Experiments with Intermediality in the Early Poetry of Mihály Babits[1*]

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Abstract
Mihály Babits (1883-1941) was one of the most influential figures of modern twentieth-century Hungarian poetry. In an earlier article (Kelevéz 2023), I examined Babits' efforts, as a poet still in the early years of his career, to engage in open or hidden dialogues with masterpieces by the great figures of European and Hungarian art. Babits created these dialogues not simply by using the common tools of intertextuality. In other words, he did not merely interweave literary allusions and references into the tapestries of his poems. He also used various forms of *ekphrasis* and other kinds of intermedial references. Babits experimented with ways of interlinking the visual arts and the world of words, and these innovative interlinkings gave him new and complex means of expression. In the discussion below, I analyze several examples of these experiments and show how the threads of intertextual and intermedial references are interwoven into unified works of art in Babits' poems.

Keywords
Hungarian literature; intermediality; intertextuality; Mihály Babits; modernity

1. Intermedial references

One of Mihály Babits' most noticeable aspirations in the earlier phases of his career was to engage in open or hidden dialogues with works by

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prominent figures of European and Hungarian art. Surprisingly, however, he did this not simply by using the common tools of intertextuality. He did not merely interweave literary allusions and references into his poems in order to establish links between them and their classical and contemporary textual predecessors. He also used various forms of *ekphrasis*[1] and other kinds of intermedial references. He incorporates into his poems allusions that go beyond the world of intertextuality, not by seeking to craft an evocative description that might compete with the sensuousness of visual representation, but rather by experimenting with ways of interlinking the visual arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, film) and the world of words, creating a new and complex means of expression. Babits seems to have been interested in the ways in which varying forms of allusions to texts by different authors and ages can interact within a poem. He also experimented with ways of conjuring works of visual art in a textual narrative, crossing over from the visual to the verbal. If we seek to situate Babits' poems in the world of intermedial phenomena[2], Irina O. Rajewsky (2010, 55) offers a helpful classification distinguishing three types of intermedial art: 1. medial transposition (film adaptations of literary texts, novelizations, and so forth); 2. media combination (opera, film, theater, illuminated manuscripts); 3. intermedial references (references in a literary text to a specific film, *ekphrasis*, or the musicalization of literature). The works by Babits discussed below belong to the category of intermedial references.

«Rokonok vagyunk, régi testvér» (We are kinsmen, old brother). So Babits writes in his poem *Pictor Ignotus* about an anonymous medieval painter. The line, which emphasizes the family bond in two of the four Hungarian words, makes it clear that Babits' concern is not the old quarrel over the primacy of poetry or the fine arts. On the contrary, he approaches the millennia-old *ut pictura poesis* debate not from the dilemma concerning the essence of depiction (is it primarily visual and secondarily textual or

[1] For a definition of *ekphrasis* see Mitchell (1994, 152): «the verbal representation of visual representation». See also Wagner 1996; Krieger 1992.

[2] Heinrich Plett (1991, 20) distinguishes three important groups of media in his discussion of intermedial processes: the verbal, the visual, and the acoustic. He then lists the various ways in which these groups of media can be combined.

the other way around?)[3]. Rather, he emphasizes communion among those who strive for artistic expression (see Kelevéz 2008, 41-55).

Babits, known as a *poeta doctus*, took a serious interest in the fine arts. He was instinctively open to the sensual pleasures of the visual arts, and also trained himself to understand and appreciate them from university onwards (see Péter 1943; Szíj 1980; Rába 1981; Tandori 1983; Losonci 1994). His thirst to pursue continuous education (including self-education) is shown quite clearly by the fact that, for example, he subscribed to the English art magazine *The Studio* while teaching in the remote Transylvanian town of Fogaras (or Făgăraș by its Romanian name), despite his limited financial circumstances. The remarkable breadth of his knowledge is revealed by his lecture in 1910 titled *Modern Impresszionisták* (Modern Impressionists), which included projected images of paintings, at the Magyar Királyi Állami Főgimnázium (Hungarian Royal State Grammar School) in Fogaras. This talk was about the theoretical aspects of landscape painting and the history of changes in the genre, but the tone of his argument reveals a personal involvement:

> The same landscape affects each person differently; we seek to see in the painting how it affected the painter. A landscape is not a photograph, not a pure copy of nature: a landscape is the lyrical poem of painting, like a song in which the painter expresses his own emotions, his own impressions.[4]

From the outset, he was not simply interested in formulating the difference between image and word. He was excited by the prospect of understanding the multi-faceted nature of perception, by the new, complex combination of impressions. It is revealing that, in 1909, he devoted an independent study to the description of phenomena in another field of the senses. He sought to legitimize odors as art, claiming that the sense of smell, like the senses of sight and hearing, is subtle and sophisticated, and that scents can be given an artistic composition and aesthetic meaning (Babits 1909a).

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[3] About the history of Intermediality see Müller 1998, 32-33, Wang 2023.

[4] Orig.: «Ugyanaz a táj minden emberre másképp hat; a képen azt szeretnők látni, hogyan hatott a festőre. A tájkép nem fénykép, nem tiszta másolása a természetnek: a tájkép a festészet lírája, olyan mint a dal, amelyben a festő a saját érzelmét, a saját benyomásait fejezi ki» (Babits 1910, 186). Unless otherwise stated, translations are by the author of this article.

Babits' open-minded approach to the interrelationships between the senses and the arts is indicated in the manuscript collection of his poems, the second booklet of *Angyalos könyv* (The Angelic Book) completed in the summer of 1906 (National Széchényi Library, Babits bequest, Fond III/2356), which contains several carefully compiled verse cycles. One of these cycles is a set of eleven poems under the title *Lyrai festmények* (Lyrical Paintings), a clear reference to the fine arts. A few years later, in 1908, Babits chose the name of a genre within painting as the title of his new cycle: *Csendéletek* (Still Lifes). The landscape, always one of the most popular genres in painting, was present as a theme and subject in his poetry from the outset, offering another clear indication of his fascination with the complexities of capturing a visual spectacle.

2. Landscapes

Babits' enduring interest in landscapes as subjects worthy of artistic expression is shown by the fact that, in addition to the *Lyrical Paintings*, he also composed a cycle of six poems entitled *Tájképek* (Landscapes). His fascination with the genre did not wane, and he continued to write his landscapes, experimenting with different methods to cross the boundary between the realm of the visual arts and literature. The world of his landscape poems bears affinities with the world of modern painting. In 1911, he compiled a new cycle titled *Paysages intimes* (the French title meaning Intimate landscapes) for his second volume of poems, *Herceg, hátha megjön a tél is!* (Prince, What If Winter Comes!), in which he bundles together his older and more recent landscape poems. By using a French title, he alludes to the painters of the French Barbizon school and the new genre they created, the intimate landscape. Babits uses this term from painting to capture the intimately poetic world of his verse (see Kelevéz 2008, 23-40).

In the end, Babits published his largest group of landscape poems in an unusual way. His short story *Útinapló* (The Travel Diary) offers an innovative mix of prose and poetry in a deeply personal or confessional tone, including sixteen poems with the central motif of the natural landscape. Babits compares his life to a great journey, as Seneca did in his time. He describes the backdrops of the most important stops on this journey in

prose and links the landscape poems written in these settings to them, thus making the descriptions of the landscapes a personal part of his life. Babits found the question of the aesthetics of landscape exciting not only from a poetic perspective but also from a theoretical one, as he discusses the significance of the spectacle of landscape at length in his short story. In his view, old French landscape painting made no pretense of striving for anything resembling photographic fidelity. The effort, rather, was placed on the creation of an idealized imaginary landscape embellished with romantic ruins, classical buildings, and scenes from classical mythology. The Barbizon school, in contrast, represented for Babits a genuine and praiseworthy commitment to plein air painting based on an almost simple view of nature without preconceived notions. In his view, Jules Dupré was the first French painter to break new ground and to use the term «paysage intime», which a year later he would make the title of his book of poems on landscapes:

> Dupré paints his painting *Le Matin*, and with it, the key term of intimate landscape painting is given: the Paysage intime. Dupré [...] endeavors to express with his colors, tones, and shades the whole mood that the simple landscape conjures in him every morning. Dupré is a true poet among painters. For him, the main thing is the expression of his own feelings. Nature is everything, man is nothing, he used to say. There is nothing stupider than a mountain range: the painter comes, sees it, paints it, and breathes life into it.[5]

Babits feels a kind of *ars poetica* communion with this approach, referred to as poetic in painting, a way of depicting the landscape that breathes life into it and expresses his own feelings. He inserts, in connection with Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, a personal confession between two commas, as a generalizing remark: «Like so many others, he also found the

[5] Orig.: «Dupré megfesti a *Reggel* című képét, és ezzel ki van adva a bensőséges tájképfestés jelszava: a Paysage intime. Dupré [...] színeivel, tónusaival, árnyékolásával iparkodik kifejezni mindazt a hangulatot, amit ez egyszerű táj reggelente költ benne. Dupré valóságos költő a festők között. A saját érzéseinek kifejezése a fő előtte. – A természet minden, az ember semmi – szokta mondani. – Nincs butább egy hegységnél: a festő jön, meglátja, megfesti, és szellemet lehel belé» (Babits 1910, 186).

redeeming power in nature»[6]. Babits discovers a deep affinity between his own poetic tools and landscape painting. A good poem, he insists, «is also a landscape: a picture of the inner landscapes of the microcosm». Indeed, the ability to take joy in contemplating a landscape is, in his view, «the surest gauge of aesthetic sensibility»[7].

3. Clouds

This is precisely why a certain project which Babits undertook is of particular importance. He wanted to create a series on clouds, the depiction of which had been one of the fascinations of nineteenth-century landscape painting. He neither finished nor published this project, but even in its fragmentary state, it reveals some interesting features of his unusual approach to the question. As the mere titles of his poems *Cirrus*, *Stratus*, and *Cumulus* make clear, he wanted to capture the spectacle of different cloud forms in verse on the basis of a scientific system, the so-called Howardian system of cloud classification. The famous meteorologist Luke Howard (1772-1864) first published his *Essay on the Modification of Clouds* in 1803 in *Philosophical Magazine*, accompanied by vivid diagrams. This illustrated presentation became so popular that it was republished several times and won its author international recognition. Copies of the pictures were also made, and they were included as illustrations of the classification of clouds in the *Pallas Encyclopaedia*, which Babits used.

The autograph manuscript editions of the unpublished poems bearing the names of the cloud forms as their titles have been classified in different pallia in the Babits estate (*Stratus* OSZK Fond III/1969/37; *Cirrus* OSZK Fond III/1728/21. See Babits 2022, 247-260.) On closer inspection the two folios of *Stratus* and *Cirrus*, which had been put in different folders, clearly belong together: the title of each is underlined in a similar manner, the font sizes are the same, the color of the ink and the type of paper are the same, and the corresponding edges of the pieces of paper match. No manuscript of the

[6] Orig.: «Ő is, mint annyian, a természetben találta meg a megváltó erőt» (Babits 1936, 464).

[7] Orig.: «a jó vers szintén tájkép: a mikrokozmosz belső tájainak képe»; «legbiztosabb hőmérője az esztétikai érzőképességnek» (Babits 1909b, 497).

poem *Cumulus* (the only one of the three actually published by Babits) has survived. That the three poems were born of the same inspiration is revealed not only by the strong similarities between the two surviving manuscript editions, but also by the strong poetic similarities among them. They have similar verse forms and use the same rhyme scheme. Most importantly, Babits sought to remain faithful to the visual style of Howards' illustrations. Thus, he does not refer to the scientific text but rather transposes the visual spectacle of the images of the clouds into the world of text; or, to apply a theoretical classification, he does not follow the well-worn text-to-text route, but rather embarks down the visual-to-text path. (Plett 1991, 20.) Using a plethora of similes, he vividly portrays the differing shapes of the three cloud formations, capturing their unique character and color and also striving to express the feelings that these natural formations evoke in him.

Babits drew not only on the ideas of a scientist like Luke Howard but also found inspiration in literary and artistic works, and he refers to these works with the titles he gave his poems. He was almost certainly familiar with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's series of similarly titled poems *Howards Ehrengedächtnis; Stratus; Cumulus; Cirrus; Nimbus*, written in 1820 and inspired by Howard's essay. Goethe's poems were published in 1865 at the very beginning of the third edition of Howard's book (Howard 1865, XI-XIII). On the basis of this, one could see the title as a doubly intertextual reference, since it can be read as an allusion both to Howard's classification system and Goethe's poems about clouds. Furthermore, Howard's classifications and his precise descriptions also had an influence on the English landscape painters John Constable and William Turner. Although there is no clear mention of any such specific link in Babits' surviving writings, the idea of depicting clouds according to scientific categories may have been inspired by a series of cloud paintings by Constable, who, among his many other paintings of the sky, produced paintings of clouds titled *Cumulus Clouds* and *Cirrus Clouds* (1815, 1822)[8]. Babits was familiar with Constable's oeuvre; in November 1909 (three years after the completion of his cloud cycle), he refers approvingly in his short story *The Travel Diary* to a book

[8] The two paintings are currently in the collections of the Yale Center for British Art and the Victoria & Albert Museum.

by Constable's monographer, C. J. Holmes, a book he had read attentively. Given the dates, he must have been thinking of one of two books, either *Constable* or *Constable and His Influence on Landscape Painting*. Holmes makes specific mention of the words 'cirrus' and 'cumulus' in both books, and he writes enthusiastically about the two paintings (Holmes 1901, 19; 1902, 86, 120, 245; 120, 164 respectively). Furthermore, given his enduring interest in painting, he almost certainly saw Turner's and Constable's paintings in person when a major exhibition opened in Budapest at the National Salon between 24 January and 21 February 1904 titled *Művészettörténeti Kiállítás I. A XVIII. század angol mesterei. II. A francia barbizoni iskola mesterei* (Art Historical Exhibition I. English Masters of the Eighteenth Century. II. Masters of the French Barbizon School). According to the catalogue (1904, 14), among the more than twenty paintings by Constable on display, a painting titled *Cloud Study* was exhibited. Finally, several writings of Babits refer to John Ruskin's five-volume *Modern Painters*, which devotes a section titled *Of Truth of Skies* to the description of clouds and analyzes the roles of clouds in painting, for instance in Turner's art. In his own series, Babits transforms the image of clouds into a poem and engages in one dialogue with the fascinating celestial spectacle as part of the landscape, another with paintings of the clouds, and another with texts from the sciences, world literature, and art history. All this, however, remained within the confines of his poetic workshop, as the only poem in the series that was published was *Cumulus*, as part of the aforementioned cycle *Still Lifes* (see Babits 2022, 26-30, 253-255).

4. *Pictor Ignotus*

Of Babits' poems in which a description of a work or works of visual arts is a central element, the most famous is *Pictor Ignotus*, written in 1909. Babits chose a museum space as the narrative setting for the poem, which begins with the line, «Nagy képtárakban hogyha járok» (If I happen to stray in large galleries). This setting is a space of ideas in which the lyrical self, speaking in the first-person singular, contemplates the paintings by the great masters of the Italian Renaissance. The paintings have been given names and titles, in keeping with established practice in modern museums. As we

wander through this space of ideas, the lyrical «I» describes the paintings he is viewing. In creating this narrative space, Babits may well have drawn on his experiences during a trip he took to Venice in the summer of 1908, perusing a vast array of works in the rich collection of the Gallerie dell'Accademia. This impressive building is home to the most important works of Venetian painting from the thirteenth century to the eighteenth, arranged in chronological order (spanning numerous rooms). The exhibition begins with large panel paintings from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the accompanying texts for which indicate clearly that the names of the painters are unknown: *Pictor Ignotus*. The character of the poem as a work of textual art that draws on the visual arts is immediately apparent since it contains references to works of fine art as well as several intertextual allusions. First of all, by using the list of painters as one of the structural elements of the poem and also highlighting their names, Babits plays on the structure of Charles Baudelaire's poem *Les Phares*. Baudelaire writes of the oeuvres of nine world-famous painters whose works, like beacons or lighthouses, shed light on the path humanity treads: Rubens, Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, Pieter Brueghel, Michelangelo, Puget, Watteau, Goya, and Delacroix. According to Baudelaire, these artists are brilliant minds with the gift and vision to interpret and translate the mysterious language of nature. He dedicates one stanza to each of them as a tribute to their art. Unlike Baudelaire, however, Babits does not give a general overview of art history. He concentrates, rather, on a specific period: the centuries of Italian painting from the beginnings of the Romanesque period to the late Renaissance. He focuses not only on the geniuses who stood out as major figures, but also on the smaller important masters, and he does not dedicate a separate stanza to each artist. In the second stanza, he writes of three Italian painters and in the third stanza of five: Leonardo da Vinci, Carpaccio, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Pinturicchio, Mantegna, Crivelli, and Cimabue (see Babits 2022, 579-580). However, in his poem the transposition of visual experience into a textual medium is denser than it was in that of his French predecessor.

As in the poem by Baudelaire, in *Pictor Ignotus* the names of the painters are not followed by descriptions of specific works but rather by a pithy and precise characterization of the given painter's oeuvre. The brief, *ekphrasis*-like descriptions reveal a serious knowledge of art history, and

they are linguistically both inventive and evocative. Two-line descriptions of the oeuvres of two prominent Italian quattrocento artists, Crivelli and Pinturicchio, make the backgrounds of the figures in the paintings a central motif of his poem. The world of Pinturicchio's frescoes is characterized by an overflowing richness of color. The backdrops of the biblical subjects he paints are no longer monochrome, as they had been before, but rather depict natural landscapes. Pinturicchio's paintings celebrate the detail-rich beauty of forests, trees, and animals, i.e. the attentively rendered Tuscan landscape. Babits calls attention to this in his vivid poetic summary of Pinturicchio's art: «Pinturicchióé dús világ / mesemadár és mesefák» (Pinturicchio's lush world / Fairytale birds and fairytale trees). Crivelli, whose oeuvre is characterized by a fascination with richly decorative materials and who loved presenting the patterns of his fabrics with such detailed precision that he even depicted the ornaments woven with gold thread with meticulous precision, is given the following two fitting lines in the poem: «Crivelli elmerengni hív / s arannyal hímez primitív» (Crivelli invites us to contemplate / and embroiders with gold primitive). In the end, however, unlike Baudelaire, Babits feels a sense of kinship not with the great masters of the art world, but rather with the painter who created in anonymous solitude, whose works have survived but whose name has been forgotten: «te alkottál s neved ma nincs / és vagy, szegény, mint aki nincs, / Pictor Ignotus» (you created and today your name is no more / and you are, unfortunate one, as if you never had been, / Pictor Ignotus.) The title of the poem (which is also its brusque concluding formula) can be read as another intertextual link, since it refers to a poem by the English poet and playwright Robert Browning (1812-1889), for whom Babits also had great admiration. Browning gave the same title to one of his famous dramatic monologues, the speaker of which is also an anonymous figure of the Italian Renaissance. But this anonymous monk laments the fact that he has remained unknown, and he contemplates the fame he might have attained had he but announced his presence to the world and created his frescoes under his own name. In *Pictor Ignotus* Babits creates a web of references in which threads of intertextual and intermedial references are interwoven to form a rich unity that could have served as an excellent additional example for the phenomena highlighted by recent theory. (Rajewsky 2005).

5. Classical Dreams

Beginning in the summer of 1908, during the years he spent in Fogaras, Babits began another important poetic experiment on the relationship between image and word. Some of the works that belong to this endeavor have become a familiar part of the canon of Hungarian poetry, though with little recognition of the ways in which they reflect, with their philosophical and literary motifs, on the visual arts. Babits himself noted, in his statements concerning the ideas and works that inspired him, that he wrote the poems *Hegeso sírja* (The Tomb of Hegeso) and *Bakhánslárma* (Bacchanalian Din) in the same day and that both were influenced by Nietzsche. In these two works, he playfully intertwines the Apollonian and Dionysian worldviews. Over the course of the next several years he composed numerous poems in which he experimented with the simultaneous experience of the two ways of being and with the possibility of capturing them in parallel in the arts. In the spring of 1909, he composed a poem entitled *Klasszikus álmok* (Classical Dreams) in which he expressed a yearning for the harmony of the Apollonian vision of life. At the same time, he also wrote *A Danaidák* (The Danaids), which overflows with Dionysian passions. Similarly, the dreamy, decorative world of Babits' 1910 poem *Csipkerózsa* (the Hungarian name of the princess in the tale *Sleeping Beauty*, known as *Briar Rose* in many English versions) shows a stark contrast with the harsh struggle between the female figures of *Két nővér* (Two Sisters), which Babits also wrote in 1910. Babits offers in these poems an innovative presentation of the form-giving world of the Apollonian view of existence by alluding to works of art, describing them in an *ekphrasis*-like manner, and in some cases even indicating in the title of the poem the work of art to which he is referring. The title and subtitle of the aforementioned poem *Hegeso sírja: Egy görög emlékére* (The Tomb of Hegeso: On a Greek Monument) clearly reveal that the inspiration for the sonnet is a famous work of Attic art in Athens, the grave stele of Hegeso, dating from around 410 BC. The poem offers a meticulous description of the scene on the stele of the tomb, which depicts a maiden seated on a chair and being given a small chest by her servant. However, Babits was prompted to compose the poem by the visual experience of a small illustration in a book and its concise explanatory text. As he revea-

led a decade later: «I had Reinach's little mirror of the arts with me at that very moment»[9]. This refers to French archaeologist and religious historian Salomon Reinach (1858-1932), who wrote a comparatively early survey of art history that was translated into Hungarian by Béla Lázár in 1906 and published with the title *A művészet kis tükre* (A Little Mirror of the Arts). In his discussion of Greek art, Reinach (1906, 65-66) refers specifically to this tomb. He writes of the sorrows of those left behind, of subtle restraint, and of the naturalness of the scene and the gesture. Babits thus was influenced both by the image of the work of art itself and by Reinach's description of it, which can be seen as a kind of faithful art-historical *ekphrasis*. The result is a new composition which faithfully describes the history and figures of the scene on the stele while also creating a new, personal narrative in which the poetic self becomes a character in the form of the future bridegroom. (Babits 2022, 392-395)

Babits' poem *Classical Dreams* also merits discussion from the perspective of the relationship between word and image. The title refers to Nietzsche's division, which makes the dream belong to the realm of Apollonian art, but the poem also touches on Nietzsche's ideas when striving to make expressivity palpable by alluding to a concrete visual arts source and transposing a classical visual art tradition into the world of words. The description of the image of the goddess in her unflinching state evokes a famous ancient statue known from copies and descriptions. the 12-meter statue of Athena Parthenos by Phidias, her face made of ivory, her dress, of gold. Babits had access to the Hungarian encyclopedia *Pallas lexikon*, according to which

> [T]he artist [Phidias] placed in the goddess's right palm a golden statue of Nike, the personification of victory. The dress flowed all the way to the feet, the left hand, on which leaned the spear, rested on the shield. The outer side of the shield showed the battle of the Amazons, the inner side the battle of the giants. The breast was covered with the *aegis,* the head with the crested helmet.[10]

[9] Orig.: «akkor volt nálam Reinach művészeti kis tükre, éppen akkor» (Gál 1975, 457). See also Rába (1981, 201-204).

[10] Orig.: «[A] művész [Pheidias] az istennő jobb tenyerébe Nikének, a győzelem megszemélyesítésének aranyszobrocskáját adá. A ruha talpig lefolyt, a bal kéz, melyhez a lándzsa támasztva volt, a pajzson nyugodott. A pajzs külsőfelén az amazónok, belső felén a gigások harca volt kiverve. A mellet az égisz, a fejet a tarajos sisak födte» (Vári 1893, 282).

Babits' poem conjures up this archaic figure detail by detail but does so without naming the famous statue or its creator. The description is so vivid and faithful that an educated contemporary reader could recognize the references to Phidias' composition.

6. The Dream of Briar Rose

The dream is also a central motif of *Csipkerózsa*, and the poem is closely related thematically to *The Tomb of Hegeso*: the protagonist of both poems is a maiden lost in a death-like sleep and brought back to life by the kiss of her unknown future lover. In both poems, dream and death are closely intertwined. Like *The Tomb of Hegeso*, *Csipkerózsa* was also inspired by a work of visual art, specifically a picture by English illustrator and author Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872-1898). Here, however, Babits does not name the source of his inspiration, as he had so politely done in *The Tomb of Hegeso*, and indeed he does not give as many clues as he had in *Classical Dreams*. Although the prominence of decorativeness is evident from the poem as a whole, the visual source of inspiration is impossible to deduce from the text. In a later confession made around 1920, Babits noted that «the poem was influenced by an image: Beardsley's portrait» . These confessions, published in 1975, did not reveal *which* painting or drawing had inspired the poem and to what extent. The situation was further complicated by the fact that Babits also mentioned that he had been «influenced» by the famous poem *The Day-Dream* by Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892), which Babits had translated years earlier and which also deals with the folktale of *Sleeping Beauty*. It is hardly easy to untangle the intricate web of influences, given the popularity of Tennyson's poem, the diverse narrative characteristics of the *Sleeping Beauty* (including the long, death-like state of sleep, the waking kiss, the roses, etc.), a story that also inspired many contemporary Pre-Raphaelite paintings. It is nonetheless worth considering the various philological explanations, since the thematic affinities have long suggested the very conventional possibility that Babits was inspired to write his poem simultaneously by a literary (or narrative) work and a depiction of this narrative in the visual arts, i.e. by a narrative captured both in image and word, rather than by an associative linking of separate, completely different cultural experiences.

To elucidate the genesis of composition, it is worth considering the connection between *The Day-Dream* and *Csipkerózsa*. Babits translated Tennyson's poem as a university student, several years before writing *Csipkerózsa* in 1909, but the manuscript of this translation was lost when he was still a young man. Later, in 1924, he translated the work a second time (Tennyson 1924). When writing *Csipkerózsa* he was already familiar with Tennyson's text, and to the extent that his poem differs from that of Tennyson, this was clearly the result of deliberate decisions on his part. Indeed, the themes of the two poems are shared, but their moods are quite different. Babits' poem is dominated by the contrast between black and white, for instance the lines (which occur twice in the poem), «fekete gyászu kárpit / fehérrel kivirágzik» (black mournful tapestry / blossoms with white). Tennyson's poem, in contrast, is more lively with its use of color, for instance the contrast between purple and black: «Across the purple coverlet, / The maiden's jet-black hair has grown». In Babits, the pillow on which Briar Rose rests is suffocatingly deep and the velvet leaden. The dream is oppressive, seemingly endless, and stifling (as for suffocating or stifling, Babits uses the somewhat unusual Hungarian word «fullatag» in his text, giving the poem a slightly archaic or distant tone), and there is not even a single reference to the figure of the prince who, according to the folktale, will someday wake the maiden with a kiss. In Tennyson, the dream is «A perfect form in perfect rest», the princess is «happy» (as are the plains, the sleep, the kiss, and even the hour when Adam first embraced Eve), and everyone in the palace is waiting for the kiss that will free the maiden from her slumber. Briar Rose's sleep is not nightmarish, and she is not «az ágynak betege» (the sick patient of the bed), as she is in Babits. Rather, she is calm and expectant: «Her constant beauty doth inform / Stillness with love, and day with light». Indeed, in Tennyson's poem, Briar Rose does not dream at all, she only sleeps: «She sleeps, nor dreams» (1965, I, 149-150). What the two poems have in common, however, is their decorativeness. It was precisely this feature of Tennyson's poem that inspired several contemporary Pre-Raphaelite paintings, which offer examples of the transformation of a work of verbal art into a work of visual art.

One of Babits' Hungarian contemporaries, the literary historian and novelist Antal Szerb (1901-1945), noted the decorative richness of motifs

in *Csipkerózsa* and arrived at the conclusion that Babits must have drawn inspiration from the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, though he could not have known precisely which work or works had inspired the poem. He tried to make connections based on the scene depicted, calling attention to an 1871 painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti entitled *Dante's Dream*, in which Dante gazes on the figure of Beatrice lying dead on a bed, surrounded by fallen roses (Szerb 1927, 146). Indeed, Babits' poem does seem to bear important thematic affinities with the painting. A pioneering monograph (Rába 1981) identifies *The Legend of Briar Rose*, a series of paintings composed between 1885 and 1890 by Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones, as a possible source of Babits' inspiration. This series is the most famous contemporary rendering in the visual arts of Tennyson's poem (Harrison, Waters 1977, 149-151). It offers an almost archetypal example of the artistic interplay of word and image, presenting the familiar scenes of the fairytale with all the decorative splendor of the exuberant Pre-Raphaelite style. The maiden lying on the cushions and the roses growing around her are dominant visual elements of the paintings. Babits unquestionably knew these paintings, and his textual narrative seems to borrow elements from the depictions (the sleeping girl, the pillow, roses), but none of the paintings has the oppressive atmosphere of Babits' poem, nor do they rely on the strong contrast between black and white.

After considerable research, I have managed to identify the mysterious Beardsley drawing which Babits must have had in mind in his autobiographical confessions (2022, 738-739). Surprisingly, the poem was not inspired by a drawing thematically related to the story of Briar Rose, as scholars had previously expected, since Beardsley never made any illustrations for Tennyson's poem. The story of Briar Rose does not appear anywhere in Beardsley's oeuvre. Nor could the image to which Babits was referring accurately be called a portrait, as Babits himself characterized it, and certainly not a portrait of a woman. It is, rather, a sort of self-portrait composed by Beardsley in 1894, four years before he died of tuberculosis at the age of 25. Very little of the artist's face is actually visible in the depiction. The print is known by two titles, either simply as Portrait of Himself or by the text in the upper left corner: «Par Les Dieux Jumeaux Tous Les Monstres Ne Sont Pas En Afrique». These lines, which are from the beginning of the

play *Le Pédant joué* (The Pedant Imitated) by Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac (1619-1655), mean, «by the twin gods, not all monsters are in Africa»[11]. If one looks at Beardsley's print and reads Babits' poem alongside it, one cannot help but notice that the attempt to capture the image in words is astonishingly accurate. The relationship between the two works of art is undeniable, and we realize we are dealing with a profound example of *ekphrasis*. In the print, the delicate figure of the artist, who has an almost girlish face, is lying on a late seventeenth-century bed covered by a giant drape. His head is small considering the size of the picture, and it has sunk deep into his large pillow. His face is barely visible from under the blanket and whatever soft clothes or covers have been put on his head. Given the depiction, the term self-portrait seems almost grotesque, since a self-portrait is traditionally an effort by an artist to craft his identity by presenting his face to the world. In this print, however, the focus is not on the creative figure of the artist. It is, rather, on the sufferings of a man enduring a prolonged disease of the lungs («fullatag», the rare and unusual word of the Hungarian text, captures this very well) and the tragic manner in which we are vulnerable to the whims of circumstance. The feminine traits of the artist's face arguably allude to the homoerotic side of Beardsley's sexuality, which was common knowledge among his contemporaries. The heavy drapery surrounding and covering almost everything is black, as in Babits' poem: «Kárpitja mint az ében» (Its drapes like ebony). As often in his *oeuvre*, Beardsley uses here forceful black lines and strong black and white contrasts, accentuating his characteristic, heavy eroticism. The black material in the print is decorated with large, white rose-like flowers; Babits' poem also refers to large, white flowers: «fehérrel kivirágzik / s nagy rózsákat susog» (blossoms with white / and whispers large roses). The drapery in the print has heavy tassels dangling from it, another prominent element of the decorative world of the image, and again, one finds a textual echo of this in the poem: «s aranyos súllyal omlik / aranyzsinórja, bojtig» (and with golden weight falls / its golden cord, to the tassel). Yet all these motifs are but preparations for the overall sense of hidden fearfulness lurking in the background of both works.

[11] See Lavers 2001.

The French text in the upper corner of the print is enigmatically despairing even before we realize its origin. Art historian Annette Lavers (2001), who mentions Beardsley's great education and gives the source of the French text, still calls the inscription a «mysterious text» because she cannot discover a causal connection between the image and the text[12]. Some critics have suggested, drawing on biographical sources, that Beardsley was recalling fears from his childhood. As a schoolboy he seems to have felt very different from those around him, and the monsters in the passage from de Bergerac may have resembled, in his mind, the terrifying figures of his own fears. Others have claimed that Beardsley, who was often bedridden because of illness, had delirious nightmares in which terrifying monsters appeared (Reade 1998, 346). Babits was obviously not aware of these subsequent explanations. Presumably he did not even realize that the text was a quote from the play by de Bergerac, yet the text could have prompted him to associate the figure lying in bed or the dreams this figure was dreaming with monsters, gods, and exotic fears. Struggling with oppressive dreams of his own, Babits may have found in the stifling mood of the black-and-white print and in the shocking, if subtle, confessional nature of this unusual self-portrait something in common with his own art. He may well have woven this into a poem in which the figure of the fairytale maiden is a bit of a disguise. Gender identity becomes doubly ambiguous or intertwined, as the inspiration for a poem about a classic female fairytale figure, who is arguably used as a disguise for a male poet, was a self-portrait with feminine features and imbued with a sense of self-deprecation by a male artist. And we can be confident in our claim that this image was a source of inspiration for the poem, as Babits' surviving library contains Rudolf Klein's small German monograph on Beardsley published in 1904 which has this print on the front cover as an important *Selbstporträt* (Klein 1904), although the booklet does not mention that the French text is a quote from Cyrano de Bergerac.

The discovery of the Beardsley painting as the inspiration for Babits' poem is thus interesting not simply from a philological point of view but

[12] Similarly, Tünde Topor (2020) cannot decipher the connection between the quote of Cyrano de Bergerac and the image.

also because it reveals even more clearly how deliberate Babits was in his decision to leave the poem's ties to the world of the visual arts in the dark. He creates a faithful textual narrative for a visual experience by making the oppressive mood of Beardsley's print the lyrical backdrop of his retelling of the story of Briar Rose. The poem could be characterized as an experiment with the potentials of poetry itself. It is arguably an attempt to push the borders of poetic expression and further develop the tools of the workshop, to see how language, metaphor, and synesthesia can be used to recreate the visual experience of a work of visual art while playing on a well-known literary topos, in this case the story of Briar Rose.

7. The Moving Photograph

In his poems, the young Babits endeavors to capture not only works from the traditional, established branches of the visual arts. He also ventures into the world of the comparatively new genre of film. His poem *Mozgófénykép. Máskép: Amerikai Leányszöktetés – szenzációs szerelmi tragédia mozgófényképben előadva* (The Moving Photograph. An American Girl's Elopement – a sensational love tragedy performed in moving pictures) was inspired by the dramatic visual experiences of this new art. The intermedial relationship between text and film is usually considered from the perspective of cinematic adaptations of literary works, even though early films certainly influenced the writing methods of some authors and also figured in works of literature. James Joyce's *Ulysses* offers a famous example; in her article «Film and Modernist Literature», Laura Marcus (2016, 14) shows how «the ludic dimensions of early film, and early film performance, were particularly influential in the composition of Ulysses»[13]. Babits' poem offers a different example: with surprising detail and sensitivity to the technical achievements of filmmaking, it presents a specific work of cinematic art in a manner that also captures the influence of the new act of projecting a film on the creation of a sense of community among the viewers. In this case a poet very precisely observes and reproduces the visual concepts and possibilities of filmmaking, which were then in the

[13] See also Williams 2022.

process of being developed. While describing the story, the poem closely follows the montages and cuts, paying attention to the use of the camera and reporting on the rhythm of the successive close-ups and long-distance cuts and the changes in perspective. We recognize in the poem the features of the action-adventure film, which became popular between 1903 and 1906, and which was the perfect genre for the similarly popular theme of elopement. The fact that several Hungarian film aesthetes have studied the historical role of this poem offers eloquent testimony to its importance. Izabella Füzi, who dedicated a thorough study of film aesthetics to this poem refers to it as «one of the founding pieces of the discourse on film and the cinematic effect»[14]. Babits does not simply strive to convey the novel visual experience in an *ekphrasis*-like manner, he also considers it important to capture the sense of communal catharsis that is created by the experience. As a kind of overture, the frame-narrative structure of *The Moving Photograph* establishes very precisely the conditions under which the film will be projected, i.e. where the experience of the spectacle will captivate those who have taken a seat in the audience. The first line provides a realistic description of the play of light and shade, the new conditions: «A gép sugarát kereken veti, képköre fénylik a sik lepedőn» (The projector's beam is cast, its round image shines on the shimmering canvas). The importance of the shared nature of the experience is underlined by the chatter among the people sitting next to one another, which Babits captures with short exclamations placed in the text of the poem, the excited words of the viewers. The poem suggests that the communion among the spectators, who have been brought into an intimate closeness by the darkness, also influences the reception of the work of art. Babits seeks to convey the sensational physical and visual experience of the new genre not only by accurately recreating the cinematic effects but also by capturing the conditions of the moment, which affect all the senses.

[14] Orig.: «a filmről és a mozihatásról szóló nyelv, diskurzus egyik alapító darabja» (Füzi 2016).

8. Conclusion

The poetic journey from the clouds in the poem *Cirrus* to the grave stele of Hegeso, the print by Beardsley, and the presentation of the experience of a motion picture in words is interesting not only because it involves works of art that span millennia, but also because it makes vividly clear, through the examples discussed above, that Mihály Babits drew on an array of different sources for inspiration, from findings in the natural sciences to works of classical and modern art. Furthermore, these compositions offer engaging examples of the ways in which Babits' poetic approach included complex intertextual playfulness and an openness to intermediality, enhancing the effect of the text by situating it in a tangled web of complex interrelationships. The poems he composed as a young man are rich tapestries of allusions which are given both color and life by carefully crafted interactions and interlinkings among the arts.

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