplikálja a művész a saját lelkével, mert mentől távolabb esnek egymástól a kevert dolgok, annál újszerűbb, szokatlანabb az eredmény» (Babits 1912, 1001). Unless otherwise stated, translations are of the author.

¹⁰ For an analysis of intertextuality in *Turanian March* and Babits's poem *Golgotha Tavern* see Kelevéz 2009a.

¹¹ Orig.: «Tudjuk, a vers Richepin egyik költeményének (*Marches Touraniennes*) valóságos átköltése» (Rába 1981, 208).

perfectly openly translated the title. This is not, however, merely a case of «slavish imitation», as Rába puts it. Rather, the work is considerably more complex. The poem can be regarded as a kind of literary experiment the subject of which is how to fuse the poetry of Richépin, an important figure in the poetry of the time, with something very different, namely the traditions and heritage of Hungarian literature. Even the Hungarian-esque rhythm of the semiquaver eighth and the frequent use of rhymes created with suffixes (suffixes play a very prominent role in Hungarian grammar) are reminiscent of the versification of old Hungarian poetry. The phrase «röpke rárók», which could be translated as ‘swift winged-creatures’, is also not merely a deliberately conspicuous use of rare words, as Rába contends, but rather is a powerful allusion to a famous poem by sixteenth-century Hungarian poet Bálint Balassi (1554-1594). In his poem numbered sixty-six [with the subtitle, *Valedicit Patriae, amicis iisque omnibus quae habuit carissima* (He bids farewell to homeland, friends, and all that he so loved)], Balassi uses the phrase «rárószárnyon járó hamar lovak»¹² which could provisionally be translated as ‘swift horses on wing’, though this does not capture the archaic tone of the original). Indeed, Babits alludes in this poem not only to Balassi but also, in a variety of ways, to the unfinished Hun trilogy by nineteenth-century Hungarian poet János Arany (1817-1882). In an essay that remains in manuscript form, Hungarian literary historian János Horváth (1912) contends that the poem was inspired by Arany’s work. In an essay written in 1908, Imre Márki makes a similar assessment:

The language, faithful to its age, and the old-fashioned rhythm of this poem belong directly to János Arany, who alone of all the poets of Hungarian literature would have been considered capable of composing a masterpiece of similar perfection on the same subject.¹³

Yet we are dealing with something that goes beyond the general mood and language mentioned by these critics. One finds clear intertextual links

¹² See Balassi 1993-1998, <<https://magyar-irodalom.elte.hu/gepesk/bbom/itart.htm>> (12/2023).

¹³ Orig.: «E versnek korhú nyelvezete és ódon csengésű ritmusa egyenesen az Arany Jánosé, akit a magyar irodalom összes költői közül egyedül tartottunk volna képesnek azonos tárgy mellett hasonló tökéletességű remekműnek az alkotására» (Márki 1908, 6).

between *Turanian March* by Babits and Arany's *Buda halála. Hún-rege* (1863, *Death of Buda. A Hun Legend*, translated by Anton N. Nyerges, 1976). The words in Babits's verse «Széltől ellett ménünk táltos» (2022, 339; our mare, born of the winds, is *táltos*), for instance, quote concretely Arany's verses in *Tenth Canto. Etele hadba mén* (*Attila Goes to War*):

Vad ménes akarhány, vad anyáktul ellett,
Barangol a síkon, Etel vize mellett,
Vemhedzik a kanca viharos széllángtól,
Fene tátos-méntől, futosó villámtól. (Arany 1953, 99)

Numberless wild stallions born of wild dams roam the
plains by the waters of Etel. The mares are served
of stallion fiends, the flaming winds, and fleeting
lightning. (Nyerges 1976)

In his poem *Az utolsó magyar* from 1858 (*The Last Hungarian*), Arany uses a similar phrase to describe the horses ridden by the Hungarians when they arrived from the east as conquerors in the Carpathian Basin: «hol a csikó széltől fogant» (1998, 1232; where the foal was conceived by the wind). Indeed, the battle cry «huj, huj, huj», which is used as a refrain in Babits's poem (and which is not a part of standard vocabulary in Hungarian), is certainly borrowed from Arany, who uses the same ancient exclamatory in *Death of Buda*:

Lárma, paizscsörgés, ördögi huj! huj! szó:
Félelem a vadnak ez idegen új szó. (Arany 1953, 50)

Clamor, rattle of shields, a devilish huj, huj!
This new, foreign word strikes fear in the wild beasts.

Arany even included a note for his reader concerning this word: «One of our oldest historical words. Our chronicle puts it in the mouths of the old Hungarians as a battle cry: 'diabolica huj! huj! exclamatio'»¹⁴.

Babits was quite deliberately alluding to Arany's work, as evidenced

¹⁴ Orig.: «Huj! huj! Egyike a legrégibb történeti szavainknak. Mint csatakiáltást adja krónikánk a régi magyarok szájába: "diabolica huj! huj! exclamatio"» (Arany 1953, 132, note 4).

by the fact that a few years later, in 1910, after having composed *Turanian March*, he himself mentioned Arany's phrasing and use of language in a review of Gábor Oláh's verse novel and even quoted, with a shade of irony, his own poem as a «modern pagan-Hungarian» march:

Often the reminiscences are very striking; when we read of the ancient Hungarians that [...] 'the word huj-huj was ringing on the plain back then. / They climbed and shook the gates of Gallen,' who would not then remember together the great 'devilish huj-huj' of Arany and the pagan-Hungarian marches of some of the moderns.¹⁵

As was often the case with Babits, the allusion in the poem was a way of expressing his admiration for Arany. We know that even as a university student he held the completed parts of the Hun trilogy in high esteem, and in December 1904, he wrote a poem in tribute to Arany titled *Arany: Csaba töredékei olvasásakor* (Arany: While Reading the Fragments of Csaba).

In the 1906 poem *Golgotai csárda* (Golgotha Tavern), Babits also borrows from works by authors who were distant from one another in time, space, and style, and he weaves the threads of allusions together to form a coherent whole. He paraphrases a scene from the Gospel of John (19:23-24) in which the crucified Jesus is stripped of his garb by the Roman soldiers, who then divide the clothes into four parts among themselves. They do not tear Jesus' seamless robe, however, which is regarded as valuable. Rather, they roll dice to determine its fate. The poem, which is written as a monologue, tells the story from the point of view of the uneducated and insensitive Roman soldier who, having won Jesus' robe because of a roll of the dice, recounts the events to his companions in a roadside tavern. The poem is remarkable in part because it bears a resemblance to Tom Stoppard's 1966 play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Stoppard creates an intriguing paraphrase of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by focusing on two minor characters in the play, while the main characters of the original appear only in the

¹⁵ Orig.: «Sokszor a reminiscenciák nagyon is szembetűnők; mikor azt olvassuk az ősmagyarokról: "[...] Zengett a pusztán akkor huj-huj szó. / Gallen kapuját mászták és rázták,-" kinek ne jutna eszébe akkor együtt az Arany hatalmas "ördögi huj-huj szó" és némely modernnek pogány-magyar indulói» (Babits 1910b, 474).

background. The poem relates to the grand narrative of the Bible by retelling the Christian story, but not from the familiar, sacralized perspective. This intertextuality suggests, among other things, that the value and truth of any event in the world is at least in part a matter of interpretation.

The poem has the following subtitle: *Egy ismert passió-ének dallamára* (To the melody of a familiar Passion song). With this paratextual element, Babits indicates the specific text to which the poem alludes in its structure and turns, parts of which it even incorporates as a guest text. The text in question is the very popular fourteenth-century hymn *Patris sapientia*, the melody and Hungarian translation of which are found in several nineteenth-century hymnbooks. The hymn was often sung as part of the Lenten devotions¹⁶. The so-called *hymnus omnis horae*, *horae* hymns, recount the *Passion of Christ* according to the *horae canonicae*, canonical hours. A shared feature of these hymns, which Babits also uses, is that half of the lines of a given stanza recall the time of the moment recounted, the other half recall the event:

Délután halálra vált
Három óra tájban
"Lelkemet fogadd, Atyám!"
Mondta végszavában. (Tárkányi [1855] 1874, 176)

In the afternoon, he died,
Around three o'clock
"Receive my soul, Father!"
He said with his last words.

Golgotha Tavern plays on this text with its rhythm, rhyming, and vocabulary:

Megkukult a feszület
három óra tájban
Akkor elfogyott a szusz
a zsidókirályban. (Babits 1909, 34)

¹⁶ Several manuscripts suggest that the author of *Patris sapientia*... was Bishop Aegidius Colonna [d. 1316].

The crucifix fell silent
 Around three o'clock,
 And the puffs ran out
 In the King of the Jews.

One of the linguistically engaging elements of the poem is the manner in which the familiar liturgical motifs of the story from two thousand years ago mix alongside the *argot* of the modern world, a bit like a collage (for instance, the Hungarian word *szusz*, translated here with the deliberately clumsy word 'puffs' to create a similar tone in English). With this mix, Babits sharpens the contrast between the sacred events and uneducated commentary. The Roman soldier is eager to throw a «little shindig» (*kis murit*) to celebrate having won the garment, and he uses a vulgar term, *dajna* (meaning essentially a stocky woman and translated below as 'pudgies') to refer to the women weeping with the mourning Mary:

Ott fönn a kereszt alatt
 bög egynéhány dajna. (*Ibidem*)

Up there by the cross
 Couple of pudgies sobbing.

One even discerns in Babits's use of irreverent language in these passages the influence of Richepin again, if perhaps in a less direct way than in the case of *Turanian March*. Richepin's *argot*-infused poem *Les Blasphèmes*, published in 1884, contains similarly harsh, crudely sacrilegious language.

The playful intertextuality of *Golgotha Tavern* is made more emphatic by its first, manuscript title, *Wayside Inn*. The use of an English title for a Hungarian poem with a Biblical theme may seem unusual in and of itself, but it is even more striking when one considers its meanings as an allusion. With this title, Babits refers to a volume of poems by American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863). The setting of the three-part lyrical work is an American wayside inn. Guests from many different national backgrounds come to the inn and tell their tales, their own origin stories. This combination of varied narratives essentially captures the larger story of the complex culture of modern American society, which is being formed out of a motley and mixed crowd. For Longfellow, the sim-

ple roadside inn becomes the symbolic space of the emerging new world. Thus, in the first version of his poem, Babits not only brings together (into collision with one another) the traditions of the sacred story, the liturgical language of the hymn, and the blasphemous vulgarity of crass language. With the English title *Wayside Inn*, he also anachronistically blurs the timelines, juxtaposing the speech of the character in the two-thousand-year-old biblical scene who enters the tavern with the commentaries of the guests who gather in the inn in the 'new' world. The allusion in the English title suggests that a character from the Biblical story would enter the tavern near Golgotha in Jerusalem (which is referred to somewhat playfully with the Hungarian word *csárda*) in much the same way as the guests of this American inn. The Roman soldier tells his story in against a backdrop which becomes poetically open in time and space. Given the deliberately tightly woven structure of the poem, it may seem surprising that Babits changed the original manuscript title to *Golgotha Tavern* when the work was published and thus lost the whole modern dimension created by the allusion to a work by a poet who was almost his contemporary. The gesture seems unexpected, but it arguably strengthened the poem rather than weakened it, as the omission of the allusion made the structure of the poem, which is based on contrasting traditions and dissonant layers of language, even clearer and more emphatic.

The poem *Esti kérdés* (*An Evening Question*, translated by István Tótfalusi, in Babits 1988) is perhaps the most striking example in Babits's oeuvre of a complex temporal web of textual references¹⁷. In this poem, Babits creates intertextual links with several texts from completely different periods. One of the most significant works on which he draws is Victor Hugo's ambitious poem *Le monde et le siècle* written in 1829. Hugo's poem contains a long, repetitive series of questions, like *An Evening Question*, with the words «pourquoi» and «à quoi bon» at the beginning of many adjacent lines, creating a recognizable rhythm, as literary historian Győző Murányi, who wrote a monograph on Hugo, pointed out in 1970. Below is an extract from Hugo's poem followed by an extract from *An Evening Question* in the original Hungarian and in English translation by István Tótfalusi:

¹⁷ For an analysis of intertextuality in *An Evening Question*, see Kelevéz 2009b.

Pourquoi le brouillard d'or qui monte des hameaux?
 Pourquoi l'ombre et la paix qui tombent des rameaux? [...]
 Pourquoi les bois profonds, les grottes, les asiles?
 A quoi bon, chaque soir, quand luit l'été vermeil,
 Comme un charbon ardent déposant le soleil
 Au milieu des vapeurs par les vents remuées,
 Allumer au couchant un brasier de nuées? (Hugo 1840, 61)

ez a sok szépség mind mire való?
 mégis csak arra fogsz gondolni árván:
 minek a selymes víz, a tarka márvány?
 minek az est, e szárnyas takaró?
 miért a dombok és miért a lombok
 s a tenger, melybe nem vet magvető?
 minek az árok, minek az apályok
 s a felhők, e bús Danaida-lányok
 s a nap, ez égő szizifuszi kő?
 miért az emlékek, miért a multak?
 miért a lámpák és miért a holdak?
 miért a végét nem lelő idő? (Babits 2022, 546-547)

to what these beauties and delights avail?
 you none the less will ask: wherefore is there
 this silken water and that marble stair,
 what is the evening for, that winged veil?
 wherefore the hill, oh and wherefore the willow,
 wherefore the sea where seeds are never sown?
 wherefore have ebbs and tides been ever made,
 wherefore the cloud, that sad Danaid maid,
 and Sun, that burning Sisyphean stone?
 wherefore the memories and days of past,
 wherefore the lamps, the moons, the leaves at last,
 and wherefore Time that seeks its end in vain? (Ivi, 11; Transl. by Tótfalusi)

The basic framing of the two poems and the attitudes they reflect are fundamentally different, however. While in Hugo's poem the questions are addressed to God in the form of a dialogue, in Babits's poem, this dimension is completely absent. Babits also crafts his poetic language in the form of appeals, but he uses the second-person informal verb tense, which strengthens the meditative character of the poem by suggesting that he is

in dialogue with himself. Hugo's poem clearly must have been an important source for Babits, even if he himself never mentioned it, not even in the detailed confession he made to his student, fellow poet Lőrinc Szabó, concerning his inspirations. It was precisely for this reason that, for a long time, no one even considered that *Le monde et le siècle* could have had any influence on Babits's poem.

Babits uses allusions in his poem to create links not only to different authors but also to different centuries and even millennia. In addition to the pattern of questions borrowed from Victor Hugo, who as a nineteenth century writer was almost his contemporary, he also includes several famous motifs from Greek mythology. The cloud become a «sad Danaid maid» (*Danaida-lányok*) and the sun a «burning Sisyphean stone» (*égő szizifuszi kő*). Even the sea, «where seeds are never sown», is an image inspired by Homer, as György Rába points out (1981, 319).

And finally, one also finds in *An Evening Question* allusions to the most canonical text of Western culture, the Bible. According to the Hungarian poet Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922-1991), Babits makes the millennial weight of the questions more ponderous by «borrowing the language of ancient parables» (1984, 46). Tibor Melczer shares a similar insight: «It is as if [...] the opening passages of the Book of Solomon had been given a modern poetic orchestration»¹⁸.

The now famous parallel questions of the last two lines, based on a rhythm of thought, focus on the topos of grass as it grows and then dries out and dies:

miért nő a fű, hogyha majd leszárad?
miért szárad le, hogyha újra nő? (Babits 2022, 547)

why does [the wee blade] grow if it is doomed to wither?
why does it wither if it grows again? (Ivi, 11; Transl. by Tótfalusi)

¹⁸ Orig.: «Mintha [...] *A prédikátor Salamon könyve* kezdő szakaszai kapnának itt modern költői hangszerelést» (Melczer 1993, 23). See also in Kelevéz 2009a.

In search of the meaning of life, the two questions elevate the poem to a symbolic height by referring again to a recurring parable in the Bible, the cyclical nature of the growth and withering of grass (found, for instance, in 1 Peter 1:24, Isaiah 40:6-8, and Job 14:1-2). Perhaps the most familiar occurrence of the parable is in Psalm 90. Textually, Babits plays mostly on the widely known words of the Hungarian translation by Albert Molnár Szenci ([1607] 1998). *An Evening Question* of Babits's most richly layered poems, and its text is defined poetically by a masterly interweaving of threads of various allusions that span millennia of European culture.

Metacritique: intertextuality as self-defense

Babits wrote his poems in the spirit of modernity from the outset, but in his assessment, modernity was fully compatible with drawing on tradition and using the most varied forms of intertextuality. This is one of the reasons why he was caught completely off guard when his poems were first published in an anthology, and he suddenly found himself besieged with accusations. The anthology *A Holnap* (Tomorrow), which consisted of poems by seven young poets, was published in Nagyvárad (today Oradea, Romania) in the fall of 1908. The volume, with Ady as its most prominent figure (he was already considered an outstanding talent in modern Hungarian poetry at the time), sparked wide-ranging debates in the press that constituted something of a turning point in the already heated literary and ideological polemics between conservatives and moderns. Babits was not spared the blunt attacks. His poems were described as «the monstrous whelp of anti-poetry»¹⁹, and his poetic style was characterized either as «reeking with the stench of the library»²⁰ or, conversely, as showing disdain for. His carefully selected volume of poems published in 1909 met with similar scorn. He found himself in something of a creative crisis, and he even faced the risk of falling silent. In the end, he moved on, drawing on his poetic achievements thus far. In defiant response to the unmerited criticism with which his works had met, like something of a poetic refugee, he exploited

¹⁹ Orig.: «az ízléstelenség és az antipoézis szörnyszülöttjei» (Krüger 1908).

²⁰ Orig.: «néha egy kis könyvtár-szaga is van egyik-másik versnek» ([Schöpflin?] 1909).

the expressive potentials of intertextuality even more than before. He responded to the inward-looking debates by widening his perspective. He did not simply juxtapose the old with the new, as his critics did. Rather, he linked the old and the new through intricate webs of allusions in poems like *Palinódia* (Palinode), *Arany Jánoshoz* (To János Arany), *Levél Tomiból* (Letter from Tomi), *Szonettek* (Sonnets), and *Symbols*.

Of the poems written by Babits in response to the criticism with which he met after the publication of the anthology *Tomorrow, Sonnets* – which draws heavily on other texts – merits closer examination from the perspective of intertextuality²¹. The poem contains allusions to two important groups of recognizable texts. The first constitutes an innovation compared to Babits's earlier experiments with intertextuality, because it is based on irony. Babits borrows passages from the stubbornly obtuse writings of his contemporary critics and mockingly exaggerates them. Many of the turns of phrase and adjectives used in *Sonnets* are borrowed from the often-damning characterizations found repeatedly in the reviews and placed by Babits in an entirely new context. For example, in his devastating review of the volume of poetry *Levelek Irisz koszorújából* (Leaves from Iris' Wreath), reviewer Géza Szilágyi wrote, «there is no arching impetus in his poems, often a coldness and dryness makes his lines rigid or languorous»²². In response, Babits makes defiant use of the word «cold» with the candid pronouncement at the beginning of his poem: «ezek hideg szonettek» (these are cold sonnets). Miksa Bródy (1909, 2) also wrote a sharply worded review, dismissing Babits as a «dexterous virtuoso» rather than a real artist. Babits (1910a) clearly worked these words in the sonnet: «[...] Mind ügyesség / és szenvtelen, csak virtuóztatás [...] ez nem költészet; de aranyművesség!» (All dexterity / and passionless, mere virtuosity [...] this is not poetry; but goldsmithery). Ernő Bresztovszky lamented Babits's alleged lack of creativity and considered him little more than an imitator precisely because of his use of allusion:

He is capable of nothing more than mere show, with dizzying technique, of plastic images, splendid imitations, and interesting characterizations. This book

²¹ For an analysis of intertextuality in *Sonnets*, see Babits 2022, 637-638.

²² Orig.: «Nagyívű lendület nincsen verseiben, sokszor valami hidegség és szárazság teszi rideggé vagy bágyadttá sorait» (Szilágyi 1909, 32).

is a picture gallery: it contains many good pictures, many very good pictures, a few blundered pictures, but all by different painters.²³

In retaliation, as announced in the title of the poem, Babits chose the sonnet, a form which had a regal history, having been used by the greatest masters of the European tradition, and also demanded great mastery.

With the second group of allusions, which is more significant than the first, Babits delves back into the past, as he had done before, to find support against the attacks he faced by drawing on the texts of the poet predecessors he held in high esteem. He calls on them to come to his side in his struggle against the uncomprehending. This was most clear when the poem was first published in *Nyugat* (West), the most important literary journal of the time, which was one of the main forums for literary debates (Babits 1910a). Babits included, after the title of the poem, two citations (in English) from poems by English poets William Wordsworth and Robert Browning in defense of the sonnet. Babits later omitted the citations from his volume of poems, *Herceg, hátha megjön a tél is!* (1911, 49; Prince, What If Winter Comes!), but their presence in the issue of *Nyugat* in which the poem was first published is so decisive from the perspective of a discussion of intertextuality in his poetry and even from perspective of the texture of this specific poem, which is rich with allusions, that it is worth dwelling on them for a moment, since the paratextual mottos themselves contain allusions.

The first motto is a passage from Wordsworth's poem *Scorn not the Sonnet* (1827) «With this same key», Wordsworth writes, «Shakspeare [sic] unlocked his heart». The exact quote is found in the second and third lines of the poem:

Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have fowned,
Mindless of its just honours; with this key
Shakspeare [sic] unlocked his heart. (Wordsworth 1827, II, 318).

Importantly, the word «same» is not found in front of the word «key»

²³ Orig.: «Nem képes többre plasztikus képek, pompás imitációk, érdekes jellemzések szédületes technikával való előadásánál. Ez a könyv képtárlat: sok jó kép, sok igen jó kép, néhány elfuccsolt kép van benne – de mind más festőtől» (Bresztovszky 1909, 5).

in this poem. In this sonnet on the sonnet, Wordsworth defends the genre against his contemporary critics by invoking Shakespeare. His poem is rich with other allusions to the towering figures of European literature, as he evokes the sonnets of Petrarch, Tasso, Camões, Dante, Spenser, and Milton, in addition to Shakespeare.

The second citation is a reference to a later moment in the debate. Half a century later, Browning wrote a poem entitled *House* in which he engages in a dialogue with Wordsworth by citing his poem, using italics to mark the text (Browning inserts the word «same» in front of «key», and Babits clearly borrowed from Browning's text). Browning cites Wordsworth in the last stanza of his poem, in which he replies to his own skeptical question raised in the first two lines, «Shall I sonnet-sing you about myself? / Do I live in a house you would like to see?»:

"Hoity toity! A street to explore,
Your house the exception! '*With this same key
Shakespeare unlocked his heart*' once more!"
Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he! (Browning 1896, 440)

Babits cites only the last two lines: «Did Shakspeare? If so, the less / Shakspeare he!». Browning thus also invokes Shakespeare, but with a double twist, through a citation from Wordsworth, without mention of Wordsworth's name. In other words, he relies on his reader to recognize the famous poem from the lines written in italics. Babits also plays with the allusions, which are already in dialogue with each other, by quoting lines from the two poets independently of each other as passages with related content, but without making the allusion from Browning's poem (the italicized citation from Wordsworth) part of his text, i.e., without revealing the direct link between the two. He thus creates an even more complex intertextual relationship which will only be understood by a reader with a comparatively robust knowledge of English literature. Finally, he weaves the concluding metaphor of his own poem into this web of interpretation, using two keywords found in Wordsworth's poem, «heart» and «key». He enters the series of poetic dialogues by stressing the importance of spiritual «kinship»:

Ki hajdan annyi szívek kulcsa voltál,
 Szonett, aranykulcs, zárd el szívemet,
 erősen, hogy csak rokonom nyithassa [Babits 1910a]

You, who were once the key to so many hearts,
 Sonnet, golden key, lock my heart tight,
 So that only my kinsmen may open it.

From the words borrowed from the critical reviews of his work to the references to Shakespeare, Babits makes the temporal interplay among his allusions the basis for the interpretation of his poem such that the void between these guest texts, which is waiting to be filled, takes on one of the leading roles. When he decided to omit the allusions to Wordsworth and Browning from the poem in the volume of his poetry in which it was published, he made the process of reception easier, but he lost the broad panorama of a rich literary background. The discerning reader, however, can still recognize the message of the intertextual allusions hidden in the poem, an ars poetic agenda linking Babits work to his predecessors.

Modelled on Greek mythology: intertextuality as a classicist idiom

It is also thanks to the influence of Babits's critics that intertextuality became one of the central organizing principles of the so-called Greek period in his oeuvre, from fall 1908 to 1910. He published poems in the book *Prince, What If Winter Comes!* (Babits 1911). During this period, he wrote a series of poems 'in disguise' based on classical models, in which he dealt with his poetic crisis and the unsettlingly uncomprehending reception of his works. He chose titles which, each with the name of a mythological figure, refer to a fundamental text of ancient Greek culture, such as *Thamyris*, *Héphaisztosz* (Hephaestus), *Protesialaos* (Protesilaus), *Laodameia* (Laodamia). The very titles of the poems establish easily recognizable intertextual links with the ancient classics. Perhaps the revealing example from this perspective is the poem *Thamyris*. In this case too, the earlier text on which Babits was drawing can be identified beyond doubt, because the manuscript on which Babits himself gives the source has survived. Next to the title *Thamyris*, he wrote the following note in pencil: «B 595». «B» is the Greek letter of the second Book of *The Iliad*, and «595» indicates the number of the line in which the

name Thamyris appears, the story itself being found in lines 594-600. The audacious Thracian poet Thamyris challenged the Muses, but the gods punished him for his brashness by silencing him. Faithfully following the original text and assuming the guise of the punished poet, Babits narrates his crisis in the first-person singular and expresses his fear of the danger he faces of being silenced and having forever to abandon his poetic career (see also 2022, 621-622).

In the sonnet *Hephaestus*, Babits uses the mythological figure of the blacksmith god, known for his wondrous works, as a model to express his own place as outcast and the poetic dilemmas he faced, by recalling the trials suffered by the Greek diety. In twelve confessional lines, Babits condenses the story from *The Iliad* (Book 18, 395-405), the story of a god who was cast from Olympus to the depths of the ocean by his mother but who nevertheless created masterful works. There are many parallels between Babits's poem and the ancient epic. In Homer's narrative, the story is also told in the first-person singular. Babits uses the same distinctive epithetical noun found in the Hungarian translation, «ebszem», for the goddess Hera. The English translation of *The Iliad* by Alexander Pope contains only the adjective «proud» as a characterization of Hera in these passages, and Samuel Butler's translation is even more restrained. In Butler's translation, Hephaestus mentions only his «cruel mother's anger». The Hungarian word «ebszem» is far more disparaging and also a far more literal rendering of the original Greek, κυνῶπιδος, which is the genitive of κυνῶπις, meaning 'dog-eyed' or, metaphorically, 'shameless one'²⁴.

Babits's narrative also closely follows the order of events retold by Hephaestus in Homer, with a description of the jewels the blacksmith god has crafted and the ocean's depths, specific mention of the time he has spent there (nine years), and the other gods mentioned by name, Thetis and Eurynomé. Indeed, Babits follows Homer's narrative with almost quotable precision. Through these tightly knit allusions, he creates a work of such intensity and paradoxical uniqueness that even his contemporaries sensed the sincerity of the deeply personal confession behind the mask (Füst 1924,

²⁴ See Greek Word Study Tool - Perseus Digital Library, <[http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=kunw%2Fpidos&la=greek&can=kunw%2Fpidos0&prior=i\)o/thti](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=kunw%2Fpidos&la=greek&can=kunw%2Fpidos0&prior=i)o/thti)>.

502-503). Nothing could offer more persuasive testimony to his greatness as a poet (see also Babits 2022, 632-633).

The poem *Protesilaus* merits attention in part because, when it was first published, Babits again clearly indicated mythological story on which he was drawing: Luc. Char. 1. Dialogi mort. XXIII.c.I. (1910c). With the precision of a philologist, Babits directs his reader to Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, written in Greek, «Dialogi mort.» being an abbreviation of the Latin translation of the title, *Dialogi mortuorum*. This devastatingly satirical cycle of dialogues is built around the theme of Lucian's desire to return from the dead. Protesilaus (the main character of dialogue 23 in Lucian) is the Greek warrior from the tale of the Trojan war who first went ashore once the Greek ships had landed, even though he knew of the prophecy that the first Greek to set foot on Trojan soil would perish. After having died his heroic death, he is in conversation with Pluto, lord of the Underworld, and his wife Persephone. The passages used by Babits are found in the first part of the text. Having had to leave his young wife the day after their wedding, Protesilaus pleads with Pluto to let him return to her for a short time. Babits's Protesilaus is not a mask. The first-person narrator of the poem draws a clear parallel between his poetic destiny and the destiny of the epic hero, who foresees his tragic fate but nevertheless accepts it. Babits again omitted the clear reference to Lucian when he published the poem in a volume of his works, as he had done earlier with *Sonnets*, the name of the mythological Greek hero in the title makes the intertextual nature of the poem clearer than in the case of the omission of the citations from Wordsworth and Browning (see also 2022, 767-768).

Babits wrote a whole page of notes in pencil (found in a manuscript notebook alongside poems on Greek themes in the National Széchényi Library, Fond III/2356, folio 78 recto) that reveals a great deal about his deliberate, strategic use of allusion. Babits takes a thorough look at János Arany's narrative poem *Keveháza* written in 1853, in which Arany makes heavy use of epic elements. Going stanza by stanza, Babits finds lines from Homer's *The Iliad* that in his assessment had a significant influence on Arany's text. He uses letters from the Greek alphabet to indicate the given song from the Greek epic, followed by line numbers, as in the manuscript version of his poem *Thamyris*. In all, he finds more than 90 instances of echo

or allusion. His notes, which could easily be considered intertextual research by a literary historian, are much richer than any of the studies produced by earlier scholars on the epic roots of Arany's work. Babits, who regarded Arany as his idol, clearly passionately sought to discover the secrets of the intertextual workings of Arany's poem and Arany's methods of repetition and paraphrase so that he could then use these techniques to enrich his own works with allusions to the Greek classics.

Perhaps the richest work in Babits's oeuvre from the perspective of allusions is *Laodamia*, a dramatic poem of more than 900 lines written in the spring of 1910²⁵. The text is an ornate tapestry of intertextual allusions to works written millennia apart, from Homer to Algernon Charles Swinburne and János Arany. The intertextual richness of the text was immediately mentioned by reviewers after its publication. Sándor Sík noted that «it faithfully follows the style of the Greek tragedians to the point of deception. And in the chorus songs, he uses the most complex Greek lyric verse forms with wondrous virtuosity»²⁶. Precisely because of this, Babits then felt it important to reveal the sources on which he had drawn, and he made this confession concerning his inspirations not to just anyone. He chose his friend Vilmos Szilasi, a philosopher and scholar with a thorough knowledge of the culture of Antiquity. He prepared an accurate inventory, writing down the names of the authors present at the beginning and in the margins alongside the given lines in his drama in the edition of *Prince, What If Winter Comes!* dedicated to Szilasi. He identified Lucian's Protesilaus as an influence on the whole play, «Swinburne's Atalanta on the chorus songs», and «all the relevant passages from Homer. Catullus, Sappho, Horatius, Aeschylus» (Kelevéz 1994, 755). And just as Babits said in his confession, he does indeed allude to relevant passages from Homer's *The Iliad* in several places (Book 2, 695-709), and indeed in the language of the work he tries to evoke the epic mood. His use of epithetical adjectives – a frequent element of style in Homer – is also a sign of deliberate playfulness: *görbe hajó* 'curved

²⁵ For an analysis of intertextuality in *Laodamia*, see Babits 2022, 857-868.

²⁶ Orig.: «A csalódásig híven követi a görög tragikusok stílusát. A kardalokban pedig a legbonyolultabb görög lírai versformákat szólatatja meg csodálatos virtuozitással» (Sík 1911, 698).

ship', *érelábvértű görög* 'ore-greaved Greek', *nyilas Artemisz* 'arrow-armed Artemis', *Ares-kedvelte hős* 'Ares-favored hero' (see also Babits 2022, 858-862).

As Babits himself notes, Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon* had a decisive influence on the whole work. From the perspective of the discussion here, however, one important different between the two compositions is that Babits cites the original model much more faithfully in his play than Swinburne did in his. In its structure and the construction of the chorus songs, *Laodamia* follows the strictly defined order of the ancient Greek tragedies with almost philological precision. Several features of the text also suggest, however, that while the Greek tragedies may have served as a kind of general model, Aeschylus' *The Persians* is undoubtedly the most direct source on which Babits draws. These features include the large number of allusions, the similar thematic motifs, the similarly structured antistrophic structure of the chorus songs, and the identical structure of the two works. For example, the following lines from Babits seem to have been taken almost word for word from the translation by his contemporary, János Csengeri:

Remegek reájuk nézni,
remegek hozzájuk szólni.
(*Laodamia* in Aeschylus 1903, verses 406-407)

I tremble to look at them,
I tremble to speak to them.

Remegek nézni szemedbe,
Remegek szólni szavadra
(*Perzsák*, *Persians* in Aeschylus 1903, verses, 694-695)²⁷

I tremble to look you in the eye,
I tremble to speak at your words.

Thus, while imitating the Greek pattern with strict consistency and using passages from Homer and several Greek dramas, Babits inserts into his *Laodamia* more than twenty lines (822-845) from Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) in his own translation as a sign of respect for the modern

²⁷ See also Rába 1969, 109.

version. Decades later, he publicly confessed this in the course of a discussion broadcast on the radio:

It is more than a translation, it is the greatest posthumous gift a writer can offer as tribute to the greatness of a distant companion and master, a confession that his soul lives in me and has shaped my soul by its influence.²⁸

Babits's radio confession sheds light on an essential element of his poetic awareness. He did not seek to conceal the transtextual interconnections between his *Laodamia* and the works on which it draws. On the contrary, he enumerated them. Indeed, he expected his reader to recognize the allusions (which sometimes were as long as an entire stanza) woven like the elements of a mosaic into his text. One of his contemporaries recalled that he himself complained about his fellow writers, his publisher, and his critics failed to understand his work, since «no one recognized the original Sappho poem in the ode *Büszke székesden* [sic] *magas Aphrodité* (*On the throne of many hues, Immortal Aphrodite*, see Sappho 2014)»²⁹. Indeed, the passages of Sappho's poem in Babits's *Laodamia* (582-585) are not even Babits's translation. As Babits himself revealed to Szilasi, he used the translation by Ferenc Kölcsey and József Fábchich, which was widely read at the time. With this conjuring, through Kölcsey, of Sappho, there is again interplay among texts from different eras. The very gesture of alluding to and interweaving texts from different, even distant periods is as meaningful, as an element of the poem, as the more narrowly understood lexical meaning of the citation. In both form and content, Babits's aforementioned essay *Tale of the Big World* is a key work. In the introductory section of the essay, he recounts listening to two people unfamiliar to him as they talked to each other while walking along a riverbank and realizing suddenly that Socrates and Phaedrus were chatting. In his essay, which falls into the genre of fable, he records the content of this dialogue. The form and style of the conversation he recalls

²⁸ Orig.: «Több ez mint fordítás, a legnagyobb síri ajándék, amellyel versíró áldozhat egy távoli társ és mester nagyságának, vallomás arról, hogy lelke bennem is él és az én lelkemet is alakította hatásával» (Babits in Vezér 1969, 163).

²⁹ Orig.: «Hogy Babits környezete, kiadója, kritikusai mennyire nem értették meg korai műveit, azt az is bizonyítja, hogy a *Büszke székesden magas Aphrodité* ódában senki sem ismert rá az eredeti Sappho versre» (Frideczky 1999, 11).

can be seen as a pastiche of the Platonic form of dialogue, but its content is the creation of the modern imagination, since Socrates and Phaedrus are talking to each other not garbed in togas in ancient Athens but in everyday clothes on the banks of the Olt River near the city of Fogaras (today Făgăraș, Romania). Moreover, the characters in Babits's essay make mention of Leo Tolstoy and Friedrich Nietzsche. Discoursing on the diversity of the world and inspired by the natural philosophical views of Gustav Fechner, Babits's Socrates makes the following surprising proclamation: «[...] once, when I was Fechner, I said that there is life too!»³⁰. In Babits's vision, the ancient Greek philosophers are a living, integral part of the history of thought. One cannot read their works without falling under the influence of the ways in which they have since been read. In other words, their texts interact with the texts of the philosophers who came after them. Socrates and Phaedrus thus become symbols of the continuity and survival of tradition. The opening sentence of the essay places the essence of the vision in a broader context, which is the foundation of Babits's approach to culture and texts: «the world is interrelated, and no matter what we are talking about, we are talking about everything»³¹.

Some conclusions: towards Babits's practice and theory of intertextuality

Complexity is definitely a characteristic feature of Babits's texts, especially those of the early period. They are defined not by one or the other of the many cultural references or the collage of allusions, but by the temporal interweaving of all of them. In creating his complex webs of texts, Babits clearly relies on an ideal, discerning reader. It is thus particularly true of his poetry that the interpretations they are given will vary widely, depending on a given reader's level of education and attitude and even the amount of time that has elapsed since the publication of the work. Some readers will be more familiar with the texts on which he draws, and some will not, and some readers will consider a given text important as a possible influence,

³⁰ Orig.: «[...] egyszer, mikor Fechner voltam, azt mondtam, hogy élet is van!» (Babits 1912, 995).

³¹ Orig.: «A világ összefügg és akármiről van szó, mindenről szó van» (ivi, 991).

while others will not. Some of the intertextual references will be missed or forgotten because of Babits's decision to omit any mention of sources from a given title or from the notes originally included beneath a title, and other allusions will be missed simply because the context in which the work was composed is either entirely unfamiliar to the secondary literature or can only be reconstructed with laborious research, such as the allusions to contemporary critical reviews in the case of *Sonnets* or the strong presence of the poem by Victor Hugo in the case of *An Evening Question*. Thus, there may well be allusions which constitute an important element of a given text but which, for the moment, have been overlooked. Nonetheless, the possibility and importance of an intense dialogue between Babits's texts and other texts remains a fundamental experience for the reader. As Riffaterre has pointed out, even if a reader fails to notice the intertext, a kind of intertextuality can still be at play, as the work itself still bears the outlines and thus the influence of the unfamiliar composition³².

Decades later, in 1936, Babits wrote a major work of scholarship, *Az európai irodalom története* (The History of European Literature). This work arguably also offers a rich source for the study of intertextuality as poetic method and indeed also testimony to the relevance of intertextuality as a tool with which to further a nuanced understanding of literary history itself. In the introduction to this ambitious work, he makes the following proclamation:

Only the greatest belong to true world literature. And the true history of world literature is the history of these greatest. The greats who continue one another, century after century, and who stretch out their hands to one another over the heads of the masses.³³

³² See: «Ce type d'intertextualité fonctionne même si le lecteur ne parvient pas à retrouver l'intertexte: dans ce cas, sa lecture cerne un inconnu, elle en subit l'influence sans pouvoir l'éluider, puisqu'il est aussi présent comme question qu'il le serait comme réponse. Vide à combler, attente du sens, l'intertexte n'est alors qu'un postulat, mais le postulat suffit, à partir duquel il faut construire, déduire la signification» (Riffaterre 1980, 6).

³³ Orig.: «Az igazi világirodalomhoz csak a legnagyobbak tartoznak. S az igazi világirodalom-történet ezeknek története. A nagyoké, akik folytatják egymást századról századra, s kezet nyújtanak egymásnak a népek feje fölött» (Babits 1936, 11).

He sees the essence of literature in this continuity, in the interconnecting series of reconstructions and reinterpretations. In their inspiring polyphony, the complex time games in the various forms of allusion in Babits's early poems, which constantly seem to gesture towards something beyond themselves, are sophisticated, masterful examples of the dialogical intertextuality that Babits considered fundamental to great literature.

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