

THE PERMANENCE AND MUTABILITY OF AESTHETIC VALUES

(Mihály Babits: *The History of European Literature*)

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This is an expanded version of a paper I read at Indiana University on 5 April 1997. The topic of the conference – “Hungarian Contributions to Scholarship” – suggested a synthetic approach. My decision was to discuss the Hungarian contribution to Comparative Literature studies with a special focus on a book that exerted a profound influence on literary opinion in Hungary during the decades following its publication. In preparing the fuller presentation published here, I have decided to omit the introductory section and give a somewhat lengthier analysis of what may be regarded as the most important history of European literature published in Hungarian.

It is common knowledge that among the larger works that attempt synthesis and take panoramic views on Western literature there are two that still continue to play a major role in the formation of literary taste in Hungary. The first is *The History of European Literature* (1935) by Mihály Babits, one of the major Hungarian poets and prose writers of his age, and the second *The History of World Literature* (1941) by Antal Szerb, essayist, critic, novelist and short-story writer. This essay is devoted to the first of these two works. On another occasion I will examine the later work, which is a much more ambitious undertaking but heavily indebted to its predecessor in the sense that it is based on the idea that literature is a closed concept. Since Szerb does not act critically in relation to Babits (he refrains from problematizing the distinction between literature and nonliterature), his work can be read almost as a commentary on its predecessor that leaves most of the ideals of the poet-essayist unchallenged. Although the title *The History of World Literature* would suggest an extension of scope, it does not attempt to move beyond the Eurocentrism that is more justifiable in the work by Babits. Because of this, some of the remarks made in the following pages may apply to both works.

1. The Concept of World Literature

What is the justification for writing a comparative history of literature? When asking this question, Babits expressed his conviction that in his age national literatures tended to keep a growing distance from their common legacy. "World literature is a unified, coherent process, blood circulation on a monumental scale," he wrote at the beginning of *The History of European Literature*. "It existed a long time before Goethe recognized its existence and gave it a name; it is much older than national literatures." In the 1930s such an opening statement had obvious political implications. "It is not a modern task to draw the picture of world literature as a traditional unity. If someone tries to do this today, he or she has to bear in mind that such an effort is conservative, even reactionary. The power of European tradition is declining; the different nations insist on continuing their fights in the field of human spirit, looking at each other with hostility; our literary culture seems to disintegrate."

It would be a simplification to assert that in drawing the distinction between national and world literature, Babits simply ignored the cultures of other continents. He never denied the artistic value of works composed outside Europe but viewed them as the manifestation of various national literatures. World literature was not born in Europe, he added, and it certainly extended to other continents. His criterion was not geographical when he maintained that more readers had a first-hand knowledge of the works of Dante, Shakespeare, or Goethe than of the poetry of any other continent. Although his focus on Europe may seem unjustifiable from the perspective of the late twentieth century, his emphasis on the international character of literature was exceptional rather than typical in 1935. His taste was "Catholic" in the original sense of the word, and his attack on provincialism was comparable in strength to those made by Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot in the English-speaking countries, Valéry Larbaud in France, or Ernst Robert Curtius in Germany. His goal was that of the curator of an imaginary museum, who would strip works of their local origins and estrange them from their original functions.

The sharp distinction between local and universal values is perceptible throughout his work. "It was a national event rather than a phenomenon of world literature," he remarks about the first performance of *Hernani*. "The battle was won by the Romantics, but the liberty it led to was not too meaningful outside France." Assimilation is viewed as a *sine qua non* of world literature. St. Paul is more central to this ideal than Moses because he was a Roman citizen who relied on Hebrew culture and used the Greek language. It is assumed that world literature from its earliest phase was governed by synthesizing multicultural sources.

The great literature of ancient Rome was not developed by the representatives of some 'national spirit.' The 'true Romans' who were intolerant, isolated themselves from alien forces, and wished to create a culture deeply rooted in local traditions. (...) The glory of literature in Latin was the result of the activity of writers who were the most brilliant spokesman of the alien spirit of Greece.

The Hungarian author's vision of culture has been compared to that of T. S. Eliot. Although the American-born poet-critic is not mentioned in *The History of European Literature*, there are undeniable similarities between the arguments made in *Tradition and Individual Talent* and in the book written by the Hungarian author. Both Eliot and Babits were convinced that the European legacy was in principle accessible to mankind as a whole, whereas national literatures had more limited scope and relevance. From our vantage point such a position may seem Eurocentric. Babits makes occasional references to Asian cultures – when introducing the genre of the "novella," for instance, he mentions the *Panchatantra* and the *Arabian Nights* – yet he takes it for granted that world literature is identical with European literature. It was born in ancient Greece; its tradition was continued later by writers who used Latin; and the legacy of the Christian Middle Ages was further developed by authors who used languages related to Latin. Although it is true that Babits admitted that later other linguistic communities also joined the tradition – otherwise it would have been impossible for him to include literature written in his native language – his conception seems somewhat limited if compared with the canon outlined in *The March of Literature* published three years later by Ford Madox Ford. Ford was the Hungarian author's senior by ten years, yet his book reflects a taste that may be called less dated. Although his treatment of the twentieth century is as scanty as that of Babits, his early chapters on Chinese poetry reveal his closer association with the avant-garde.

In any case, a criticism of the nationalist approach to literature and Eurocentrism are the two main characteristics of *The History of European Literature*. "For the historian of a national literature nation may have greater significance than literature." This statement suggests that for Babits only a work of the greatest artistic value can aspire to a status in world literature. This assumption reflects a strongly canonical view.

Minor literature is attached to time and space. For world literature only great individuals are of interest, who respond to one another through ages and countries. Only the greatest belong to world literature. (...) Those who continue the work of their predecessors and shake hands above the different nations.

A close reading may reveal a self-contradiction in such an approach. On the one hand, world literature is defined as continuity; on the other hand, it represents a canon of works of timeless aesthetic value. The texts central to this canon ask for

slow reading. The reader can go back to them with increased insight and appreciation. "One has to stop at individual lines and drink them drop by drop, as one enjoys good wine," he remarks about Shakespeare. Such semantic plenitude is rare in works composed in more recent periods. When asking for the reason for this decline, the following answer is offered: "The most likely explanation must be found in the higher culture and more refined sensibility of an earlier age that for us is no longer understandable and credible. In the last three centuries literary culture has never ceased to decline, despite some wonderful moments of recovery."

The adherents of the Neoclassical ideal of a timeless canon often tend to be nostalgic. Babits was firmly convinced that the interwar period was marked by cultural decline. When describing the age of Horace, he raised the following questions: "What could have become of mankind if the culture of the nineteenth century had not fallen suddenly into the extreme darkness of the present age? And what achievements could have been made if Roman culture had continued to develop undisturbed?"

History is not regarded as distinct from a critical evaluation, but the unfolding of European literature is not presented as a history of progress towards the achievement of certain ends. Unlike Hegel or Burckhardt, Babits was reluctant to find in all aspects of the Renaissance an improvement on the Middle Ages. Deeply concerned about the disintegration of the unity of world literature and a collective loss of memory, he could not believe in what was usually called the Enlightenment project. This attitude may have developed as a result of the experience of World War I, the short-lived Hungarian Commune of 1919, and the Trianon Peace Treaty. In any case, after the 1920s Babits had become increasingly skeptical of cultural progress. It was a strong fear of a cultural decline that made him a supporter of a supranational canon.

The reader may be insensitive to the greatness of some works but aesthetic values are immanent. Such a preconception underlies the narrative of *The History of European Literature*. The very concept of literature seems unchanged since Homer. Dada is characteristically dismissed as a "Romantic experiment" and "mere illusion" at the end of the introductory section of the book. By ignoring popular culture, oral literature, and folklore, Babits seemed reluctant to admit that the ontic status of the literary work is variable.

The clear-cut distinction between national and world literature is further elaborated at the beginning of the first historical chapter. "The history of a national literature opens with folklore, i. e. collective and anonymous experiments. No comparable start characterizes world literature." Writing at the time of the rise of Populism in Central and Eastern Europe, he dismissed the idea that high culture could draw inspiration from folklore and rejected the cult of the "primitive" advocated by the avant-garde. In his view the evidence for the universality of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was that they were praised, preserved, and canonized in a very early period. Their style and structure are so sophisticated, Babits ar-

gued, that they cannot be viewed as the products of some "primitive" culture. They can be appreciated only by a literate public. Last but not least, a further proof of their supranational character is that their narrator is reluctant to sympathize with any of the communities involved in the war of Troy related by him.

As is well-known, Neoclassicism was one of the dominant movements in the arts of the interwar period. After 1920 Babits became a major representative of this trend, and *The History of European Literature* was written with the purpose of justifying the relevance of international Neoclassicism in a Europe divided by World War I. At a time when the relevance of the Classical heritage for the cultural life of the day was increasingly questioned by the advocates of the avant-garde and by the Populists, he drew attention to the culture of ancient Athens and Rome, as well as to the Latin Middle Ages. He was born into a society in which lawyers and doctors, clergymen, politicians, civil servants, and even bankers read Virgil and Horace, Livius and Tacitus, Cicero and Seneca, and sometimes even the Greek authors, as a matter of course in the original. The type of secondary school called "gymnasium" in which he studied and later worked as a professor convinced him that Graeco-Roman Antiquity represented the core of the canon. As a young instructor he published an essay in the yearbook of the gymnasium of Fogaras, arguing that education was closely tied to articulation, so the study of rhetoric was indispensable for culture. Later he felt dismayed at seeing that the knowledge of classical languages was declining at an alarming rate, viewed the historian as a kind of curator, the keeper of the canon, and insisted that world literature was at least in part a matter of accessibility. Greek and Latin were used by authors with very different ethnic backgrounds; hence their universal character. It was Protestantism that placed a high priority on the Old Testament and constituted a movement that helped the rise of national cultures versus the common European legacy. National cultures as such have limited relevance in so far as they are accessible only to their own interpretive communities. That is the message of the chapter on the Bible in *The History of European Literature*.

I have nothing in common with the Old Testament. I feel the lack of openness and hothouse atmosphere of a self-centred race in the barbaric tales about Moses, the patriarchal family and business relations, the strong sensualism of the love lyrics, the inhuman patience of Job, the fits of anger of the prophets, the national attachment to God, and the cynical skepticism of the Preacher.

Babits can be criticized, and has been, for taking a cultural rather than religious interest in Christianity. He undoubtedly failed to see that many passages in the Old Testament could be interpreted as foreshadowing passages in the New Testament. The statement just quoted is certainly in contradiction with the long and distinguished tradition of emphasizing the unity of the Bible. Readers of Hegel or Northrop Frye may dismiss the Hungarian poet's approach as irrelevant.

Whatever the weaknesses of his reading of the two Testaments, it was inseparable from his opposition between world literature and national literatures. Although Babits was indebted to the legacy of Romanticism, he rejected the idea that literature was the expression of "Volksgeist." For him the individual represented values more fundamental than any community. His conception was marked by a profound self-contradiction: the Platonic ideal of unchanging aesthetic values was undermined by a reader-response orientation. The tacit assumption underlying the narrative of *The History of European Literature* is that the creative artist has the best qualifications to give a valid interpretation of the legacy of his art. This starting point resembles that of Pound, T. S. Eliot, and some New Critics. Somewhat paradoxically, the significance of this work for scholarship is related to the fact that it reflects the views of a European poet-novelist on the international literary canon. One of the features common to *The March of Literature* and *The History of European Literature* is that they can be read both as pieces of historiography and as spiritual autobiographies. Their influence on historical works is at least as important as their influence on literature. This makes it understandable why Babits calls Pindar local in time and space in contrast to Alcaeus, although Pindar's works have survived and Pindaric odes often served as sources of inspiration for poets who rejected the more didactic tradition of Horace.

No one can accuse Babits of having failed to warn his readers that his criteria for selection were subjective. Needless to say, he is willing to accept some results of philological research – he admits, for instance, that the *Iliad* is a much earlier work than the *Odyssey*, so the two epics must have been written by different poets –, but he insists that no history of world literature could be written by a Positivist scholar. "World literature lives in its readers; and I am trying to describe how it lives in me."

To write a history of European literature is an impossible task for one person, yet only the unified perspective of a single individual can make world literature appear as an organic whole. This paradox serves as an excuse for the Hungarian author's admissions of the limitations of his reading. Not knowing Portuguese and finding the available translation weak, he was unable to read the epic by Camoens, and a similar language barrier made it impossible for him to pass a value judgement on the plays of Lope de Vega and Calderon.

2. The Historian's Perspective and Narrative Rhythm

One of the characteristics of *The History of European Literature* is that its author does not remain faithful to the principles laid down in the introductory section. At the outset he insists that in reading literature only first-hand knowledge and experience counts. When introducing the eighteenth century, he contradicts himself:

since I cannot say much new about this century, I shall try to be a conscientious chronicler. New things can be said only about what is capable of constant renewal. In England *Pamela* appeared, a novel by Richardson. Who would be able to say anything new about *Pamela*? Certainly not someone who has not read it. (...) Once I glimpsed into it. It must be infernally boring, and the same could be said about the other works of Richardson. (...) 'Who has read Klopstock's *Messiah*?' That question was often asked when I was a young student. Let me confess that I have not read it.

Fortunately such lapses are quite rare. In fact, Babits goes out of his way to define the three perspectives used in his narrative. Works read in the original often receive a stylistic analysis. Such strict scrutiny can be observed in the passages devoted to the author's favourite poets. Similar to Valery or Heidegger, Babits has a strong temptation to regard prose as inferior to poetry. Great prose stylists often seem to have escaped him. The three sentences on Joyce in the final chapter do not go beyond a fairly unoriginal reference to interior monologue, and Fontane or Henry James are not even mentioned. Yet there are some exceptions. "Carlyle is primarily a voice," Babits observes and his characterization of the uniqueness of the language of *Sartor Resartus* is more than apt.

A less careful scrutiny is used in the case of texts inaccessible to the author in the original language. When comparing Byron and Pushkin, he makes the following statement about the Russian author: "my feeling is that he is more authentic than his master, despite the fact that unfortunately I do not know the music of his verse in the original." While it is quite understandable that the readers are frequently warned of the gap between original text and translation, it is somewhat surprising that translators are characterized as useful transmitters and fertilizers rather than artists in their own right, especially in view of the fact that Babits himself was a major translator. The translator is compared to a bee, whereas original works are called flowers. In order to demonstrate his point Babits invokes the example of August Wilhelm Schlegel, a mediocre poet but an extremely influential translator of Shakespeare.

A third narrative modality can be detected in the passages in which Babits admits that he has not read a certain work. This distance is especially felt if the work in question was written in a language known to the author — as in the case of the book entitled *Paroles d'un croyant* by Felicite de Lamennais. The three different perspectives share the idea that history can be written only on the basis of a dialogue between past and present. That explains why generic classification is reinterpreted in the light of later developments. It is suggested, for example, that the odes of Horace could be read as songs in the twentieth century. For the same reason, modernity is treated as a questionable and ambiguous term. The mechanistic materialism of Lucrece was modern yesterday. Today it seems limited and outmoded. When comparing Dante's *Vita nuova* and Boccaccio's *Fiammetta*,

Babits points to the vulnerability of a twentieth-century perspective: "The later work is closer to the taste of the modern reader – which should not be taken as a favourable value judgement." On other occasions it is suggested that the antecedents of later developments do not necessarily correspond to great artistic achievements. "It is by no means true that the good always paves the way for the future." This remark is made about *Manon Lescaut*, which Babits considers to be a conservative novel. "It is certainly true that 'modernity becomes obsolete faster than anything else.' It bears the stamp of the age." Ironically, this generalization applies to some judgements formulated by Babits himself, such as to his claim that in the middle of the nineteenth century the works of Musset seemed to represent modernity, in contrast to those of Tennyson, whereas later the verse of the English poet proved to be of more lasting value. The conclusion is inescapable that comparative value-judgements about works written in different languages are especially vulnerable, and modernity is a matter of perspective: for Taine Musset, for Babits Tennyson seemed to represent it; in our age both authors may seem equally distant.

The History of European Literature consists of two halves, which were originally published in separate volumes. The self-contradictions of the work are closely related to this division and testify to the author's growing awareness of the difficulties of writing such a synthetic work. The first half starts with the *Iliad* and ends with the late eighteenth century, whereas the second covers the period between 1760 and "the present age." Babits was perfectly aware of this disproportion. The only explanation he could offer was that the narrator of world literature could not help slowing down when he came to discuss the literature on which he had been brought up.

Narrative rhythm is not the only factor that reveals a shift in focus. Part one starts with Homer, part two with Ossian. In the former timeless aesthetic value, in the latter reception seems to be the governing principle. This dichotomy raises important and difficult theoretical questions. How is it possible to distinguish between interpretation and that which is interpreted? How is the identity of a literary work explained over time? To what extent is the canon of world literature vulnerable to historical changes. The inconsistencies of *The History of European Literature* are closely related to its author's inability to find satisfactory answers to these three questions.

While in the first half of the work the output of a given author is usually treated as a unit, in the second half chronology is observed. Goethe's career is discussed in eight different chapters. Although works are personalized throughout the book in the sense that the status, significance, and value attached to them is bound up with the idea that every poem, play, or novel is the product of a particular individual's compositional activity, in the chapters on the nineteenth-century individual careers are deconstructed for the benefit of emphasizing para-

digm shifts marked by the rise and fall of such movements as Romanticism or Realism.

Today world literature and Hungarian literature are taught as separate subjects in different departments of the Hungarian universities. Babits would be unhappy with such a division. *The History of European Literature* is an attempt to discuss Hungarian literature as an integral part of an international historical process. Insofar as the subject of the work is the image of world literature as it appears to the author, the goal is met; but to the extent that the criterion is international reception, the inconsistency arises that some works are included on the basis of the author's belief in their artistic value. The poetry of Daniel Berzsenyi (1776–1836) is a case in point. "Unlike Byron, Berzsenyi is never turgid; in contrast to Chateaubriand, he is never posing. We Hungarians happen to know a great poet from the years which for others may be associated with the cloak of a Lord and the tie of a 'vicomte.'" Babits felt despair at seeing that Hungarian literature was not known to the rest of the world. His lines about the late poems of Vörösmarty express resignation, perhaps even helplessness: "His last poems are certainly among the greatest achievements of nineteenth-century lyric. Yet they represent a literature 'unknown' to Europe. There can be neither excuse nor consolation for this."

For T. S. Eliot Dante, for Harold Bloom Shakespeare stood in the centre of the Western canon. Babits translated both the *Commedia* and *The Tempest*, yet in *The History of European Literature* he gave more space to the works of Goethe than to those of the two other poets. The chapter entitled "Intermezzo about Goethe" is not only the summary of earlier assessments of the works but also an emphatically subjective homage to the author whose output is the embodiment of world literature in the sense that it is encyclopaedic in genres and sources of inspiration. For Babits Goethe is an author who deserves special attention because he worked within a medium pre-shaped by many traditions.

3. The Loss of Narrative Teleology

The study of Goethe's works led Babits to the conclusion that the main challenge to the ideal of a Western canon came from Romanticism. Accordingly, this movement is given a more detailed analysis than any of its counterparts. It is significant that Kleist, an author rejected by Goethe, is presented as one of the most profound exponents of Romanticism, and special emphasis is placed on his poem *Germania an ihre Kinder*. Babits observes,

it is a frightening poem, and unfortunate is the people which includes it in the curriculum. Are we still within 'European' literature? Undoubtedly, it is inseparable from Europe. Nationalism, the intellectual cur-

rent that not only tolerates but even produces such voices, is definitely European. It is not the property of Germans, since it was born elsewhere. It is a European trend, although it divided the European spirit and may succeed in breaking it into tiny and barbaric national 'cultures,' Yet the poet who represented this frightening trend with so much barbaric sincerity should not be blamed, for he stood for Europe.

Romanticism for Babits is a term to be evaluated heuristically, one that is inseparable from the paradoxical nature of history. He seems critical of the antiquated concepts of periodization and influence, never falls prey to the aberration of calling certain authors more or less "Romantic," and refuses to accept the idea of an eternal clash between Classical ideals and their Romantic rejection, in sharp contrast to his "Geistesgeschichte" contemporaries. "To break free from Classicism, we have to turn to the Classics," he wrote. Another remarkable feature of the chapters on the nineteenth century is that Realism is not defined as a reaction against Romanticism. Instead, a gradual transformation is described, a shift from the local colour of the distant to that of the familiar. While Romanticism is characterized as a movement inspired by the tension between the cult of local values and the universal characteristics of the imagination, Realism is called a more one-sided trend that undermined the unity of European culture. "Realism was one of the causes of the gradual disintegration of European literature into separate national literatures. An emphasis on local colour and partial truth may easily lead to division and national selfishness."

This change seems counterbalanced by another teleological process leading to the cult of *l'art pour l'art*. This development makes it possible for Babits to condemn sentimentalism in Dickens, didacticism in George Eliot, Tolstoy, and even Dostoyevski. While trying to sustain the illusion that towards the end of the nineteenth century literature was moving in a specific direction, Babits cannot help realizing that this preconception could easily result in the exclusion of significant works. "How deeply divided the leading intellectuals had become!" he exclaims. Afraid of getting lost in details, he decides to discuss the major works published in the 1870s strictly observing their chronological order. The conclusion of this long chapter is that Naturalism seemed to be decisive in the short term but its opponents proved to be the winners in the end. Still, he is not quite satisfied with this solution, as is clear from the opening of the next chapter:

History as history cannot be continued from this stage. It is no longer unified. Is it possible that our lack of perspective makes it chaotic? Literature is a matter requiring some distance. In its absence only individual works are perceptible.

The history of European literature is related in the form of the narrative of a journey. At the end of this journey Babits noted that texts are not literature as

such, they can only become literary works. What is close in time can be described only in a very subjective manner.

When I started reading, Naturalism was triumphant. Attempts at a revival of the Romantic legacy were not yet known to us. (...) One of the characteristic writers of the age was Maupassant (...). Although I was only eleven years old when he died, I read his short-story collections as the embodiment of what was 'contemporary.'

In some respects, this subjective interpretation seems highly relevant today. The analysis of an immense dialogue between Tolstoy and Nietzsche, for instance reveals that Babits had exceptional insight when reading authors of the later nineteenth century. In other respects, however, the last chapters of his work confirm the truth of his conclusion that contemporary literature might be a self-contradictory concept. Swinburne's works are given a more detailed analysis than those of Mallarmé. While Anatole France, Oscar Wilde, and G. B. Shaw are overrated, and although his brother's works were read by Babits in his formative years, Henry James is not even mentioned. Although none of those born after 1880 — Martin du Gard, Joyce, Woolf, Giraudoux, François Mauriac, Julien Green, Malraux — could be called insignificant, the treatment of the early twentieth century is sketchy. Except for the derogatory allusion to Dada at the beginning of the work, and an equally off-hand mention of "erratic experiments" in the final section, avant-garde movements are excluded and the literatures of the Americas and the smaller European nations are ignored. The New World is represented only by Washington Irving, Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Poe, and Whitman — Dickinson is merely glossed over in the penultimate paragraph among those regretfully left out. No twentieth-century Spanish or Latin American author is discussed, and Sienkiewicz is the only non-Russian Slav whose name appears in the book. His disregard for such writers as Unamuno, Kafka, Reymont, and Faulkner is as surprising as the exclusion of the ancient Chinese and Japanese poets and the representatives of Futurism and Expressionism, since the works of all these authors had been translated into Hungarian by his contemporaries.

Still, such weaknesses are probably found in the final chapter of most, if not all, literary histories. Given the scope of the book, *The History of European Literature* has to be regarded as one of the pioneering attempts at a synthetic approach to the Western canon. The shift from a Platonic concept of immanent aesthetic values to a profoundly historical view is the result of a serious inquiry into the workings of literature. The distinction between timeless values and reception, or the shift from the former to the latter, is by no means a simple polarity or a sharp antithesis. One thinks of it as a passage, transition, or transformation rather than as a sheer opposition. Although the narrative is based on a chronological sequence, it would be erroneous to believe that Babits equates history with linearity. As he constantly reminds his reader the major poet lives not in the present

but in the past and the future. He avoids not only the naive Platonism to be found in the works of such interpreters of European literature as Curtius but also the temptation of subordinating literature to history. Such moments of recognition as between Homer and Virgil, Virgil and Dante, or Dante and Goethe are retrospectively reinterpreted as central articulations in the history of literature. Unlike his contemporary Dezső Kosztolányi – who endorsed a more open concept of literature but assumed that literary works stood by themselves and could be examined in isolation – Babits associated literariness with intertextual relations. Goethe is in the centre of his canon because the author of *Faust* never ceased to recognize himself for what he was in relation to his precursors and opened new territory, which was to be conquered by other poets than himself. Historicity turns out to be a characteristic innate to literature, which has nothing to do with political events. *Weltgeschichte* and *Weltliteratur* are equal parts in a dialogue of great complexity. The relationship between them is both a discontinuity and a continuity. The end of the passage on Chénier can be taken as a clue to understanding the methodological importance of *The History of European Literature*:

His rhymes, and the modality of his verse, had more influence on the future of Poetry than the World Catastrophe which cut his life short. (...) Literature, as organic life, has an inner logic that cannot be broken by any crisis. (...) Those who try to explain literary phenomena with reference to contemporary events are mistaken.

The History of European Literature is a spiritual journey. Its starting point is a Platonic belief in the timelessness of aesthetic values; its end is an acceptance of mutability as a consequence of an unfinished dialogue between past and present. In the first half the guiding principle may remind one of what E. H. Gombrich represented in art history in recent decades, when he maintained that the “history of art (...) is rightly considered to be the history of masterpieces,”¹ while in the second half it is admitted that certain works that once seemed unquestionably significant, later proved to have no lasting value. The supremacy of creative activity has been replaced by that of reception. The example of Macpherson has led Babits to the insight that the notion of the canon rests on the definition of the literary work as fixed for all of time. In contrast to such countries as Russia, Bohemia, or the United States, Hungary had no school of textual analysis in the early twentieth century, and this absence made it relatively easy for Babits to reject the idea that the work-concept was fixed. The assumption underlying the later chapters of *The History of European Literature* is that it cannot be argued that literary works, once created, are fully formed and permanently existing entities, unchanging continuants, since the meaning of a work of verbal art is to be found in its interpretive experiences. Once an essentialist concept of literature appears vulnerable and canonic status seems a matter of perspective (the result

of temporal process), the canonic work has to be regarded as an ontological mutant that cannot be viewed as existing outside history. Although *The History of European Literature* has undeniable weaknesses, lacunae, and idiosyncrasies, a shift to a contextual view of the literary work and a questioning of the permanence of the canon in the later chapters of the book are worthy of consideration in so far as they anticipate a thesis formulated in more recent decades. "Despite its irresistible tendency toward canon formation," Paul de Man wrote in 1981, "literature is noncanonical, the critique or, if you wish, the deconstruction of canonical models."²

Notes

1. E. H. Gombrich, *Ideas and Idols: Essays on Values in History and in Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), 152.
2. Paul de Man, *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 191.