The Old Sin Expiated:
The New Historicist Reassessment of Keats

The cultivation of the new historicist approach in the revision of the traditional reading of Keats seems to be motivated by the intention to expiate the guilty feeling that has lingered on so persistently in the critical history of Keats. The intensely personal and polemical tone of the recent publications can probably be attributed to a painful awareness of the old sin committed against Keats by the conservative critical organs of his own time, on the one hand, for whom he was a "radically presumptuous profligate" (Matthews 245), and by Shelley, Leigh Hunt, Hazlitt, Byron and others, on the other, who eulogized or derided him, as the case might be, for the wrong reasons, and created the myth of Keats as "a Priest of Beauty slain before his time (Wilde 5), "the archetype of the stricken Romantic" (Motion XIX). This "pet lamb in a sentimental farce" image of Keats was already radically redefined, however, by Swinburne, the Pre-Raphaelites and eventually by the aestheticism of the end of the century: Keats's reputed "effeminacy" was increasingly seen as a single-minded dedication to the Platonic concept of Beauty. At the turn of the century the cultural processing of Keats forked in two directions. (1) The Modernists' image of Keats can be traced back to Hopkins, who in a letter to Patmore writes: "Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and even Leigh Hunt, right or wrong, still concerned themselves with great causes, as liberty and religion; but [Keats] lived, in mythology and fairyland, a life of a dreamer." Hopkins strains to see in Keats "the beginnings of something opposite to this, of an interest in higher things and of powerful and active thought," but he confesses this is an effort. Still, he remains grateful that Keats was possessed of "judgment" sufficiently "fine" to restrain him "from flinging himself blindly on the specious Liberal stuff that crazed Shelley and indeed, in their youth, Wordsworth and Coleridge" (quoted by Wolfston 171-72). This is the view which was embraced by T.S.Eliot and the New Critics. (2) In sharp distinction from this view, a new insight was voiced in sporadic statements by Bernard Shaw, and before him, William Morris, who found in Keats "a voice of their age, seeing a prophetic Marxism in the stanzas of *Isabella* in which Keats attacks the avaricious capitalism of Isabella's brethren" (Wolfston, "Introduction" 172). These remarks are quoted again and again in the new historicist revaluations of Keats's poetry.

The motive power and the most perceptive mind behind the recently emerging new historicist reassessment of Keats has been Jerome J. McGann, who seems to have a larger ambition: it is not only the time and space specific character of the romantic poem he wants to demonstrate, he also means to subvert the "entire Kantian and romantic-based tradition of criticism and aesthetics." By adopting the general orientation of Galvano Della Volpe's *Critique of Taste*, whose program is "to replace an Idealist and romantic aesthetic with a materialist and historical one" (quoted by McGann, "Romanticism" 575), McGann promises to produce a "*critical* view of romanticism" and to challenge "the scholarship and criticism of romanticism [of today]...[which] are dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in romanticism's own self-representation" (McGann, "Romanticism" 573).

It was in an article in 1979 entitled "Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism" that Jerome J. McGann addressed specifically Keats's work, and called for "sustained attention to the political situation of Keats's poetry" (quoted by Wolfston 172). Soon a debate was initiated by Morris Dickstein at the 1983 MLA Convention in his lecture entitled "Keats and Politics". His chief arguments are mainly supported by a flimsy enough claim: "No less than a massive and deliberate evasion would indeed have been required for a poet whose active career spanned the four years from Waterloo to Peterloo" to remain untouched by the socio-political issues (Dickstein 175). He

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claims no less than that "all of Keats's longer narrative poems have vital political subtexts" (Dickstein 179).

Keats, however, as far as it can be seen today, has proved to be an embarrassment. He does not lend himself very easily to the historical and temporal perspective of the method, simply because in his poetry there is scant overt reference to the political, historical situation, apart from some very early sonnets, like "Written on the Day that Mr Leigh Hunt left Prison", "Written on 29 May: The Anniversary of the Restoration of Charles the 2nd", "Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition" or "To Kosciusko", which represent no real challenge to any sophisticated new method of interpretation. New Historicism has managed to reevaluate in a significant way the poetical achievement of Blake (a detailed excavation of his indebtedness to the ideologies of political and religious radicalism was carried out by E.M.Thompson; of Wordsworth (*The Prelude* and its complex system of reference to the French Revolution has been explored most successfully as, for instance, Stephen Gill's *William Wordsworth: A Life*, 1989, testifies). To Byron it has, indeed, managed to do the great service of reinstating him among the major poets of Romanticism (especially interesting is the treatment of the philosophical and theological background of his view of history and concept of human nature by McGann himself in his book *The Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development*, 1968, which certainly is a landmark in modern Byron criticism despite McGann's own self-critical statements, e.g. in his essay "Romanticism and its Ideologies"); and essentially new light has been shed on the components of Shelley's radicalism as well as on the way it has been appropriated by the radical movements in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain (for instance, in Paul Foot's *The Red Shelley*, 1980). Keats, however, seems to resist the partisan treatment that is characteristic of much of the new historicist writing, and, what is more, the main theses articulated by the critics who show an exclusive interest in the political dimensions of Keats's writings are not essentially new. The excellent biographies of the 1960s give a detailed rendering of his social milieu, of the political climate of his time, and offer a day-to-day record of his life and thought, as well as his liberal sympathies as far as they are reflected in his letters. The embarrassment is obviously felt by the new historicists themselves. Following the 1983 MLA Convention the journal *Studies in Romanticism* organised a Forum in its 1986 Summer issue, where a number of arguments are already articulated which seem to caution against the excesses and the dangers of an exclusively socio-historical reading of Keats's poems. The most controversial collection of new historicist essays, *Keats and History*, edited by Nicholas Roe, came out in 1995, which displays some of the most extreme positions and is representative of the gamut of all the inventiveness as well as the self-righteous platitudes of the new critical discourse. Michael O'Neill's statement is characteristic of the feeling of unease in the face of some attempts to reduce the complex framework of reference in Keats's poems to a set of allusions to the political trammels of Regency England: Keats's anxiety about the role of poetry in the modern world and his desire to attain knowledge through sympathetic identification, O'Neill claims, outweighs "a Marxist view of the relations between modes of production" (quoted by Scott 279).

As a matter of fact, the most discriminative new analyses combine the virtues of the New Critics, the insights of Paul de Man's very important contributions to the understanding of the Romantic consciousness or consciousnesses, and they also express their indebtedness to the great biographers, that is, they manage to "strike a balance between rigorous historical analysis and subtle close reading" (Scott 278) and have been able to clarify important issues, e.g. Greg Kucich unsettles the "earlier accounts of Keats's happy embrace of Godwinian perfectibility" (Scott 281).

On the whole, if it is not too early to say, there seem to be two main strategies used by the revisionist critics to extricate themselves from the embarrassing situation. Some of the best studies

redefine the connotations of terms like "escapism", "evasion", and though they bring sustained attention to the political situation of Keats's poetry, as McGann himself, they are "chiefly concerned to read Keats's poems as evading, suppressing, or altogether mystifying their political circumstances" (Wolfston 172), that is, they consider Keats's aestheticism as an *indirect* form of protestation against the thwarting political circumstances of the time. Morris Dickstein himself quotes Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*: "the aesthetic cultivation of sensuous and utopian values is itself a `negation' of the established order, a `Great Refusal'" (Dickstein 176). Paul de Man's authoritative voice is quoted again and again, for instance, by Paul H. Frye in his most insightful essay on "History, Existence, and `To Autumn'". Frye cites Paul de Man's "Introduction" to the latter's edition of Keats's poetry: "Keats's `snailhorn' personality is caught up so intimately in the social matrix that his very empathy becomes an evasion, an escape from self-confrontation" (quoted by Frye 213), and, though Frye is aware of the fact that on his quick visit to London during his stay at Winchester Keats witnessed the enthusiasm with which the 30 000 people who lined the streets from Islington to the Strand greeted Henry Hunt on his triumphant entry into the capital, and that two days after the composition of "To Autumn" Keats says in one of his letters that he hopes sincerely he will be able "to put a Mite of help to the Liberal side of the Question", he refuses to see "To Autumn" as an expression of the political atmosphere ensuing after Peterloo. On the contrary, he declares: "Somewhat reluctantly, knowing what angry misunderstandings this sort of vocabulary can inspire, I persist in thinking that `To Autumn' concerns the ontology of the lyrical moment" (Frye 217).

In the automatically generated new historicist essays prompted by the "authors' conscious ideological impulses" (Scott 135), however, "history [often] becomes a grid that is laid noisily over the poem" (Scott 278). In his new biography of Keats, which was avowedly intended to explore the contemporary concerns reflected in Keats's most seminal poems (Motion XXIV), in the course of brilliantly recreating Keats's social and intellectual milieu, Andrew Motion reduces many of the poems to ideologically charged gestures of protest. In his discussion of the sonnet "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" he claims, for instance, that "[b]y writing about them as admiringly as he did, Keats was identifying himself with a cause in which artistic considerations were inextricably involved with liberal issues" (Motion 152). In support of the view Motion declares: "The staccato conclusion...alludes to the fragmentariness of the Marbles while perhaps also raising questions about how and why they had been removed from their original site" (Motion 153).

About the same sonne another critic, Grant F. Scott, maintains, somewhat vaguely, that since ekpharsis "always reveals a specific cultural ideology", in it "verbal, hence cultural imperialism is implicit" (quoted by Spiegelman 134). Quoting and redefining Leigh Hunt's famous statement about the "transcendental cosmopolitics" of *Hyperion*, by shifting the emphasis from cosmo- to politics, Morris Dickstein offers a tentative thesis: "the dethronement of Saturn could hardly be described without some political resonance in the last days of George III, in Shelley's `England in 1819'" (Dickstein 180).

As once upon a time the new critics found "Ode on a Grecian Urn" the greatest challenge to discuss, now the new historicists seem to be intent to subvert all traditional readings of "To Autumn" and to make it into a test case. This "most impersonal, negatively capable lyric [of his]...may be understood as the belated celebration of an ideal commonwealth of humankind and the natural world" (see Fenton 41). The ode has been called a "historical intervention", it has been read as a document which testifies Keats's alertness to the social anxieties made explicit by the Peterloo Massacre, or, in general, to the plight of the labouring classes ("the bees have been persuaded to work overtime", Motion 460-61) and the dispossessed (Autumn in stanza 2 is seen

as a gleaner, and we are reminded by Motion, 462, that gleaning was made illegal in 1818; how much weight this carries is difficult to know in the face of the fact that the word, in one form or another, had been used three times by Keats previously, in "To Spenser" l. 32; "Sleep and Poetry" l. 291; "When I have fears" l. 2; see Becker, Dilligan, Bender 216).

At the same time "To Autumn" has been defined as "an evasion of history", "an alienation from history", and Paul H. Frye, who seems to be fully alert to the political dimension of Keats's consciousness, claims that in "To Autumn" Keats's special achievement "is precisely his refusal to sublimate mortality as a social conspiracy" and, with a reference to Stanley Cavell's article "Politics as Opposed to What?", in which Cavell describes the "intimacy with existence" he finds in Emerson and Thoreau, Frye claims it is Keats's own "intimacy with existence" that "takes the measure of `To Autumn'" (Frye 216).

In interpreting Keats in a socio-political context any reading will necessarily have to be accepted as one of the possible clues to the overall meaning. No decisive evidence can be quoted from the poem without destroying its coherence. A putative reconstruction of the contemporary readers' response might be made, but obviously there are very few data to use. Interestingly enough, however, it seems to be a compulsive move in all the analyses to excavate evidence from the letters. In most of the new historicist readings of Keats's work the letters seem to have acquired an unprecedented importance and are usually discussed much more extensively than the poems. This is more than disturbing as one should be wary about identifying in such a happy and simplistic way the consciousness voiced in the letters and the dimensions of experience--on the most various un-, pre- or fully conscious levels--of challenge and intellectual-emotional response shaped and defined by the poet's sense of form in the poem. This must be remembered especially in view of Keats's own attempts to explicate the radical difference between personal identity and the poet's temporary loss of identity ("negative capability", the "chameleon" nature of the poet, etc.).

In summary, one is tempted to say it is difficult to see if any real break-through has been achieved by the new historicists in the case of Keats.

The history of the reception of Keats in Hungary has shown the same ambivalence in the interpretation of Keats's aestheticism, and here, too, he has been used again and again either as a shield to protect the critic against ideologies or as an argument to support the ideology of the critic. There were four major critical voices in the first half of the twentieth century whose reading of Keats has been handed down practically speaking to the textbooks and literary histories of the early 9Os. All the four critics, Mihály Babits (1883-1941), László Németh (19O1-1975), Antal Szerb (19O1-1945) and György Lukács (1885-1971), were more or less closely connected for a longer or shorter period in their careers with the literary journal *Nyugat* ("West"), which was established in 19O8 and edited by Ern_ Osvát till his death in 1929, and which, in strong opposition to the conventional nationalism of the establishment of contemporary Hungary, sought to invigorate Hungarian culture by an increased receptiveness to Western stimuli. All the four critics responded, in their own diverse ways, to the two centrifugal forces of the intellectual climate at the beginning of the century, positivism and irrationalism, and this fact might be seen as a common starting point and formative influence in the development of their concepts of art.

The most important dates in the research of the English-Hungarian literary contacts indicate quite clearly that in this country there has always been a very strong ideological-political motivation behind the academic interest in English poetry. It was in 1936 that in his long essay "About a Specific Task of English Studies in Hungary" Sándor Fest, the first scholars of English Studies in

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Hungary, declared: "Hungary being from the most ancient times part of the Western cultural community means among other things that we have never been completely cut off from the political and intellectual life of England" (quoted by Gál 5). It was in 1942 that the book of the Debrecen based scholar, István Gál, came out which offers the most extensive survey to date of the English contacts of Mihály Babits, the central poet of Hungarian Modernism, and one of the key figures of the critical movement launched by *Nyugat*. In the first page of his book Gál claims:
"It is an obligation for us to explore the intellectual interaction between Hungary and England, an obligation which, due to the political situation, is more pressing today than it has ever been: during the time of World War II the country should be able to see the history of its contacts with England in an appropriate light" (Gál 5-6).

Nobody has ever done quite so much for introducing nineteenth-century and contemporary English literature to the general public in Hungary than Mihály Babits. His enthusiasm for English poetry went so far as to his defining England as the very nation of poetry: "as if he soul of the people of England had directly been fashioned by God and Fate for poetry," he says in his discussion of the exuberance of creative energy in the age of Shakespeare (Babits, *Az európai* 222). "The poem is a greater, a more profound and, up to the present moment, a more meaningful experience for the soul of the English than for any other nation in Europe" (quoted by Gál 66). He saw in the English poem a blend of an acute interest in reality and a feeling for the magic of poetic imagination (see Babits, *Az európai* 166).

The first book from which Babits collected some basic information about the literary history of England was Taine's *L'Histoire*, which he possessed as a student. Taine gives a vivid and most sympathetic description of Wordsworth's, Coleridge's and Shelley's milieu, his portrait of Lord Byron is especially detailed and intimate, he makes, however, no mention of Keats. Already as an undergraduate Babits read Ruskin, and in his first two posts as grammar school teacher at Baja and Szeged he sudied the poetry of Robert Browning, Tennyson and Swinburne with a great deal of enthusiasm. The next three years from 1908 to 1911, which he spent as a kind of "a recluse" at the far-away Fogaras in Transylvania teaching a the local grammar school, show an amazing speed in the development of his critical ideas. Later on he recalled how he lived literally on books during those years. "It was then that I discovered the Greeks--through the English. I was overwhelmed by the feverish, glowing Greek atmosphere of Swinburne and some other English poets, and I thought that it was exactly that quality which was missing in Hungarian poetry" (quoted by Gál 17-18). It was probably at that time that he read Walter Pater, whose aestheticism and interpretation of Plato had a lasting influence on him. Most of his own tragic "Greek" poems were written at Fogaras in 1909-10 (Rába 11) under the influence of the "sweet, decorative, Alexandrian Hellenism" (Nemes Nagy 81) of Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites (D. G. Rossetti, Burne-Jones; see Rába 58-9, 72). It was after that sort of preparation that Babits started to read the English romantics, Keats and Shelley above all, in English. Although no philological trace of any influence of Keats can be pointed out in Babits, some characteristic poems of the period show "undoubted kinship" with Keats (Gál 49). His interest in the aestheticist movement of the English stems from his very early ambition "to step out of the first person singular position" (Nemes Nagy 28); as early as at the age of twenty one or two he already used the term "objective poetry" (Nemes Nagy 14) and was ambitious to achieve an impersonal effect by an intellectual and laborious concentration on form. Antal Szerb, who was probably the best early critic of Babits, published an extensive analysis of his work in 1929 in which he measured Babits's achievement against the modern English tradition, and called the period between 1904 and 1915 his English period. Szerb was the first to point out the inner kinship between Babits and the English which manifests itself in the intellectual quality of their

poems. "The precondition of the poetry of both Swinburne and Babits is Pre-Raphaelitism: their poetic attitude is much closer to Rossetti's attitude of the artist seeking meaning in form, to Morris's indefatigable polyhistorian attitude and Burne-Jones's dreamy industry", than to Verlaine or Ady. For Babits as well as for Swinburne or Rossetti poetry is first and foremost a craft, a form of hard but dignified labour: in a revolt against the cult of spontaneous inspiration and self-assertion "[t]he Pre-Raphaelites and their half-brother, Swinburne, had the courage to admit[...], what they discovered by studying painting, that the technique and the premeditated form are the outcome of application". Both the Pre-Raphaelites and Babits liked "decorative allegory, the noble tradition of the Middle Ages, which has fallen into disrepute and has been ousted by its sister, the symbol". In Szerb's view Swinburne for Babits meant a strong tension between the Greek and the modern elements, between the Greek sensibility and the decadent, the nervous anxieties, the phobias of the end of the century (Szerb, *Gondolatok* 202, 2o3, 2o2, 209).

It is against these aesthetic and critical "training" that Babits's response to Keats is to be defined. Embracing Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*, Babits published a history of European literature in 1934-35 (*Az európai irodalom története*), which he himself called a "confession, a diary of the experience" of reading (Babits, *Az európai* 222). It is here that the first extensive analysis of Keats's poetic achievement appeared in Hungary. Babits's portrait of Keats is naturally enough "distorted" by the prism of Swinburne, Swinburne's Hellenism, and the Pre-Raphaelites' cult of Beauty. Keats is seen by him as the poet who managed to "escape from he pessimism and gloomy world-view of the time into the world of the sensual delights of melancholy Beauty" (Babits, *Az európai* 31O). He sees harmony and richness as the most important features of Keats's verse, where colours become music, rhymes produce painterly effects, and this intricate music of Beauty has the rich choral effect of ancient Greek drama. Nobody has ever been able to sing so magnificently about the beauty and the pleasure of melancholy, Babits claims. "The admiration of beauty in the case of this consumptive apothecary was deeply rooted in his melancholy" (Babits, *Az európai* 3O8). Babits quotes already important passages from the letters, and gives very interesting insights into his own Keats; he describes briefly, but with a great deal of admiration, the sonnets, *Endymion*, "Ode on a Grecian Urn", *Lamia*, *Isabella*, "The Eve of St. Agnes", "La Belle Dame" and the Hyperion fragments. To understand the secret of Keats's richness he tries to find some psychological motivation: it is the tension between sickness and the desire to possess life as fully as possible that, in Babits's view, is Keats's most important drive. His conclusion is reminiscent of the concept of Keats created by the Pre-Raphaelites and embraced by Oscar Wilde:

"In [Keats's] visions there is nothing prophetic, and unlike in Shelley, there is no theory, no revolutionary commitment in his lyrics. Beauty is its own justification in these poems and if apart from the impressionism of his highly refined painterly effects there is anything else that connects Keats to the later aestheticist trends, it is the self-justification of beauty. The *l'art pour l'art* has every right to quote his name among its forerunners". But Babits qualifies the *fin de siĕcle* portrait of the high priest of Beauty by making an important distinction: there is nothing of the cold deliberations of the *Parnassian* schools in him: every line of his is aglow with the fever of feeling, "the feverish feelings of a decadent, vulnerable soul" (Babits, *Az európai* 322, 321).

Nyugat had only 600 subscribers in 1928 (Lackó 34), by that time, however, it had managed to carry out a complete redefinition of culture and literature. The journal was joined for a short time by László Németh, a much more controversial figure, for whom both criticism and creative writing were strongly ideologically specific (Lackó 173). He was discovered and invited to contribute to *Nyugat* by the editor, Ern_ Osvát himself. Németh, however, soon enough realized that he could not accept the ideology reflected in Osvát's editorial policy. Osvát was aware of the fact that in

Hungary literature had always been strongly used *and* abused by political interests and he tried to steer along a middle course between the political left and right. That was seen by Németh as a disguised form of liberal-leftist politics, and he thought Osvát meant "to enclose the writer within the confines of art" (Lackó 10).

Németh's most crucial historical experience was the collapse of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, the retribution in its aftermath, and, as a consequence of Trianon, the isolation of the Hungarian spiritual climate from Western Europe (Lackó 169). He wanted to find a completely novel way of revitalizing Hungarian culture, and in the various schemes he elaborated towards that end he rejected both what he considered as "old radicalism" and "national liberalism".

His view of history was strongly influenced by Nietzsche, Spengler and Ortega, his view of human nature by Freud. He was deeply disturbed by the polarity of aristocratic culture and democratic civilisation just as much as by the polarity of intellectualism and the moral sensibility. He was convinced that the modern mind was plagued by the conflict between the instinctive drives and the moral imperatives, between nihilism and ascetic heroism, and eventually probably it is the solitude of the ascetic that he embraced in principle (Lackó 190), that is, his struggle to resolve the psychic conflict of modern man ended with the triumph of the moral self: you have to accept the neurosis of abstaining from all semblance of a solution of the conflict of the intellect and the moral self; the greatest task is to accept sickness, without, however, being engulfed in the chasm which opens up behind it (Lackó 197). It is characteristic that Németh seemed to see Babits's greatness in quasi-Freudian terms: in the incessant heroic struggle against the anarchy of the nervous system, and behind it the deeply felt attraction of the anti-social and anti-intellectual pulls (Lackó 202). In his own nature he also diagnosed a kind of neurosis, from the depth of which, however, the voice of an angel could be heard (Lackó 2O2). Thus Németh created a myth of self-deification (Lackó 202-3), and with a compulsive sense of missionary zeal he wanted to create a third type of Hungary single-handed. "I want to be the organizer of the intellectual forces in Hungary," he wrote in a letter to Osvát at the end of 1925 (Lackó 164).

His whole career as a critic, creative writer and political thinker was determined by reiterated attempts to find a way which would have ensured the predominance of the Hungarian ethnicity in the cultural and political life of the country.

"His ambition was to transcend both the middle class and the peasant cultures and create a unified set of values" (Szegedy-Maszák 18), and insisted that a culture is to be created which would be based on the values of those layers of "the people of the earth" (i.e. peasant traditions), the only section of the population which among the general decay had continually grown in cultural prowess and was about to develop into a new middle class: "the time has come when, in alliance with these rising masses, the section of the middle classes sympathising with the people should articulate the voice of the Hungarian people in Hungarian culture as well" (quoted by Lackó 180).

He was ready to organise a veritable revolution, called the "revolution of quality", which would have been based on the idea of the free competition of different cultural identities living side by side in Hungary. Behind this scheme it is easy enough to recognize his fear of a Jewish liberal intellectual hegemony in this country (see Lackó 203). His cult of quality, "his cult of the élite comes from German philosophy whose irrational categories he transforms into the preconditions of a peaceful take-over of power by a populist intellectual and political élite" (Poszler 194).

In 1932 Németh started to publish a cultural journal single-handed called *Tanú* ("Witness"), "an invitation to a conference where I carry out a dialogue with myself" about Europe, he says in the introduction (Németh 49). In the first essay, "A min_ség forradalma" ("The Revolution of Quality")

he announces his "metapolitical programme" (Lackó 204), the programme of "quality socialism", a "third way", different from the traditional concepts of both capitalism and socialism, a cultural revolution which will be carried out by an intellectual élite (the concept itself comes from Ortega: Szegedy-Maszák 23) recruited from the middle classes and the rising peasantry prepared for the task by appropriate education and enlightenment. In his own definition: instead of just distribution, the respect for the quality of work can bring about a real cultural change (see Németh 51-53). In 1932 *Tanú* carried an essay in which Keats's *Hyperion* is accorded unqualified praise; it, however, is interpreted in terms of Németh's own ideology of "the revolution of quality".

"When I close my eyes, and utter the word `poet', I have Keats in front of me", he says. Keats "is the only [poet], who, although a living person, can be used as a notion". In the analysis of *Hyperion* itself, Németh mentions Keats's interest in Hellenism and maintains that Keats "shows much more promise than Goethe ever did that he could have fused the ancient Greek and the modern sensibility in a perfectly unified harmony." *Hyperion* is "a whole Genesis which lifts up enormous arches from amazingly insubstantial material. A Cathedral from rays of light, a poem in which the poet's dream of Greek mythology is supported by the dawn of the nineteenth century, the most energetic centuries of all". In a language that is adjusted to the sublime and picturesque style of the poem, Németh tells the story of *Hyperion*, and then in conclusion he says:

"Of the new gods we can see only one, but this was the one whom Keats loved more than all the rest. Apollo was an unprotected child, but the wisest of the old gods gave him a fragile instrument, a lyre, the eternal symbol of quality, and when quality is leaving the island of Delos we know Hyperion is bound to fall..." Eventually Németh conjures up a terrifying possibility: with some familiarity with the ancient myth, he claims, it is easy to know what the end would have been,

"but who can predict the end of that poem which is not quite complete yet, in which the Titans of Saturn and Hyperion have already reoccupied the heavens, and Quality left behind somewhere on a deserted island, talking with Mnemosyne" (Németh 54, 55, 58).

Most obviously the essay ends in an overt expression of Németh's anxiety, in a reference to the possibility of disintegration and chaos, the triumph of barbarism, and the expulsion of quality from life: culture becoming a deserted island.

Antal Szerb's career spanned the period between the two World Wars, a period of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, when the danger of Hungary after Trianon to recede into a parochial province was most keenly felt, and when the most aggressive ideologies emerged and slowly gained supremacy in Europe. He was also intrigued by the opposition of the cultural élite and the masses. His very fragile hopes to find a solution, however, are not shaped by the visions of Nietzsche, Spengler and Ortega; his dreams of a future that might be acceptable are different from Németh's controversial concepts. In his essay on Kelemen Mikes, a literary figure of the first half of the eighteenth century, who painfully enough had to spend much of his life in exile after the fall of the 1703-11 War of Independence, Szerb writes: "He inaugurates the idea of literary literature, which is destined-- what a hopeless struggle that proves to be most of the time!--to tame, like an Orpheus, the beastly instincts" (quoted by Poszler 195). Against the threat of barbarism he found some bulwark in the humanistic traditions, in the cultural traditions of Europe, a Europe which at that time already was probably no more than a myth. In his obituary on Babits Szerb defines Babits as the master and moral teacher of his generation. "Through him we reached Europe[...] In recent years he was virtually the only surviving member of that great generation of writers which entirely modernized and Europeanized Hungarian cultural life in the years preceding the war of 1914". To define the most important quality Babits represented for his generation Szerb quotes Babits

himself: "And yet I believe in Reason.[...] Europe has gone through the horrors of unreason: now let Reason appear" (Szerb, *The Passing* 396). In a darkening world for Szerb and his generation Babits represented the last link with Reason, with the humanistic traditions of Europe. It is far too painful to know that in January 1945 Szerb himself was killed in a labour camp at Balf.

What connects him to Babits apart from the above is a keen interest in the culture of nineteenth-century England, the romantics, and the aestheticism of the Victorians, of Ruskin, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde.

Szerb's very early youth--due to the intellectual ambience of the prestigious grammar school he attended, which had been established by the Piarist order--was influenced by Neocatholicism. To liberate himself and reach maturity he sought new guidance in the religion of Beauty, in aestheticism. "He appealed to Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater" (Poszler, *Eszmék* 382).

In several essays of his he analyses the contacts of Hungarian poetry with the English tradition. "The great period of Hungarian poetry never turned towards any other literature so very openly as it turned towards the poetry of the far-away country, England.[...] In the nineteenth century the English influence is much more pronounced than the French or the German, first of all because Arany, the most erudite of our old poets, in order to find models and stimulation, turned first of all to the English romantics whom he felt close to himself in temperament". In the twentieth century he points out the influence of the "mature, fruity sweetness" of Keats's ode on Árpád Tóth, and the influence of Browning and Swinburne on Babits (Szerb, *Gondolatok* 200). In his literary histories (*Magyar irodalomtörténet, A világirodalom története*) he integrates Hungarian literature into the context of the history of the spirit of Europe. In defiance of the nightmare of a German Europe, European culture for Szerb meant Paris, London, Goethe's Weimar, and Florence (Poszler, *Eszmék* 389).

In 1941 Szerb published his own version of the history of world literature (*A világirodalom története*). This can be read as a conclusion to a long life of search for ways to defend the values he cherished above all, Reason and humanism. His youthful enthusiasms are atill present but some of the emphases have shifted by now. His interest in the Victorians is still there but he has obviously reassessed them, and "there is much more scepticism in his treatment of Ruskin, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. He seems to reject aestheticism now as a social-political attitude as well as William Morris's nad'vely utopistic programme of redemption with obvious irony. Aestheticism as a life-defining programme or philosophical concept of the world disappears from his ideology.[...] But the Platonic philosophy is still there, the enchanting religion of beauty of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, and the English lyric poets are also still there, first of all Keats and his belief in the creative influence of beauty as a redeeming power" (Poszler, *Szerb* 371).

In his analysis of Keats the emphasis is laid on the principle of Beauty and the concept of intensity. "Intensity is the condition of deepest understanding, the moment when the hidden meaning of the world is revealed for the poet and the seer. This is the meaning of his tragic lines:

Verse, Fame and Beauty are intense indeed,
But Death intenser, - Death is Life's high meed."

Szerb singles out *Hyperion* as the expression of Keats's deepest insight into the mysteries of existence. Reading it "we feel something similar to the awe engendered by Hölderlin's last hymns: in his "intensity" the poet is speaking about truths that are beyond our understanding and we are overwhelmed by *horror sacri*" (Szerb, *A világirodalom* II. 245-46).

The definition of *l'art pour l'art* seems to be a central problem in the Keats portrait of both Babits and Szerb. In the elaboration of the concept both of them seem to have been influenced by Walter Pater, whose concept of *art for art's sake*, which he developed after a careful study of the

Romantics and of Goethe above all, has been reevaluated again and again in English critical history as the literary canon has been redefined in response to the intellectual challenges to be faced by the subsequent generations of critics. By the time he wrote his survey of the history of world literature in 1941 (*A világirodalom története*), under the pressure of the threat of the horror anticipated by the political tendencies that had become far too articulate in Hungary as well, Szerb probably came closer to the modern interpretation of Pater's concept. One of the most recent readers of Pater suggests: "By using the term [art for art's sake] Pater claims the centrality of art to all other forms of experience, not its separation from them" (Loesberg 11). On the last pages of his *Winckelmann* essay Pater proceeds to define a service art performs for modern culture. Labelling "the sense of freedom" as the chief need of the spirit "in the face of modern life" (Pater 184), Pater claims that it is art that provides this need. In the conflict of necessity and freedom, which gives the tragic sense of life so characteristic of the modern experience, where "for us, necessity is[...] a magic web woven through and through us, like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks, penetrating us with a network, more subtle than our most subtle nerves", it is art that can "give the spirit at least an equivalent of the sense of freedom," (Pater 185), a deliverance from Necessity. To the extent that his concept of art provides that freedom, Pater "responds to the need defined by socially engaged theories of art and history" (Loesberg 29).

In Hungary *l'art pour l'art* was the most important issue that made explicit the gulf between the aesthetic ideology of *Nyugat* and their most militant opponent in the 2Os, György Lukács. In his first period Lukács, who had a background in lots of ways similar to that of Szerb, and who was perplexed by the same dilemmas and sought a solution for them along ways similar to the search of Babits and Szerb, could be defined as "a religious existentialist, steeped in the German mystics, in Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky" (Lichtheim 87). The profundity of his thoughts elaborated in his first collection of essays in 1910, *A lélek és a formák* (*Die Seele und die Forme*, 1911; *The Soul and the Forms*, 1972) was fully recognized by Babits who found his ideas "interesting, profound, subtle, often true and exceptionally coherent, stemming from a unified world view. They are the ideas of a sophisticated and refined mind for sophisticated and refined minds" (Babits, *Esszék* I.158). It was Lukács's *The Soul and the Forms* as well as the major work of his first period, *Die Theorie des Romans* (1920) that has been described as the deepest formative influence upon the development of Szerb's concept of art. In his first period Lukács was deeply influenced by Dilthey's *Geisteswissenschaft*, by the aestheticism of the *fin de siĕcle*, especially as it appeared in Rudolph Kassner's critical writings (e.g. in *Die Mystic, die Künstler und das Leben. Über englische Dichter und Mahler in 19. Jahrhundert*, 1900) whose Platonizing attitude (drawing obviously upon Oscar Wilde's aestheticism) to poetry influenced his views just as well as those of the early Babits and Szerb. In his view, too, nineteenth-century English poetry was a climax in the history of European art, and in his concept of the English Romantics a somewhat mystified view of the Platonic conflict of living and thought seems to be central. It is in form, he suggets, that the conflict can be resolved: "a life-and-death struggle" (Lukács, *Soul* 22) is to be fought between the claims of life and the desire for truth which finds its resolution in form, "the self-assertive *Logos*", which always emerges out of despair and thus becomes affirmative (see Bacsó 218).

"In form alone [...] does every antithesis, every trend, become music and necessity. The road of every problematic human being leads to form because it is that unity which can combine within itself the largest number of divergent forces, and therefore at the end of that road there stands the man who can create form: the artist in whose created form poet and Platonist become equal" (Lukács, *Soul* 22).

With a great deal of insight, he defines the essential problem inherent in the Romantic stance:
"A seemingly deliberate withdrawal from life was the price of the Romantic art of living, but this was conscious only on the surface, only within the realm of psychology. The deep nature of this withdrawal and its complex relations were never understood by the Romantics themselves and therefore remained unresolved and devoid of any life-redeeming force. The actual reality of life vanished before their eyes and was replaced by another reality, the reality of poetry, of pure psyche. They created a homogeneous, organic world unified within itself and identified it with the real world. This gave their world a quality of something angelic, suspended between heaven and earth, incorporeally luminous [...] but the tremendous tension that exists between poetry and life and give both their real, value-creating powers was lost as a result. And they did not even look for it, they simply left it behind on their heroically frivolous flight towards heaven; they were scarcely aware that it existed. Only in this way could they achieve their universality, but because of this they could not recognize its limitations. [...] all action, every deed, every act of creation is limiting. No action can be performed without renouncing something, and he who performs an action can never possess universality" (Lukács, *Soul* 50).
He points out how many of the great Romanic careers end in failure, disillusionment, mere repetition of youthful achievements or "return with resignation to the quiet waters of the old religions" (Lukács, *Soul* 51). Keats, however, seems to be singled out by him as a creative artist who could resolve the dichotomoy of creation and life in a higher synthesis: "Thus Keats's life outgrows his poetry because he thinks his being-as-a-poet through to the end, embraces a saintly asceticism, renounces life; and the two--life, in particular in the case of Keats, as the backdrop to verse--combine to a new and higher unity" (Lukács, *Soul* 23).

Later on, in the agony of 1914-18, when in a quest for a total system of truth about the world, some writers with philosophical inclination were led "to religion, others to Nietzsche's irrationalism, still others to a nihilistic rejection of culture as a whole, Lukács...moved in a different direction: toward Hegel" (Lichtheim 26). This anticipates the divergence of the careers of Babits and Szerb on the one hand, and of Lukács, on the other. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, in exile in Vienna, from Hegel through Lenin (in 1924 he "became a full-fledged Leninist": Lichtheim 24) he started to elaborate what was later on termed a Marxist concept of art.

One of the first indications of this radical shift was his theory of the two trends in Hungarian culture which he worked out during the twenties in Vienna. The trend represented by Osvát and Babits and some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics is defined by him as the main trend which implies above all a readiness to accept a compromise with the established order. The "revolutionary" trend, on the other hand, constituted by the poetry of Pet_fi and Ady (the latter in Lukács's analysis is central to, though solitary within, the *Nyugat* movement), and he predicts that the revolutionary poetry of the Communists is going to continue the tradition of Pet_fi and Ady.

Today it is painful to listen to the shrill voice he used in the twenties to discredit Osvát and Babits in his articles sent home from Vienna and published here under different pseudonyms:
"In the present-day crisis of European culture as a whole, and especially in the crisis of Hungarian culture--in the midst of an apocalyptic transformation, when it is a question of life and death for all of us to find the right way--it is a spectral experience to see those, who have never been able to recognize anything new, try to show the way by hiding their heads in the dry sand of pure poetry" ("Két kísérlet. Kézfogás egy sír felett", published in *100%*, quoted by Lackó 64).

It is during this time, around 1927-28, that he worked out his first definition of *l'art pour l'art* in the context of "modern", that is, "bourgeois" poetry. In his article "A l'art pour l'art és a proletariátus költészete" ("*L'Art Pour L'Art* and the Poetry of the Proletariate") he claims that as

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the modern climate is becoming more and more hostile to the arts, the *l'art pour l'art* attitude covers up the tragic contradiction inherent in the status of the bourgeois artist. As a sensitive man, he is opposed to the established order, but, as an artist, he is attached to the directly sensuous, fetishized social reality much more strongly than those sections of the bourgeois intelligentsia who treat of ideological and theoretical issues. His being-an-artist prevents him from recognizing the genuine social forces working in the deep and at the same time as an artist he is tragically aware of the fact that it is no longer possible for him to establish any direct, sensuous relationship with actual reality (Lackó 79).

The real turning point in the reception of *l'art pour l'art*, of aestheticism in the ideological history of Hungary comes in 1947, when Lukács, once again in reference to *Nyugat*, more particularly to the publication of the complete works of Osvát, redefines his concept of aestheticism. For a long time after that *l'art pour l'art*, and the representatives of the trend in the movement initiated by *Nyugat* which in Lukács's former definition was ready to accept an easy compromise with the established order, were seen with a great deal of suspicion, were hushed up or rejected outright. It is painfully grotesque that it is Osvát who gives the context, who after all was the president of the Directory of Writers in 1919 during the Hungarian Soviet Republic, and whose moral integrity was deeply respected by Lukács (see Lackó 16). In this essay, however, Osvát is seen as the representative of the intellectual compromise, of withdrawal into "the power-protected interiority" ("macht-geschützte Innerlichkeit", a term borrowed from Thomas Mann's essay on Wagner) of modern literature.

"*L'art pour l'art*, the withdrawal into the ivory tower of immaculate expression is everywhere a Janus-faced, double-headed phenomenon: on the one hand, it is a protest against, and opposition to, the uncultured conditions of the time (in this case to gentry Hungary), on the other, however, it is that type of protest and opposition which in principle keeps away from any practical social and political action.[...] To-day--due to the legend he has become--Osvát constitutes one of the influences, one of the ideological factors which drive a wedge between our literature and our new life. For in the case of a basically reactionary social system pure form, the cult of pure interiority has its own relative justification, since it implies a covert or directly not articulated critique of the society, [...] but on the way towards attaining freedom, it reverts into its opposite. It either looses completely its more or less hidden relationship with reality, and then it becomes mere epigonism.[...] Or it reverts into opposition to the new social order [...] and becomes the poetic glorification of the past which is doomed to perish" (Lukács, *Magyar* 377, 382).

Lukács's great international reputation and political commitments, which, though varied, were never quite orthodox, nay, often enough proved embarrassing for the establishment, but still were openly declared, made him the great idealogue of Marxist aesthetics. His critical statements were quoted, in the original version or in simplified and vulgarized paraphrase to exclude certain trends from the canon, and soon enough Romanticims itself was seen by the politically controlled critical organs of the country as an evasion of the artist's task realistically to render the social conditions and actively to be engaged in a critical denunciation of the establishment. When from 1971 his early works were reissued and early manuscripts were published in Hungary, the subtlety of Lukács's early thought exercised an "intellectual shock effect" upon his closest disciples (see Almási 5) and there was an immediate and most enthusiastic response on the part of the youngest generation of theoreticians who, interestingly enough, in their first analyses seemed to define Lukács's growth as a thinker in terms of continuity (See Földényi 35, Bacsó 219). Probably it is too early as yet to distinguish theory and life in his case just as well as legend, anti-legend and actual achievement. What is easy enough to see, however, is that, partly due to his ideologically committed historicist

approach, the general critical attitude to Romanticism and especially to aestheticism in the '50s and '60s was hostile or confused: Wordsworth and Coleridge were seen up the beginning of the 60s as outright reactionaries, Byron, Shelley and Keats, on the other hand, as representatives of "revolutionary romanticism", or later on, for instance in 1991 (!) in *Világirodalmi lexikon* ("Encyclopedia of World Literature"), as the poets of "active" romanticism. In this light Keats, of course, has again proved to be an embarrassment. Relatively little space has usually been given in the textbooks to the discussion of his achievement, the assessment of his aestheticism has been far too vague. In the Hungarian critical tradition the political dimensions of his thought have not as yet been properly elucidated, neither has a sustained reading, which would properly integrate the aesthetic and the historical-historicist approaches, been elaborated as yet.

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