

INTRODUCTION

The language of a small nation can be an eternal prison, a tomb, even for the greatest writer. Popular and influential though he may be in his own country, in the eyes of the world he is dead, or—what is even worse—he was never born. The mere fact that his works are translated will not resurrect him, not unless this is done at an appropriate moment. World literature, and especially European literature, is gradually achieving a certain unity. Contemporary writers are aware of each other's work, they tend to move in step with each other, and the new trends, the new waves reach every shore at the same time. The writer whose contribution to the main stream of literature is not highly specialized or completely unique, who, like Mihály Babits (1883—1941), is more interested in taking part in this united progress than in isolated achievement, cannot be indifferent to time. This is the back-cloth against which we must see Mihály Babits.

And there are other factors as well which are equally important. In his own language area a writer owes his significance and influence to his entire life-work, or more accurately to his entire creative personality only some of whose facets catch the light in each work. But the gleams of all the different facets evident in the sum total of his work, interacting on one another, and reinforcing each other, combine to illuminate what is characteristic of his art. The reader knows the character of every writer of universal significance, without necessarily being familiar with every one of his works. How would we read *Salammbô* today if we did not have a certain image of Flaubert before we started? The same question could be asked about Martin du Gard's *Jean Barois*.

It is just this advance image of the writer that the English reader

lacks in connection with Mihály Babits. And *The Nightmare* gives just a flash of his personality. During his lifetime his novels were translated only into German and Italian, and his *History of European Literature* which was very original in its approach, appeared only in Hungarian and German. And very few English readers have read the examples of his poetry which were included in English anthologies of foreign poetry.

For this reason, let us try to evoke the Hungarian readers' image of Mihály Babits; the manner in which they see his genius.

First some background information.

In the early part of the twentieth century a great and timely transformation took place in Hungarian literature. The classicism and folk traditions which suited a semi-feudal agrarian country's need for expression but proved outgrown and obsolete for reflections on the greater complexities of twentieth-century life and bourgeois development were being discarded and a new literary style was created. In this flourishing literary revival, begun by a group of brilliantly gifted writers, peculiarly Hungarian traditions mingled with several early twentieth-century trends of Western literature, from naturalism through symbolism to the early *avant-garde*. The group had formed around the periodical *Nyugat* (West), whose title expressed the programme of progressing with the Western world. Their ideas and their work inspired a literary movement that was to determine the course of literature for several years to come.

Mihály Babits was for a long time the intellectual leader of the *Nyugat* movement, the editor of the periodical and, next to Endre Ady, its greatest poet. His interests were encyclopaedic, and, although he was a poet, his vision ranged over the entire horizon of intellectual life, from the problems of philosophy, and the moral issues of society, to the craft of the contemporary and classical writer. His analytical and comprehensive mind created an entire school of essayists. In his poetry an unusual emotional sensibility combined with exceptional intellect. Babits was always able to project his momentary emotional reactions into enduring, often philosophical, validity, and, in turn, his avid intellect never ceased to inspire his creative emotional world. These double roots erupted into luxuriant lyric poetry which was a synthesis of the restlessness of the age and all that is timeless in cultural endeavour. His was a

poetry that revelled in poetic invention in rhymes and alliterations, and the audacious use of form. Babits—particularly in his younger years—tried his hand at the entire range of form in European literature: he wrote Greek tragedies, Horatian odes, Virgilian eclogues, new Leonines, and Dantean tercets, he drew from Swinburne and Baudelaire, but he always filled these stylistic forms and poetic patterns with his own restless search for the new even in the old, with suggestive meaningfulness.

This poetic practice which turned more and more in the direction of classic simplicity, and, under the influence of war and the onslaught of fascism, bore the imprint of moral struggle and the main problems of individual and community life, was supplemented by an ambitious programme of translations—in itself a life-work—through which Babits, true to the aims of the *Nyugat* movement, interpreted the treasures of world literature for Hungarian readers. Hungarian translations of poetry have traditionally striven to preserve the forms and patterns of the original, and—contrary to Western custom—the country's greatest poets have always accepted the task of translation as an exciting literary challenge and a national responsibility. In addition to the two Oedipus dramas, Babits translated Dante's entire *Divina Commedia*, Goethe's *Iphigenie in Tauris*, Shakespeare's *Tempest*, and a great many works of Verlaine, Baudelaire, Tennyson and Oscar Wilde.

If, on the basis of his poetry and philosophical concepts, we were to place Babits the poet somewhere between Paul Valéry and T. S. Eliot, then we should not be very far off the mark. It is not so easy to place Babits the novelist, who is a highly individual combination of much that is traditional in the Hungarian novel with a close affinity to intellectually inspired European writing, the early-twentieth-century innovators of the novel. In *The Nightmare*, which was published in 1916, and was written approximately at the same time as Gide's famous *Les Caves du Vatican* and Joyce's *Dubliners*, the portrayal of small-town life suggests the influence of Hungarian tradition, while the intellectual approach indicates his link with the new objectives of the European novel. With bold intellectual play, Babits accepts at their face value two well-known literary statements, namely that "life is a dream" and "dream is reality." Applying the then new Freudian psychology of his times, he carries this idea to its logical conclusion. In the split personality of his hero,

he asks the question—carrying it *ad absurdum*—which world is the real one, the world of his dreams or of his life?

The Nightmare is obviously one of the early-twentieth-century experimental novels inspired by the new ebullience of philosophical thought and the new achievements of scientific investigation. The reader who expects this to be a modern novel will be deceived. And if he thinks that this one experimental novel will give him a full picture of Babits the novelist, he will be doubly disappointed. To obtain such a picture, he would also have to read *The Sons of Death*, *Virgil Timár's Son* and *A House of Cards*, Babits's contributions to the social novel. At the same time, however, *The Nightmare* does reflect the exceptional radiance of Babits's personality, suggests his poetic depth, and also makes one sense the almost embarrassingly coherent logic with which he tries to unravel some of the unusual problems of life. We believe that *The Nightmare* deserves a place—as a distant but esteemed relative—among the world's most significant early-twentieth-century experimental novels.

Balázs Lengyel